On new music by James MacMillan, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Bryce Dessner; newish music by Philip Glass and Wynton Marsalis; unfamiliar music by Bizet; the conductors Riccardo Muti and Santtu-Matias Rouvali; the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; and the pianist Conrad Tao.

An evening of liturgical music was enjoyed at Alice Tully Hall. Enjoyed? In a way, yes, although this must depend on the listener. The concert was an event in Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival. There were two pieces on the program and one composer: James MacMillan.

He is a Scotsman, born in 1959. A note in our program said that MacMillan had an abrupt change of life in the late 1980s.

He left a teaching post at Manchester University to return to his native Scotland and settled in Glasgow. There he devoted much of his energy to working with students and amateurs.

MacMillan did this out of a sense of commitment motivated by his strong sense of identity as a Scotsman, a socialist, and a devout Catholic.

The first piece in the White Light concert was *Miserere*, composed in 2009. It lasts about ten minutes. The second was *Stabat Mater*, composed in 2015, which lasts almost an hour. Both pieces were receiving their U.S. premieres.

*Miserere* is for mixed chorus, unaccompanied. To generalize about it, it is calm and beautiful. It seemed to me written in an attitude of prayer. “We should really be in church, not a concert hall,” I thought. I also thought of something I had written in 2015, when asked to address the basic question, “How is music doing, and where is it going?”
Most days, I don’t sweat the future of classical music, which has been sweated forever: Charles Rosen, the pianist-scholar, said, “The death of classical music is perhaps its oldest tradition.” Music is one way in which people express themselves. It is also a way in which people praise God (and such praise has resulted in some of the greatest music). The creative instinct is unkillable. Beauty, though it may be suppressed, is unkillable. And genius will out.

In Alice Tully Hall, Miserere was performed by The Sixteen, a British choir founded by Harry Christophers in the late 1970s. Mr. Christophers conducted the evening in New York. When he was through with Miserere, he took the score from his stand and carried it off. I smiled and thought, “Not American. The unions would clobber him for doing that. Will someone reprimand him?”

Stabat Mater requires an orchestra, in addition to a mixed chorus, and the singers were joined by Britten Sinfonia, a chamber orchestra based in Cambridge (England, of course, not Massachusetts). Stabat Mater definitely belongs in a concert hall, as well as church. It is vivid, unsparing, and occasionally cinematic. It is not meant to be pretty. Instead, it reflects an ordeal, as a Stabat Mater really must. MacMillan ends his piece with strange, rather staccato Amens.

I cannot say that I enjoyed the piece, and I cannot say that I was supposed to enjoy it. Frankly, it struck me as a private piece, one with deep, deep meaning for the composer (as well as a universal application, to be sure). James MacMillan “puts himself out there,” as they say today. That is important for an artist.
Five days after this concert, the New York Philharmonic was guest-conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, the fabulous Finn. The program included a work of his own—a new work, in two parts. Its title is Gemini, and the two parts are “Pollux” and “Castor.” Salonen has written an interesting composer’s note about Gemini, and he talked about the work at some length from the stage (less interestingly). I will relate some of what I heard, as the Philharmonic played and Salonen conducted.

“Pollux” is star-like, sci-fi. I would say that, right? Because I have been influenced by the title—by those words: “Gemini,” “Pollux,” “Castor.” Honestly, I think I would say it regardless. At any rate, the music has a minimalist lull and sheen. Then it is Impressionist—Debussyan—and still lulling. There is a pleasant din, conveying an atmosphere. “Music-of-the-spheres stuff,” I scribbled in my notes. We hear tinkly soft percussion. That din grows louder, with a feeling of rhapsody.

Gemini is imaginatively orchestrated, by the way. Esa-Pekka Salonen has spent his life around orchestras—conducting them—and he knows what they can do.

“Castor” is a showpiece, I would say, and a kind of tone poem. It is exciting, also loud. There is a perpetual-motion feeling about it. There is also a dose of primitivism, with savage timpani. “Rite of Spring territory,” I scribbled.

When Gemini was over, the sharp woman sitting next to me said, “I think it’s fun to play. I think
the players enjoyed doing that.” I believe this is right. I also think that Gemini has a chance to outlive its composer—that orchestras will want to play it, as an example of Salonen.

Two nights later, the Philharmonic played a piece called Wires, written in 2016 by Bryce Dessner. He is an American, born in 1976. When he was in his mid-twenties, he founded an indie rock band, The National, with his twin brother, Aaron. He also writes film music. Thinking about his career, I thought of Jonny Greenwood, of Radiohead fame—and film-score fame and classical-music fame.

Wires is for electric guitar, although “for” is not quite the right word. Wires is not a concerto, but it certainly features the electric guitar, which, with the Philharmonic, was played by the composer himself. He was sitting in the concerto soloist’s position, next to the conductor. So if you supposed it was a concerto, you could be excused.

