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New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Recent performances at Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, and more

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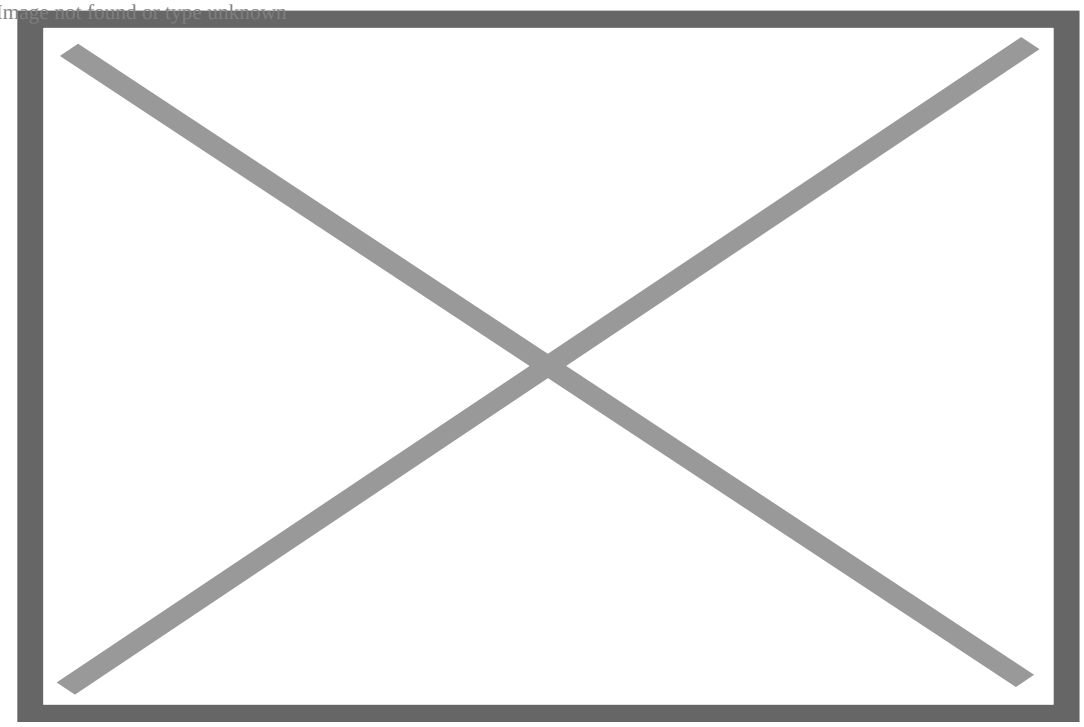

Under the baton of Semyon Bychkov, the Russian-born conductor, the New York Philharmonic played Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11. Chances to hear this symphony are few—which is too bad, because it is magnificent. The symphony has a nickname, "The Year 1905." The four movements here are meant to commemorate the revolution of that year, and there is a fairly specific program: "The Palace Square," "The Ninth of January," etc. But the symphony can be heard simply as music, without reference to a program. Some have heard it as a tribute to the Communist revolution that seized power twelve years after this 1905 revolution. Others have heard it as an attack, indirect, on the Communist dictatorship. As in so much Shostakovich, there is an ambivalence.

Regardless, Bychkov and the Philharmonic delivered a memorable performance. From the beginning, you knew you were in expert hands, namely Bychkov's. He had total authority, and the orchestra responded to this
authority. The music had every quality it needed, from matter-of-factness to tension to terror. It was never bombastic, yet had full power. Mainly, Bychkov let the music speak for itself. It proceeded inexorably. From a technical point of view, the Philharmonic was almost immaculate. The brass were unified, and other parts of the orchestra were unified as well. Even the pizzicatos were accurate, which was astounding. Markus Rhoten was suggestive, deft, on the timpani. Robert Langevin, the principal flute, proved once more that he is one of the finest musicians in New York.

To my ears—if I could mix up the senses for a moment—you could practically smell the events of 1905. Bychkov gave a lesson in Shostakovich conducting. Funnily enough, I tend to think of him as a young conductor, because when I first knew about him, he was in his twenties, working in my home state: He led the orchestra in Grand Rapids, Michigan. But now he's a senior conductor in his sixties. I must say that, when I walked into Avery Fisher Hall on that Friday afternoon, I did not expect to hear a great performance—but that's what we in the audience got.

