On Rosa Feola in recital at the Park Avenue Armory, a new piano concerto by Esteban Benzecry, a new cello concerto by Brett Dean, and a performance of Winterreise by Peter Mattei and Lars David Nilsson.

Readers of these pages are familiar with Rosa Feola, the Italian soprano. I have reviewed her in opera and concert—“concert” meaning performances with orchestra. She is a favorite of Riccardo Muti, the veteran conductor. Now I have heard Feola in recital, which is to say, in a program with a pianist. In this case, the pianist was Iain Burnside, a Scotsman. And the venue was the Park Avenue Armory.

What? That immense hall (if “hall” is the word, for an armory)? No, in the Board Officers’ Room, a beautiful space within the building. They set up a little stage in the back, or at one side, depending on how you look at the room. This is a civilized space for a recital. And Feola, a light lyric—the kind to sing Nannetta in Falstaff—sounded huge in it (when she wanted to).

Honestly, performers and music ought to find their right space. Last summer at the Salzburg Festival, I remarked to a friend that Mozart symphonies seemed particularly exciting to hear in the Grosser Saal of the Mozarteum. This is what you might call a chamber hall. “Yes,” he said. “We’re used to hearing those symphonies in cavernous auditoriums, sitting two hundred yards away. That is not exactly ideal.” For sure.

Rosa Feola is from Caserta, a province of Campania, whose capital is Naples. Last summer—from Salzburg, in fact—I wrote that “southern Italy simply pours out of her, somehow.” She herself says she is a “true daughter” of the region. In fact, she could be on a poster from the Italian ministry of tourism. She is the embodiment of Italianità, i.e., Italian-ness.

In that beautiful boardroom, she sang a program of Martucci, Respighi, Rossini, Ponchielli, and Liszt—in other words, an all-Italian program. You will have to forgive me, or give me, the Liszt, for this was his Petrarch sonnets—Tre sonetti del Petrarca—which qualify as Italian song.
Since we speak so frankly in these pages, you and I, can we say this? The Italian song recital is traditionally a second-class citizen, compared with the German song recital, or Liederabend. They are usually light affairs, sung by opera stars who really don’t do recitals. But an Italian recital done right can, of course, be a very special thing. Rosa Feola presented an Italian recital done right.

The aforementioned Martucci is Giuseppe Martucci, who lived from 1856 to 1909, and was himself from Campania. The aforementioned Muti—who was educated in Naples—has been known to conduct a Martucci notturno, or nocturne, as an encore. La Feola sang Tre pezzi, a group that sets poems by Giosuè Carducci, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1906, a few months before he died. The last of these songs is “Nevicata,” which is not to be confused with a semi-famous “Nevicata,” which is by Respighi, a student of Martucci. Respighi’s song sets a poem by Ada Negri, who did not win the Nobel Prize.

Feola sang the Martucci songs beautifully, intelligently, accurately, and enchantingly. She was “on the breath,” fully supported. She did no slumming whatsoever. What I mean is, she treated this music with great care and respect, the way one would, say, Wolf songs (and I don’t mean Wolf-Ferrari). (I don’t mean to put down Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari either. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, for one, sang his songs with great pleasure.) Moreover, Feola is an arresting and winning stage presence.

From Respighi, we heard Quattro rispetti toscani, a group that is seldom heard, and deserves its hearings. The poems are by Arturo Birga, a Pisan who lived from 1871 to 1959. Feola has the gift of storytelling while singing. I had better make that clearer: She tells a story, yes, but she does not forget that she is singing. She does not forget the musical line or the essential musicality of the
song. The story is within the music, if that makes sense. She does not impose the story on the music.

In my notes, I wrote something corny: “The song is within her.” Corny, but true. Songs such as these Respighi numbers emerge from her naturally.

The first half of this recital ended with a well-known set by Rossini, *La regata veneziana*. Feola gave each song a delicious character. She is exceptionally slinky, in her singing and even in her physicality. Once, Martin Bernheimer, the late critic, described Diana Damrau, the German soprano, as “dancerly.” That fit Damrau to a T. Feola, too, is dancerly. She not only sang the Rossini songs, she embodied them—without overdoing it. There was never a hint of mugging.

After intermission, the main work was those Petrarch sonnets by Liszt. You mainly hear them from tenors, for whom the composer wrote them. But they are fair game for (almost) anybody. Feola sang these songs well, needless to say. But they perhaps do not fit her voice as well as those other songs do. Feola was occasionally effortful in them, especially up high, maybe wanting to make herself bigger than she naturally is. In the first half of the recital, you never felt that she was forcing anything. The second half was a little different.

