The New Criterion

Music April 2016

# New York chronicle

*by* *Jay Nordlinger*

*On Manon Lescaut, at the Metropolitan Opera; Juraj Valcuha at the NY Phil; the Jasper String Quartet at Weill Recital Hall; the Vienna Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall; and The King and I at Lincoln Center.*

In opera, there are two big *Manon*s: *Manon*, by Massenet, and *Manon Lescaut*, by Puccini. Naming the latter opera, you want to pronounce the second "n" in "Manon," *all'italiana*. It seems to me that the former opera is more popular in the opera world now. But *Manon Lescaut* is a beautiful, striking, and powerful work, especially when conducted so well as Fabio Luisi did at the Metropolitan Opera.

The Met had a new production, courtesy of Sir Richard Eyre. The soprano was Kristine Opolais, from Latvia, and the tenor was Roberto Alagna, from France (though of Italian parentage). The soprano, by the way, is married to a fellow Latvian, Andris Nelsons, who is now the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The tenor was supposed to be Jonas Kaufmann, but he withdrew at almost the last minute. Alagna got up to speed in a hurry. At the end of the performance I saw, he shook the hand of the prompter, in grateful acknowledgment of help.

*Kristine Opolais in the title role of Puccini's* Manon Lescaut/*Photo by Ken Howard/ Metropolitan Opera.*

At the beginning of the performance, Alagna was in bad shape. He was straining and struggling and not producing much sound. What sound he did produce was not good. His character's first aria, "Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde," should be graceful, lilting, and gay. From Alagna, it was work. The second aria, "Donna non vidi mai," was better: smoothly belted. But it was still not A-1 Alagna. Meanwhile, Opolais sang ably, and she shone in her aria "In quelle trine morbide." This is essentially a lyrical aria, and Opolais seems essentially a lyric soprano.

She could not fill the bill in the love duet. She simply didn't have enough voice. I could barely hear her. The stage director did not help in placing the singers toward the back. Those two needed to

stand at the front of the stage and sing. Alagna had more voice than his partner, but still too little, and he was sloppy in his rhythm. The duet didn't build and thrill as it should.

At some point along the way, something happened to Alagna: He got "hooked up," as some say. His vocal apparatus kicked into gear. His sound was riding on his breath. He was free, unstraining, and *loud*. I have learned, over the years, that you can never write Alagna off in an opera. If he starts out rocky, he can hit his stride. As for Opolais, she sang the opera's final aria, "Sola, perduta, abbandonata," with honor. But without enough voice. The casting of undersized voices is a scandal in opera today.

Sir Richard Eyre's production is set in Nazi-occupied France. Nazi occupation is a fashion in opera today. In Salzburg a few summers ago, I saw a *Norma* set in—where else?—Nazi-occupied France. It was ridiculous. Sir Richard's production is not ridiculous. When I saw Nazis with rifles, I simply ignored them, concentrating on *Manon Lescaut*. The production's concept, or conceit, does not interfere. And I must say, the third act was unbearable. What I mean is, the parading and mocking of those courtesans was poignantly, rawly, and heartbreakingly staged. I think I had to turn away.

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What made the night was Fabio Luisi and the Met orchestra. This was an unusually orchestral *Manon Lescaut*, by which I mean, the orchestra was unusually present and important. Luisi supported the singers, sure. But he also supported Puccini. He gave an example of disciplined Romanticism (much as the company's music director, James Levine, does). The score was tender, insouciant, scalding, and riveting. Luisi conducted the opera as though it were a masterpiece—which maybe it is.


*Juraj Valcuha/Photo: Chris Lee, courtesy New York Philharmonic*

The next morning, the New York Philharmonic played a concert with a guest conductor: Juraj Valcuha. When you attend the Philharmonic regularly, you hear an array of young, or youngish, conductors. This lets you know who's who, who's where, and who's up and coming. In our February issue, I wrote about James Gaffigan (not to be confused with the famous comedian Jim Gaffigan), an American who works in Lucerne. Valcuha is a Slovakian who works in Turin. The first piece on his program was Kodály's *Dances of Galanta*—Galanta being in Slovakia. Perhaps the

thinking was that Valcuha had a home-field advantage.

David Geffen Hall is to get a thorough renovation. Then orchestras will have no excuse. They won't have the old acoustics to kick around anymore.

These dances are delightful, clever, and full of color. Valcuha conducted them well. He did not conduct them with Gergievian electricity and wizardry. But it must be added that Gergiev himself is sometimes un-Gergievian. Val?uha demonstrated command and understanding. He was very precise. From where I sat, he got from the orchestra what he wanted, and he got it without working very hard for it.

Some of this music ought to be warm and filling. It ought to fill a hall with warmth. This did not happen on this particular day. Was it because of the hall, the maligned Avery Fisher, or David Geffen, as it's now called? The hall is to get a thorough renovation. Then orchestras will have no excuse. They won't have the old acoustics to kick around anymore.

