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by Jay Nordlinger

On performances by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Alexandre Tharaud, Anna Caterina Antonacci, Ying Fang, Nicolas Altstaedt and Fazil Say at Carnegie Hall; Emmanuel Pahud at the 92nd Street Y; and the New York Philharmonic.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra was known for its brass—not its administrators but its trumpeters, trombonists, and so on. "The Chicago brass" was a byword in music. Is it still? My impression is, no. There is an essential parity between orchestras, or a sameness, if you like. Regardless, the Chicago brass is still impressive—and some of them got to show off.

That was in a new concerto by Jennifer Higdon, an American born in 1962. She calls it "Low Brass Concerto," and the soloists are two trombones, a bass trombone, and a tuba. It was interesting to see them up front—"up close and personal," to borrow a phrase from sports TV. They spend their lives in the back.

Jennifer Higdon. Photo: Limelight Magazine

Higdon's concerto is in one movement, like most modern concertos, for some reason. It has different moods. For a while, there is a wash, that familiar musical wash. The soloists have some nice chorales. At some point, the music turns spiky and jazzy. Later, it is broad and Western, which is to say, Coplandesque. Ultimately, it is fast and busy—busy busy busy, like so many pieces. This concerto is new, but I felt that I had heard it before, often.

The next night, the cso played another new work, by another American: Samuel Adams, born in 1985. He is the son of John Adams. I am talking composers, of course, though it sounds like I'm talking about Founders. The new work by Adams the Younger is *many words of love*. As modern concertos are in one movement, modern titles are in all smalls. Why, I can't tell you. This has been going on for years. Adams takes his title from a poem by Wilhelm Müller, used by Schubert in *Winterreise*.

I felt I had heard this new piece many times before. It has a sci-fi feel. It is spooky. There are those shudders, those sudden scared sounds. The music is bleak and wailing. Eventually, however, there is some affirmative material, repetitive. The ending is clever.

I'm sorry to be dismissive. Samuel Adams is obviously a brainy person, with much to offer. (I can say the same of Jennifer Higdon.) He writes well, by the way—I'm talking about prose. You can see this in his program note, or composer's note. I have no doubt that *many words of love* makes perfect sense to him. Whether he succeeds in communicating this sense to others, I don't know.

Samuel Adams. Photo: CSO Sounds

The cso was playing at Carnegie Hall, in two concerts under its music director, Riccardo Muti. The highlight of the concerts, probably, was the overture to Verdi's *Sicilian Vespers*. It was taut, bristling, and balanced. Muti sculpted the music expertly. The orchestra's pizzicatos were accurate,

and when the cellos had the melody, they really sang. From Muti, you heard total Verdian authority.

You heard a French authority, too, in Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, for voice and orchestra. Whose voice, on this occasion? The soloist was Clémentine Margaine, a French mezzo. Her sound was big and unforced. Low notes were exceptionally beautiful. Some high ones were slightly flat, but it mattered little. Margaine fused poetry and music (as Chausson does). She showed a range of colors. So did the cso, under Muti.

One line of the text—by Maurice Bouchor, a poet who lived from 1855 to 1929—speaks of "l'oubli," oblivion. From Margaine, it sounded just like that, chillingly.

On each night, Muti conducted an encore, one of which was a *notturno*, or nocturne, by Giuseppe Martucci. He lived in Naples, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Muti was educated there, by people born about that time. The nocturne is obviously dear to him, and you can take pleasure in what is dear to others. Such pieces make wonderful encores (particularly in voice recitals, I would say).

The next week, in Zankel Hall, Alexandre Tharaud played a recital, offering a single work: Bach's Goldberg Variations. Tharaud is a French pianist. Writing the program notes was Harry Haskell—who quoted Wanda Landowska, the legendary harpsichordist. The aria in the Goldbergs, she said, is "grave and yet happy, tranquil and at the same time vibrant with internal life." Haskell added that the same could be said of the work as a whole. In his excellent program notes, he pointed out that Bach wrote music both sacred and secular—reams of each type. But, you know? Much of his secular music is streaked with the sacred. I would say this is true of the Goldbergs.

On this particular evening, I thought of William F. Buckley Jr., a friend to many of us, who passed away ten years ago. There have been events to mark the occasion, and remember the man. He loved music supremely, and he loved Bach supremely, and he loved the *Goldberg Variations* supremely. He never tired of listening to them. Who would?

I should say something about Monsieur Tharaud. I think I will skip it, however, because he was not his best self in Zankel Hall, and neither were the *Goldbergs*. Both have had better nights and will again. Let me recommend Tharaud's 2013 album of encores, *Autograph*. First-rate.

For Emmanuel Pahud, they screamed as for a rock star—and he is merely a flutist. He is one of the greatest flutists we have ever known, but still: he is a flutist, not Elvis. Pahud, who is Swiss, is a principal flute in the Berlin Philharmonic as well as a soloist. With Alessio Bax, the Italian pianist, no matter what his last name says, he played a recital at the 92nd Street Y.

