Music to our ears
by Heather Mac Donald

On Alma Deutscher’s Carnegie Hall debut.

Her compositions have been praised by classical music’s royalty, including Anna Sophie-Mutter, Zubin Mehta, and Thomas Hampson. Europe’s most prestigious music festivals—from Aix-en-Provence to Lucerne—have welcomed her participation. The Vienna State Opera has performed the family version of her opera. And yet when the fourteen-year-old British composer Alma Deutscher made her sold-out Carnegie Hall debut in December 2019, soloing in her violin and piano concerti with the Orchestra of St. Luke’s and presenting her more recent works, the New York classical music press stayed away.

Two possible reasons present themselves. Hypothesis number one: solicitude. Deutscher started writing melodies at the age of three and soon began working them into chamber music, sonatas, and orchestral settings with a command of harmony and a “sense of phrasing,” in the words of Sir Simon Rattle, “which many people two or three or four times her age would be lucky to have.” She is a gifted violinist and pianist. Perhaps the New York press, aware of the propensity of prodigies to flame out, simply wanted to give her time to mature and “find her voice,” as the phrase goes, before passing judgment on her career to date.

Hypothesis number two: contempt. Alma Deutscher rejects the last seventy years of non-tonal music theory and practice in favor of the deliberate search for musical beauty. She works within the harmonic tradition that unites Palestrina and Richard Strauss. As she explained in her Carnegie Hall program notes: “It has often been suggested to me . . . that as a modern composer I need to integrate more harshness, experimental noises, and unresolved dissonance into my compositions, in order to reflect the modern world. [But] there is enough ugliness in the world as it is, and I’ve never understood why I should add more ugliness to it with ugly music.” To the classical music press and composing establishment, them’s fightin’ words.

Alma Deutscher rejects the last seventy years of non-tonal music
Yet every time Deutscher recounts her musical philosophy to an audience, it erupts in grateful agreement. Listeners are voting with their feet and flocking to her concerts, affording her an advantage enjoyed by few other contemporary composers: hearing her compositions performed multiple times by different orchestras. The typical new orchestral work today from the legions of academic composers turning out the latest manifestation of spectralism or integral serialism is performed once and then shelved forevermore, to almost no one’s regret but the composer’s. Nevertheless the critics insist that the only way to rebuild the classical music audience is through more such “one-and-done” commissions, whether the audience wants them or not. The diminutive Deutscher is a threat to that consensus regarding atonal music and so must not be recognized.

Which hypothesis is more likely? Consider a thought experiment. An imaginary fourteen-year-old composer, female to boot and thus fulfilling the diversity mandate that is engulfing the classical music world, has been turning out “experiments” in process music since leaving the cradle. Her Black Lives Matter opera about police brutality—fusing hip-hop, Stockhausen, and algorithm-derived tone clusters—premiered when she was twelve. (Deutscher’s opera is a witty but non-ironizing variation on the Cinderella story.) Would The New York Times avoid covering this woke composer’s Carnegie Hall debut in order to allow her room to grow without the burden of premature evaluation? Unlikely.

The composer, violinist, and pianist Alma Deutscher.
Sheer curiosity about the Deutscher phenomenon and the desire to document a counter-development in musical culture would alone entice the musical press, one might think. This was only the second time her music has been performed in the United States since *Cinderella* played to a sold-out run in San Jose, California (see “Operatic precocity” in The New Criterion of May 2018). But Deutscher’s compositional heresies cannot be rewarded. The best way to shut her down is to ignore her.

So what did the critics miss? A night of increasing musical wonder. Deutscher’s most recent works were marvels of exuberance and urbane sophistication. For the last two years, Deutscher and her family have lived in Europe’s musical capital, Vienna. The last piece on the Carnegie program, the “Siren Sounds” Waltz, from 2019, is a tribute to the city’s still-active waltz culture and to Deutscher’s “new passion,” as she described it in an email: ballroom dancing. Vienna’s ball organizers are pressing her to compose waltzes, she said, and the Siren Sounds Waltz—actually a chain of four different waltzes—explains why. It releases gravity-defying waves of sound from the orchestra, deploying cymbal and snare, tuba and trumpet, to achieve musical effervescence. The initial motif of the first waltz, heralded by harp arpeggiation, recalls the theme from *Swan Lake’s* Act One Grande Valse, but then it’s on to fleeting echoes of Prokofiev, Shostakovich’s Jazz Suites, and *Der Rosenkavalier*, all masterfully driven along last month by the British conductor Jane Glover.

