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New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On the opening of the New York Philharmonic's 2004-2005 season under Lorin Maazel, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center under new artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han, the Philadelphia Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, Traviata, Daphne and Platée at New York City Opera & Otello and Carmen under James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera.

The season began, and began well—all across the board. Since the below chronicle will be opera-heavy, let's touch first on some other things, starting with the New York Philharmonic. Lorin Maazel began his third season as music director there. His has been a "controversial" tenure, in that not everyone likes everything he does. But it has been a tenure of distinction and excellence (in addition to some vexation). Over the summer, the Philharmonic announced that it was extending Maazel's contract through 2008–09, when the maestro will be seventy-nine. I say, why not extend it further, if all is going well? Some conductors are just warming up as they approach eighty.

Youth-fanciers were consoled when the Philharmonic made a simultaneous announcement that it would showcase three guest conductors: Riccardo Muti, David Robertson, and Alan Gilbert. This development was thought to represent a competition: Which would be Maazel's successor? Muti, as you know, is an Italian stallion, now at La Scala. Robertson is a critic's darling, a Californian, a champion of contemporary music. Gilbert is similarly favored by critics, and he has the advantage of being the son of two Philharmonic musicians. (The feature pieces would make readers go "ah.")

Muti is already in his sixties. (Was I saying something about youth?) But Robertson is in his forties, and Gilbert his thirties. If it's youth we're lusting after, why not consider Antonio Pappano, the London-born conductor of Italian parentage who's now in charge of Covent Garden? But if it's youth we're lusting after, we don't deserve to go to concerts anyway. Used to be, gray or white hair was a welcome—and reassuring—sight before an orchestra. Are we now to count it a drawback? What a pitiful pass. In any event, Lorin Maazel is as youthful as any conductor, if it's youthfulness you want (and that is just one of the many artistic traits on which a conductor should be able to call).

Maazel began the 2004–05 season with two standard—very standard—works: the Beethoven Violin Concerto and the "New World" Symphony. The soloist in the Beethoven was Maxim Vengerov, the superb Russian violinist, who is known for charisma, but who was utterly faithful to Beethoven. (Of course, offering some charisma can be part of faithfulness to Beethoven, and to others.) In the Dvořák, Maazel indulged in some of his eccentricities— particularly of rhythm and dynamics—but this was an exciting account, reminding you of why you loved the "New World" Symphony in the first place. Or, put another way: You may be sick of this work; Maazel is not.

The next concert was even better, featuring Beethoven's Seventh Symphony—Maazel's not sick of that one, either—but also a fine performance of a Messiaen work: *Les Offrandes oubliées*. In this, Maazel succeeded by not being too mystical and profound; he was naturally, straightforwardly musical; the music contains the mysticism and profundity already. Also on that program was the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, with Vengerov again the soloist. He and Maazel managed to reveal new sides to this warhorse, making it run and disport like a colt.

The third concert of the season boasted Lang Lang, the pyrotechnical pianist, playing Tchaikovsky's pyrotechnical Concerto No. 1. That performance was strange, but satisfying, like a lot of Lang performances (and a lot of Maazel performances). We also had a thrilling, virtuosic performance of Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin* Suite (to go with a dull, clumsy one of Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* Prelude). But the curiosity on the program was a new work by Augusta Read Thomas, a Long Island native who is now composer-in-residence at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This was *Gathering Paradise*, a collection of Dickinson settings for soprano and orchestra. The work is thoughtfully crafted, and has many points of interest. But it also suffers from monotony, which is odd for a work with so much to play with (seven poems). Maazel, the Philharmonic, and their soloist—the exquisite soprano Heidi Grant Murphy—gave a stellar performance. *Gathering Paradise* can live a hundred years and not get better treatment.

