On recent classical music performances at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall.

It's an old question, one that has been raised in this space many times: Can music mean anything? (Music without words, that is. Once you add words, all bets are off.) Many times, I have quoted Ned Rorem, the American composer, who once said to me in an interview, “A composer will go to some lengths to tell you that something is about something.” But he should save his breath. “A piece without a text, without a vocal line, can’t mean detailed things like Tuesday, butter, or yellow, and it can’t even mean general things like death or love or the weather, although a timpani roll can sound like thunder, and certain conventions about love come out of Wagner.”

I thought of these things when contemplating a new piece by Carl Vine, an Australian born in 1954. (He is not just Australian but is also from Perth, which, in my mind, makes him extra-Australian.) The piece is his String Quartet No. 6, which he nicknames “Child’s Play.” In a program note, he writes that the commissioners of the piece “wanted to help create music that uplifts, edifies, and elates.” He thought of children, with their playfulness, innocence, etc.

This is all well and good, but a string quartet’s a string quartet for a’ that. It is a wordless piece of music.

It's an old question: Can music mean anything?
And yet, if you’ve read the program notes—or even noticed the nickname—it’s too late: you will think that the piece is “about” children and their play. We think that La mer, the Debussy work, is “about” the sea because it’s called The Sea. Otherwise it could be about anything, or nothing. Vine’s string quartet, in addition to its nickname, has five movements with the following markings: “Play,” “Concentration,” “Friendship,” “Sleep,” and “Running.” Let me ask you: What if they had tempo markings? What if they were marked Allegro, Andante, Moderato, and so on? Would anyone be the wiser? Would anyone think of children and their play, or their sleep or what have you?

Carl Vine. Photo: Carl Vine

In any case, the new Vine work was played by the Takács Quartet in Zankel Hall. Its general idiom is slightly atonal—an easy atonality, you could say. The first movement is like a scherzo. It is fond and kind. It ends ambiguously, without resolution. The second movement is spiky, then smooth. Then spiky again. The third movement, “Friendship,” strikes me as another scherzo. And it is indeed friendly. I thought of the word “roundelay,” that name for a circular dance.

The fourth movement, “Sleep,” is duly slumberous, and also songful. And the last movement put me in mind of another word, “courante.” That word, which comes from “running,” is the name for a dance found in countless Baroque suites, such as those by Bach. Carl Vine’s last movement, “Running,” is spirited and jazzy—also dance-like, in a jagged way.

From beginning to end, this quartet is pleasant. I know this can sound like a putdown. I once asked a distinguished critic what he thought of Roy Harris’s music. (Harris was an American who lived from 1898 to 1979.) He said he thought it was “nice”—and never has “nice” sounded more
brutal! Rest assured, though, that when I call Vine’s String Quartet No. 6 pleasant, I mean nothing but praise.

In David Geffen Hall, a concert of the New York Philharmonic began with an oomp, i.e., an obligatory opening modern piece—and one designed to be an oomp, it seems. Esa-Pekka Salonen describes his Gambit as “a shortish work for a large symphony orchestra of overture character.” He wrote it in 1998 and dedicated it to Magnus Lindberg, in honor of Lindberg’s fortieth birthday. Lindberg is a Finnish composer, and so is Salonen (who is also a famous conductor, as you know). Both were born in 1958. Salonen’s dedication was a notable collegial gesture, I think.

And Gambit is a good piece. It builds slowly, creating an atmosphere. It has a sheen. It starts to scamper, jazzily. There is ample percussion, as you can expect in a modern piece. Is the music “sound design”? No, it is more than that, I think. It has something to say. It is interesting all through. It builds to a jungle pitch, then ends on a calm diminuendo—a nice gambit, if you will.

The piece was very well played by the Philharmonic, as led by a guest conductor, Paavo Järvi, the Estonian American (and son of Maestro Neeme Järvi). Orchestra and conductor then moved on to a Rachmaninoff piano concerto, No. 4, which, like No. 1, is a troubled stepchild among Rachmaninoff piano concertos. (The middle two of the four are the favored, trouble-free children.) At the keyboard was Leif Ove Andsnes, the Norwegian pianist. He played like he usually does: with elegance and self-possession—with an air of aristocracy. Not a hair was out of place. Also, Andsnes is an excellent tamer of bombast, as he proves in, among other concertos, the Grieg, of which he is my favorite player of all time.

It is good for a Norwegian to be good in the Grieg—even better if he is great.

Andsnes played Rachmaninoff’s first movement with clarity and drama. That is an important combination. Järvi conducted with tautness and bloom. That, too, is an important combination. Both men acted as though they were performing a great piece of music—which is exactly how one ought to act. The middle movement, Largo, was beautiful, and beautifully straightforward. Unmilked. And the finale had all the impishness and squirminess required, from all parties. The virtuosity of Andsnes was almost insolent. He sounded like Art Tatum, running up and down the keyboard, not breaking a sweat.