The Siren Sounds Waltz is a retort to the critics’ claim, as Deutscher explained from the Carnegie Hall stage, that “melodies and beautiful harmonies are no longer acceptable in serious classical music.” She turned that injunction on its head. Instead of making her music “artificially ugly in order to reflect the modern world,” she would take ugly modern sounds—the nasal warble of an Austrian police siren and car klaxons—and turn them into “something more beautiful, through music.” She warned attendees—seemingly in all sincerity—not to be “scared” by the beginning of the piece, which is “really a complete cacophony of noise.” Anyone familiar with her critics’ music, however, would not be scared by the introduction but merely amused, since it coyly recycles the staples of contemporary composition, including the fingernail-on-blackboard screech of untuned string glissandi. But then the whining glissandi start terminating in the warm embrace of a chord; a melody issues from a flute; and light dawns across the orchestra, as in *Night on Bald Mountain* and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. The Austrian police siren and tipsy glissandi reappear as motifs throughout the rest of the work, but tamed by musical form.

Another stunning work from 2019, unannounced on the program, also reflected Deutscher’s new home. Having absorbed German to near-fluency, she has embarked on that quintessential activity of the Germanic composer: putting Goethe’s poetry to music. Goethe’s
“Nähe des Geliebten” (“The nearness of the beloved”), a reworking of an earlier poem by Friederike Brun, has been set by Schubert, Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and dozens of less-known composers. It took some cojones, then, to take another stab at it, though Deutscher confesses that, had she heard Schubert’s version beforehand, she may have held off. While Schubert’s piano music deeply influences her own piano writing, the song “I think of you” (the first line of Goethe’s poem), which she performed at Carnegie in piano transcription, is in a different world entirely—suave, cool, characterized by surprising modulations and subtle chromatic embellishments, more Bill Evans than Biedermeier.

Deutscher soloed in her violin and piano concerti, composed between the ages of nine and twelve. The violin concerto is the more satisfying work, opening with a poignant dialogue between the violin and woodwinds and then unleashing the gypsy savagery and heartbreaking pathos familiar from the monuments of the violin canon. The piano concerto, though containing moments of lyrical beauty, including a brief harmonic sequence right out of Rachmaninoff, is handicapped by an insipid early motif and by the unsolved challenge of sustaining a longer-scale dramatic arc. Rounding out the concert was the overture and two duets from her opera Cinderella, which Glover conducted in San Jose. Here, Glover brought out even more diaphanous playing from the orchestra.

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Assessing Deutscher’s gifts, one is reminded of those fulsome dedications to seventeenth-century patrons that attribute to them every virtue that a beneficent Fortune can bestow. While those dedications were likely ironic, they would not be here. Deutscher is the complete package. Her stage presence is natural and by all appearances fearless. Between numbers, she spoke cheerfully to the audience, welcoming first-time concertgoers and explaining the genesis and context of various pieces. Her piano and violin playing is sensitive and adept. She will never outcompete those conservatory students with Popeye biceps who have been practicing the piano ten hours a day for the last fifteen years, but she does not need to. While they are forced to claw their way up the competition ladder with yet another jaw-dropping performance of Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto, she tours, like composers of the past, playing her own works, for which her technique is more than adequate. She has a lovely singing voice, which we learned during a brief bout of harmonizing from the piano with the baritone Thomas Hampson, who made a cameo appearance to sing her setting of “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas.” She is willowy and pretty, unmarred by makeup, her long sandy hair either in pigtails or pulled back from her face in braids and a bun. Her enthusiasms are endearing and unaffected. The only diva manifestation during the concert was the intermission change of wardrobe, though this proved a relief, exchanging an inexplicable red and yellow dress, whose hem started above the knee in front then descended to the floor in back, for a comely scarlet
gown with a flounce around her bare shoulders. At the reception after the concert, she wore a third outfit—a white skirt, fetching black velvet sash, and embroidered tunic.

