A recap of this year’s Salzburg Festival.

I began last month’s chronicle with a Holocaust opera: *The Passenger*, by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, presented by the Lincoln Center Festival. I will begin this month’s chronicle with a Holocaust opera: *Charlotte Salomon*, by Marc-André Dalbavie, presented by the Salzburg Festival. Weinberg’s opera was written in the 1960s but has long been neglected. Dalbavie’s opera is new.

He is a French composer, born in 1961. The subject of his opera, Charlotte Salomon, was a Berliner born in 1917. When the Nazis came to power, she and her family coped as well as they could. She studied for a while at the art academy. Then she, her family, and their fellow Jews could cope no longer. In 1939, Charlotte went to the south of France, to join her grandparents in exile. She learned about a pattern of suicide in her family. She thought she herself would go mad and commit suicide. To stave off this development, she created a work of art. She painted hundreds of
watercolors, and put words along with them. She also indicated music. All of this, she called a Singspiel, or singing play. It was about her life and that of her family.

While in France, Charlotte married an Austrian exile, Alexander Nagler. They were deported to Auschwitz in 1943. Charlotte was twenty-six and pregnant. She was gassed upon arrival.

The libretto of Dalbavie’s opera is by Barbara Honigmann, relying heavily on Charlotte Salomon’s own words. The libretto is in German and French. The score is decidedly French. I believe it is a descendant of Pelléas et Mélisande (Debussy). It is linear, delicate, and often hypnotic. It is more suggestive than explicit. The score is patient, ruthlessly patient, in the way it proceeds. Dalbavie often creates a wash of sound. He mixes popular music with his own music, to relate the story. Ultimately, the opera is moving.

Yet it is a long sit: over two hours, with no intermission. I can understand the desire not to break the momentum of the piece with an intermission. It might be hard for listeners to reenter the mood. But the uninterrupted length of the piece may curb its salability.

Salzburg’s production was by Luc Bondy, the Swiss director, son of François Bondy, the late writer. Bondy père was a democrat and an anti-Communist when it was difficult, brave, and urgent to be those things. Luc Bondy’s production matched the score and the libretto: More from a production cannot be asked. Bondy directed with keen sensitivity and artistry. The cast was of high quality, with a mixture of ages and voice types, necessary to the opera. The composer himself conducted the Mozarteum Orchestra of Salzburg. He did so with care and patience, two qualities embedded in his score.

After it was over, and the people were applauding, I thought, “Here is something new and worthwhile.” It’s gratifying to hail something new as worthwhile.

I would like to make a final comment, relating to the production: The Nazis were depicted with distorted, grotesque faces. The singers and actors portraying the Nazis were wearing masks of some sort. One can appreciate this decision: The outer is reflecting the inner. Part of the evil of totalitarians, however, is that they look like everyone else.

Charlotte Salomon was presented on the vast, wide stage of the Felsenreitschule. The Grosser Saal of the Mozarteum is a much different Salzburg venue: more intimate, for one thing (despite the word “Grosser”). Onstage in this venue one evening was plush, attractive furniture: chairs and couches of various sizes. There were also music stands and a fetching fortepiano. What was going on? A Schubertiade, i.e., an evening of music devoted to Schubert. Soirées of this kind were held in the composer’s own time.

Onto the stage trooped a small army of singers, led by Cecilia Bartoli, the Italian mezzo-soprano, wearing a dirndl. (“Bosom City,” as the first President Bush might say.) The incongruity between this classic Italian woman and the Austrian traditional dress was striking. There were just two
other women onstage—another mezzo and the fortepianist. There were almost twenty men, none of them wearing a tie. This was meant to contribute to informality, I think.

The program was made up of a mixture of songs, some of them famous, some of them scarcely known, some of them for one voice, some of them for two or three or more. French horns were on hand, making occasional contributions. The program included one of my favorite songs of all time, “Ständchen,” D. 920. This is not to be confused with the more famous “Ständchen,” which is from Schwanengesang, D. 957. The former “Ständchen” is for mezzo and chorus. Though it is one of my favorite songs, I had never heard it before—not in the flesh. Only on vinyl (or the modern equivalent).

Some of the singers were weathered, senior, past their prime. One such singer was Robert Holl, the Dutch bass-baritone. He and others sang with something perhaps better than polish or freshness: with sincerity, heart, and love of music. There was a touch of amateurism about this evening. I didn’t mind. Accompanying the songs on the pianoforte was Ann Beckman, who did a fine job. I felt myself wanting a modern piano, however—I don’t believe a large Steinway would have offended.

What was La Bartoli doing singing German art song? She was singing some of Schubert’s Italian songs, actually. And she sang them exquisitely. The woman cares so much, it hurts. She wears her heart on her sleeve. In a cool, ironic age, she is the opposite. Earlier in her career, I was very hard on her, and maybe not always justly. I have come to appreciate her more and more. I don’t believe there is an insincere bone in her body.

