On Daniil Trifonov at Carnegie Hall; Massenet’s Thaïs and the Verdi Requiem at the Metropolitan Opera; a new piece by John Luther Adams, performed by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center & Sharon Isbin at the 92nd Street Y.

As regular readers know, I like a performer who rolls his own—who writes his own music, in addition to performing. Marc-André Hamelin does this. Stephen Hough does this. Both of these men are pianists. It is pianists, typically, who roll their own, if anyone does. So does Daniil Trifonov, another pianist, the Russian sensation, now in his mid-twenties.

A couple of years ago, I reviewed a recording that Trifonov made of Rachmaninoff’s Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Behind him was the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Also on that album was a piece of Trifonov’s own: Rachmaniana, which he wrote when he was about eighteen. At Carnegie Hall recently, he played his Piano Concerto, which he wrote some four years ago. It is in E-flat minor. Has there ever been a concerto in that key? No doubt, but there must be very, very few.

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I will describe Trifonov’s concerto in briefest terms. It is moody, colorful, and madly virtuosic. Trifonov is madly virtuosic himself, so it stands to reason that he would write music of this nature. In his concerto, he is playing around on the keyboard, dizzyingly. The music is almost Berliozian in its freedom. It is occasionally a little bombastic. Do you remember the Warsaw Concerto, which had a vogue? It was written in the 1940s for a movie. It was akin to a parody of a Romantic concerto. Trifonov’s work reminded me of it.
The blunt question is, Would the Trifonov Concerto be programmed if it weren’t by a famous performer? To ask it another way, Would it be programmed if he didn’t play it? Almost certainly not. But this concerto reflects a love of music. And it reflects a Romantic heart. Moreover, performers ought to be encouraged to roll their own, as performers did for centuries. Only in the twentieth century did a serious split develop between composers and performers.

At Carnegie Hall, Trifonov favored the crowd with an encore, written by Prokofiev: his Sarcasm No. 3. It is fast and fiendish, and Trifonov played it to perfection (not a word to be used lightly). Looking on from the side of the orchestra was Valery Gergiev.

This was a concert of the Mariinsky Orchestra from Saint Petersburg (Russia, not Florida), which has long been led by Maestro Gergiev. He began with a Strauss tone poem, Don Juan. He ended with a symphony of Prokofiev. Which one was it? No. 1, No. 5, or No. 7? Those are the ones we hear regularly, although the composer wrote seven. This happened to be the Symphony No. 6, a rarity—and in the key of E-flat minor. Perhaps someone was putting two and two together.

The symphony is intense, savage, calm, eerie, puckish, delirious, fearful, mad. In other words, it is by Prokofiev. The slow movement, Largo, might put you in mind of the composer’s famous ballets: Romeo and Juliet and Cinderella. Gergiev conducted the work brilliantly, leading the orchestra to play it the same way. You heard both the logic and the music, so to speak. You were aware of the structure—almost the mathematics—of the piece, and of its inspiration. The playing was exceptionally well defined.
I’m not sure that the Prokofiev Sixth is a crowd-pleaser, and I can’t say that the crowd was overwhelmingly pleased. Still, Gergiev and the Mariinsky offered an encore, the closing music from a Stravinsky ballet, *The Firebird*. No one could have been displeased.

The Metropolitan Opera revived Thaïs, the Massenet opera of 1894, in a production by John Cox, the veteran British director. (The production is from 2008.) Thaïs is not as well loved as the two big Massenet operas, Werther and Manon—but it has its devotees. I sat next to one. He had never seen the opera live, and was really looking forward to the experience. Many years before, he had heard Thaïs on the radio, and been enchanted. He went to buy a recording. In the shops, the clerks told him, “Oh, you must mean Aida.” No, he said, Thaïs. Finally, he got it.

*Gerald Finley and Ailyn Pérez in Massenet’s Thaïs. Photo: Chris Lee / Metropolitan Opera*

*Thaïs* needs, first and foremost, a Thaïs, the soprano in the title role. It is a difficult role, filled by the likes of Price, Sills, and Fleming. The Met cast Ailyn Pérez, an American (like those three). She certainly looked the part: lush, sensuous, and dreamy. Did she sing like that? To a degree, yes. But often her voice was bright and forward, rather than lush. She sang a good high C, and although her D may not have been pretty, it was there. (This is the note—somewhat famous—that ends the soprano aria.) What Pérez had going for her, above all, was self-confidence: confidence that all eyes and ears would be on her, and should. This goes a long way in opera singing, and in life.

Her Athanaël was to be Gerald Finley, the Canadian baritone, but he was indisposed, replaced by Bradley Garvin, an American. Like his Thaïs, he looked the part, which is to say, handsome, like a leading man. He sang in much the same fashion. Really singing well was Jean-François Borras, the tenor in the role of Nicias. A Frenchman, he sang natively, and he showed a lovely voice. Also, he sang easily—with no strain, no apparent effort. I once heard the aforementioned Leontyne Price
make a remark to a student tenor in a master class, who was singing “Una furtiva lagrima,” the aria from Donizetti’s *Elixir of Love*. “It’s so easy for you,” she said. “It’s like falling off a log.” So it was with Jean-François Borras.

