The New Criterion

Music June 2019

New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On Thomas Larcher and the New York Philharmonic; Michael Tilson Thomas, Yuja Wang, and the New World Symphony; and Katia and Marielle Labèque.

The New York Philharmonic opened a concert with a new piece, or rather new enough: it was composed in 2015 and '16. It is a symphony, the Symphony No. 2 of Thomas Larcher. The work has a nickname, Kenotaph, which is simply German for "cenotaph." Larcher is an Austrian composer, born in 1963. He wrote this piece with a crisis in mind: the crisis of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean, where they often drown.

The symphony was commissioned by the Austrian National Bank on the occasion of its two-hundredth anniversary. (Does the music world know how much it owes to banks?) The symphony is dedicated to Semyon Bychkov, the Russian conductor, who led the performance with the Philharmonic. He also led the premiere, in 2016, with another philharmonic: the Viennese one.

Larcher's piece has some exotic instrumentation, particularly in the percussion, where you find—this is a partial list—oil barrels, a flexatone, boobams, mixing bowls, Indian drums, crotales (bowed), a Chinese cymbal, and a bright sizzle cymbal.

In a program note, Larcher writes, "How can we find tonality that speaks in our time? And how can the old forms speak to us? These are questions I often ask myself." Rightly or wrongly, I never ask myself these questions. I don't really understand them. Good music, in whatever form, speaks through all time. In 2008, on the eve of his hundredth birthday, I sat down with Elliott Carter—who referred to "the old music," meaning music up to about Wagner, and "modern music." The "old music," said Carter, was inadequate to the task of speaking to the modern person, however beautiful or interesting it might be.

I don't know. Beethoven symphonies speak to me just fine. But we might leave philosophical musing to another time. (Incidentally, Elliott Carter was one of the brightest people I have ever been around.)

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In David Geffen Hall, before Maestro Bychkov appeared, Mr. Larcher walked out to talk to the audience. I was surprised. I had not seen this done since Jaap van Zweden became music director of the Philharmonic last fall. The orchestra's concerts have been blissfully free of remarks from the stage. In any event, Larcher explained that he was the composer of the piece we were about to hear. The audience applauded. "Don't clap too early," he quipped. In other words, *Wait till you see whether you like it*. This is one of the most charming remarks I have ever heard from a stage. Moreover, Larcher kept his remarks short. He said nothing that wasn't in the program notes already—but they never do.

Thomas Larcher with Semyon Bychkov and the New York Philharmonic. Photo: Classical Source

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The *Kenotaph* symphony is in four movements, with breaks between them. (The movements are essentially fast, slow, scherzo, finale.) I make a point of this because the rule these days is one movement, no breaks. Larcher's work is a throwback in this sense. I will tell you a little of what I heard in it, movement to movement.

The symphony opens with furious punches in the percussion. Soon there is buzzing elsewhere in the orchestra: wasps, hornets. Lots of composers write this buzzing. Larcher has a keen sense of rhythm. And he avails himself of his mighty percussion section. Regular readers may know my line: Today's music has more pots and pans than Williams-Sonoma. Relieving the musical fury, the concertmaster has a sweet solo, balm-like. Then the buzzing begins again. There is chaos,

cacophony. Destruction, crashing, breaking. We get another balm, this time from the principal viola, though this balm is accompanied by portentous beats in the percussion. At one point, I thought of *Jaws*—the famous score of that movie.

Before the end of the first movement, the wind whips up, terribly, and there seem to be waves. I thought of drowning at sea. Is this because I had read the evening's program notes, and heard from the composer onstage? Yes, of course. The power of suggestion is seldom greater than in music.

The second movement, Adagio, opens with a kind of chorale in the low strings. Then it moves to the low woodwinds. Lyricism prevails. From the percussion come "tinklies," as I call this effect. I also use the term "fairy dust." Lots of composers like to sprinkle their music with this dust. Here, in Larcher's Adagio, I don't deem it necessary. The lyricism over, there is great agitation, indeed terror. This comes courtesy of the percussion, mainly. There is another windstorm, which struck me as just slightly cliché-like—reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*.

The scherzo movement is of a piece with what we have heard before. There are more "insects," buzzing. There is also more wind, lots of wind. I found this—no offense, because the subject, or background, of the symphony is grave—somewhat corny. Here in the third movement, Larcher started to lose me a bit. I had been with him, but now my mind started to drift.

Let me offer a curious detail: a passage of this third movement reminded me of Strauss's *Elektra*—the moment when Aegisth enters the palace, where he will get whacked.

For a while, the final movement sounds like a Baroque piece. Larcher is not shy about shifting styles. In due course, there is urgency, fear, and outright violence. This subsides, replaced by lyricism, and the piece fades out in sadness.