By the way, I've called Pahud a "flutist" whereas many people prefer, or insist on, "flautist." I am charmed by what he says in his own bio (in English): "flute player."

Pahud and Bax began with Poulenc's Sonata, and Pahud began nonchalantly. It was like falling off a log for him. He was utterly relaxed, utterly confident—and he has a great deal to be confident about. He played the sonata perfectly, I must say, using the most brazen of words. It's not merely that nothing was wrong but that everything was right. Technique could be taken for granted. And the style was inarguable. There are certain words that we often apply to flute-playing: "beguiling," "enchanting." They apply here. Pahud can produce any number of colors on his instrument, and his Poulenc could not have been more French. The composer marks his last movement "Presto giocoso" (a playful presto). From Pahud's lips, it was just that way. And after he was finished, they screamed for him as for a rock star.

Emmanuel Pahud. Photo courtesy of the artist

Incidentally, I thought of Renée Fleming, the great soprano. She once said to me in an interview, "We're the only musicians who have to face our audience. We see everything: who's asleep, who's happy." Even cellists, who face their audience bodily, are mainly looking down. Well, flutists too, it occurred to me, face their audience. Moreover, I found myself evaluating Pahud as I would a singer, at certain points in his recital. That was certainly true in the Schubert that he played after the Poulenc. I thought of Diana Damrau, the German soprano—whose instrument is flute-like.

What Pahud played was the Arpeggione Sonata, arranged by himself. The flutist is rolling his own, so to speak, expanding the repertoire for himself and his fellows. On the second half of the

program, he would play a Mendelssohn violin sonata, also arranged by himself. In the Schubert, he was Schubertian, in a word. And the piece sounded like a flute sonata, rather than an arrangement. I think Schubert would have smiled.

Here's something I noticed that I would have noticed in a singer: Pahud sang, or played, in one register, without breaks. Callas used to speak of "my three voices." If Pahud gives you a different voice, it's because he wants to, not because he has to. (Mind you, Callas did all right.)

I could gush on, piece by piece, detail by detail, but I will stop, noting that Pahud is not only one of our greatest flutists and one of our greatest woodwinds but also one of our greatest musicians. I have said nothing about Signor Bax, who was commendable. Next time.

Anna Caterina Antonacci is an Italian soprano who sings a lot of French literature. Indeed, one is apt to think of her as a French singer, in practice rather than nationality. With the pianist Donald Sulzen, she appeared in Zankel Hall, though under the auspices of New York City Opera. She sang no opera: she sang a song recital, in three languages. There was Debussy, Respighi, Boulanger, Britten, and Poulenc.

By "Boulanger," I mean Nadia, not her younger sister, Lili. Nadia Boulanger was the most famous composition teacher of the twentieth century. She taught anyone and everyone. But she was also a practitioner, a composer: and the seven songs that Antonacci sang show considerable skill and talent. A knockout is "Cantique," or "Hymn," setting a poem by Maeterlinck. It is a quiet knockout. I consider it one of those religious-sounding secular songs, a cousin, perhaps, to "A Chloris" (Hahn), "Aimons-nous" (Saint-Saëns), and others we could name.

Anna Caterina Antonacci. Photo: The New York Times

Antonacci began with "Mandoline," by Debussy. It was passable. The voice showed a lot of mileage on it. I thought, "I'll stay for the first half of the recital and write a perfunctory paragraph in my chronicle." But then something happened: Antonacci drew you in, with rare interpretive artistry. You could overlook every vocal or technical imperfection. Indeed, they were irrelevant. Antonacci was communicating the truth behind the songs. They had their maximum impact, in their music and their words. Also, she was not really singing art songs. She was singing songs, plain and simple. There was no real wall between the classical and the popular. Often, you heard touches of the cabaret, perfectly appropriate.

Respighi wrote a song called "Crepuscolo" ("Twilight"), to a poem by Antonio Rubino (1880–1964): "The day dies, and in the vast restless shade / A song of happiness trembles and saddens . . ." Antonacci was devastating in this moment. She obviously lives to communicate, in song.

I have said that she sang no opera—but, at encore time, the pianist started a familiar rhythm. Yes, it was the Habanera, from *Carmen*. Antonacci did not sing it according to Hoyle. Beckmesser, the fussbudget in *Die Meistersinger*, would have marked her down. But she sang the aria bewitchingly. It was on little cat feet. It prowled around, irresistibly. The Habanera was no longer a tired cliché but fresh and new. You got some of the thrill, perhaps, that you did when you first heard it.

In my business, you can get jaded and cynical. But then a Pahud or an Antonacci comes along and penetrates all that.

