The New Criterion

Music April 2019

New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On Mikhail Pletnev and the Russian National Orchestra, Matthias Pintscher and the New York Philharmonic, Igudesman & Joo, and Falstaff and The Daughter of the Regiment at the Metropolitan Opera.

Mikhail Pletnev is one of the greatest pianists of all time, a living legend. He will sometimes go eccentric on you, but he almost always amazes. I could regale you with Pletnev stories, but let me offer just one: In the 2000–01 season, he played Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2 in Carnegie Hall. The concerto was note-perfect. You could not have doctored it in the studio any cleaner. And Tchaik 2 is not exactly a little ditty, mind you. Also, it brimmed over with musicality. In these pages, I wrote, "To hear Pletnev—a sincere musician with the ability of an exhibitionist—is to absorb something historic."

In David Geffen Hall recently, he played Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2. He played it with the Russian National Orchestra, which he himself founded in 1990. (While mainly a pianist, Pletnev is also a conductor, composer, and arranger. His piano transcriptions—of *The Sleeping Beauty*, for example—will long outlive him.) Conducting the rno on this night was Kirill Karabits, a Ukrainian whose father, Ivan, was also a conductor (and composer). When Pletnev appeared onstage, he received a huge, prolonged ovation. People know this fellow's musical worth.

Mikhail Pletnev with members of the Russian National Orchestra in 2017. Photo: Russian National Orchestra.

He walked slowly to the bench, and unsteadily too, it seemed to me. He tripped slightly, just before he sat down. The opening figure of the concerto, he muffed. And there were many strange occurrences thereafter as well. Pletnev could not quite settle on a tempo. He pushed and pulled. He and the orchestra were seldom together. I felt sorry for Maestro Karabits, as his soloist must have been impossible to follow. Pletnev had no spirit of collaboration in him. He sometimes tried to conduct a little, as he always does when he plays a concerto (at least in my experience). He indulged in some odd rubato. He committed crazy accents, completely out of musical bounds.

Was anything good? Oh, yes. Sounds, shadings, subtleties. Pletnev came up with some brilliant phrases and some dreamy phrases. But his performance as a whole did not cohere. It was mentally unsound. Pletnev's fingers were working—there was no technical problem—but his thinking was astray. He at times seemed to be experimenting with the concerto. He did not appear altogether serious. He poked at the keyboard as though bored or indifferent. Let me quote from an old review, which I wrote in the 2004–05 season. Pletnev had just played the two Brahms concertos, and I was talking about the second, in particular:

> As he played, Pletnev seemed to be searching out ways to make the music "fresh" or "interesting," certainly to himself. It occurred to me that he might be just slightly bored with these works. I have thought similarly about Rostropovich and the Dvořák Cello Concerto. Players of that instrument find themselves performing that work over and over—do they endeavor, consciously or not, to keep themselves entertained (the score aside)?

In any event, the audience was on its feet after the Rachmaninoff concerto. I was standing with them. The concerto had been weird—really weird—but there was still Pletnevian power in it (and Rachmaninoff's, too). Moreover, we were applauding a man who represents a great tradition, the tradition of Russian piano playing, stretching back at least to Rubinstein (Anton, not the Polish-

born pianist of a later generation, Artur). With a "Who, me?" shrug, Pletnev sat down for an encore.

It was a Scarlatti sonata, the one in D minor, K. 9, or L. 413, if you like. It was classic Pletnev: wizardly, beguiling, bewitching. He stretched the rhythms to the limits, but not beyond. He was imaginative but respectful. He employed a number of colors. There was a whole musical world within this little piece. Pletnev makes you realize what a piano can do, in the right hands. No one else can play Scarlatti like this—*equally well*, maybe, but not in the same fashion. Horowitz, Haskil, and the rest of the great Scarlatti players would have rubbed their eyes. I myself was shaking my head. It was scarcely believable.

After intermission, the rno played Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* (making the concert all-Rachmaninoff). The disorder of the concerto was gone. The *Dances* were correct, stylish, and pleasurable. They had their quirkiness without being nutty. The orchestra was smooth, adhering to the musical line. The unison playing in the strings was exemplary, with those strings singing as one. Plus, the rno has some great principals, in the woodwind section, not least. The second dance, the waltz, had its desired spookiness. In all three, Kirill Karabits showed himself a fine leader.

The audience wanted an encore. What could it be? There is no Rachmaninoff encore, really—not for orchestra. The only possibility, I thought, was an arrangement of the Vocalise. And, lo, that's what Karabits and the rno played. The audience wanted yet another encore. "Something rousing," I thought (after the dreamy Vocalise). I could not think of another Rachmaninoff encore. The orchestra turned to Glière: the Russian Sailors' Dance from *The Red Poppy*. It was played, and conducted, to the nth degree. It was a carnival, a riot, of Russianness.