Deutscher’s critics lob the phrase “pastiche” against her, characterizing her work as merely a cut-and-paste job of earlier composers and styles. It is true that one hears the ghosts of Brahms, Bruch, and Beethoven, and of Schumann, Mozart, Beethoven again, and Chopin flitting through the violin and piano concerti. But her music is not a pastiche; it is her authentic voice, albeit drawing on four hundred years of musical tradition. “She is speaking a native language, not imitating the surface of something learned too late,” says the Northwestern University music professor Robert Gjerdingen, who schooled her on eighteenth-century Neapolitan improvisation. Nor do her compositions bear any resemblance to the self-conscious archaizing of Stravinsky, Respighi, Prokofiev, and Tchaikovsky in their neo-Classical modes, which produce, especially in the case of Stravinsky, a mongrel idiom that contains the strengths of neither the Classical nor the post-Classical style.

Alma Deutscher in rehearsal before her Carnegie Hall debut. Photo: Alastair Miller.

Granted, her position is a curious one. She is not surrounded by a corresponding musical culture
that sees itself, as she does, as linked in an unbroken line to the past. Her chosen musical
contemporaries are also her models, and they exist on the far side of the divide that purportedly
signaled that the tonal tradition was a spent force. She poses a challenge to that assumption: it
turns out that there still are, waiting to be discovered, new melodies and harmonies, consonances
as well as dissonances. Nevertheless, she exists in some sense on a musical island as the waves of
pop triviality and of modernist sound-without-harmonic-and-thematic-structure lap the shore.

This position raises two questions. First, against what standard should her compositions be
evaluated? It is premature to compare her violin concerto to Sibelius’s, say, but in five or ten years,
what should be the benchmark? Second, and most intriguingly, where is she headed? Will she end
up recapitulating twentieth-century musical history because it was in fact unavoidable? Or will
she find a path not taken, building on an only contingently interrupted legacy? She is currently
immersed in the scores of Richard Strauss and Bruckner, plumbing them for insights into how to
coax, in her words, “this rich warm lush sound” from a full orchestra. But while she studies “with
the greatest teachers there have ever been: . . . Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, and
Richard Strauss,” the best clue to her future direction may come not from her orchestral writing
but from her solo piano works. The luxury piano maker Fazioli invited her to record her first
album in its concert hall in Sacile, Italy; the CD, made in July 2019, was released in November. The
purity of line in solo piano writing provides a clearer picture of the sensibilities and styles that
presently animate her. Recently composed variations on a melody which she penned at age eight
move from the ingenuousness of Schubert to an ebullient explosion of ragtime, ending with the
sinuosity of Manuel Ponce. Themes from Cinderella and the concerti that bordered on the banal
in the orchestral versions here bloom with revelatory detail and imaginative ornamentation. There
is a worldliness throughout the album that is quite stunning. The Deutscher family attended a
performance of West Side Story during its New York stay. Deutscher already displays a sassy
rhythmic sense; what could come out of more exposure to the American musical tradition?

Other questions present themselves. Will she continue to sell out venues as she gets older?
Audience reactions are wildly enthusiastic about her compositional style, suggesting that it
is not just her precocity that animates her rapturous public reception. Will her work have a life of
its own when she is not performing it? At this point, no aspiring concert pianist or violinist would
choose her concerti over the classics. But her opera is a fully self-standing work and would be a
welcome addition to Broadway. Will conductors and orchestra managers program her ever-richer
orchestral writing to fulfill the mandate to offer “new music,” or will her compositions be
marginalized as archaic and a gimmick? And most important, will other young composers feel
that she has released them from conformity to modernist conventions? That will depend on her
future fame and ability to attract commissions. She is currently writing an opera for the Salzburg
State Theatre, something most young composers can only dream of.

Gian Carlo Menotti also bucked the atonal cartel, without producing any long-lasting effect on the
acceptable musical idioms. “To say of a piece that it is harsh, dry, acid, and unrelenting is to praise
it, while to call it sweet and graceful is to damn it,” he wrote in 1974 in The New York Times.
Menotti’s effort to “rediscover the nobility of gracefulness and the pleasure of sweetness,” in his words, brought him enormous popular success in the middle of the last century, but no successors followed. Whether Deutscher will create a different pattern remains to be seen. She says that she wants to start a summer school one day where “composition is taught in a fun way.” Let’s hope that by then potential faculty will be lining up to teach.

Heather Mac Donald is the Thomas W. Smith fellow at the Manhattan Institute and author of The Diversity Delusion (St. Martin’s Press) and The War on Cops (Encounter).

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