To me, the symphony felt too long and became tedious. But "full disclosure," as people like to say: a great many pieces, especially new, feel this way to me. There is no question that Thomas Larcher knows his way around music. No question that he has an ear for the orchestra and its possibilities, including its colors. There is also no question that he has written a work of deep human sympathy. One cannot—I cannot—but salute it.

In Carnegie Hall, Michael Tilson Thomas conducted the New World Symphony—not the Symphony in E minor by Dvořák, nicknamed "From the New World," but the New World Symphony, the orchestra for young professionals that mtt founded in 1987. It is based in Miami. I have said "young professionals," but it would be more accurate to say "graduates of music programs who aspire to be professionals, and probably will be."

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the New World Symphony. Photo: Richard Termine.

mtt and the nws began their concert with a new piece written for them: *Fountain of Youth*, by Julia Wolfe (an American born in 1958). I wrote about Wolfe three chronicles ago, after the New York Philharmonic performed her oratorio *Fire in my mouth*, which is about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, a disaster that struck New York in 1911. According to Carnegie Hall's program notes, Wolfe means *Fountain of Youth* to be "serious fun." She wrote it to pay tribute both to "this incredible orchestra of young people" and to Tilson Thomas, "who is forever young." She also means to recall the Fountain of Youth, sought by Ponce de León, or so says the myth, in the orchestra's home state of Florida. The composer is quoted as follows: "Many have searched for the Fountain of Youth. If we found it, what would it sound like?"

Well, her piece begins like a cement mixer. Then there are rattles. (Rattlesnakes?) Out of this general sound, a melody emerges, sort of New Agey. Then there is a dirge-like cacophony, or a cacophonous dirge. I'm thinking, "When does the fun begin?" Sirens go off. The music is "assaultive," as people like to say now, and also a bit minimalistic. There is a section that sounds like rock 'n' roll. And something that sounds like dinosaurs (a score for *Jurassic Park*?). Eventually, all of this dies down. There are more rattles, plus tinklies. Then we have music that's jazzy, even stomping—a bit of fun!

Overall, the piece is very noisy, and has some rhythmic interest. I must say, I struggled to find merit in it, though I know the worthiness of this composer, if from *Fire in my mouth* alone.

Next on the stage was Yuja Wang, the Chinese pianist, for Prokofiev's Concerto No. 5. What? Yes. This piece is almost never performed; it is virtually unknown. There are five Prokofiev piano concertos, and I will run through them quickly. No. 1 was written when the composer was about twenty. It is fairly popular. No. 2 is less well-known but not unknown. It is stupendously hard,

within the reach of relatively few pianists. Yuja Wang is a prominent exponent of the piece today. No. 3 is Prokofiev's No. 1 piano concerto, so to speak: the best-known and best. No. 4 is one of those for left hand alone, commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I. (He was a brother of the philosopher.) Wittgenstein didn't like Prokofiev's Concerto No. 4—or rather, he didn't understand it, he honestly explained—and never played it. Very few play it today. Same with No. 5.

Yet it is a wonderful piece, No. 5. (This is not to slight No. 4, which we might discuss another time.) Originally, Prokofiev wanted to call this work "Music for Piano and Orchestra" rather than a concerto. I think he was right. The work is in five movements, all on the short side. I think of the word "scenes," or "moods." You can hear in these movements the coming ballets, namely *Romeo and Juliet* and, especially, *Cinderella*.

So, what do you want in a Prokofiev pianist? I will name a few qualities, or more: virtuosity, fire, playfulness, whimsicality, percussiveness, dryness, lyricism, sarcasm, irony, rhythm—a really good rhythmic sense, and also a sense of accentuation. Wang has all of these things, in spades. She played the Concerto No. 5 with phenomenal precision and concentration. She evinced incredible charisma and dynamism. She had just the spirit of the piece. I think Prokofiev (a very good pianist) would have been amazed and grateful. His final movement is marked Vivo, and *vivo* it was. At one point, I lol'd, laughed out loud: Wang did something witty and hilarious.

The crowd was appropriately enthusiastic and it looked like there would be an encore. What Prokofiev encore would it be? I was thinking an item from *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cinderella* (in an arrangement by the composer himself). Or one of the *Sarcasms* or *Visions fugitives*. Or perhaps the *Suggestion diabolique*. It was none of these pieces. It was a piece by Michael Tilson Thomas, written expressly for Wang.

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Before she played it, the composer spoke from the stage, and he did something rare: made himself heard. It's amazing how many musicians, who make their living communicating sound to an audience, do not speak audibly from the stage. mtt is truly a pro in this respect, and in others. His piece is called *You Come Here Often?* It is a jazz piece, or a jazzy one, and I would classify it as "high cocktail lounge." It is Previnesque. It is propulsive and neat. And Yuja Wang played it with deftness and élan.

