The New Criterion

Music December 2002

New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On Anne-Sophie Mutter, Guarneri String Quartet, David Shifrin, Josc van Dam & Berlioz's Damnation de Faust.

When she enters a stage—as she did at Carnegie Hall—Anne-Sophie Mutter sort of slinks, looking smashing. You may think it crass to mention this, and even crasser to *begin* with it. But let's not kid ourselves: Glamour has always been a big part of A-SM's marketing. No one from Team Mutter could possibly object.

The violinist appeared for a recital dub- bed "Song and Dance." This was something of a pops recital, beginning with the Fauré Sonata, but continuing with three Brahms Hungarian Dances, the Suite from *Porgy and Bess*, and a few ditties by Kreisler, before concluding with a three-movement work written for Mutter by her now-husband, André Previn. The program may have been lightish, but it was perfectly appetizing, and there was no reason it couldn't have been a success. In fact, well played, it would have been a capital evening.

It certainly started out well: Mutter was splendid in the first movement of the Fauré. She was intimate and engaging, making use of understatement. She displayed a beautiful sense of breathing, and she had a connectedness about her playing—one thought relating to the other. Her sound is all her own, thin-ribboned and slightly grainy, and capable of adapting to most any musical situation. One can never rest easy with Mutter's intonation—but in this opening Allegro, she was a model of Impressionistic/Romantic violin playing.

The second movement, Andante, was intelligent and effective, and if the third—Allegro vivo—was a little scratchy and "picky," it was defensible. The concluding movement, however, was thoroughly mediocre. Mutter lost that sense of connectedness and became listless. This is a nagging Mutter trait.

Her pianist, as usual in these recitals, was Lambert Orkis, who was adequate and largely supportive, but seldom assertive (meaning, helpfully assertive). As a pianist, he has the common tendency of rushing in difficult passages. Why people do this is a mystery, but it is a longstanding

fact.

The three Brahms Hungarian Dances were startlingly bad—startling in many respects. By rights, this music is in Mutter's blood, but her renditions were feckless, gutless, and astonishingly uncharacteristic. Past the point of individuality, they were bizarre. Everything was colossally distorted, bent and twisted out of shape. It was all one could do not to ask, "Is she on drugs?" In one of these Dances, her rhythmic fluctuations were so severe and nonsensical that one thought of a record, coming in and out at different speeds, owing to a balky turntable—perhaps one with a short. And her intonation completely left her. It was hard to tell that we were listening to the same woman who'd begun the Fauré.

Mutter has long been inconsistent; but she has become worryingly more so. Often, she plays like Cecilia Bartoli sings (alarmingly), and she can be as loopy, interpretively, as the latter-day Kathleen Battle.

After intermission, Mutter assayed the Gershwin Suite, the one fashioned by that great admirer of the composer's, Jascha Heifetz. A German violinist doing Gershwin? Sure—after all, Heifetz, a Russian (though a proud American citizen), did so. And if Mutter's countryman Thomas Quasthoff can sing "Ol' Man River" and spirituals, certainly she can play Gershwin.

But not like this, she shouldn't. Again, eccentricity—unmusical eccentricity—held sway. She drowned in portamento, sliding all over the place, vulgarly. In pitch, she became flatter and flatter: You might have been listening to Frederica von Stade, on her worst night. A great many phrases were un-*Porgy*-like, and un-Gershwin-like. Key moments like the "now and forever" in "Bess, You Is …" were utterly lost. Mutter seemed never to have heard the duet. She seemed not to have heard "It Ain't Necessarily So" either. Her tempo was so slow, she had no chance of sustaining it.

She played this Gershwin not as though she had just arrived from Germany—knowing nothing about America—but as though she had just arrived from Neptune. Incidentally, her husband is one of the best Gershwin interpreters in the world. Ever, really.

But surely she must have played *Fritz Kreisler* in authentic, or at least plausible, fashion? Not really. Her playing was a shame. Birthplace, as is so often the case, counted for little. For Kreisler today, one does well to turn to Joshua Bell, reared in the Indiana cornfields (although taught by Josef Gingold). Mutter was, again, vulgar, distorted, and super-slidey. Lambert Orkis continued too unobtrusive. He could have given these pieces more shape, some structure—backbone. He sort of let Mutter disintegrate, when it was incumbent on him to intervene.

The Previn piece—composed in 1997—is called *Tango, Song, and Dance*. It is both clever and charming. It is thoroughly Previnesque, too, which is to say that it's a little pastichey and derivative (although a kinder—and more appropriate—word would be "borrow-y"). Its crown and joy is its second movement, the "Song," which is beautiful. One hears in it—as in other parts of the work—some of the composer's opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The concluding Dance is jazz-

fueled and kicky.

Mutter did well here—especially considering the foregoing—and as she exited, she gave a sweet, wifely wave to Previn, sitting in a box. Quite rightly, she repeated the Song as an encore. But, judging from recent appearances, there seems to be something amiss in this violinist. Given the abundance of excellent young violinists today—Vengerov, Hahn, Midori, Bell, Chang—she must get her act together or be left behind. No matter how pretty she is.