Moving to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, it has new artistic directors this season, David Finckel and Wu Han, a cellist and pianist who are also husband and wife. (Finckel is best known as a member of the Emerson String Quartet.) They replace David Shifrin, the clarinetist who served for twelve years as artistic director. CMS's opening program was eclectic, a trademark of this society. Now and then they might throw all six Brandenburg Concertos at you, or forty-three Birtwistle polonaises (I made that last one up)—but they are usually good about giving you a variety show, which is ordinarily the most satisfying way to spend a musical evening.

The opening concert gave us Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* for flute, clarinet, string quartet, and harp; Berlioz's song cycle *Les Nuits d'été*; Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* (his birthday present to his wife on Christmas Day 1870); and Stravinsky's *Renard*, a burlesque for a motley crew, including four dancers. Nancy Allen was the splendid harpist in the Ravel, and Jennifer Larmore lent her formidable mezzo to the Berlioz, some interpretive misjudgments aside. The Stravinsky was fun, a nice manifestation of the Chamber Music Society's eclecticism.

Finally—before we hit the opera—Carnegie Hall opened with the Philadelphia Orchestra, which is virtually its home orchestra. The Philadelphians should really leave toothbrushes there. This opening concert was a gala affair, featuring celebrity patrons in tuxedos and gowns, and two celebrities onstage: Renée Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma. The music-making was of poorer quality than the clothes.

The conductor Christoph Eschenbach—in his second season with the Philadelphia—led a sloppy, disappointing program of Richard Strauss (*Don Juan*, the *Four Last Songs*, and then another Don, *Don Quixote*). I had my usual quarrels with Eschenbach, interpretively—his pointless energy, his inattention to detail or nuance—but more worrying is this orchestra's technical condition. Before—under other conductors—you could quibble, or even anguish, over interpretation, but technique was in the bag. Judging from Eschenbach-led performances in recent months, this is no longer the case.

If it's curtains for the Philadelphia Orchestra, this is a sad, sad development, considering what that body has meant to music for about a hundred years.

Now, to the opera, starting with New York City Opera, which this season offers a most interesting lineup. It includes *La Rondine*, the Puccini opera that is one of the most underrated works in the whole repertoire. (*La Rondine* is the opera from which "Chi il bel sogno," or "Doretta's Song," is plucked.) *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*, Poulenc's masterpiece from 1953. And a new work, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, by Charles Wuorinen, based on a children's text by Salman Rushdie. And, oh, yes: *Cinderella*. By whom, you ask? Rossini, Massenet? No, not either of those: This is *Cinderella* by Rodgers and Hammerstein (1957).

But the first City Opera production I witnessed was of a staple, a tried-and-true friend, Verdi's *Traviata*. It never gets old, does it? (At least it shouldn't.) *La Traviata* is pretty close to a perfect opera—perfect in its every page—as even those who may have reservations about Verdi readily concede. Melody and invention simply poured out of him, and his structure is exemplary.

This production was by Renata Scotto, the retired Italian diva who was a mean Violetta (Traviata) herself. It is a production that understands the opera, thoroughly. In the spotlight was the soprano Maria Kanyova, who, despite what you might guess, was born in St. Louis. She made a wonderful Violetta, both in voice and in dramatic characterization. Hers is a vibrant, juicy instrument, right for a variety of roles, including Violetta (which is a role that itself contains great variety). Kanyova tends to sing accurately and purposefully, making every note count. Her showstopping, multifaceted aria in the first act was excellent. She seemed to be thinking it as she sang it—and she gave a boffo E flat at the end.

Her Alfredo was Robert Breault, from Menominee, Michigan, way up in the U.P. (Upper Peninsula). His voice, I would describe as pleasant, which is the word I use repeatedly about Matthew Polenzani (a tenor star at the Metropolitan Opera, who is a favorite of James Levine). As

Alfredo, Breault was ardent, as one must be, but he wasn't especially Italianate. His singing was more neutral. For example, Alfredo's big aria—"De' miei bollenti spiriti"—was nice, but it was sung rather like a Rodgers and Hammerstein song. That said, I enjoyed it (as I enjoy R&H songs). And his high notes—like Kanyova's—were outstanding.

