

# The New Criterion

## Music

June 2006

### New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

A season-in-review.

The music season is like the academic year: It starts sometime in September, and ends sometime in May (if it doesn't spill over into June). It also happens that the journal you are reading operates on much the same schedule! Rather than submitting the usual chronicle, I thought I would use June to write a season-in-review—but not an ordinary season-in-review. I will concentrate almost exclusively on the good, only occasionally remembering the bad. We will let that simply drop away. This review will touch on almost every category of music: orchestra concerts, opera stagings, recitals, etc. You won't see any chamber-music performances. That's not because I didn't consider them; it's because I didn't judge any worthy of inclusion here.

Without further ado, the 2005–2006 season, starting with orchestras and conductors.

Lorin Maazel stood frequently before his New York Philharmonic, although he took plenty of time off to pursue his many other endeavors. Among the performances that stand out are those of Richard Strauss. Maazel is a devoted, highly sympathetic Straussian, and when he's on, there's really no one better in this music. Early in the season, he conducted *Don Juan*, the *Rosenkavalier* suite, *Death and Transfiguration*, and *Salome*—I mean, the Dance of the Seven Veils. This last was so charged, so erotic, it should have come in a brown paper wrapper. It's a joy to see a conductor excel in a composer he loves; so it is with Maazel and Strauss.

One of Maazel's virtues, as you have heard me say before, is that he makes the hackneyed fresh. He never tires of the warhorses; therefore they don't sound tired. Maazel's "New World" Symphony, this season, was boffo. He dove into it as though excited and grateful to have the chance. And if Maazel isn't regarded as a Mozartean, he should be. During the Mozart at 250 blowout, in the first part of 2006, Maazel conducted the Philharmonic in the last three symphonies of that composer (No. 39 in E flat, No. 40 in G minor, and No. 41, the "Jupiter," in C). I will tell you that I was reluctant to attend that concert—three Mozart symphonies, even immortal ones. But so alive, refined, and right was Maazel, I could have listened to about ten more, on into the night.

Sir Colin Davis visited Avery Fisher Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra. They played three concerts: the first giving us the Verdi Requiem; the second being all-Sibelius; and the third offering two English symphonies, both rarely played. These were the Sixth of Vaughan Williams and the First of Walton. Sir Colin is unsurpassed in this music, the heir to the great Three Bs of English conducting: Beecham, Barbirolli, and Boult. That third concert was a peak musical experience for anyone attending. And Daniel Barenboim brought the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to Carnegie Hall, during his last season with that band. They, too, played three concerts. Barenboim's performances were uneven, as they tend to be—but he delivered a great, truly great, Schubert Ninth.

(And this symphony happens to be dubbed “the Great”!) You can hear this canonical work for twenty years or more, and never hear it more intelligent or inspired.

Among James Levine’s orchestral performances—and there were many—I will single out one: of Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture. Levine has the habit of making such music sound like Beethoven; and the music is better off for it. The Fantasy Overture—played by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra—was disciplined, glowing, and incredibly purposeful. Levine confirmed for us the excellence of the work. It is really one of the best things Tchaikovsky ever wrote.

If 2006 is a “Mozart year,” it’s also a “Shostakovich year,” for the music world is observing the centennial of that composer’s birth. Valery Gergiev is celebrating by conducting all fifteen Shostakovich symphonies, in Avery Fisher Hall, with two different orchestras: the Kirov Orchestra and the Rotterdam Philharmonic. The opening concert (with the Kirov) featured Symphonies 1, 2, and 10. Like Barenboim, Gergiev is an uneven conductor, sometimes a ridiculously uneven one. But on this occasion, he was superb: He electrified the Kirov Orchestra, and he electrified the audience. About a month and a half later, Mstislav Rostropovich, too, did his part for Shostakovich. He was a close friend of the composer, of course, and no one knows his music better. Rostropovich conducted the New York Philharmonic in Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No. 1—with Maxim Vengerov, soloist—and the Tenth. On the night I heard him, “Slava” was a bit tired. But of his authority, and his limitless musicality, there was no question.