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The guitarist and composer Bryce Dessner. Photo: Chris Lee.

The guitar in this work is twangy and droney. The music at large has a wooziness, common in today’s works: that stunned, disoriented feeling. There is lots of percussion in Wires, as, again, is common in today’s works. Rhythms are tricky and interesting. I would like to hear Wires again, which is higher praise than it might sound.

Once more, the New York Philharmonic had a guest conductor, and once more he was a Finn. A
fabulous Finn? Probably, yes. They grow conductors on trees over there. This one has the curious, lovely name of Santtu-Matias Rouvali, and he was born in 1985. Rouvali is from Lahti, where his parents played in the orchestra. He is set to succeed Esa-Pekka Salonen as the principal conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra (London) in the 2021–22 season. Meanwhile, he is in Gothenburg and elsewhere.

Rouvali has great big bushy hair—and interesting hair is an asset to a conductor (although men such as Solti have done all right with none). Rouvali has a thin, lithe body, and he is enjoyable to watch on the podium: balletic.

This concert began with Tchaikovsky and ended with Sibelius. The Tchaikovsky was the *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture, about which I will generalize, and over-generalize: slow parts were fussy and somewhat stagnant; faster parts were fine. And the Sibelius? It was the Symphony No. 1, and I have to ask, Do Finnish conductors conduct Sibelius because they have to or because they want to? Some combination, I imagine.
Again, some generalizing, and overgeneralizing: The First was beautiful and serene—more serene than I prefer it, but musically convincing. The playing was unusually transparent. You could have written down the score from it. Rhythms were easily, smartly negotiated. When conducting a brass choir or woodwind choir, Rouvali tended to use his left hand alone, batonless. The performance made me love the Sibelius First all over again. The final pizzicato was a mess, but that’s par for the course, I’m afraid.

Talk about great hair. The next night, Riccardo Muti came into Carnegie Hall with his Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In an interview, I once had the temerity to raise his hair (to raise the subject of his hair, I should specify). He said that, lifelong, it has been “croce e delizia,” borrowing a phrase from La traviata: a burden—a cross to bear, the subject of much comment—and a delight, a pleasure, an asset.

Muti and the cso performed two concerts, the first of which began with a rarity—a symphony by Bizet. The Symphony in C? That is no rarity, but a staple! It is also one of the greatest juvenile pieces ever written, produced by the composer when he was seventeen. No, the symphony in question was Roma, which Bizet labored over for about ten years and apparently was never satisfied with. He composed it under the inspiration of a long sojourn in Italy, which resulted from his winning—what else?—the Prix de Rome.

Personally, I don’t remember ever having heard the Roma symphony. What do we know of Bizet, typically? The Symphony in C, of course—by the way, Roma is another symphony in C—and Carmen.
, needless to say, and The Pearl Fishers, or at least the great, gala-friendly duet from it, and the suite from L’Arlésienne, and maybe a song or two: probably “Chanson d’avril” and “Adieux de l’hôtesse arabe.” But nothing else.

Is Roma a neglected masterpiece? It is certainly neglected. And, listening to the first two movements, I felt I had met a new, wonderful friend. The second two movements require patience, I would say. In any case, Riccardo Muti conducted the piece with clear affection and understanding. The piece could not ask for a better advocate. He likes to champion orphaned works, Muti does: I think of the “Dante” Symphony (Liszt) and Lélio (Berlioz).

During the intermission of the Chicago concert, a man made an amusing remark (and I believe he is French, this fellow): “Say what you will about Roma, the French need all the symphonies they can get.” We then made a quick catalogue: the Symphony in C; the Symphonie fantastique (Berlioz); the “Organ” Symphony (Saint-Saëns); Roussel’s Symphony No. 3, maybe; are you allowed to count the Franck, even though the composer was basically Belgian? I’m sure I have overlooked a few.

The singer Joyce DiDonato. Photo: Todd Rosenberg.

Later in their program, Muti and the cso performed some Berlioz: The Death of Cleopatra, which Joyce DiDonato, the great American mezzo-soprano, came on to sing. I wondered about the voice. Most of us think of DiDonato as a Baroque and bel canto singer. And we think of the Berlioz as calling for a big, rich, fat, plush mezzo voice. As it happened, DiDonato sang the piece superbly—with her own, authentic voice, which was plenty big and rich enough. Mainly, she sang with keen, keen musical intelligence—musical and dramatic intelligence. The voice was almost
beside the point. Muti and the Chicagoans were unerring, with the final pages grippingly executed. Those pages are quiet, yes—but they were gripping all the same.

Shortly after the Chicagoans left town, Conrad Tao played a recital in Weill Recital Hall. He is a young (twenty-five) pianist and composer. When he entered, many in the audience whooped, as young people do. He is a huge talent, Tao—as has been evident since his teen years.