Last year, I wrote a piece about Michael Hersch, the American composer. I said, "He has written music of virtually all types: symphonies, concertos, chamber music, songs. The only thing that's missing is opera, which will no doubt come." It now has. Hersch has written a chamber opera called *On the Threshold of Winter*. It is based on poems by Marin Sorescu, a Romanian (as his name tells you) who lived from 1936 to 1996. Those poems are found in a volume called *The Bridge*, which, as Hersch says in a program note, "chronicles the final weeks of Sorescu's unsuccessful battle with cancer." Hersch uses a translation by Adam Sorkin and Lidia Vianu.

The opera will have its premiere next summer. In the meantime, Hersch has fashioned a suite from it, which he gives a different title: *How Far the Cradle*. The suite is for soprano and piano, and it has six sections. Hersch explains that these are "drawn from a number of lullaby-like movements which appear scattered throughout the opera." The suite was performed at an evening of Hersch's music held at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music, on West 37th Street.

It is natural, though somewhat cheap, to talk about other music when discussing new music—and here I go: Some of the suite reminded me of Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*. The third section, "Set me spinning to roam the universe," is a bleak and beautiful lullaby—and put me in mind of both Chopin and Shostakovich. Hersch is a writer of lullabies: Two years ago, he wrote two of them for the piano. The final section of the suite requires a big range from the soprano (a "Come scoglio"–like range, I thought). The pianist does some plucking at strings, within the piano.

Though it may sound macabre to say, Hersch is very good at writing about death. Mahler and Shostakovich are two others who handled the subject well, to put it mildly. Years ago, the Philadelphia Orchestra, under Wolfgang Sawallisch, played the Shostakovich Fourteenth at Carnegie Hall. It was a very good performance—and people were streaming out of it. Afterward, a

colleague of mine, Sedgwick Clark, observed, "That piece scares the hell out of old people."

Downstairs in Carnegie Hall, in the venue called Zankel Hall, there was a concert geared to the Britten centennial—that composer was born in November 1913. We had three singers, led by Ian Bostridge, the English tenor. Joining him were Iestyn Davies, a countertenor, and Joshua Hopkins, a baritone. Accompanying them was the pianist Julius Drake. On the second half of their program, they performed Britten's *Canticles* (and when I say "they," I really mean Bostridge, who was chief singer). First, however, they did Purcell: songs of his "realized" by later composers, namely Britten, Tippett, and Thomas Adès. The third of those composers, of course, is still with us, and he realized, or arranged, "Full fathom five," which makes sense: Adès wrote an opera on *The Tempest*. His realization is rich and wonderful. I thought I heard an echo of the knights' procession from *Parsifal*, I swear.

The singers sang their Purcell ably, though one could pick at them. The final song, by the way, was "Music for a while," which was a switch: This song is a famous recital-opener ("Music for a while / Shall all your cares beguile").

In Britten's first canticle, "My Beloved Is Mine," Bostridge was a model of poise and understanding. He was that way all evening long, really (and he has been that way all career long, come to that). Canticle II was probably the highlight of the evening. It is "Abraham and Isaac," and Bostridge was joined by the countertenor, Davies. They made this piece—or Britten made it—a tensely understated drama. There are five canticles in all, and I must say I have a hard time loving them, in toto. But Bostridge is, again, a model in them. Once, Lee Hoiby accompanied Leontyne Price in a song of his, and, after, she said, "You played that awfully fast." The composer replied, "That's the way it goes, Leontyne." Bostridge knows "the way it goes."