Comparisons are odorous, Shakespeare said—but then, a lot of music criticism reeks. It wasn't the Guarneri String Quartet's fault that they performed in New York the night after the Brentano String Quartet; but they were put at a distinct disadvantage. The Brentano is only ten years old, and they gave a brilliant and stirring concert in the Weill Recital Hall (which is part of the Carnegie complex). More than a few people think they are—even now—the top string quartet in the world.

The Guarneri is a much older group and is still a much bigger name: but, when they appeared in the auditorium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they seemed tired, uninspired, and rather yesterday's news. Opening the concert was Haydn's String Quartet in C, Op. 54, No. 2. This is an unusual quartet from that Classical master in that it begins with a Vivace and ends with an Adagio. The first of the Guarneri's problems was its sound: It was simply unpleasant, rough and careless. Sound isn't everything, of course, but it's not nothing.

The performance, at its best, was routine. Missing were the composer's famous humor and gaiety. The Guarneri played stiffly and unlyrically, and they were often out of tune. In the later movements, the playing wasn't damnable, but neither was it polished or admirable. It was afflicted with that most dreaded of qualities: okayness. This opus may not be Haydn's most ingenious creation, but you can do a lot more with it than the Guarneri did.

Next came Kodály's String Quartet No. 2, Op. 10—a work in which beauty is even less important, which was fortunate. The first movement (Allegro) was intelligently done, with some strong playing from the Guarneri's first violinist, Arnold Steinhardt (except for a lamentably shaky final note). And the closing section—Allegro giocoso—had some of the "giocoso" missing from the Haydn. The playing overall was somewhat subdued, but one might also call it mature. Kodály's folk elements were a bit undersold—but at least they weren't obnoxious.

The second half of the concert was given over to another C-major quartet, that by Beethoven, Op. 9, No. 3. Back again was an anemic, scratchy sound, and the opening movement had little of the composer's joy or spirit. At this point, one must see through the playing to soak up the work. This is what one should do at any concert, if I may pause for a little (unasked for) advice: If you don't care for the performance, listen only to the music (apart from the rendition of it); if you happen not to care for the music, concentrate on the performance. Ideally, of course, no such choice has to be made.

Beethoven's second movement—Andante con moto, quasi allegretto—saw some improvement, with a nice, lively contribution from the cellist, Peter Wiley. If this movement wasn't heartfelt or probing, it was at least respectful and respectable. The following Menuetto actually had a smile—some warmth and generosity. It also reminded us of how much Beethoven loved C major, and how many moods he could convey in it.

Finally there comes a fugue, which the Guarneri executed deftly. One could see, at last, how they made their reputation. This was first-rate playing, with drive, expertise, and commitment. But the wait had been long.

Who is the greatest clarinetist in the world? This is probably not a question you've given much thought to, but I will volunteer an answer: David Shifrin. He certainly receives many votes, distinguished as Richard Stoltzman, Sabine Meyer, and several others are. Shifrin is also the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a successful and invaluable endeavor. At one of the Society's recent concerts, Shifrin was featured in a new concerto, by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

This is one of those pieces that "took a turn" after September 11. Over the last year or so, we've read many times, when attending a premiere: "The piece was meant to be this, but after 9/11, it was impossible to continue in that vein, so it had to take a turn, reflecting what had happened." September 11 has generated a lot of music—or has worked its way into a lot of music—not very much of it good.

Zwilich has made two versions of her clarinet concerto, one for chamber ensemble and one for orchestra. Not long after this Chamber Society concert, David Shifrin premiered the latter version with the Buffalo Philharmonic.

He is, indeed, a wondrous instrumentalist, and musician, and he had ample chance to prove it in the Zwilich. The concerto starts with zing: It is jazzy, riffy, propulsive, improvisatory. Everyone, it seems, gets jazz-minded when writing a clarinet concerto (though not Mozart). Pete Fountain would have fun in Zwilich's first movement. As for Shifrin, he is the complete clarinetist: the complete woodwind player, the complete wind player. He draws from his instrument a gorgeous tone, and he can alter that tone as required. His virtuosity is absolute. And his range—from bottom to top—has a wholeness, a unity. These aren't separate registers, but one "voice." Any singer would kill for that. Singers would kill for Shifrin's breathing capacity, too. That capacity, as Shifrin demonstrated in the second movement of this work, is almost superhuman.

It is in that second movement that the concerto takes its turn—a very abrupt one. This is the only movement that has a title or any marking at all: "Elegy: September 11." There is a feeling of kaddish about this section, and the clarinet lends a hint of the klezmer. It goes without saying that this music is sincerely meant: but to my ears, it came off as a little hokey—a little like film and television music. I thought of one of those after-school specials, when music comes on that's

supposed to make you feel sad. For me, this was a little too self-conscious to be truly affecting. In all likelihood, you can't consciously write about tragedy; it simply has to come.

On top of which, that contrast between the first and second movements seems too drastic to be credible (although, it is true, those planes came out of the blue, on a beautiful day). To return to the performance, Shifrin effected, at the end of the second movement, a jaw-dropping diminuendo.