If a better case could be made for “Rach 4” than the one made by Andsnes, Järvi, and the New York Philharmonic in this concert, I could not imagine it.
After intermission, Järvi conducted the orchestra in a Sibelius symphony, No. 5. I will report the performance in the most general terms. Järvi was stupendous; the orchestra responded stupendously to him. Järvi conducted with the confidence of a man who knows how it goes, and knows how to communicate to others how it goes. In fact, the piece wasn’t so much conducted as breathed. Virtually every page was perfectly natural.

The precision of the orchestra was miraculous. The onsets, the pizzicatos, the chords at the end (tricky and awkward). I practically had to rub my eyes, or ears. Every section of the orchestra made its contribution, but the woodwinds shone. And they have much to do in this piece.

Paavo Järvi. Photo: Harrison Parrott

Over the years, there have been a lot of Sibelius conductors—Colin Davis and, before him, Eugene Ormandy come to mind. On this occasion, Paavo Järvi needed to take a backseat to no one. And let me say something about the venue, David Geffen Hall, formerly Avery Fisher Hall, formerly Philharmonic Hall: there is nothing wrong with it. It may not be the most attractive place in the world, or even on Lincoln Center Plaza, but its acoustics, long bemoaned, long faulted, worked just fine in this concert. Could the conductor have something to do with it?

Like other critics, I have heard and reviewed Paavo Järvi for many years now. Last May, I reviewed him in a Don Giovanni from La Scala. This was Mozart conducting, and Mozart-opera conducting,

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of the first order. After the Philharmonic concert, I talked with a fellow critic, and he remarked, “Oh, Paavo has been my favorite conductor for years.” Järvi really ought to have a major podium, no offense to the ones he has (namely that of the NHK Symphony Orchestra in Japan and that of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich).

This was just another concert on a Friday morning, another Philharmonic matinée. Applause was scant. But, you know? It was one of the best orchestral concerts I have ever heard. That sounds weird to say, and extreme to say. But I say it because it’s true.

I will gush on, because this was a lucky stretch of music in New York. Those who heard Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria in Alice Tully Hall were very lucky indeed. This is a Monteverdi opera, and this is a Monteverdi “year.” The music world sometimes seems organized around anniversaries. Last summer, I did a public interview of Helga Rabl-Stadler, who is the president of the Salzburg Festival. She has quite a challenge in 2020: That year will mark the centennial of the festival. It is also a “Beethoven year,” featuring the 250th anniversary of the composer’s birth. Yet isn’t every year a Beethoven year?

Monteverdi is 450, having been born in 1567. Bringing his forces with him, Sir John Eliot Gardiner conducted the three major Monteverdi operas: the aforementioned Ritorno d’Ulisse; L’Orfeo; and L’incoronazione di Poppea. What or who are his forces? Well, he has many, but I am referring to the Monteverdi Choir (appropriately named) and the English Baroque Soloists, a chamber orchestra. Sir John founded the former in 1964 and the latter in 1978.
Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria was staged, or semi-staged, in a production by two directors: Sir John himself and Elsa Rooke, who, despite that English name, was born and raised in Paris. This is a very smart production. It has neither too much nor too little—too much acting nor too little acting. The opera felt neither slighted nor loaded up.

As for the performance, it was just about perfect. Now, how is that possible, given that the opera is three hours long and involves scads of performers? I don’t know. It just was. Chief credit goes to Sir John, who conducted with great intelligence—a musical intelligence. This intelligence governed the entire performance, in phrasing, tempos, articulation, dynamics, feeling. The singers
and players were like extensions of Sir John’s hands.

There were sixteen singers in the cast, and if I had to sum them up, collectively, I would say they sang with an impassioned correctness. A feeling correctness. I will mention just four members of the cast.

Furio Zanasi, an Italian baritone, was Ulisse, or Ulysses. I gather he is not a young singer, but he sang freshly and nimbly. So did Anna Dennis, an English soprano in the part of Melanto. She was precise, saucy, and gamine—altogether a treat. An Italian bass named Gianluca Buratto played a trio of roles. His voice was so booming, I assumed at first it was amplified. I think it was just him. And Robert Burt, an English tenor, almost stole the show as Iro, the braying, bragging glutton.

At every stage of this opera, the performance was alive. It had a rare combination of taste and excitement. One of the highlights was “Balliamo che l’onde,” a dancing chorus. It was well-nigh riotous (tastefully so).

I will give you a footnote. In the orchestra, one of the wind players had long stretches with no work to do. So she found work: knitting. What she was knitting, I could not quite tell. But I had never seen anything like it.