One of the sweetest singers in the house was the concertmaster, David Chan, playing the hit of the opera: the Meditation, a violin solo. Blessedly, the tempo was un-slow. Serving as conductor was Emmanuel Villaume, who knew what he was doing. But I must say this, not only in reference to the conductor, but to the performers at large: maximum drama was not wrung out of *Thaïs*. Far from it. *Thaïs* may not be a masterpiece—a threat to *Rigoletto*’s reputation, let’s say—but it need not be dull.

Not dull at all was the belly dancer, Syrena Nikole, a siren and a half.

John Adams is a very well-known composer, maybe the best-known in the world, or at least in America, along with Philip Glass. (If you count John Williams, of movie fame, all bets are off.) Less well-known is another American composer, John Luther Adams, though he has had a distinguished career, which includes the Pulitzer prize. In a program note, Ransom Wilson wrote, “I’m fond of saying that I’ve known John since before he used his middle name!”

Wilson is a flutist, and he was a featured performer on a concert of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. On that concert, a new piece by Adams was played. Its title has small letters, like so many titles in today’s music: *there is no one, not even the wind*. In a program note of his own, the composer explained that he adapted his title from a line of Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet. Paz wrote, “There is no one, not even yourself.” (This is a translation from the original Spanish.)
Adams was born in 1953 in Mississippi. For about forty years, he lived in Alaska. I will now quote from the Chamber Music Society’s program notes:

After he began having trouble with his eyesight in 2014 and was also increasingly troubled by what he realized, he said, is “the accelerating reality of climate change in Alaska,” he moved to New York City, though he continues to assert that Alaska is “the landscape of my soul.” Unable to resist the lure and creative nourishment of open spaces and solitude, he now divides his time between the city and the desert of Mexico.

Adams says that his new work “comes directly from my experience of the space and solitude, the stillness and light, of the desert.” He further says that it “embraces layered time and physical space as central elements.”

The work is for nine players, including two percussionists and two flutists. It is mystical and a bit psychedelic. I thought of a peyote ceremony. Many would regard the music as deep, I think. It seems both to commune with nature and to reflect nature. We hear a suggestion of thunder. We also hear something like wind chimes on a porch. I often say of minimalism, “If the drug takes, you’re fine. If it doesn’t, you’re not. If the spell sets in, you’re fine. If you’re wide awake, without benefit of the spell, you’re not.” I think something like this applies to there is no one, not even the wind. I kept waiting for something to happen—for the music to develop. But there was no one.
Perhaps I don’t have patience enough for this music. (Many others surely did.) The piece lasted for about a half-hour, I think. If it had been five minutes, or an hour, or five hours, what difference would it have made?

At intermission, I observed something that I had never seen in a lifetime of concertgoing. A patron complained bitterly about the Adams piece to an usher—actually, to two ushers (separately). He had paid good money, he said, and what had taken place on the stage was a “disgrace.” He was leaving the concert as a result. And he wanted his complaint “lodged.”

This patron was not an old fogey, either: he was in his late twenties, probably, and informally dressed. He was very, very rude, of course—for one thing, the ushers had nothing to do with the programming. I don’t defend his behavior for one second. But I must say I understand him a bit.

After intermission, Ransom Wilson played Dutilleux’s Sonatine for Flute and Piano, along with Juho Pohjonen, a Finnish pianist. The incensed and leaving patron really missed something! Henri Dutilleux, a French composer, lived for almost a century: from 1916 to 2013. In 1943, he composed this sonatine to serve as a competition piece. I would call it a French work with a Bartókian accent. It is shimmering, pure, mysterious, flitting, and beautiful. An irresistible piece, really, done full justice by the two performers. (In that program note, Wilson said that he had worked on the piece with Dutilleux himself in the 1970s.)

Above, I referred to a lifetime of concertgoing. One of the greatest performances I ever heard—ever—was of the Verdi Requiem, conducted by James Levine. It was during the 2000–01 season at Carnegie Hall. Levine conducted his Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus. The soloists were Renée Fleming, soprano; Olga Borodina, mezzo-soprano; Marcello Giordani, tenor; and René Pape, bass. All of the soloists, except for Giordani, were in top form, and Giordani was good enough. Levine was staggering. He wrung full power from that piece—musical, emotional, and spiritual. Afterward, people hung around the auditorium, not wanting to leave. They wanted to remain in the atmosphere a little. They wanted to talk a little about what had just happened, even with strangers. It was the damnedest, most wonderful thing.

