The New Criterion

Music March 2019

New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On Elegy and Fire in my mouth at the New York Philharmonic; Sabine Devieilhe, Mathieu Pordoy, and Seong-Jin Cho at Carnegie Hall; and Carmen at the Met Opera.

A concert of the New York Philharmonic began with an oomp—an obligatory opening modern piece—but an oomp of good quality. It was Elegy, by Steven Stucky, an American composer who lived from 1949 to 2016. The piece begins with a scream, or wail, and portentous beats. Then there is another scream, or wail, and further portentous beats. Before long, a little song begins. There are brief, warm brass choirs. The music is beautiful, and, on this first listening, I was not entirely sure it was sad. You could have construed it as affirmative. But you were primed to regard it as sad, because you saw that the piece was called Elegy.

What's in a name? A lot, when it comes to music. A name steers us to think a certain thing about a piece of music. Long ago, Ned Rorem made this point to me in an interview. Take *La mer*, he said. You think it's about the sea, because of the name. So you hear the wind, the waves, and so on. But what if someone told you it was about something else? Mentally, you would be steered.

After the concert, I did a little reading about *Elegy*. Stucky adapted it from a choral work he had composed: a liturgical piece, an *O vos omnes*. Like an elegy, an *O vos omnes* is sad—explicitly so, for it has words, unlike an elegy, or at least Stucky's musical elegy, which is wordless. When a work leaves a composer's pen and arrives in a listener's ear, who knows what the listener will make of it? One man's sadness may be another man's (mere) wistfulness; one man's ecstasy may be another's noisy confusion.

In David Geffen Hall that night, we heard *Elegy* out of context. It comes from an oratorio by Stucky, one that is quite explicit: *August 4, 1964*. This work was commissioned by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra to mark the centennial of Lyndon B. Johnson, who was born in 1908. Jaap van Zweden conducted the premiere of the oratorio, as he was the music director in Dallas at the time. Today, he is the music director in New York, and it was he who conducted the concert in Geffen Hall. *August 4, 1964* deals, specifically, with the Gulf of Tonkin (and thus the Vietnam War) and the murder of the three civil rights workers in Mississippi: Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner.

Jaap van Zweden conducts Fire in my mouth *at the New York Philharmonic. Photo: Caitlin Ochs.*

There is no question what this work is about—the texts (diaries, letters, etc.) tell you so. The same is true of *Fire in my mouth*, a brand-new work, performed on the second half of the Philharmonic concert. It, too, is an oratorio, and it is by Julia Wolfe, another American composer, born in 1958. She likes to deal with social issues, and in particular labor history, it seems. A few years ago, she wrote *Anthracite Fields*—also an oratorio—which is about coal mining in northeastern Pennsylvania. Some composers are attracted to such subjects. I think of another American, Frederic Rzewski.

Fire in my mouth? It's about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, that disaster that struck in 1911. Almost 150 people—146—were killed in that fire. The factory was on Washington Place, in Greenwich Village. This is the territory of New York University, where Julia Wolfe happens to teach. She passes the site routinely. She assembled a variety of materials for her new oratorio. As she writes in a composer's note, "I weave fragments of oral history, the clatter of factory sounds, Yiddish and Italian folk songs, words of protest, and stories of loss and grief."

The work is in four movements, beginning with "Immigration." We see the people—the huddled masses and wretched refuse—arriving in America from Europe. Did I say "see"? Yes. There are pictures on a screen above the orchestra and chorus. You see the ships, the waves (only imagined in *La mer*!), and, eventually, the Statue of Liberty. Is this cheating? Shouldn't the pictures be painted in music and words? You could say "cheating," yes, but you could also say "enhancing." *Fire in my mouth* is in part a theater piece. The chorus does some acting. It occurred to me, as I watched and listened, that Wolfe could turn the work into an opera, if she wanted: adding some

arias and ensembles.

In the first movement, the music is minimalistic, with notes and words repeated over and over. Wolfe has a good sense of rhythm, and suspense, and climaxes. This movement is a little long for me, but then, I remind myself—and, often, readers—that much is.

The second movement is "Factory," bringing those industrial sounds, those clattering sounds. We also hear the Yiddish and Italian music. I suspected this would be kitschy, but no: the "ethnic" music is embedded flavorfully. The third movement is "Protest," which features more minimalism. It is jolting, propulsive minimalism, effective. "I want to talk like an American," the factory women sing. "I want to look like an American. I want to sing like an American. I want to walk like an American." Etc. A labor activist, Clara Lemlich, is quoted, reflecting on this period some years after the fact: "Ah, then I had fire in my mouth." This is where Julia Wolfe gets her title, of course.