Germont was Michael Corvino, a baritone from the Bronx. He was largely graceful, if a bit glib, and a little worn. (I don't mean worn in the way Germont—the greatly troubled father—might be.) His killer aria, "Di Provenza il mar," was somewhat stilted, not expressing its full, uncanny power.

Act III was effective, with Kanyova let-ting out a notably bitter and despairing "E' tardi" ("It's late"). As she lay there dying, a chorus of cellphones went off in the New York State Theater, prompting a second chorus, this one of shushing and murmuring, which is always—*always*—worse. Violetta and Alfredo's final duet, "Parigi, o cara," was controlled, affecting, and beautiful. The very ending, however—as Violetta drops, and the orchestra rages at the injustice of it all—should have been far more savage. That end ought to be unbearable—and this was sadly too easy to bear.

Orchestra and chorus were competent, occasionally rising above that. The conductor, George Manahan—the music director of City Opera—was dutiful. In truth, the evening never really glowed unless Maria Kanyova had her mouth open. Fortunately, that was a lot of the time.

Another opera dominated by a soprano is *Daphne*, Strauss's Grecian jewel from 1937. When City Opera performed it in September, believe it or not, it was giving *Daphne* its New York stage premiere. This opera is a worthy item in the Strauss repertory, often linked with *Capriccio* (1941). The score is exotic, involving, and beautiful—thorough-ly Straussian. Many people know it only through excerpts, recorded by such sopranos as Kiri Te Kanawa and Renée Fleming (to name only two of the more recent).

City Opera's soprano was Elizabeth Futral, a stalwart whom I have sometimes described as a "dramatic coloratura." There is not much call for coloratura in *Daphne*, but strength and lyricism are requisite, and Futral provided both. She provided rather more of the former, however. In her favor, she knew the music cold, and she made herself believable as Daphne, the targeted, tormented nymph.

The tenor Roger Honeywell, singing Leukippos, was quite good, although he was at times tight and pinched. He became less so as the evening progressed. Moreover, there is something very appealing about this singer, making you want to root for him. Another tenor, Robert Chafin, singing Apollo, had significant pitch problems, but he was game. Our Gaea, Ursula Ferri, was listed as a mezzo, but she sounded like a contralto—a true contralto. What a remarkable instrument. A shame it was off pitch (flat) much of the time. The baritone John Avey was Peneios, and he was a little underpowered, though it could have been that the orchestra was a little overpowered.

That orchestra was again led by George Manahan, who mainly stayed out of the way of the music, which sounds like faint praise, but which is really a tribute. And the production itself was superb: The director Stephen Lawless used ample imagination, tempered by modesty and responsibility. The set and costume designer, Ashley Martin-Davis, hit the mark. Indeed, the set (there is only one act) looked like Strauss's music itself, swirling, dreamy, protean. And the lighting—conceived by Pat Collins—served the drama exceptionally well.

A very satisfying evening at the opera. Short, too (about an hour and forty minutes).

And now for something completely different—*Platée*, by Rameau. City Opera makes a specialty of bringing us the Baroque, particularly Handel and Rameau. And *Platée* is not something you can see on just any stage.

Which may suit you fine. It is not a deathless opera, no matter how much life this company poured into it. The story is supremely strange, and I doubt my ability to sum it up neatly. Suffice it to say that this is a messy tale featuring muses, lizards, gods, goats, gators, and freak upon freak. The prologue had a motley crew hanging out at a bar (complete with Budweiser and Miller signs). (Keep in mind that this opera was written in the 1740s.) This crew looked like the Village People, of "YMCA" fame. You had a leather guy, a sailor, a fairy princess, a cop. I don't believe I saw an Indian.