The third movement revives a peppiness, and it continues to exploit the clarinet nicely. And in the fourth and final movement, we are back again in elegy mode, though this time with more sweetness and resignation. In my eyes—and, again, I keep qualifying these things, because the matter is so personal—this concerto does not succeed as commemoration. There is such a thing, we've discovered, as tragedy kitsch. We may have to accept that criminal calamities like 9/11 are inexpressible in music. And if you have to tell someone what a piece is "about" …

It wasn't quite winter, but José van Dam visited Alice Tully Hall for Schubert's *Winterreise*. Actually, this was the first of two recitals given by the famed Belgian bass-baritone, the other being all-Schumann (including the *Dichterliebe*). Van Dam is—if I may—in the winter of his career. He is an old vocal warrior who has lived a lifetime with *Winterreise*, among other important works, and he has performed it the world over many times. It shows. Experience and wisdom count.

But so does voice, a little bit—and van Dam sounds like an old man. That may seem rude and harsh, but it's certainly not meant to be. As it is appropriate for a woman, or a man, to look his age, it's appropriate for a singer to sound his age. Van Dam's instrument is now husky and ragged, though it has resources—resources that van Dam knows how to employ. And if the voice is gone, or going, a singer must depend all the more on his wiles: musical wiles. This, van Dam does.

Yes, a singer in later years must rely more than ever on characterization and insight—but there is the danger of overdoing it, in compensation. This is an affliction of many a singer with gray hair: over-artistry, let's call it. But van Dam avoids it, which is infinitely to his credit.

In every one of the songs making up this cycle, van Dam touched the core. His technique is in superb shape. He seems to have acquired it early, which is standing him in good stead now. His intonation, for example, was rock-solid. Through catarrh and scratching and wear and everything else, that intonation came through. His German is clear and correct. And his range should be anyone's envy. In *Winterreise*, he sang almost two octaves, from a low G to a high F. He evinced zero strain.

As happens in good *Winterreise*s, a mesmerizing effect soon took over. One forgot the voice—the initial adjusting to the voice; one heard not the voice, but the singing. Besides which, that voice grew on one. In addition, van Dam demonstrated a fine sense of rhythm—of pulse—with no tempos intolerably slow. That's another affliction, or danger, for the old: slowness of tempo, as a stand-in for profundity. Van Dam unified these two dozen songs, all through. And he used just enough variation of mood, inflection, and so on to avoid monotony. This performance was a feat of

stamina, and, more important, of concentration—mental stamina.

The pianist was a Pole named Maciej Pikulski, a fine player with a nice tone and an easy, fluid technique. Sometimes, it's hard to play something so (relatively) simple: oom-pah-pahs, or a simple melodic line in the left hand. This takes evenness, composure, and maturity, which Pikulski has.

We will end with a colorful, outsize, thrilling evening: a presentation of Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust* by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. We are coming up on a big Berlioz year, 2003, the bicentennial of the composer's birth. *La Damnation de Faust* is … what? An opera? A concert opera? A dramatic oratorio? Whatever it is, it is a rhapsodically Romantic "show," and the Montreal forces milked it for all it's worth.

Mention first must be made of the tenor—the Faust—Michael Schade, described in his bio as a "German-Canadian." He was heard at the beginning of the season in the Beethoven Ninth with the New York Philharmonic. But that gave hardly any indication of what he can do. In the Berlioz, he was fresh-voiced, lyrical, and a joy to listen to. He put one in mind of Fritz Wunderlich—a sentence that is almost never written, and that I, for one, have never had occasion to write, that I can recall. Like Wunderlich, Schade was graceful but powerful, his gleaming, beautiful instrument buttressed by a sure technique, and guided by sure musical instincts. His soft singing was superb, and his high "head voice" astonishing.

The Méphistophélès was a proven young Canadian, John Relyea, who seems more and more like the successor to Samuel Ramey, the veteran American bass whom he resembles in many ways. Relyea is clean, disciplined, and musical. He conveyed his role well, with plenty of menace in the voice, but without mustache-twirling inadvertent comedy.

Equally impressive was the evening's Marguerite, the mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Donose, a Romanian, with the signature qualities of that nation, vocally. They seem to have an endless supply of darkish, wide-ribboned, alluring voices. Donose is not only a singer of considerable beauty but also one of considerable control.

Berlioz's *Faust* requires a very full stage, and the Montreal people went all out, having not only a groaning orchestra and the symphony's chorus, but the Petits Chanteurs de Laval as well. Leading the affair was the French conductor Michel Plasson, most closely associated with Toulouse. (The Montreal Symphony recently lost its longtime conductor, Charles Dutoit, whose high-handedness finally proved too much.) Plasson was extraordinarily vigorous and enthusiastic, seeming to enjoy himself immensely. The orchestra committed itself lustily, and the chorus—obviously well drilled—sang precisely and gloriously.

Vocally, we may not hear a more distinguished program all year. And dramatically, the entire evening was supercharged. It was at times riotous, spilling over with emotion and passion. The whole, undying story was conjured, a living tale.

About midway through this performance, I had one wish, and command, for the Montrealers and their crew: Record.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found here.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 21 Number 4 , on page 64

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2002/12/nychronicle-dec02-1856