Inevitably, the fourth movement is "Fire." It is horrible, needless to say. I mean, it is hard to sit through. Sitting there, I asked myself, "Is this emotionally manipulative?" It sure is—but you could say the same about *La traviata*. And about any number of movies you have seen. At the end, Wolfe does something interesting and affecting. She weaves in the names of all the 146 who were killed in the fire. ("Essie Bernstein" is one name; "Concetta Prestifilippo" another.) This may not be strictly related, but I thought of Andrei Sakharov, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975. In the middle of his lecture, he paused to name names: names of political prisoners in the Soviet Union. One by one, he listed them—about a hundred. Then, at the end, he said, "and many, many others."

Fire in my mouth is an intelligent, skillful, and heartfelt work. After the performance I attended, the audience gave the composer a robust, cheering ovation. I thought of Rorem, who in that aforementioned interview lamented the fate of contemporary classical composers: "We're a despised minority. Actually, we're not even that, because we don't even exist, and to be despised, you have to exist." On this night, certainly, Julia Wolfe existed, and was hailed.

Jaap van Zweden conducted her work with his customary discipline and vividness. I have never heard another performance, of course, but I can't help feeling that he got the maximum out of the piece. No matter how long the work lives, it will not have a better advocate on the podium, I bet.

There was a third work in this concert, sandwiched between the modern ones: Copland's Clarinet Concerto, which was written for Benny Goodman in the late 1940s. Van Zweden's soloist was the Philharmonic's principal, Anthony McGill. I give you fair warning: I will use the words "perfect" and "perfectly" a lot.

As the concerto began, Van Zweden, with the orchestra, breathed just right. The pulse was perfect. The music was slow but not stagnant. It moved forward. McGill, when he entered, did some "just right" breathing himself. Soloist and orchestra entwined Copland's notes, perfectly. The concerto is in two movements, linked by a cadenza. McGill judged this thing perfectly. The cadenza swung, classically. What I mean is, it reflected the fusion of jazz and classical music that the composer

intended (I believe). Also, the cadenza sounded improvised, written though it is. In the second movement, McGill was nimble, jaunty, nuanced, and, frankly, perfect (or darn near). You could see the music in his very body. McGill was not showing off—his "body language" was natural, irrepressible. Coming from the stage was sheer jazzy joy. Van Zweden, along with his American soloist, caught the spirit of the work, foreigner though he is. No true musician is a foreigner, really, in music.

The previous week, Van Zweden had conducted a concert of Beethoven and Rachmaninoff. And I recalled a story from the Metropolitan Opera, which I told in a review of this concert for *The New Criterion*'s website. Walter Taussig was a conductor born in Vienna in 1908 (same year as Lyndon Johnson!). He joined the music staff of the Met in the late 1940s (when Copland was writing his concerto for Goodman). One day, he said to James Levine, the Met's music director—this was in the '80s or '90s, maybe—"You know, Jimmy, they talk about 'the good old days.' Well, I was there, during the good old days. And let me tell you: *these* are the good old days."

Some of these New York Philharmonic concerts, with this new music director, Van Zweden, at the helm, have felt like the good old days.

In 2013, Dalton Baldwin gave a master class in the song program launched by Marilyn Horne. Baldwin is a legendary accompanist of singers; Horne is a legendary singer. On the agenda that day was French music, only. Horne talked about her experience as a recitalist in America. "When you left the stage after singing your French set, you had to come back out real fast if you wanted another bow—because the applause would die down." It was hard to sell these French songs, she said. But what a great repertoire, no matter what an audience thinks.

I thought of Horne and Baldwin when attending a recital in Weill Recital Hall—the very venue of Baldwin's master class, six years ago. The recitalist was a French soprano, Sabine Devieilhe, accompanied by Mathieu Pordoy, a French pianist. Their program was all-French: Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, and others. One of the others was Maurice Delage (1879–1961), a student of Ravel. Also included was Albert Roussel, who is best known—at least by me—for orchestral works. His song "Réponse d'une épouse sage" is fascinating. (A married woman rejects the advances of an admirer—though not without regret.)

Mathieu Pordoy and Sabine Devieilhe perform at Weill Recital Hall on January 19, 2019. Photo: Steve J. Sherman.

Rather than go song by song, I thought I would jot some generalities. Sabine Devieilhe is smart as a whip. She has a beautiful voice and a secure technique. She is very confident, very poised. She is engaged by singing and engages others. In her songs at Weill, she was clean, clean, clean. Her French is a pleasure to listen to, and very clear. This clarity is especially beneficial in quick songs. She can tell a story, when a song entails it. She is an excellent musician. Anything wrong? No, but I have some reservations. Some of the songs were a little straight for me. I could have used more of a smile—more color or warmth, more soulfulness or sensuality. Take "Hôtel," the Poulenc song. At the end, I like at least a hint of the blues.