Vijay Iyer is not one to stick to his knitting. An American born in 1971, he does a variety of things, including jazz piano, classical composition, and teaching (at Harvard). He is a winner of one of those “genius grants.” And he had a piece played by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra in Carnegie Hall. It is called Asunder, written in four movements.
To accompany his piece, Iyer wrote one of the most interesting composer’s notes I have ever read—also one of the most candid. He begins, “I can’t tell you how to feel with this piece, but I can tell you how I felt while writing it”: lousy. He thinks America is falling apart. And he was going to write a piece reflecting this, a piece true to the title *Asunder*. But he decided to write a piece going against the grain of his title: a piece that, through various compositional techniques, suggests unity. Plus, he did it with “an ear toward pleasure,” he says.

He further says, “I never trusted the kind of biographical musicology that attributes musical details to the composer’s real-life highs and lows—never, that is, until I started composing a lot of works myself . . .” That sort of testimony—personal, and born of experience—is hard to refute.

The first movement of *Asunder* is marked “Agitated.” Leaving agitation aside, I thought of neo-Classicism when the music began. Specifically, I thought of Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 1, the “Classical.” The music gets agitated, yes—also busy, jazzy, and edgy. But it eventually becomes upbeat, I think. The next movement is marked “Patient and mysterious.” Mysterious, yes. You might have called it that without knowing the marking, and tense, too. But the word “patient” reminds me of something: I found this movement too long, as I had the first. As regular readers know, I frequently find movements and pieces too long. Is there something wrong with my attention span or with the composers? I like to think the composers. Earl Wild said, “Music should say what it has to say and get off the stage.”

Iyer’s third movement is marked “Calm and precise, like clockwork.” It, too, is mysterious, I would say. Also minimalistic or repetitive. The final movement is “Lush,” and there is definitely some of that, along with jazz. Mainly, however, the movement is quick and feel-good. “Feel-good,” like the earlier-discussed “pleasant,” may sound like a putdown. But I have no objection to feeling good, trust me.

At the beginning of the season, I was talking with a woman who works in the music business. She studied the piano. I asked her who her favorite pianists were. There is no living pianist she admires more than Martha Argerich. Yet she had never heard Argerich live and in the flesh—and she would have an opportunity, it gets a good one.” What that meant was, “I hope Argerich can play like a world-beater. She can also play both ways on the same night.

My friend, the Argerich admirer, got a good one.

Martha Argerich is one of the greatest players of the Prokofiev Third of all time.
Antonio Pappano. She played Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3. For years, this has been her go-to piece, along with a few others (Beethoven’s C-major concerto, for example). Senior musicians often narrow down. I think of Kurt Masur, who conducted anything and everything. But toward the end of his career, he liked to conduct Dvořák’s Symphony No. 8, over and over. Why, I don’t know. He probably felt very secure in it. André Previn, too, conducted anything and everything. Toward the end, he liked to conduct Rachmaninoff’s Symphony No. 2.

Anyway, Martha Argerich is one of the greatest players of the Prokofiev Third of all time. In 1967, she made a famous recording of it, with Claudio Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In Carnegie Hall, she took the stage as she customarily does: appearing a bundle of nerves. She would not look at the audience; she talked to the conductor the entire time. When she sat down to play, she was basically herself—her world-beating self. This Prokofiev Third was basically an Argerich Prokofiev Third. She has played it with greater precision and greater intensity. She has made the climax at the end more of a climax. But this was basically an Argerich Prokofiev Third. Unlike many senior pianists, she is afflicted by no tightness whatsoever. She is fabulously loose at the keyboard. Her hands can do anything. She played with her famous, astonishing fluidity.

Called back many times, she finally played an encore—but with the conductor, Sir Antonio, sitting beside her. They played a duet from Ravel’s *Mother Goose*.

Conductor and orchestra had begun the concert with a rarity—a rarity drawn from a non-rarity. This was the Sinfonia from Verdi’s *Aida*. And after intermission, they gave us two Respighi tone poems, representing the orchestra’s home city: *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*. When it comes
to both Verdi and Respighi, the Santa Cecilia Orchestra ought to be to the manner born—and they exhibited essentially that.

_Pines of Rome_ gives you a lot of noise—glorious noise. Announcing an encore, Sir Antonio said (something like), “Maybe we can use some quiet after all that.” The orchestra played _Valse triste_, by Sibelius. And this leads me to a pet point, and crotchet: you seldom hear short pieces anymore because the fashion in orchestral programs is to have long pieces. Almost never do you hear _Valse triste_, except as an encore. Other short pieces—and other short masterpieces—are neglected altogether.

As for Sir Antonio Pappano, I think of him as the one that got away. He leads the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, as well as the Santa Cecilia group. For years, I have wanted him to succeed James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera. It is not to be. But may the Met prosper regardless.

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**Jay Nordlinger** is a Senior Editor at _National Review_.

His podcast with _The New Criterion_, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.