*The Jasper Quartet/Courtesy: Carnegie Hall*

In a different hall—Weill Recital Hall, upstairs in the Carnegie building—the Jasper String Quartet played a concert. The jsq was formed at Oberlin Conservatory in 2003. This was well before "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings," I believe. How did these four survive? In any event, they are named after Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies. And they began their concert the way string quartets often do: with a work by Haydn. In this case, it was the String Quartet in G, Op. 76, No. 1. And the jsq played it superbly.

I was looking forward to the next piece on the program—a new work by Aaron Jay Kernis—but the concert was stopped. That is, the momentum was killed, and the atmosphere was killed, by talking. A member of the quartet stood up to talk about the Kernis piece. He said, for example, that it would begin with a beautiful cello solo. Couldn't we have heard that, if only they had played? He quoted from the evening's program notes. Couldn't we have read them, or not? He said that the new work presented "challenges," but "there are more challenges for us than for you listeners." In other words, "Don't worry: it won't be so bad." Is this helpful, to anyone? The quartet spokesman talked at length, telling the audience how good the piece would be, prejudicing the jury.

No one is ever offended, so far as I know: not composers, not audiences, not anybody. Oh, well.

In 2009, as he was leaving the New York Philharmonic, I interviewed the conductor Lorin Maazel. One question I asked was, "Who are today's composers worth listening to?" Immediately, he said, "Penderecki." Then he paused for a while. "Mention some American composers I've conducted here," he said. "I hesitate," I said. Then he said, "Kernis? I think he's a very, very talented composer, a master of what he does." That is high praise.

Kernis, according to the program we received in Weill Recital Hall—the one the spokesman quoted from—"came of age in the 1970s and '80s, when the cracks in the edifice of high modernism were widening into fissures wide enough for younger, more independent-minded composers to leap through with abandon." Thank heaven for those cracks and fissures. Kernis's bio also says that his music "defies easy classification." It's hard to find a composer's bio that does not say his music "defies easy classification." One time, it would be amusing to read, "Smith's music, unlike others', is easily classified."

What the Jasper String Quartet played was Kernis's String Quartet No. 3, dubbed "River." It was written for them and is dedicated to them. It was commissioned by seven organizations, which speaks well for collaboration in the music world.

Kernis has written long and fairly detailed notes on his "River" quartet. Apparently, he is a close analyst of his own music. Is this a good thing or a bad thing in a composer? My impression is, some composers like to analyze their music and are good at it; and some don't, and aren't. Kernis cites literary influences on his quartet. And he says he is concerned with "change, flow, and flux." The quartet is in five movements, which are labeled as follows: "Source"; "Flow/Surge"; "Mirrored Surface—Flux—Reflections"; "Cavatina"; and "Mouth/Estuary."

I thought of another interview—one I did of the composer Ned Rorem in 2002. He was saying that music could never really be "about" anything (music without words, that is): "A composer will go to some lengths to tell you that something is about something. Take *La Mer*. If the audience were unalerted, you could tell them that the first part was about slaughterhouses in Paris, the second part about having coffee at La Flore, and the third part about bordellos. They'd believe it, if you told them that."

On hearing Kernis's "River" quartet, I did not notice any water, though I was of course prepared to. But who cares? This is music we're talking about. A world of musical notes, apart from the physical world. If Debussy had not called that piano piece *Reflets dans l'eau*, would you think of reflections in the water? Hard to say.

Kernis's String Quartet No. 3, "River," begins—as advertised from the stage—with a beautiful cello solo. The first movement has touches of folk, pop, bluegrass. You see? Kernis's music really does defy easy classification! The movement has an anxiety—quiet anxiety—as so much modern music does. I have frequently said that this period in music ought to be called "The Age of Anxiety." In due course, the first movement turns savage, or dissonantly emphatic.

If Debussy had not called that piano piece *Reflets dans l'eau*, would you think of reflections in the water? Hard to say.

The second movement is quivering, spiky, and churning. It is fleet and scherzesque (to use a funny coinage of mine). It ends with a kind of scream. Initially, the third movement put me in mind of Debussy or Ravel. It is squirmy and quiet. Then rhapsodic and tumultuous. Then disembodied and whispery. It ends on a delicate, questioning note.

The fourth movement—the one marked "Cavatina"—is indeed a song. An almost lush song, which builds intensely. I had a thought: "This is the true Kernis. His natural compositional self. This is what he does. All the rest is for show. It's to prove he's not a fuddy-duddy, not a mere tunesmith. It's to be cool, to buy some peace from his less talented peers." This thought could be utterly wrong, and I suspect it is. But it occurred to me.

Like the first movement, the fifth and final movement begins with the cello alone—something like a cadenza. Then the music is, as before, squirmy and anxious. Also pretty and somber. Toward the end, there is a rather American tune, played in unison by the violins. In these final pages, we get a kind of resolution or release, I think—quiet. Frankly, I did not much care for this work. But I had the feeling it was brilliant and potentially lasting. I look forward to hearing it again, especifically if played by the Jasper String Quartet, which was magnificent. Aaron Jay Kernis is a big talent, a master. Maazel said so.

