

David Lang Wins Music Pulitzer

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AP Photo/Peter Serling

NEW YORK (AP) -- David Lang had always loved Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion." But as a Jewish composer, listening to one of classical music's greatest works always gave him pause.

"It's a strange thing as a Jewish artist to listen to this music, because we are the enemy in this, we are the bad guy, and yet the music is fantastic," he said of the orchestral and choral piece, written for Easter and considered to have some anti-Semitic text.

So when coming up with the concept for what on Monday became his Pulitzer Prize-winning work - "The Little Match Girl Passion" - he decided to use the revered "St. Matthew's Passion" as his base, but remove the Christian element of the piece.

"When I got this commission, I thought maybe there's a way to heal this wound, to fix this, so I imagined what it would be like to take some of the story of the 'St. Matthew's Passion' and take Jesus out of it and put in the story of this other person who also suffers and who also dies," he told The Associated Press on Monday after winning his prize.

So he used the story of the tragic child who was the focal point of Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Match Girl" and wrote text that was interspersed with the Book of Matthew in the Bible, Andersen's words and others. The 35-minute piece, which debuted at Carnegie Hall in October 2007, was performed by the vocal group Theatre of Voices.

"It's a very emotional piece. ... it's a very heartbreaking story," he said. "It's an odd feeling as a composer to be happy to have had so many people in the audience miserable."

Lang, who is co-founder and co-artistic director of the music collective Bang on a Can, admits he was feeling pretty miserable himself on Monday morning. He was having a bad day and was in the studio. His mood didn't brighten until he got a call from National Public Radio telling him he had won the Pulitzer.

"I feel a little better, (but) I'm sure I'll be miserable tomorrow," he joked.