Amazingly, the audience still wanted more. They clapped and clapped. A New York audience, on a weeknight especially? Usually, they (we) are racing to the exits. A performer can barely make it off the stage after the first curtain call. "Must be a lot of Russians here," I thought. Finally, in response to popular demand, the orchestra played a third encore: the overture to *Taras Bulba*, by Lysenko, the Ukrainian composer. Incidentally, Kirill Karabits, as a youngster in Kiev, went to the Lysenko Music School. And when we say "Lysenko," we are not referring to Stalin's agronomist, the author of Lysenkoism. That was Trofim Lysenko; the composer's first name was Mykola.

What a strange trip this night was. I am still living in its atmosphere, as I write.

The next night, in the same hall, the New York Philharmonic played a concert. On the podium was a guest conductor, Matthias Pintscher. The composer? Yes, but he conducts too (obviously). Pintscher is the music director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris. This is the group founded by Pierre Boulez in the middle 1970s. The Philharmonic concert began with Ravel (Alborada del gracioso) and ended with Stravinsky (The Firebird). In between came a work of Pintscher's own, written in 2011. This was mar'eh for violin and orchestra. Composers are in love with all smalls. I think that Copland, today, would write appalachian spring (or maybe AppalachianSpring?). In any event, Pintscher's title is a Hebrew word meaning sight, appearance,

vision. He dedicated his piece to Luigi Nono, the late composer, and also to Julia Fischer, the violinist, who gave the work's premiere. In David Geffen Hall, the soloist was Renaud Capuçon (elder brother of Gautier, the cellist). I will give a sense of what I heard.

The violinist Renaud Capuçon and the New York Philharmonic perform Matthias Pintscher's mar'eh*, with the composer conducting. Photo: Chris Lee.*

mar'eh starts from nothing—with a ghostly whisper. Then there are squiggles, squeals, and shudders. There is lots of percussion, especially soft percussion: rubbings and brushes and tings. While listening, I thought of the term "sound design." Much of the piece is quiet. And anxious. There is also an occasional wooziness. At some point, a storm brews. The music could be the soundtrack to a horror flick, and it would also work for sci-fi. Eventually, there is some passion, some vigor. The violin has many solo moments—unaccompanied moments—including something like a cadenza. The instrument is like some bird, which has survived a terrible event or breakdown. The bird is persisting, out of the gloom. Almost inevitably, the piece goes out with the same whisper it began with.

Frankly, I had a hard time concentrating on the piece. It seemed too long to me (about twenty-five minutes), but then, so much of today's music seems too long to me (and a fair amount of yesterday's). Worse, I felt I had heard the piece many, many times before. It incorporates many of the traits that mark today's music. Indeed, it could stand as a symbol of today's music. They say that all Vivaldi concertos sound alike—but these concertos at least have the excuse of having been composed by the same person.

I have no doubt that Matthias Pintscher is a talented, bright, and sincere composer. About the sincerity of *mar'eh*, there is no question. And perhaps the piece would "speak to" me more on

further listenings. But I don't understand why composers want to lavish their talents and intelligence on music of this nature. Maybe the joke is on me. I just don't know.

The night after this Philharmonic concert, the Metropolitan Opera, next door, revived Verdi's Falstaff in the production of Robert Carsen (2013). Falstaff is a big ensemble piece—but there are two players who matter above all: the conductor and the Falstaff. And the conductor matters most. Falstaff is a quick, tricky, intricate work, like a sustained scherzo, with its Mozartean and Mendelssohnian touches (and Verdian touches). The opera is easy to botch, or to make stodgy. It must have pinpoint accuracy and sure sparkle (along with doses of pain). Some conductors have devoted a fair chunk of their lives to Falstaff: Toscanini, Karajan, Muti. The ex–music director of the Met, James Levine, was a great conductor of Falstaff. Taking on the challenge most recently was Richard Farnes, a British maestro, making his Met debut.

Ambrogio Maestri in the title role of Falstaff *at the Metropolitan Opera. Photo: Sara Krulwich.*

Muti once made a comment about the opening measures of the opera. They must be "like a spring," he told an orchestra, bubbling forth. I think of the opera as beginning in mid-bustle. From Richard Farnes, these opening measures were okay—maybe a little boxy, but okay. As the opera unfolded, it was clear that Farnes has much intelligence and skill. He conducted the opera satisfactorily. Yet I sometimes wanted more, out of greed, perhaps: lighter, faster, crisper, snappier, more graceful. The fugue at the end was not the performance's finest hour. It was a little slow and balky. But *Falstaff* is a big challenge, and Maestro Farnes proved up to it.

Falstaff is, among other things, a talky opera, and it helps to have a cast of Italians. There were just two Italians in this cast—but the foreigners were perfectly adequate. One of the natives was

Francesco Demuro, a tenor who sang Fenton. He conveyed the sweet, youthful ardor of his character. His Nannetta was Golda Schultz, the South African soprano. She has sunshine in her voice, on her face, and, evidently, in her soul. She made a thoroughly winsome Nannetta. Other cast members deserve their praise, but I will cut to the chase, or to the title character.