When a conductor was needed—for the choral songs—that conductor was Diego Fasolis, from Switzerland. Once or twice, as the audience was applauding, he held up the score and mouthed, “Schubert.” He knew who the real star of the evening was—though Bartoli was pretty starry herself. She sang an encore, “Non ti scordar di me,” the classic Neapolitan song. What was this doing on a Schubertiade? I don’t know, but it was wonderful, and I believe Schubert would have thought so too. For another encore, the gang reprised “Ständchen”—so now I have heard it twice.

In the course of the evening, some of the singers moved furniture and stands around, as necessary. A few of us Americans remarked that, back home, this would be illegal. The unions would raise hell.

The next night, there was more Schubert, on another Salzburg stage: that of the Haus für Mozart. This was a Schubert opera, Fierrabras. It is seldom staged, seldom heard. The same is true of all the Schubert operas. Is Fierrabras worthwhile? Oh, more than: As I reminded myself, it is three hours of Schubert—how bad can it be? He was no hack. The Schubert operas may be unknown, but that hardly means they are bad.

Fierrabras is a medieval tale, involving Franks and Moors—knights in shining armor and maidens in distress. The libretto is weak, as everyone says, and this has hurt the opera’s salability. Literary
weakness has hurt Schubert operas in general.

Outstanding in Salzburg’s performance was the orchestra in the pit, the Vienna Philharmonic. They played like the VPO is capable of playing: warmly, accurately, and wisely. The conductor was Ingo Metzmacher, a German whom I have heard many times and always respected. But I had no idea he was capable of the excellence he displayed on this night. He was elegant, assured, committed—masterly at every turn.

The cast was large and starry, and I will mention just two of its members. Michael Schade, the German-Canadian tenor, sang the title role, Fierrabras, the Moorish prince. I thought to myself, “Is this the only chance he’ll have to sing the Moor?” (What I meant was, “Will his voice ever be able to withstand the rigors of Otello?”) He sang ringingly, lyrically, and well. One of the sopranos onstage was Dorothea Röschmann, the great German. She did not sound like herself. In fact, I checked with festival officials, just to be sure it was she who had sung. But she is Röschmann regardless, and she sang well enough.

The production was in the hands of Peter Stein, the septuagenarian German director. This was a “traditional” production—it looked like the story, and like the music too, for that matter. Everything was silvery, orderly, beautiful, and legend-like. Some of my friends disliked the production for its literalism, or squareness. I loved it. Virtually no one has ever seen Fierrabras. Why subject it to an experimental or avant-garde production? Let it get its legs, and then try to cut them off. (I well understand my friends’ objections, however.)

Onstage at the Grosses Festspielhaus was a Verdi opera, Il trovatore. To get the production out of the way first: It was by Alvis Hermanis, a Latvian director and set designer. The opera was set in an art museum—the whole opera. The characters were security guards, evidently. But at night (or something), they pretended to be figures depicted in the paintings around them. They were like military reenactors (I believe). Paintings moved around distractingly as people tried to sing arias. The director was taking over the opera, taking over Verdi. His production was not Eurotrash, mind you—no, no. It was an interesting, sincere, intelligent failure, in my opinion. First-time viewers of Trovatore in the audience have still not seen the opera. Also, I’m so square I actually think there ought to be an anvil in the Anvil Chorus.

There were to be two big stars in this show: the Russian soprano Anna Netrebko and the Spanish baritone—formerly a tenor—Plácido Domingo. By the time I got to Trovatore, Domingo had withdrawn, sick. Netrebko’s voice seems to be getting darker and more Slavic by the hour. It is not remotely Italianate. Some of her singing was indistinct, fuzzy. Her intonation was not always secure. But as I routinely say: Her musical IQ and theatrical IQ are off the charts. She was brilliant. She can also sing the character’s coloratura bits, not just the dramatic material. Her trill is a real one, not a fake one.

Subbing for Domingo was a Polish baritone, Artur Rucinski, who sang gamely and beautifully.
The audience was strongly behind him, knowing he had the burden of replacing one of the stars. Our tenor was Francesco Meli, who sang cleanly, idiomatically, and well. The role (Manrico) proved a size too big for him, however. He was most successful in soft, lyrical phrasing. (“Madre? Non dormi?” Heartbreaking.) Our mezzo was Marie-Nicole Lemieux, a Canadian. At the beginning of the opera, she had a bad case of the wobbles. But she settled down to sing with some Zajick-like potency and drama.

Conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, and everyone else, was Daniele Gatti, who followed Verdi’s contours naturally. The Philharmonic sounded wonderful and played wonderfully, of course—but they were not Verdian. They were more VPO-like. Some of the best and most moving singing of the whole show came from the women of the choir: singing the nuns’ chorus offstage with startling beauty.

Over at the Haus für Mozart, Diana Damrau sang a recital. When we arrived, there was a harp onstage, no piano. (It is a striking instrument to look at, the harp.) What was that instrument doing there? The starry German soprano was accompanied by the harp, from first song to last. The harpist was a Frenchman, Xavier de Maistre, formerly of the Vienna Philharmonic, now on his own, apparently. The program consisted of Strauss songs—about fifteen of them—and Dvořák’s *Gypsy Songs*. (The Dvořák set had been sung on this same stage by the Polish tenor Piotr Beczala a few nights before.) Also, de Maistre had a couple of solo turns, playing transcriptions with impressive virtuosity.

I believe that both performers—the soprano and the harpist—were miked, which may have been necessary but was a little impure.

After about five of the Strauss songs, I thought, “That was nice. A harp accompaniment is a novelty. This has been a fine experiment. Now will you please wheel out the piano for the rest of the songs?” An all-harp evening was vaguely dissatisfying, to my ears. Almost no harp transcription was an improvement on, or the equal of, the piano accompaniment. There was a big exception, however: “Wiegenlied,” Strauss’s cradle song. The harp accompaniment was divine there, better than the piano.

At Damrau, I could pick for several paragraphs. Her “Befreit,” that slow, gripping Strauss song, never gelled or transported. The harp sounded frenetic in it. “Traum durch die Dämmerung” never cohered or floated—it didn’t help that de Maistre lost his place, briefly. I wish the two could have done that one over (for it should have worked with a harp).

But Damrau is still Damrau, delicious and glorious. She sings like an instrumentalist—having an awareness of the musical line, for example. She is personable, famously so, but seldom guilty of ham. Her German diction is exemplary. She takes full advantage of her language. For example, the first syllable of “schlechtes Wetter” sounded like truly awful weather. She can express great tenderness and warmth—I wish you could have heard the kindness in the voice when she sang
“Du meines Herzens Krönelein.” And, as I frequently say, she has a secret ingredient, an intangible: adorability.

She sang several encores, one of them a coloratura number. And that leads me to her bio, printed in the program. It begins with a statement from me, acclaiming her the “leading coloratura soprano in the world.” Hmmm. I did some Googling. Reviewing a Barber of Seville at the Metropolitan Opera in 2006, I wrote, “Rosina is Diana Damrau, perhaps the leading coloratura soprano in the world right now.” Her publicist has obviously done some lopping, getting rid of “perhaps” and also “right now.” Is Damrau still the leading coloratura in the world, perhaps or no perhaps? I don’t know, but she remains first-rate.

I have saved almost the best for last: a concert performance of Donizetti’s opera La favorite in the Grosses Festspielhaus. Opera fashion is a funny thing: La favorite used to be a staple—a favorite, if you will—and is now a rarity. The big Donizetti operas of our time are the tragic Lucia di Lammermoor and two comedies: The Elixir of Love and The Daughter of the Regiment. Almost completely unknown is Donizetti’s last opera, Dom Sébastien, a superb, indeed towering piece.

What is most needed for La favorite is an excellent, knowledgeable, and strongly committed conductor plus three top-notch singers. This performance had the necessary.

Roberto Abbado conducted the Munich Radio Symphony Orchestra. He conducted with great intelligence, care, and style. His entire body pulsed bel canto. Much of the success and drama of the evening—afternoon, actually—owed to him. Abbado conducted La favorite as though it were a masterpiece on par with La traviata. If he keeps this up, no one should refer to him as Claudio’s nephew. (Claudio Abbado, the late and famed conductor, was Roberto’s uncle.)

The mezzo-soprano was Elina Garanca, the Latvian. Her voice is dark and smoky, probably darker and smokier than Anna Netrebko’s. There is virtually no Italian light in it. After a while, it mattered not: Garanca turned her part into a tour de force (as it was designed to be). She sang with great pathos. And her high C’s were huge. Her tenor was Juan Diego Flórez, the Peruvian star. Initially, he did some straining on high notes, but he soon hit his stride. And Flórez in his stride is something to behold, and hear. He was reveling in his work, enjoying La favorite more than anyone else in the hall. In the role of Alphonse XI was a less celebrated singer, the French baritone Ludovic Tézier. But he held his own, singing with due regality.

If you had told me, before the Salzburg Festival began, that just about the hit of the entire season would be a concert performance of a dust-gathering Donizetti opera, I would have been skeptical. But you would have been right. This was a great singing experience and opera experience. All that was missing was a staging. Would you and I have been willing to risk that? Sure, why not . . .