There was a ton to look at in this production, with stage direction and choreography by Mark Morris and costumes by Isaac Mizrahi. These men did everything they could to dazzle—or occasionally repulse—the eye. Caterpillars (human ones) crept along logs. A character looking like Elton John ascended and descended in a type of basket. Figures of indeterminate species danced dirty. Imagine *The Secret Garden*—or some such show—gone all Mark Morris-like.

When I say that *Platée* is not deathless, I say it as a longtime champion of Rameau. I have spent years bemoaning his (relative) neglect. But this opera does not travel well, through time. City Opera's singers were decent, on the whole, and they—with the dancers—were unquestionably enthusiastic. Continual chuckles in the audience suggested that patrons appreciated *Platée*. Good for them. And good for City Opera for taking a walk on the wild side now and then, no matter what our individual reactions.

The Metropolitan Opera has been walking less wildly, but it has been turning in some excellent performances. The music director James Levine began the season with an *Otello*, and a terrific *Otello* it was: disciplined, gutsy, exciting. This is an important season for him. First, he's taking over the Boston Symphony Orchestra, giving him the kind of podium that many of us have wished for him over many years. Second, questions have been raised about his health—including by Met-orchestra musicians griping anonymously to the press. It's true that, in the last few seasons, Levine has had many sluggish, indifferent, or otherwise subpar outings. But what that has to do with health is anyone's guess.

He was crackling during that *Otello*. In a subsequent *Carmen*, however, he was much less than crackling, or precise, or feeling: He was flat, sloppy, tepid. Odd. He is a master of this score, of course, as of others, and can conduct this opera with great incisiveness and flair. Fortunately, he sort of woke up for Act IV, when he seemed at last to engage with the score and to be enjoying himself (and it).

Olga Borodina, too, had an off night, in the title role. She is a supreme Carmen—albeit a very Russian one—a combination of silk and smoke. Several seasons ago, her Carmen was so alluring, I said it ought to come in a brown-paper wrapper. This September, however, Borodina was strangely subdued. Where once she was mesmerizing, she was now merely interesting, if that. To add insult to injury, her vocal technique was on hiatus. I had never heard her intonation so poor. Before Act II, a Met official came to the stage to announce that "Miss Borodina [was] suffering from an allergic reaction," but would go on. She was suffering from something, that's for sure.

But she, too, came alive later on, singing with some of her customary authority and persuasiveness.

The Don José? In the season premiere, it was Neil Shicoff, but the night I attended, it was another American tenor, Richard Leech. He was virile, but he was also quite effortful. In the Flower Song, he displayed little nuance, just bulling his way through. One need not be delicate in this aria (despite its title), but one should at least be smooth. At the end of the aria, he gave no high *piano*, and in fact he had offered no *piano* of any kind.

But then, guess what? He, too, had an infinitely better fourth act, singing with new freedom, hitting the center of the notes, and emitting considerable dramatic intensity. A strange animal, a singer, and a strange medium, opera.

Hei-Kyung Hong was Micaëla, whom she portrayed with an air of tragic elegance. Her French may not qualify her for the Académie Française, but she knew what to do with her music. Escamillo was Borodina's husband, Ildar Abdrazakov, the Russian bass-baritone. He, too, cannot expect to sit in the Académie Française, but he was beautiful-voiced, accurate, and suave.

The production was Zeffirelli's, from 1996. A minute or so before curtain, the friend next to me said, "This may sound dumb, but I hope it's pretty." (She had never seen *Carmen*.) That wish wasn't dumb at all—it was right, even profound, in a way. A production of *Carmen* ought to reflect, in some fashion, the wondrous Romanticism of Bizet's score. Zeffirelli knows that, thank goodness.

But it was not a good night at the Met. A critic who had been there on an earlier night—the premiere night—told me that that performance was so bad—so bad in every particular—he even wanted to criticize the children. "And I hated the children's chorus, too!" he wanted to say. "They were awful!" But his wife said, "You can't criticize the children, for heaven's sake." And so it goes, in America the Soft.

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