Spend some time, now, with pianists. Vladimir Feltsman gave a recital, consisting of Beethoven and Mussorgsky. The former composer was represented by his “Pathétique” Sonata and his Sonata in A flat, Op. 110; the latter composer was represented in—what else?—*Pictures at an Exhibition*. I had heard Feltsman many times, but never knew that he could reach towering heights. This was exemplary piano playing: stringent, as Feltsman usually is, but also feeling and even somewhat transfiguring. Far from an episodic showpiece, *Pictures* was a sweeping, compelling, brilliant whole. Also appearing in New York was Philippe Entremont. This veteran French pianist was once ubiquitous on the scene, a star; his career seems quieter now, and he spends a lot of time conducting. Indeed, at the Metropolitan Museum, he conducted the Munich Symphony Orchestra. But he also sat down for Mozart’s Concerto No. 21 in C major, K. 467. He is still his aristocratic, tasteful self.

Speaking of aristocratic and tasteful: Ivan Moravec, the veteran Czech, gave a recital in Carnegie Hall. He may have lost a technical step or two, but he is still a consummate musician. He is the type of pianist other pianists want to hear, and emulate. András Schiff gave a quite good recital in Avery Fisher Hall: a program of Haydn and Beethoven. Schiff was crisp, witty, and convincing. Later in the season, he brought his chamber orchestra, the Cappella Andrea Barca, to Carnegie Hall, for three concerts of Mozart. In the one I heard, he played poorly (and conducted poorly)—but that could not erase the memory of the recital.

Richard Goode played in Carnegie Hall all season long, advancing what the hall calls his “Perspectives” series. When he is at his best, he is extraordinarily lyrical, graceful—I call him “Mr. Smooth.” Absolutely supreme in Mozart was Christian Zacharias, who played the Concerto No. 18 in B flat, K. 456, with the New York Philharmonic. (Zacharias also conducted.) As I remarked in these pages, I have heard all the major Mozart players of my time, and, via recordings, all the major Mozart players of earlier times. I don’t think I would trade Zacharias, on this evening, for any of them: Giesecking, Kraus, Casadesu, the young Perahia . . .

A quite different pianist—at least one playing quite different music—was Louis Lortie. Also with the New York Philharmonic, he played Liszt: the *Totentanz*, a perennially popular piece, and also the seldom-heard Fantasy on Motifs from Beethoven’s *Ruins of Athens*. Lortie was thoroughly dazzling, but more than dazzling: musical, stylish, nearly heroic. Liszt, that old devil, would have

grinned like crazy (and then pushed Lortie off the bench, probably).

Jean-Yves Thibaudet gave a recital of Schumann and Ravel. He was not without problems in his Schumann pieces, although he was almost invariably interesting. But when he came to the Ravel, he was splendid—particularly in *Gaspard de la nuit* (speaking of devilish things). Probably the most memorable part of the program was the encore period: It began with Chopin's Nocturne in B-flat minor, and ended with Debussy's *Clair de lune*. Thibaudet played both pieces exquisitely—but the *Clair de lune* was more special than I have the power to convey. This chestnut of the piano was mesmerizing. It was as though you'd never heard it.

Finally—and speaking of familiar pieces —Yefim Bronfman played Tchaikovsky's Concerto No. 1, with the Russian National Orchestra. You may think you can't hear this concerto once more; but you can certainly hear it from Bronfman. He played it with a pianistic flair and command that was straight out of the Golden Age (whenever that was). He was hair-raising, sensitive, and awesome. Vladimir Jurowski, on the podium, was sluggish and unresponsive, but that was no great problem: Bronfman simply left him behind.

Of violinists, I will name three: Gidon Kremer, James Ehnes, and Midori. Kremer, with the New York Philharmonic, played the Concerto grosso No. 5 of Schnittke. As usual, Kremer was austere, controlled, insightful, virtuosic—everything a violinist should be in this work (and many others). He often gives you a sense of the otherworldly. James Ehnes is a young violinist, about thirty, a Canadian—and thoroughly capable. In another Philharmonic series, he played Walton's Violin Concerto, not to be confused with his Viola Concerto, a more prominent work. Ehnes showed many virtues, one of which was an almost unbelievable lyricism. Here is another “Mr. Smooth,” for the violin. And Midori—the one-named wonder—played an all-modern recital, consisting of such composers as Goehr, Yun, and Kurtág. A smart and well-prepared woman, she hardly ever puts a foot wrong, and she didn't on this evening.

I should include a fourth name—for this is one of the greatest instrumentalists in the world. Like Rostropovich, Maxim Vengerov was not at his best in Shostakovich 1. Both men were a bit off their games. But this was still Vengerov—as it was still Rostropovich—and some of the playing was heart-stopping.