*Valery Gergiev conducts the Vienna Philharmonic at the Carnegie/Photo: Steve J. Sherman*

In Carnegie Hall, the Vienna Philharmonic played a three-concert stand, under the baton of Valery Gergiev, the aforementioned wizard (or sometime wizard). Actually, Gergiev rarely uses a baton. He has been known to use a toothpick (really). In the three concerts, Gergiev was often at his best, providing a top-drawer musical and orchestral experience. The vpo, of course, did their part too.

On the second concert was a new work, by Olga Neuwirth, an Austrian, and therefore an especially inviting composer for the vpo. This piece is called *Masaot / Clocks without Hands*. "Masaot" is Hebrew for "travels." Carnegie Hall's program described the piece as "surreal." And Neuwirth has written a long note about it.

She was asked to compose something that honored Mahler in some way. Also, she had a dream, about her grandfather—a grandfather she never met, but whom she knew a little through photos and stories. He appeared to her in a sunlit meadow, "playing one song after another to me on an old crackling tape recorder." He said, "From the start, I was strikingly different. I was an outsider and never entirely fit into my Austrian surroundings. All my life I had the feeling of being excluded. Listen to these songs: This is my story."

His granddaughter was so moved by this dream, she had to process it by writing a piece, "because for me writing always has to do with memory." Mahler's music is soaked with memory too. Some years ago, my colleague Fred Kirshnit wrote a paper on Mahler's symphonies called "The Persistence of Memory." Neuwirth wanted her piece to make a listener think he was dreaming, or listening to "something being dreamed." She also wanted time to dissolve. And to convey the idea that a person can have several homelands, at least mentally.

So, there you go: a work concerned with time, space, and memory. Aren't we all?

Neuwirth's piece starts out as a bleakscape (to call on another coinage of mine). There arises a cacophony or din. You would think the orchestra was warming up. Out of the cacophony or din—out of the modern music, if you will—come snatches of popular music. This is obviously Mahlerian, and Ivesian. I think I heard something Spanish, and some jazz licks, and a Scottish or Irish reel. Everything is hazy, woozy, off-kilter—as in a dream. There is loud ticking, maybe from an amplified metronome, or metronomes. I thought of Prokofiev, and how he makes the clock strike midnight in *Cinderella*.

The piece is about twenty-five minutes long, and after about ten minutes I thought, "All right already. I got it. There will be this din, or modernness, and out of it will come a popular tune. No need to go on." But frankly, I wanted to see what would come next: what tune, what song, what dance. I could not quite get bored. The last thing I heard, I think, was a bit of klezmer music. I thought this was significant. Is the composer saying something about being Jewish in Austria? What exactly was the fate of her grandfather? Anyway . . .

She rose from her seat in the auditorium to mount the stairs at the side of the stage and take her bows along with the conductor and orchestra. As she was going up the stairs, a security guard grabbed her arm, stopping her. She had to pause to explain what she was doing. Someone later joked, "The guard was commenting on her piece. She had no right to go up and bow." Yet I was interested in the piece, and ultimately admiring of it. As with our friend Kernis and his river, I'd like to hear it again.

Ken Watanabe in a scene from Lincoln Center Theater's production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's THE KING AND I, directed by Bartlett Sher at the Vivian Beaumont Theater (150 W 65th St). For tickets and information visit telecharge.com.
Photo Credit: Paul Kolnik
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Many years ago, I saw *The Tender Land* and *Oklahoma!* in fairly close succession. The former is the opera by Copland; the latter is the musical by Rodgers (and Hammerstein). They are similar in their settings and stories. And at the intermission of *Oklahoma!* I said, "You know? If a genie offered me the chance to have written either *The Tender Land* or *Oklahoma!* I wouldn't hesitate. I'd choose *Oklahoma!* in a heartbeat. It is much the superior work." I thought of this recently when seeing another R&H musical, at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater: *The King and I*. Let me count the wonders.

Crowning the musical is "Something Wonderful," that mezzo aria, if you will. Puccini might have eyed it with envy, or at least admiration.

There is the "March of the Royal Siamese Children," an ingenious piece. I have long marked its kinship with "Wedding Day at Troldhaugen," which belongs to the *Lyric Pieces* of Grieg. Stephen Hough, the British pianist, has made a marvelous arrangement of Rodgers's march. As a friend of mine has commented, it sounds like it could be in the Grieg set, though with extra virtuosity. Also in *The King and I* is "Shall We Dance?" with its irresistible lift. Songs such as "I Whistle a Happy Tune" and "Getting to Know You" can sound dumb out of context, and performed badly. But in context and performed well, they are very good indeed.

Crowning the musical is “Something Wonderful,” that mezzo aria, if you will. Puccini might have eyed it with envy, or at least admiration. Classical singers have always wanted to sing it. Marilyn Horne recorded it. And Bryn Terfel made it the title song of his Rodgers & Hammerstein album. Can you imagine having written that sublime, everlasting song, or aria? Then again, I should not look down my nose at *The Tender Land* either.

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

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 34 Number 8 , on page 63
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