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London diary

by Eric C. Simpson

On a piano & cello concert at the Wigmore Hall and a performance of Don Giovanni by the English National Opera.

The Wigmore Hall, they say, boasts some of the greatest acoustics of any concert hall in Europe. It's easy to hear how it got that reputation—there is a warmth to the sound, and a natural liveliness that fills the room, amplifying without masking any subtleties of texture. Sitting in the hall, one isn't aware so much of the effects and directions of the reverberations as of a feeling of being enveloped by the sound. Strike a single note, and it seems to hang in the air, undistorted, perfectly balanced.

At just under 550 seats, the Wigmore is larger than some of the jewelbox recital halls we have in New York; it doesn't have quite the cozy feeling of, say, Carnegie's 270-seat Weill Recital Hall, though it is dwarfed by Alice Tully (1,100). Even at its small size, the Wigmore is a grand place, a proud and beautiful temple to music.

The stalls were packed for a recent Monday afternoon concert by the cellist Steven Isserlis and the pianist Olli Mustonen. Robert Schumann was the theme.

Schumann is often Isserlis's theme; he loves that composer's body of work, and you can hear it in his playing. He may not be the most accurate technician—his opening interval in the first of the Op. 94 Romances was a few hairs more than a major third. This was very much a "who cares?" moment; throughout this recital, Isserlis offered some of the most beautiful, sensitive, intelligent cello playing that it has ever been my pleasure to hear.

The Wigmore Hall; photo by Nick Guttridge

I say "playing"—"oratory" might be more accurate. Isserlis is so natural, so direct in his phrasing, that it seems to take on the cadence of speech. In lyrical material especially, as in the first and third of the Op. 94 Romances, one could almost read a semantic meaning into the musical syntax, the turn of a phrase.

His partner for the afternoon, Olli Mustonen, was no less impressive. He approaches the keyboard firmly, pressing into the keys deeply, and with authority, yet never feeling aggressive. He followed the Romances with three selections from the *Album für die Jugend*, and, for all the strength with which he played it, managed to drop a beautiful mist over the first selection, "Sheherazade." Mustonen is a considerate player, careful in his musical choices, but all the more effective for it.

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He is also a composer, and a talented one—next on the program was the UK premiere of his own *Frei, aber einsam*, a fantasy for solo cello on the musical motto from the "F-A-E" Sonata. Mustonen calls the piece an "invention," which it is, to an extent—he has penned a colorful, imaginative exploration of a simple figure. It is more than that, though; the writing is rhapsodic, yearning ever after some object long lost. I should say that Mustonen's musical language is explicitly, achingly tonal. He lingers on dissonances, leans on them, but allows them to resolve, the resolution all the more satisfying for the intensity of the

discord. There is no garish exploitation of extended technique in his writing; having chosen the cello as his medium, he trusts its natural voice, molding his music to fit the instrument, and not the other way around. It's refreshing to hear a composer whose object is to communicate an idea or an emotion, rather than to impress his audience with sly facility.

We heard that little motto again in the Intermezzo from the "F-A-E" Sonata itself, in Isserlis's own transcription. Not surprisingly, the piece is a natural fit for the cello—this is music of intense longing, which works every bit as well in the tenor voice as in the treble.

On paper, the final item of the day, Prokofiev's C-Major Cello Sonata, may have seemed a non sequitur. In the hands of Isserlis and Mustonen, the connection, the Modernist inheritance of the Romantic tradition,was perfectly clear. In the lyrical passages of the second movement it was easy to detect a winding strain that was downright Schumannesque—spacious, singing melodic lines tinged with elements of Prokofiev's slightly needling whimsy.

The afternoon's encore was more Schumann: the second of the five *Stücke im Volkston*, soothing and fond, breathtaking in its simplicity. Before playing, Isserlis took a moment to remember Sir Neville Marriner, the eminent English conductor who had died just the morning before. "I can't believe he's gone," observed the cellist. "He seemed indestructible."

I had walked by St. Martin-in-the-Fields that Sunday, the day Sir Neville died, as I later learned. In this historic church on Trafalgar Square, he founded a chamber orchestra that went on to enjoy worldwide acclaim. Marriner, with his Academy, was a marvelous ambassador for art music, in addition to being an essential interpreter of the Classical repertoire. That legacy may indeed prove indestructible.

The English National Opera opened their season at the London Coliseum with a new production of Don Giovanni. As it happened, I'd just seen a performance at the Metropolitan Opera of the same Mozart–Da Ponte classic several days before (a performance that was wholly mediocre by the Met's standards, but we'll let that be).

It was a bit of a shock to go from hearing the opera in Lorenzo Da Ponte's Italian to hearing it in my own tongue just three days later. That, of course, is one of eno's distinguishing features—all performances at the Coliseum are presented in English. In principle, I actually quite like the idea of opera in the vernacular—it removes one of the strongest barriers between the art form and a wider audience, and, after all, if we're willing to hear Schiller's German translated into English, why not Wagner's? (For what it's worth, the presentation of opera in the local language was fairly common until the last century).