She used music, by which I mean sheet music. Maybe she will memorize the piece—written for her, after all, and short—in due time. After the Prokofiev, two Carnegie Hall stagehands came out,

one carrying a music rack for the piano, the other an electronic tablet, for Yuja. And what review of this pianist should be without a sartorial note? She wore a sparkly slinky green number. She may be a flashy celebrity, with a lot of Vegas in her, but she is a whale of a pianist.

The next night, mtt, the nws, and Wang appeared once more, this time in Zankel Hall. The pianist's task was to play two solo pieces by mtt. First, the composer spoke to the audience, this time with a microphone. (He spoke unamplified the night before, projecting like a pro.) The opening piece was Sunset Soliloquy, which is based on an experience that Tilson Thomas had when he was nineteen. He was sitting at the piano trying to find himself—improvising, poking around. He did one thing with his left hand (alone); he did another thing with his right hand (also alone). Eventually—if I have understood him correctly—he brought his hands, and those "musics," together, for a duet.

Yes, mtt uses the word "musics." It is one of my least favorite words in the world. But if it has spread up to mtt (from dopey academics?), it is probably here to stay.

As I listened to mtt talk about *Sunset Soliloquy* and his life, I thought, "If you have to explain . . . " Musicology can be interesting. I've written a fair amount of it myself. But a piece of music really ought to be enjoyable or interesting on its own terms, without autobiographical or other explanation.

I have no doubt that *Sunset Soliloquy* has great meaning to Michael Tilson Thomas. He said as much. It did not have meaning to me, however, and did not hold my attention. I listened to Yuja Wang as intently as I could. But I could not stick with it, I'm afraid. I am sure other listeners reacted, and will react, more sympathetically.

The second piece played by Wang was her own, or the one written for her: *You Come Here Often?* Our program notes claimed that this night marked the New York premiere of the piece. But that wasn't true—not because Wang had played it the night before, but because she had played it during the 2014–15 season. I know because I was there and reviewed the performance. In Avery Fisher Hall (as David Geffen was then), Wang played Gershwin's Concerto in F with the London Symphony Orchestra, under mtt. Then she unveiled *You Come Here Often?* as an encore. The composer listened to it appreciatively in the back of the orchestra.

Next on the program at Zankel Hall was another, more ambitious mtt piece: *Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind* for "solo soprano and two female voices, bar band, and chamber orchestra." Before the downbeat, a video was played on a screen overhead, showing the composer discussing the piece. He said nothing that wasn't in the program notes already, but that is par for the course. The piece was written, or completed, apparently, in 2016, but it had its genesis in 1976. That was America's bicentennial year, and Tilson Thomas didn't like what he considered the rah-rah patriotism around him. He took satisfaction in a poem by Carl Sandburg, "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind," out of the collection *Smoke and Steel*. The poem includes an ironic refrain:

“We are the greatest city, the greatest nation; nothing like us ever was.”

Funny, but when I was growing up in the 1970s and ’80s, Sandburg was knocked by the radicals around me as a jingo poetaster.

mtt’s work contains contemporary classical music, rockabilly, cabaret, jazz, the blues . . . I thought of the phrase “Bernsteinian eclecticism.” It is a bit of a show too, as the principal singer and her two backups move to choreography. It will not shock my readers to know that I found the piece very, very long. It suffers from repetitiveness, as I heard it. Also, I have no doubt of the sincerity of the piece, which is plain (as sincerity should be).

The main singer, Measha Brueggergosman, was magnificent—in her singing (of the various styles) and in her movements. English out of her mouth is a particular treat. She expressed the American idioms perfectly—not bad for a Canadian.

As the audience applauded, in a standing ovation, mtt was gracious, putting others forward, shy about accepting applause for himself.

What do we know from the output of Max Bruch, the German composer who lived from 1838 to 1920 (a generous span of years)? We know the violin concerto, of course—actually, the Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26. (Bruch wrote two others, which lie fallow.) We know another violin-and-orchestra piece, the Scottish Fantasy. And a cello-and-orchestra piece, Kol Nidrei. Owing to this last piece, many have supposed that Bruch was Jewish, though he was not. The Nazis had the same supposition—which is why they restricted his music.

Katia and Marielle Labèque with Semyon Bychkov and the New York Philharmonic. Photo: Chris Lee.

The New York Philharmonic presented a rarity, Bruch's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, Op. 88a. It was written, or completed, in 1915. The Philharmonic programmed it two years later—then not again until the other day. In four movements, the concerto is full of melody, rhapsody, and true Romantic pathos. There are empty or blowsy stretches, but the work is creditable, deserving of a hearing (though two might be pushing it?). Years ago, I asked a conductor about the obligation to program new music, an obligation that many performers feel. He said, "Okay, but what about an obligation to program neglected works of the past?"

At the Philharmonic, the Bruch two-piano concerto was played by the Labèque sisters, Katia and Marielle, under the baton of Semyon Bychkov, who is married to Marielle. After the performance, he congratulated the sisters with equal affection. I could not tell which Labèque was which.

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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 10 , on page 59

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