But Devieilhe knows her own mind, and it is a very good one. "I've got a right to sing the blues," sang Eileen Farrell. If that's true, then Sabine Devieilhe has a right to sing 'em straight. At the piano, Mathieu Pordoy showed knowledge and ability. I will cite a single detail: when he plays softly, he can do so without losing body.

Devieilhe told us she was going to sing one encore: it was the Fire Aria, from Ravel's opera, *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. It duly dazzled. Then she said, charmingly, that she was going to sing just one more—very brief. It was "Voyage à Paris" (Poulenc). Frederica von Stade liked to go out on this one too. The Devieilhe-Pordoy recital was performed without an intermission and lasted just over an hour: from 7:35 to 8:40. This was a critic's dream, let me tell you. They (we) love a short evening, and if the evening is a good and satisfying one, all the better.

Seong-Jin Cho's recital was not as short, but it was just as good and satisfying. He is a pianist from South Korea, twenty-four years old. He studied at the Paris Conservatory with Michel

Béroff. Cho made a splash in 2015 when he won the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. His recent recital was in Carnegie Hall, and it brought Schubert, Debussy, and Mussorgsky. (Three guesses what the Mussorgsky was.)

Seong-Jin Cho finishes his victorious performance at the 2015 Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw. Photo: Bartek Sadowski.

The Schubert was the Fantasy in C major, more commonly known as the *Wanderer Fantasy*. I once heard a pianist say, "This is not true Schubert, you know. It is virtuosic, athletic, and extrovert. Schubert is not being true to himself." I say, maybe the composer had more sides than one supposes. Anyway, Cho showed fabulous fingers in the Fantasy. Those fingers, you can pretty much take for granted. He also showed "seriousness of purpose," to borrow a phrase that used to appear on student evaluations. He did some nice, simple singing. The Fantasy could have had more depth, but at least it was not overwrought.

Then came Debussy, the three pieces that compose *Images*, Book I. The first two were fine—a little bland, not very distinguished, but fine. The third one, "Mouvement," was better than that. It had the desired Impressionistic blend of the clear and the blurry. It was also exciting, flat-out. (Just so you know: Michel Béroff, *le maître*, is one of the greatest Debussy players of all time.)

The Mussorgsky, of course, was *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It is most often heard in one of the orchestral arrangements—particularly Ravel's—but I like the original for piano. I could say the same of *Le tombeau de Couperin* and *Alborada del gracioso* (which happen to be two Ravel pieces). Cho played the opening Promenade of *Pictures* as if it were an announcement. I sat up straighter. And this Promenade, I swear, swung a bit. As he continued, he demonstrated understanding and composure. I like that he didn't bully the piano. He let *Pictures* be a piano piece, not trying to

present it as something bigger. There came a time when I stopped evaluating—stopped criticizing, if you will—and just listened and enjoyed. I could not have imagined, from the first half of the program, that Cho would play this well, and this convincingly. When he got to the Great Gate, he did not bang. (Bang on the door?) His fortissimos were genuine ones. His audience, standing, showered applause on him. I joined them, happily.

In response to this enthusiasm, Cho sat down for an encore: some Chopin, his Prelude in A flat. From Cho, it was endearing, with a beautiful singing line. He played one more encore, a real barn-burner—a Fire Aria of its own—namely Liszt's Transcendental Etude in F minor, the "Appassionata" (like the Beethoven sonata). Cho played the blazes out of it. The crowd went nuts, as well it should have, and as crowds will probably do for this fellow for decades to come.

The Metropolitan Opera put on a Carmen, with Roberto Alagna in the role of Don José. He has been doing this role for years and years, and decades and decades. According to the calendar, he is fifty-five years old. I can scarcely credit this. From the seats, he looks the same as he always has: fit build, all that hair. And, on some nights, he sounds the same, too. On this particular night, some of his singing was effortful (in the Flower Song, for example). But his theatrical powers—his operatic powers—were overwhelming. There was nothing routine about his performance. There was no clock-punching to it. He gave it his all (which remains considerable). This was just an ordinary Monday night—another day, another Carmen, another Don José—yet Alagna sang and acted as though it were some special occasion.

Roberto Alagna stars as Don José in Carmen *at the Metropolitan Opera.*

I thought of Joe DiMaggio. Late in his career, in a late-season game, which had no bearing on the pennant race, he made a daring, diving catch. After the game, someone asked him, "Why did you do that? Your body is banged up as it is. Why did you risk further injury, in a game that meant nothing?" DiMaggio responded, "Because there might have been someone in the stands who had never seen me play."

At the Met, I had with me a young cousin who had never seen Roberto Alagna perform. She had never seen *Carmen*, for that matter. And she was staggered. You never know who will be in the audience. And you may have one chance to leave an impression on him, or her, or them. Make it

good. Don’t let them down—and don’t let yourself down 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 37 Number 7 , on page 52

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