She bade farewell with a snatch from an opera—“Signore, ascolta,” Liù’s music, from *Turandot* (Puccini). Did she float high *pianissimos*, or at least *pianos*, as you want from a Liù? Not really. Maybe she was a bit tired by that point. But it had been a wonderful evening, by a soprano who is “to eat,” as my grandmother would say. An air of good feeling was present through the hall, or room. Every face was happy, and so was the chatter. In a singer, technique, vocal beauty, musical
curiosity, and discipline are all very important. Then there is an extra ingredient, something intangible. I have frequently spoken of “adorability” as a special ingredient of Diana Damrau, and of Joyce DiDonato. Rosa Feola has the very same, Italian division.

With the help of a soloist, of course, the New York Philharmonic performed a new piano concerto, by a composer who was born in Lisbon, who grew up in Argentina, who is now a French citizen, and whose name is “Benzecry.” Not all lives are straightforward. The world’s winds blow us around. In any event, the composer’s full name is Esteban Benzecry, and he was born in 1970. His father, Mario, is a conductor. In fact, Maestro Benzecry served as an assistant conductor at the New York Phil. in the very year that the composer-to-be was born.

This new piano concerto has a title, or a subtitle (the title being the straightforward “Piano Concerto”): “Universos infinitos.” The composer has said that this subtitle “has to do with humans and their connections with their internal and external universes, in a world before our civilization, where times were governed by planetary and agricultural cycles.”

The work is in three movements, each of which has a heading. Those headings are in various tongues, tribal and otherwise. I will give English translations: “An Interior World”; “Mother Moon”; and “Return of the Sun.” The composer means very specific things by his music, in the three movements. I will give you impressions of what I heard.

The concerto begins with a fanfare and soon gets rhapsodic. There is a nice integration between piano and orchestra. The music becomes a little kitschy, you might say. Would you know what I meant if I said “ethnic classical music”? That phrase occurred to me, as I listened. I further thought, “Well, Jay, are Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances ‘ethnic classical music’? Is Rhapsody in Blue?” Perhaps—but we can leave the question of ethnicity, universality, etc., to another day.

At times, Benzecry’s music in this first movement is crazy. Happily, busily crazy. The pianist has lots of razzle-dazzle. He ends the movement by assaulting the keyboard with his arm.

In the next movement, the pianist seems to be improvising for a while. The character of the music overall is spooky and tribalistic, I think. I’m afraid the composer lost me here. I found the movement too long and on the monotonous side. The pianist gets a couple of more arm crashes.

The final movement begins with a nice rhapsodic fury. There are pyrotechnics, and gymnastics, for the piano. There is some jazzy syncopation. There is energy, tumult, “excitement.” I have put “excitement” in quotation marks, which is not very nice. Personally, I had a hard time paying attention.
I will tell you this, though: Esteban Benzecry’s love of music is clear, and that goes a long way. He desires to communicate to an audience—not all composers do, you know—and that goes a long way too. The audience response to the concerto was enthusiastic.

The concerto was given an excellent and committed reading by Sergio Tiempo, a Venezuelan pianist, and Gustavo Dudamel, the Venezuelan conductor, who was (obviously) guesting at the Phil. When they took the stage together, arm in arm, they looked like brothers. Also, I was impressed that Tiempo had memorized the piece, which soloists seldom do for a new work.

I was impressed with this, too: The audience applauded enthusiastically after each of the movements. The pianist did not ignore them or, worse, scowl at them. He smiled and nodded, appreciatively.

Two weeks later, the New York Philharmonic again performed a new concerto (again with the help of a soloist, of course). This one is a cello concerto, by Brett Dean, an Australian born in 1961. He spent about fifteen years—1984 to 2000—as a violist in the Berlin Philharmonic. Then he struck out as a composer. I don’t mean that he failed; I am not using baseball terminology. I mean that he lit out, boldly, as a composer, the way Americans used to “light out for the territories.” He continues to play, and conduct, as well as compose. He has been quoted as saying that he needs all of his activities. “I think it all—particularly the performing I do in the course of a year—feeds into composing. I can’t imagine composing without being a performer or being a performer without its leading to composing.” In previous eras, all, or most, musicians were like this. To be a musician meant that you both composed and performed, and you usually performed what you wrote. You ate what you killed. About a century ago, a wall went up between the composer and the performer.

How many performers have pieces in the drawer? Things they have written that have never seen the light of day? Many, I have reason to believe.

Unlike Esteban Benzecry’s piano concerto, Brett Dean’s cello concerto has no title, or subtitle. He has discussed this issue. “I knew from the outset that this would be the purest of my concertos. . . . The premise of the new work is concerned with music for music’s sake, so ‘Cello Concerto,’ pure and simple, seems exactly the right title.” Not very long ago, no one would have said this. The information would have been dog-bites-man. But is it today more like man-bites-dog?