Yuja Wang, the young pianist and sensation, played a recital in Carnegie Hall (the main auditorium). She began with a rarely heard sonata of Prokofiev: No. 3. She played it demonically and lyrically, in true Prokofiev fashion. I have tried to describe her usual sound before: It is bony, thin, with space or separation between the notes. She does not muster much heft or lushness—but she musters other things, including clarity. Moreover, she's a very smart pedaler. She played the Prokofiev with fantastic intensity, fantastic concentration, and fantastic fingers. Next came a sonata by Chopin, the one in B minor. The second movement, Scherzo, is virtually made for her—it cries out for her nimbleness and speed, and she played it supremely. I was wondering how she would handle the next movement, Largo. How would she handle one great-hearted melody in particular, which calls for a big fat tone? She used what she had: She did not go for a fat tone, but instead played pianissimo, which was surprising and beautiful. If Wang were an athlete, we might say she "plays within herself." In her Chopin, she did not pound, trying to be a bigger pianist than she is.

After intermission, we had some jazz, out of the Soviet Union: Nikolai Kapustin's Variations for Piano, Op. 41, composed in 1984. (Kapustin, who is now in his seventies, is both a classical

musician and a jazzman.) On the margins of my program, I wrote one word: "Tatumesque." Wang was playing like that virtuoso jazz pianist, Art Tatum. So good is she at leaps, she does not have to alter the rhythm of a piece: Normal pianists have to slow down when they leap, warping the rhythm, but not Wang, who simply leaps in time. This is eye-rubbing, or ear-rubbing. She then played some more Chopin: the Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, and the Ballade No. 3 in A flat. Why she did not play the nocturne straight—with straighter rhythm—I don't know. You could almost say that she warped the rhythm. The piece was deprived of its pulse and some of its power (emotional power). The ballade was admirable, though a little mechanical.

She ended the printed program with the Three Movements from Stravinsky's *Pétrou-chka*. At its best, this playing was beyond dazzling. Once more, it was time to rub eyes and ears. The playing was almost unbelievable in its speed, accuracy, and panache.

The audience would have liked more than four encores, but Wang limited herself to that number—beginning with Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, in the arrangement by the great Hungarian pianist Zoltán Kocsis. She played it seamlessly, as though a singer were singing it. I thought to myself, "No one knows how hard that is." Then came Horowitz's *Carmen* Variations—followed by, whaddaya know? A famous Tatum arrangement, or improvisation: the one on "Tea for Two." This Chinese-born pianist played it like an all-American girl. She bade farewell with Chopin's C-sharp-minor waltz, a very familiar piece—but she showed me something in it I had never noticed before.

Speaking of showing you something: At the beginning of the evening, Wang walked out onstage in a shorter-than-short red dress, barely covering her rear, and high high heels. She appeared to have trouble walking. A Times Square hooker, in the old days, would have said, "For heaven's sake, put on some clothes!" For the second half of the program, she walked out in a black dress of the same length, although this one exposed midriff, in addition to other things. In a word, this was stripper-wear. If she's looking for a gimmick, she doesn't need one. If she thinks these dresses are becoming on her, someone should disabuse her. If she wants a fogey to say, "Oh, how shocking," she's got that. It would be terrible if this stripper-wear detracted from her greatness as a pianist. Then again, one grows tired of the proletarian black pajamas favored by today's musicians . . .

Onstage at the New York Philharmonic, there was an array of concert-wear. There were three soloists, three cellists, sitting side by side (by side). One wore a tuxedo. One wore an elegant purple dress. And the other wore the proletarian black pajamas. They were Daniel Müller-Schott, Alisa Weilerstein, and Carter Brey. They were playing Concerto grosso, a work by Krzysztof Penderecki from 2000. On the podium was Charles Dutoit, who premiered the piece in Japan. Concerto grosso was commissioned by the NHK Symphony Orchestra. (You may recall that Penderecki's most famous work is the *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, written in 1960. That was a piece they were happy to let you write in the Soviet bloc.)

The concerto has a variety of music, but, overall, it is gloomy and ruminative. The three soloists frequently talk with one another (musically). In a nice touch, Penderecki makes significant use of

the cello section, to go with the cellists in the forefront. There is also a good deal of percussion. In my view, the music becomes somewhat repetitive and wearying, not quite justifying its length (about thirty-five minutes). But the piece's merit is obvious. The composer himself was on hand to take a bow.

Several years ago, I asked Lorin Maazel, who was then the Philharmonic's music director, "Who are today's composers worth listening to?" Immediately, he said, "Penderecki." Then there was a long pause.