He was portrayed—more like embodied—by Ambrogio Maestri, the Italian baritone. Maestri is the Falstaff of our time. He learned the role from Riccardo Muti, who learned it from Antonino Votto, who learned it from Toscanini. Maestri sings, acts, and looks the part. Italian out of his mouth is a joy and an education. In Act I, Falstaff sings, "L'onore! Ladri!" Maestri works those r's to express perfect contempt. Never has an r sneered more, or more grandly. I am reminded of the way he greets the villagers as Dr. Dulcamara in *The Elixir of Love*, Donizetti's opera. In this case, however, he is not contemptuous but condescending: "Udite, udite, o rrrrustici!" In *Falstaff*, there are no arias, properly speaking, but there are aria-like stretches, including a little ditty that someone once described as "blink and you'll miss it": "Quand'ero paggio del Duca di Norfolk." From Ambrogio Maestri, it was fleet, tasty, and exemplary.

It occurs to me that the last many times I have seen *Falstaff*, it has been with Maestri. He is now imprinted on me as Falstaff. I do not object. Earlier generations had Stabile (Mariano Stabile, 1888–1968). I'm sorry I missed him. Let future generations feel sorry they missed Maestri.

Igudesman & Joo and Yuja Wang. Photo: Julia Wesely.

Joo came out dressed like Yuja, which is to say, barely at all. He had on bits of stripper-wear, as I call her outfits. The conceit was, Yuja had canceled, and the show must go on. Quickly, a large box arrives, bearing a Yuja clone or robot or something. It is, of course, Yuja Wang herself. On it goes.

The show contained many elements, and Wang played a number of pieces. (Igudesman & Joo did, too.) The first piece she played was often the last piece she plays, as an encore: Mozart's *Rondo alla turca*, in the combined arrangements of Fazil Say and Arcadi Volodos. She also played Earl Wild's transcription of the pas de quatre from *Swan Lake*—one of the best piano transcriptions ever devised. Furthermore, Yuja did a little singing and dancing—even some violin playing. The show was sprinkled with sexiness, which had varying degrees of taste.

Let us stipulate that comedy is subjective—more subjective than most things, or many things, are. This evening was not my cup of tea. I kept waiting for the comedy to subside and the playing to take center stage. There were a couple of funny lines, in my opinion. For example, Hyung-ki Joo was described as the only Korean Joo in the world, giving him a double advantage. (Get it?

Joo/Jew. And there are lots of Korean pianists in the world, not to mention Jewish ones.) Also, Gary Graffman was in the audience. (Not Korean.) This legendary pianist was Yuja Wang's teacher. One of the comedy duo—Joo, I think—called out, "Shouldn't you really be practicing?" (Graffman wrote a memoir, published in 1982, called *I Really Should Be Practicing*.)

Again, these things are subjective, and the audience seemed to enjoy the evening. Also, I appreciate Wang's appreciation of comedy.

Let's stick with musical comedy, ending with The Daughter of the Regiment (another Donizetti opera). The Met put it on once more. I didn't particularly want to go, having seen this production (Laurent Pelly, 2008) rather a lot. The cast was solid: Pretty Yende, the South African soprano; Javier Camarena, the Mexican tenor; Maurizio Muraro, the Italian bass; Stephanie Blythe, the American mezzo; and Kathleen Turner! The movie star would appear as the Duchess of Krakenthorp, a non-singing role. I thought the show would be okay, even good—yet I did not run with pleasure to the opera house. Oh, and the conductor? Enrique Mazzola, a Spanish-born Italian. I had heard him once before—in The Elixir—and he had not done well.

Daughter turned out to be great. It was "one of those nights at the opera," as Martin Bernheimer would say. Everything and everyone clicked, and they all knew it, having as much fun as the audience.

Pretty Yende with the cast of The Daughter of the Regiment *at the Metropolitan Opera. Photo: The Metropolitan Opera.*

Right from the start, Mazzola was superb, filling the opera with life. In every aspect of his job, he was sovereign. Pretty Yende, always capable, was world-beating. She sang purely, accurately, and enchantingly. She went miles above the staff with ease. Coloratura demands were equally easy. She was a model of vocal flexibility, pulling the taffy of her voice every which way. Moreover, she fully inhabited Marie, the daughter of the regiment. Javier Camarena was at his best, relishing his eighteen high B's. ("Ah! mes amis" has nine, but he encored the aria.) Maurizio Muraro is an outstanding character actor, or character singer-actor. But I had wondered: could he transfer his charms to French, the language of this opera? The answer was yes, in spades. Blythe, too, was a hoot, and assured in her singing.

How about Turner? She was Turner—a pleasure to see and hear. She is blessed with a distinctive and excellent voice, even if she can't sing (and maybe she can).

A great *Tristan und Isolde*, let's say, is a very satisfying night at the opera. So is a great *Don Giovanni*, or *Otello*, or *Wozzeck*. Take your pick. But so is a great *bel canto* comedy, such as *The Daughter of the Regiment*. It would be hard to imagine a better-executed *Daughter* than this one. It paid to show up.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 37 Number 8 , on page 60

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