The concerto is in one movement, though with five distinct sections. Dean has written about these sections, in detail—as a critic or musicologist might. As I have done, countless times. Are you
allowed to diagnose your own child? I had to smile when I read one thing in Dean’s notes. He says that one part of his concerto “unexpectedly” dissipates into something else. Well, it was not unexpected by him!

As usual, I will relate a little of what I heard. At the beginning of the concerto, the soloist does some noodling, unaccompanied, in the upper register of his instrument. As the music continues, we see (or hear) that this opening section has some things in common with many other contemporary pieces. There is some moaning, that end-of-the-world music. I sometimes use the word “bleakscape.” Also, you know that scampering around, suggestive of insects or little critters? There is a little of that, too—plus some “fairy dust,” as I say. Just a sprinkle or two.

The work contains some beautiful and interesting colors. And Dean has balanced the solo cello and the orchestra nicely. He does not let his soloist get subsumed.

Somewhere along the way, there is a wonderful stretch of singing. Celloistic singing. This is sweet and introspective—then edgy and introspective, as I recall. The composer really had my attention. Then there is a stretch that swings, enjoyably. I thought I heard a hint of West Side Story, I swear.

Elsewhere along the way, the music gets quite slow and, I would say, static. The man sitting next to me checked his watch. I understood him. The music is later belligerent—even martial—and then a bleakscape returns. As I said about the other concerto, I’m afraid the composer lost me, at a certain point. I could not hang with it, could not keep my mind from drifting. But Dean held others, as evidenced by their standing ovation.

Here is one vignette from modern concert life—something that will not surprise you: in the final measures of the work, which are very quiet, someone’s phone went off, playing the Nokia theme. For a second, I was unsure whether it was part of the score or, indeed, a phone.

The cellist was Alban Gerhardt, a German, to whom the concerto is dedicated. Or rather, I assume it is: the dedication reads, “For Alban, in admiration.” The conductor was the composer’s fellow Aussie, Simone Young. I will tell you something curious about Gerhardt (who played marvelously): he showed an actor’s face. Often, he looked directly at the audience while he was playing, not down, and the music—the mood—was reflected on his face.

In last month’s chronicle, I discussed Winterreise, Schubert’s song-cycle. There is more than one way to skin the cat of this cycle, I said. Joyce DiDonato and Yannick Nézet-Séguin had done it their way. Several weeks later, in Zankel Hall, Peter Mattei and Lars David Nilsson did it theirs. Both men are Swedes. Mattei is a famous baritone, especially in opera, and Nilsson is a pianist who has worked at the Royal Swedish Opera for about twenty years. (Whether he is related to the legendary Birgit, I can’t say.) Mattei and Nilsson have performed Winterreise together a lot, and they have recorded it, too.

When Mattei took the stage—no offense to the pianist, who would prove invaluable—there was
tremendous applause, complete with bravos. There were no props in this Winterreise. No acting, no theater. Just the songs (and not even supertitles).

The first song, “Gute Nacht,” was rightly unrelenting. It had its inner drive. It was done nearly to perfection. The woman next to me started to applaud after this first song (of twenty-four), and I could not really blame her. “Gute Nacht” set the tone of the whole cycle: this Winterreise had a feeling of inexorability, with no fuss and no muss. No unnecessary “artistry.”

The second song, “Die Wetterfahne,” was hugely dramatic, as the cycle at large would be. Mattei held nothing back, although there was never a surfeit of emotion—no gilding of Schubert’s lily. Mattei was angry, bewildered, pained, mad, numb, resigned, dead. In other words, everything the narrator, or character, is.

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This baritone’s voice is famously beautiful: up high, down low, and in between. He employed a very effective little head voice, too, and a very effective half-voice. Also, he took full advantage of the German language. “Enjoy those consonants,” I once heard Leontyne Price say in a master class. “Use them.”

I have heard many celebrated pianists in this song-cycle. I have never heard a better one than this Lars David Nilsson. He was straight-forward, honest, and Schubertian. There was never anything cutesy or arty about his playing—except, perhaps, in the final measures of “Der Lindenbaum,” which I thought were unfortunate. Later on, the opening chords of “Das Wirtshaus” were exceptionally full, beautiful, and compelling.

Mattei communicated directly to the audience, looking straight at them, which was almost disturbing. The house lights were up too. Mattei was saying, “Listen to me.” He took them on this journey—this horrible winter’s journey—with him. At the end, the audience exploded in appreciation.

I will tell you a secret. I was not especially looking forward to attending this performance. I have heard Winterreise so many times, and had only recently written about it. But, from the opening song—virtually the opening measures—I was hooked. By Mattei and Nilsson, yes, but also by Schubert. In the long history of music, has there ever been a better marriage of words and music than Winterreise?

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