This season, Levine conducted the Requiem in the Metropolitan Opera House, with those same Met forces. His soloists were Krassimira Stoyanova, Ekaterina Semenchuk, Aleksandrs Antonenko, and Ferruccio Furlanetto. There were several performances. On the night I attended, Levine was not his best self. He conducted with due competence, needless to say—but the power, of various kinds, was not really there. The cries of “Dies irae” were not the least terrifying. The Sanctus was pedestrian. Often, an audience wants to applaud after that section, so uplifting and exciting is it. On this occasion, there was no danger of that.
Furlanetto, the great Italian bass, had a rough night. He had his kingly authority, as always, and his marvelous diction—but he was very “approximate” in his pitch and in his rhythm, and “approximate” is being generous. Antonenko is a Latvian tenor and a worthy Verdian. He, too, had a rough night, especially with pitch. The Ingemisco was an unfortunate affair—yet Antonenko sang it with heart. He never lost heart.

From time to time, singers in the Requiem are called on to sing unaccompanied. When this happened, and the men were involved, things were a mess. The women had to fight to remain within shouting distance of the pitch. They had to fight to keep from being led astray.

Semenchuk, a Russian mezzo, was Amneris at the Salzburg Festival last summer, as readers may recall. She was superb in this role (the mezzo role in Verdi’s Aida). She was good in her Requiem “role” as well. She sang with true Verdian power, and she sang with solidity. Her vowels were sometimes odd. And she lisped, something I had never noticed in her before. Lisping comes and goes in some singers. It came and went in Beverly Sills; it comes and goes in Borodina. In any event, Semenchuk made a welcome contribution.

Then there was Stoyanova, the great—the surpassingly great—Bulgarian soprano. In 2011, she sang in this piece under Riccardo Muti at Salzburg. I wrote, “Her voice could not hack parts of Verdi’s Requiem; it is simply too small. In the Libera me, when she sang her big C, I heard nothing, absolutely nothing. I simply saw her mouth open. But when you could hear her, she was her admirable self.” There was no such trouble this year at the Met. Why? Well, it occurs to me that the orchestra was in a pit, not on the stage. This must make a difference. You could hear all singers clearly (for better or worse).

Stoyanova took over, redeeming the whole evening.
I have called Stoyanova “surpassing.” She surpassed herself on this night. She sang correctly, intelligently, and movingly. There was a great deal of beauty involved, and not of the la-di-da type. Stoyanova offered an array of colors. Her high notes were unshowy, accurate, and effective. I have referred to this singer’s “layback spin,” a term I borrow from figure skating. When she goes for a high note, she tilts her head and shoulders back and nails it. In this performance, I kept waiting for her to sing, almost looking at my watch until she did. When the Libera me comes along, the soprano owns the piece (along with the conductor). Stoyanova simply took over, redeeming the whole evening. You can go many, many years without hearing a Libera me so moving.

As soon as it was over, someone in the audience booed, loudly. This happened at the end of Stoyanova’s Salzburg recital last summer too (and a first-class recital it was). I wonder whether some jerk is following her around—or whether someone was responding to the overall performance.

At the 92nd Street Y, Sharon Isbin took the stage looking like a rocker. Audience members whooped, as well they might have. Isbin wore shiny black leather pants—real tight—and what looked like shiny black boots, with high heels. (Remember those heels, for they will play a part later.) Isbin is a guitarist and she sat down to play a Danza española by Granados—a piece that many of us associate with Alicia de Larrocha, the late, great pianist.

Perhaps wrongly, I think of the guitar repertory as having two main categories: Spanish music, written for the guitar, and transcriptions, of all sorts of things. In this recital, Isbin played many transcriptions of Spanish music—originally for the piano. At any rate, every guitarist has a Spanish heart, as I say when writing about Xuefei Yang and others: it is baked in the guitarist’s cake. Though we can argue about such questions as rubato, Isbin handles this music with sensitivity, skill, and style.

Throughout the evening, she talked to the audience, as one does these days. I suppose most people like it. Charmingly and defensively, she plugged her new CD, which is called *Alma Española*, or “Spanish Soul,” with Isabel Leonard, the mezzo-soprano.

Along the way, Isbin played a work by Tan Dun, written for her: *Seven Desires*. In these little pieces, Tan Dun displays his usual fusion between East and West, creating interesting sounds. There are screwy little glissandos, for example. He also has the guitarist slap the instrument and stamp the floor (which is where those boot heels come in handy). Later in the program, Isbin played another work written for her, this one by Howard Shore, of film-score fame. She is building the repertory.

Years ago, William F. Buckley Jr. presided over a National Review editorial dinner, at which Sharon Isbin was a guest. He said to her, “I understand you’re the best guitarist in the world.” Demurring, she said, “No, no. You can’t say there’s a best guitarist in the world. That would be like saying
there’s a best *writer* in the world”—at which point the great writer flashed his famous smile and said, “Waal . . .”

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