A concert of the New York Philharmonic began with an oomp, an obligatory opening modern piece. It was Dark Waves, by John Luther Adams, an American composer not to be confused with the aforementioned John Adams, father of Samuel. The title of the piece—not in all smalls!—tells the story. The listener hears dark waves, and sometimes they have a physical effect. They can numb and stun you, but perhaps not pleasantly. The cellists are sawing away, minimalistically. I thought, "That's a lawsuit waiting to happen, in this day and age: repetitive stress syndrome and all that." To my ears, Dark Waves does not hold interest, but there are other ears, fortunately.

On the podium was Jaap Van Zweden, the Philharmonic's music-director-to-be. He will have to conduct a lot of new music if he wants to get along in this town—if he wants the critical press off his back, that is. He will have to eat his vegetables, pay his dues. It's not enough to be a great conductor. You have to be seen as "advocating for" whatever is au courant.

After Adams came Wagner, Act I of *Die Walküre*, the second opera in Wagner's great tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. When Wagner is performed in concert (apart from purely orchestral excerpts), it is usually this act. You need three singers, namely a Sieglinde, a Siegmund, and a Hunding. I will pass over our singers to concentrate on Van Zweden, for every concert he conducts has special importance. The reason is, you want to know what you're getting—what the Philharmonic is getting in a music director.

His Wagner was vivid. Intense. Van Zweden showed an understanding of tempos, phrasing, and architecture. He conducted as though it mattered. Nothing was casual, nothing was routine. In initial stages, the sound of the orchestra was poor, lacking desirable warmth. But the sound improved, growing warmer and more Wagnerian. The music had the right weight. This is critical in Wagner (as in other composers, to be sure). The music must not be overladen; neither should it lapse into negligibility.

I noticed something that may be a trait, a habit, a technique of Van Zweden's: the tenor aria "Winterstürme" was going off the rails, and Van Zweden rose on his toes and conducted in exaggerated beats, to set the aria right. I have seen him do this more than once now.

The most unfortunate part of the performance was the ending, that great climax: it was anticlimactic, and shockingly so. Just when steam should maximize, our forces were low on steam. Nonetheless, I was ready to hear the entire *Ring*. Maybe Van Zweden will conduct complete operas with the Philharmonic, as Riccardo Muti is doing in Chicago.

Ying Fang is an opera singer, and she is also a song singer, as she proved in Weill Recital Hall. She is a young Chinese soprano, rising at the Metropolitan Opera and elsewhere. Her hallmark has been purity: a lyrical purity. She sang her recital with the pianist Ken Noda. There were just two composers: Mozart and Schubert. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf relied a lot on those two composers as well.

In Salzburg last summer, I interviewed Russell Thomas, the American tenor, who was singing the title role in Mozart's *Clemenza di Tito*. He said that Mozart-singing was essentially thankless: "He exposes all of your flaws and vulnerabilities. And if you sing him right, no one cares." That is, the audience is apt to take it for granted.

Ken Noda and Ying Fang in Weill Recital Hall. Photo: Julien Jourdes

Ying Fang fit Weill Recital Hall nicely, and vice versa. There is such a thing as size appropriateness when it comes to halls and voices. Ying Fang does not have a big voice, and she filled this jewel of a hall. Her Mozart was indeed pure. It was precise, shapely, and affecting. She sang arching lines without breaking a sweat, lines that terrify older singers (who are eager to give up Mozart, that divine taskmaster). Ying Fang's Schubert was not dissimilar to her Mozart. In some places, I would have liked it warmer, or deeper. But these qualities will come in time, and Ying Fang has so much already.

One of the best *Lied* recitals I ever heard was by Marjana Lipovšek, the Slovenian mezzo, at the very end of her career. A lifetime of singing, and of living, came to the fore. It will be a joy to follow Ying Fang in coming decades.

The next week in Weill, Nicolas Altstaedt and Fazil Say teamed up for a recital. Altstaedt is a French-German cellist and Say is a Turkish pianist—and composer. In 2012, Say wrote a piece for Altstaedt, which they played on this evening. It is Dört Şehir, meaning Four Cities. This is a travelogue, stopping at four points in Anatolia, or Asia Minor, as we used to say. Those stops, those four cities—and the four movements of the work—are Sivas, Hopa, Ankara, and Bodrum. The third of those, the capital of Turkey, is Say's hometown.

Fazil Say and Nicolas Altstaedt in Weill Recital Hall. Photo: Richard Termine

Sivas, the opening movement, is highly listenable. It is a curious mixture of the folkloric and the cocktail lounge. It swings, suggesting free living. The second movement (Hopa) is frankly savage. It is primitive, exciting, even frenzied. The third movement is unrelenting and nasty, I would say. It depicts a kind of hell. This is the movement representing Ankara, remember, and the music made me think that Fazil Say doesn't like his hometown very much. It would be interesting to ask him. The last movement, Bodrum, comes as a relief. It is jazzy and carefree. I took Bodrum to be kind of a dessert, after the death march of Ankara.

In both his playing and his composing, Say has great rhythm. In fact, it would be hard to think of the musical tool he lacks. Nicolas Altstaedt matched him in skill and spirit. They seem to be birds of a feather, which is fitting for recital partners.

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

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