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He is a huge talent, Tao—as has been evident since his teen years. His program was an unaccustomed mixture. It had living American composers: David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Jason Eckardt. A late American composer, Elliott Carter. And Bach, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff. Tao himself was not among the living American composers, which was a pity, I thought: I hope the young man will not be too shy about showcasing his own stuff.
He has a huge technique. He knows how to pedal. He plays like a composer, meaning that he seems to understand the logic of the piece under his hands. (I especially noticed this in Bach.) He is a good slipper into composers’ skins. He plays with great intensity and concentration, like Igor Levit and a few others. He can do just about whatever he wants with a piano, playing with it, as much as playing it. It is his plaything, if you will, and a big intelligence governs everything he does.
I noticed just a little singing—not with his fingers but with his voice, in Glenn Gould fashion. This is a bad habit to get into, in my view, and I hope the young man stamps it out early.

What should he do, by the way? What should his career be? What would you decide, if you could decide for him? He has so many options. Should he be a piano virtuoso and concertizer? A champion of new music (others’)? A full-time composer, in various genres? In my opinion—not that I have a vote—he should try to have it all, or as much as he can.

The next night, I went to Akhnaten, by Philip Glass, at the Metropolitan Opera. Glass wrote this opera in 1983; he wrote Satyagraha in 1979. In 2008, Satyagraha—which is loosely based on the life of Gandhi—had its premiere at the Met. Now Akhnaten—about that pharaoh—has had its own Met premiere. Heading the production team in both cases was Phelim McDermott, the British stage director.

Akhnaten is Glassian, in a word. Whatever you think of this composer, he is recognizable, right off the bat. The key question about minimalism, as I have suggested many times, is, Does the drug take? Does the hypnosis set in? Does the listener submit? Does he zone out, oblivious to time and space? I’m sure I have offended minimalists, but offense is my middle name. For me, sitting at the Met, the drug of Akhnaten mainly took.

Does the drug take? Does the hypnosis set in? Does the listener submit?
The visual helps, I must say. McDermott’s production is consistently interesting, replete with symbols and other appealing touches. Would you want to put on a recording of *Akhnaten* at home, without a production to look at? I’m not sure I would—but *Akhnaten* is a theater piece, after all, meant to be experienced in the theater.

Anthony Roth Costanzo, the American countertenor, portrayed the title character, and did so ably. At the beginning of the opera—for several minutes straight—he was stark naked. I had not seen full-frontal nudity at the Met since Karita Mattila’s Salome. Also, I thought of Martin Bernheimer, the late, great critic. One day, we covered a concert performance of *Tristan und Isolde*. There were video screens on the stage, showing young actors as the title characters, starkers. When Martin saw me at intermission, the first thing he said was, “I didn’t know Tristan was Jewish.”
The conductor of *Akhnaten* was Karen Kamensek, an American who has worked a lot in Germany. To conduct *Akhnaten* is, among other things, to perform a feat of counting. During some stretches, I think, a conductor must feel like a metronome. In any event, Kamensek seemed a worthy manager of affairs.

I will quote something from the program notes about Glass’s score. I had to read this a couple of times, blinking all the while: “The vocal lines also tend toward the melodic, even if they are original and remarkable.” Um . . . is melody fuddy-duddy or otherwise unremarkable?

The following night, there was another event in Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival. This was *The Abyssinian Mass*, by Wynton Marsalis. Performing was the Chorale Le Chateau along with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Damien Sneed is the leader of the chorale; Marsalis is the leader of the orchestra. Sneed conducted the mass overall (with true artistry).

Marsalis composed this work in the late 2000s, on commission from the Abyssinian Baptist Church, that old Harlem institution. Fats Waller played the organ there, while his father preached. *The Abyssinian Mass* has some twenty sections, to which Marsalis has given various styles: jazz, gospel, and other styles. For example, I thought I heard a touch of New Orleans funeral music. If you don’t like something in the mass,
wait a minute: another section will be along soon.

I especially like the Gloria Patri section: peppy, clever, joyous. Listening to it, I thought of the Sanctus in the Verdi Requiem, which I have always considered something of a scherzo moment.

A question occurred to me, as I sat and listened: How much of *The Abyssinian Mass* is written out—note for note—and how much is riffing? How much is left to the discretion and inspiration of individual singers and players? I can’t answer with confidence. I’m sure there is room for riffing.

Marsalis sat in the back of his orchestra, a humble member of the trumpet section. He let other trumpeters do the work, by which I mean, he gave them the spotlight. But every now and then he’d pick up his own horn and blow. He’s still got it, and that sound is extraordinary.

I may not have loved every minute of the mass, and you may not have either—but I loved the spirit that pervaded the hall. The singers sang as if they believed what they were singing. To continue a theme from the top of this chronicle, people will always express themselves through music, and praise God through it too.

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

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