The trouble, of course, comes from having to map English lyrics onto a vocal line that was written with the sonorities of another language in mind, be it French, Italian, German, Russian, Czech, or any other. Disastrous attempts at libretto translation have been too many to rehearse here, but at their best librettists like J. D. McClatchy manage to create a lyrical translation that preserves both

the cadences and the character of the original text. Amanda Holden, preparing the translation for this eno production, may not have captured all of Da Ponte's wit, but succeeded in supplying some of her own.

What does the alteration add to the piece?

Getting the opening night assignment was the London-born director Richard Jones—known here in New York as the author of the 2009 production of *Hansel and Gretel* that now periodically cycles through as the Met's holiday presentation. Before the opera begins, we see a telephone booth in front of the ornate eno curtain—not one of those charming red numbers that dot London's sidewalks, but a bare steel cage out of Orwell's nightmares. When the curtain does rise, we find the stage decked in that particular palette that has become so inexplicably popular, various shades of drab seemingly drawn from the mixed olive plate at some dimly-lit osteria.

The fun is only starting: Jones has thrown together a pantomime for the overture, featuring a parade of women—fitting every description of Leporello's "Catalogue"—who enter, one by one, a door leading to the Don's bachelor pad, and emerge five seconds later, apparently satisfied. The legendary womanizer of the title, in this telling, is neither particularly charismatic nor especially intimidating, but rather the kind of lounge-suited lothario you'd expect to find stalking the bar at the Hyatt. Donna Anna in the opening scene is portrayed as a well-to-do woman playing out a rape fantasy in Donny G's underground sex club . . . *et cetera*.

Christopher Purves as Don Giovanni and Caitlyn Lynch as Donna Anna in the English National Opera's Don Giovanni*; photo by Robert Workman*

Of course, directors put operas and plays through all manner of contortions in service of their particular—and often peculiar—visions of the drama. But with a single stroke, Mr. Jones charted territory that was new, at least to me. Students of *Don Giovanni* will remember that the last we see of the title character is his descent into Hell, generally via a trapdoor hidden downstage center, crying "Che inferno! Che terror!" as tasteful pyrotechnics flare all around him. *Snooze*.

Mr. Jones, I can report, had a solution to enliven Da Ponte's dull conclusion: at the crucial moment, the dallying Don pulls a switcheroo, tricking Leporello into taking his place. Now, if you're concerned that the score and the text might not support such a change, don't worry: Jones even has the two swap vocal parts, so that in the epilogue we're left with Giovanni—cleverly disguised, to be sure—explaining his valet's astonishing disappearance. How Jones slipped that one by the music director, I cannot say.

The more pressing question, though, is *why*? What does the alteration add to the piece? What do we learn by condemning the poor servant, and not his philandering master, to eternal torment? If the moral is that vice often goes unpunished—well, that's hardly a novel observation, and its delivery is startlingly glib. For all I could tell, it was simply a tidy way to facilitate a cute bookend, wherein the door business from the overture is reprised during the closing bars—a winking trick right out of the sophomore theater director's playbook.

And yet, amazingly, the opera can withstand all of this—Mozart's music, when performed as well as it was on this occasion, can shine through the pitchiest darkness. The cast that the eno fielded that Friday, top to bottom, was superb, far stronger than that heard at the mighty Met several days before. Christopher Purves sounded somewhat leaner than most Don Giovannis but held his own in the title role. Christine Rice gave Elvira a direct, clean voice that kept an attractive tone as it cut past the orchestra. Mary Bevan was a revelation as Zerlina, showing off a lovely, liquid, honeyed quality, and flawless technique, glowing in every one of her scenes. Allan Clayton was simply brilliant as Don Ottavio, exhibiting none of the stereotypical reediness one is supposed to expect from English tenors. His account of the famous aria "Dalla sua pace" ("Her joy is my joy," in this rendition) showed a gorgeous, creamy quality, with exquisite phrasing.

Clive Bayley as Leporello; photo by Robert Workman

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The strongest still, in my mind, was Clive Bayley's Leporello. It's rare that you hear a bass (or bass-baritone) with so full a voice and such subtle coloration sing this role, but a singer like Bayley is a treat to hear. He had more than enough power to fill out the role—he could have swapped in for the entirety of the title role, and no one would have complained. Most importantly, he keenly understood Leporello's essential comic character—the cheeky glee of his "Catalogue" aria was irresistible.

That aria, incidentally, included some of the finest work of Mark Wigglesworth & co. down in the pit. The charm of this aria is not only in its wordplay and the buoyancy of its vocal writing—that same wit can be heard every bit as much in the bubbling of Mozart's inspired orchestration. It's a memorable comic moment, no question, but when the orchestra sparkles and shines as much as this one did, the Catalogue can be a musical highlight, too.

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