Turn, now, to singers—not in the opera house (there will be plenty of time for that), but elsewhere. Two of the biggest stars in opera put on a concert, with the Orchestra of St. Luke's. I'm talking about Deborah Voigt, soprano, and Ben Heppner, tenor. Both singers had some shaky moments, but they also had some magnificent ones. I think of two Wagner excerpts, in particular: Voigt in “Dich, teure Halle” (*Tannhäuser*) and Heppner in Walther's Prize Song (*Die Meistersinger*). “Deb 'n' Ben” proved themselves worthy of their colossal reputations—never mind that the soprano would encounter some rough waters later in the season. Also proving herself worthy, of her own reputation, was Renée Fleming, who performed the Final Scene from Strauss's *Capriccio* with James Levine and the Met Orchestra. Singer, conductor, and orchestra imbued this music with just the right twilight.

Giving a delicious recital was Angelika Kirchschrager, the Austrian mezzo-soprano. She had a cold, but sang through it, charmingly. (Once, she literally ran off the stage for some water, or a Kleenex.) Also giving a delicious recital was Miah Persson, a Swedish soprano who is a relative newcomer on the American scene. She was sure to represent Scandinavia with some Nystroem and some Grieg. Maybe the recital of the year was that of Dame Felicity Lott, with her longtime accompanist Graham Johnson. At nearly sixty, she is in top condition, vocal and otherwise. Her varied program—titled “Fallen Women and Virtuous Wives”—was a treat from beginning to end. The audience went out sighing. Literally. (I heard them.)

The Romanian diva Angela Gheorghiu brought her act to the New York Philharmonic, on New Year's Eve. She sang a smattering of arias, winningly. The world loves to cluck over her antics and airs—but the bottom line is, she can sing. Another gifted and skillful diva is Magdalena ~KOZENA, the Czech mezzo. She sang arias from the French Baroque, with Les Violons du Roy (a group from Quebec). This repertory is filled with hidden gems, and ~KOZENA knows how to unearth and exploit them. Another big opera star, the Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón, gave a recital in the Temple of Dendur. (That's a way-cool venue in the Met Museum.) This recital was not a model of purity—but Villazón's charisma is not to be gainsaid. You can't help smiling with him, rooting for him, celebrating with him.

Also appearing in the Temple of Dendur were Stephanie Blythe and John Relyea—jointly. The mezzo and the bass-baritone teamed up for a program of songs, arias, and duets. Outstanding on this program was Blythe's "O don fatale" (the smoking, slashing aria from Verdi's *Don Carlo*). Blythe positively killed in it. And one of her encores was "What'll I Do?" by Irving Berlin. She sang this song simply, unaffectedly, and heartbreakingly. It was truly perfect. Along with Richard Goode, Dawn Upshaw performed a song-cycle by Schoenberg, *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*. She is an expert at intimate communication. And she was free of technical difficulties on this occasion. The great Polish contralto Ewa Podles visited Avery Fisher Hall, with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra. In a Rossini cantata and Russian fare—including Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*—she drove her fans wild, and the fans were right.

Thomas Quasthoff took up residence in Carnegie Hall, for a couple of master classes and a recital. The recital contained but one work: Schubert's *Schöne Müllerin*. Quasthoff traversed this cycle with clear understanding, and no end of vocal ability. Justus Zeyen was his excellent pianist.

We will now make our way to the opera house—to the Metropolitan Opera, whose opening night offered three acts, from three operas. Levine was in the pit. He began with Act I from *The Marriage of Figaro*, in which he was wonderfully incisive and bold. Bryn Terfel was a very robust Figaro, and Susan Graham made her usual first-rate Cherubino. Then we had Act II of *Tosca*—and ended with Act III from *Samson et Dalila*. At the center of the finale was Plácido Domingo, owning the opera house. For years, I've called him "the ageless Spaniard." Now and then he betrays me, but not this time.

*Ariadne auf Naxos* featured Violeta Urmana (the Prima Donna), Graham (the Composer), and Diana Damrau (Zerbinetta). Who's Damrau? She's a German coloratura, and she's as dazzling as they come. (This includes Natalie Dessay, of France—another glittering, gymnastic Zerbinetta.) Urmana and Graham were as good as you would have expected them to be. A high point, not only of the season, but of my operagoing experience, was a *Falstaff* from James Levine. He can be lethargic or indifferent, but he was wired on this occasion, conducting Verdi's last opera to the nth degree. I had never fully appreciated the greatness of this opera; Levine left no doubt. The *Falstaff* of our time—Terfel—gave a complete performance, uniting music and drama.