In Zankel Hall, the American Composers Orchestra played four pieces. The first was by an Irish composer. That's what the first line of his bio says: "Peter Fahey is an Irish composer." The ACO seems to be branching out, nationality-wise. The piece in question is *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*, and it is for "orchestra and electronics," as Fahey says in a program note. The subject is grim: abuse that took place in the "industrial schools" of Ireland. Fahey uses a recording of the testimony of a victim. In that program note, he says, "Musical material is derived from an analysis of the structure of the voice in the recording."

The music struck me as neatly arranged sounds—and creepy sounds. Think of writhing snakes or various insects. Is this work powerful? Yes, but maybe in a cheap way: There is something manipulative about it, I think. Who can fail to be moved or disturbed by victims' testimony such as this? But the composer undoubtedly has a right to his musical, or musico-social, statement.

At the Metropolitan Opera, they revived *Tosca*, in the 2009 production by Luc Bondy. I wrote about this production at length when it was new, and will hold fire now. In fact, I have good news to report: There are many new directorial touches, improving the production greatly. I presume the credit goes to Paula Williams, the stage director. On the night I attended, *Tosca* was grippingly acted. (Really.) The soprano singing Tosca was Patricia Racette, and the tenor singing Cavaradossi was Roberto Alagna. Both of them were "on form," as British golf commentators say. This was especially true of the latter.

The role of Tosca requires a soprano to be coquettish and tender, imperious and scalding. Racette succeeded on all counts. She had a case of the wobbles on high notes, however, and she lost her pitch at the end of "Vissi d'arte"—but she regained that pitch, which is not easy to do. Alagna was blazing and secure from the start. He put on a clinic of unforced power. "Recondita armonia," his first aria, was a little belted. But on the last note, he sprang a surprise: a long diminuendo, show-offy but impressive. In Act II, his cries of "Vittoria!" were a bit frayed, but his character has just been tortured. And the final aria, "E lucevan le stelle," he shaped beautifully. At fifty, Alagna is no longer a kid, but he retains his mane of hair, his trim physique, and, much of the time, his vocal freshness and power. The opera-sphere likes to snark at him: but, "on form," he is really a *primo tenore assoluto*.

Scarpia was portrayed by George Gagnidze, whom I first heard in this role with the New York Philharmonic, believe it or not: That was in a 2008 concert performance (led by Maazel). He was nearly ideal then—in sound, psychology, and looks. He brought valuable experience and ability to the Met. But, strangely, he was hard to hear—bottled up.

In last month's chronicle, I knocked Riccardo Frizza, for conducting a nothingburger of a *Norma*. He was the conductor of this *Tosca*, and the performance was very much a somethingburger: vivid, involving, superb. Anthony McGill was exemplary in his clarinet solos. This evening reminded me, if reminding one needed, what a genius Puccini is. There's another one they snark at, stupidly.

Let's end where we started, back at the Philharmonic. One concert began with a Bach cantata, "Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen." The first movement is maybe the highest expression of joy in music—unless that distinction belongs to the last movement (the "Alleluia"). In between are profundity and beauty. The soprano soloist was Miah Persson, from Sweden. She sang with sincerity, and a degree of lissomeness. But she was also pillowy, wispy, and uncertain of pitch. Her high Cs were more hinted at than sung. The orchestra, conducted by Bernard Labadie, was ragged, sounding underrehearsed. The principal cello was very dry, and so was the principal violin—dry and sour. Dryness and sourness do not equal Bach (as I think Rostropovich and Milstein would agree). The second soloist in this cantata is a trumpet, and he was Matthew Muckey, a member of the orchestra (though not the principal—that position belongs to Philip Smith). Muckey played easily, beautifully, and intelligently.

The concert continued with "Let the bright Seraphim," the hit aria from Handel's *Samson*. Here, too, Muckey was co-soloist, and he played some licks, some ornamentation, I had never heard before (in many years of hearing this piece). Persson had licks of her own—and she sang with more freedom than in the Bach. It was wonderful to hear these glorious pieces. And the soprano—Is this all right to say?—looked like an angel.

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

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

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