Standing out in *Così fan tutte* were three singers: ~KOZENA as Dorabella, Mariusz Kwiecien as Guglielmo, and Nuccia Focile as Despina. Kwiecien, a Polish baritone, is rapidly achieving star status. Focile, an Italian soprano, is little known in America, but she is an obvious pro. And, while we're on Mozart, *The Marriage of Figaro* took the stage, this time with all its acts. Luca Pisaroni, a young Italian, did a fine job in the title role, displaying a streamlined baritone, and much musical refinement. But the show was stolen by the Cherubino, not Susan Graham, but another American mezzo: Joyce DiDonato, a firecracker to adore. She would again steal the show in a tiny role, Stéphano, from *Roméo et Juliette*. The Met unveiled a new production, by Guy Joosten. It is astronomical—meaning, it shows lots of objects in the sky, playing on the "star-crossed lovers" theme. Not bad.

Renée Fleming wowed in *Manon*, or rather, she wowed in one aria: the Gavotte. The rest was not so spectacular, on the night I attended. But Fleming was superb all through Strauss's *Daphne* (in which she took the title role, of course). This was not at the Met, but at Carnegie Hall, where Semyon Bychkov led the WDR Symphony Orchestra Cologne and the fine, Fleming-headed cast. Back at the Met, Olga Borodina brought her dusky, wondrous, Russian mezzo to Rossini—to his Cinderella (Cenerentola). The rather underappreciated Barry Banks shone as Don Ramiro. And another top-drawer bel canto performance was turned in by Ruth Ann Swenson—as Adina in *The Elixir of Love*. Swenson is well-known—certainly better-known than Banks—but still underappreciated. Maybe if she were more difficult or complicated.

Levine conducted an opera in which he specializes (if such an all-capable musician can be said to specialize in anything): *Wozzeck*, by Berg. This was tight, perceptive, and devastating. Levine was scheduled to conduct *Fidelio*, *Lohengrin*, and *Parsifal*—and these, surely, would have wound up on this highlights list. But at the beginning of March, Levine fell and injured his shoulder, sidelining him for the rest of the season. Valery Gergiev led a magnificent *Mazeppa*—the opera by Tchaikovsky—making the case for a work not very familiar to non-Russian audiences. Otto Schenk fashioned what he said would be his last production for the Met: *Don Pasquale*. What a smashing show, all the more smashing for the Met's spirited cast.

And I must mention a New York Philharmonic opera-in-concert: *Bluebeard's Castle* (Bartók), led by Christoph von Dohnányi, and sung by Anne Sofie von Otter and Matthias Goerne. You didn't need a production to see the opera unfold. All involved did it for you, overpoweringly.

A couple of new operas should figure here: Both are American, and both are based on classic texts. Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy* has some very good moments, and it was given an excellent premiere at the Met (which commissioned it). But it suffers from clichés, banalities, and longueurs. Also, a cartoon Marxism—richies very, very bad, grinding their heels into the poor—does the opera no favors. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Lowell Liebermann, was commissioned by the Juilliard School, for its centennial. It is a strong work, musically, even if its libretto lingers over human depravity and brutality a bit too lovingly. This opera has half a chance to last, in my estimation. But such predictions—even grossly hedged ones, like mine—are for fools.

I have time for a couple of oddballs. And I will nominate a flute recital and a choral concert. The flute recital was by Emmanuel Pahud, and he was accompanied by Yefim Bronfman. Pahud is generally conceded to be the best flutist in the world—and he did nothing to argue against that consensus in this recital. It was no handicap to have Bronfman by his side. And Chanticleer, the twelve-man a cappella group, gave its usual Christmas concert, in front of the big tree at the Met Museum.

You put a gun to my head, asking for my favorite performance of the season? Give me five shots (so to speak) at it: Levine's *Falstaff*; Zacharias in that Mozart concerto; Thibaudet in *Clair de lune*; Blythe singing "What'll I Do?"; and Chanticleer, rendering "The First Nowell" in the David Willocks arrangement. That was not only musical, but holy.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 24 June 2006, on page 59

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