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New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

On Igor Levit in Germany; Maxim Vengerov, Peter Laul & Boris Andrianov in St. Petersburg; Robert Kahn's "America the Beautiful"; and the Met's "at-home gala."

Have you been to concerts lately? I haven't either. The last concert I attended was on March 6 in Carnegie Hall. I wrote about it in my previous chronicle: an evening of Beethoven featuring Emanuel Ax, Leonidas Kavakos, and Yo-Yo Ma. Since then, it has been home confinement and livestreams. At the end of the present chronicle, I will write about a big, worldwide livestream event that was hosted in New York. This gives me a fig leaf, perhaps: a way of claiming that I am writing a "New York chronicle," as I have done for these twenty years.

Readers of these pages are well familiar with Igor Levit, the Russian-German pianist, born in 1987. He is one of the best pianists of our time, or any, really. He is a person of extraordinary talent, extraordinary intellect, and extraordinary intensity. He has been giving nightly, or near nightly, "house concerts," from his home in Germany. He does this via Twitter. It is a gift to the world but a gift to himself, too: a way of "staying sane," as they say.

Thinking about Levit, I think of Dame Myra Hess, the great pianist born in 1890. She organized noontime concerts at the National Gallery in London during World War II. They took place Monday through Friday, even during the Blitz. Overall, there were 1,698 concerts, and Dame Myra played in 150 of them herself. The noontime concerts were good for British morale.

Levit plays his recitals, or house concerts, at 7 p.m., Central European Time. A pandemic is different from a war, of course (although we could draw parallels). But I would say that Levit has been good for morale, all over.

His Twitter bio reads "Human being. Citizen. European. Pianist." And he has a quotation: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Then we see "#nofear." Levit also has those words in big letters, at the top of his page: "No Fear." The quotation, by the way, comes from a song by Leonard Cohen, the late Canadian singer-songwriter. That song is "Anthem." Markus Hinterhäuser, the artistic director of the Salzburg Festival, once told me that Cohen was the one musician he wanted to bring to Salzburg and could not get.



Igor Levit during a "Hauskonzert." Photo: Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung.

Talking to the audience, before he plays, Levit says things like, "Dear all. Welcome back, at the end of this very weird day, during these very weird times, which are kind of confusing." On Twitter, he might write, "I have probably never felt the actual lifesaving meaning of music and sound before—not in this existential dimension of today. Everything feels new. Thank you for allowing me to share this with you. This is what keeps my inner light burning these days. See you tomorrow."

As I said above, Levit is an extraordinarily intense musician. He is this way in normal, sunny times. He is doubly so now.

After the Kennedy assassination, Leonard Bernstein put out a statement, which read, in part, "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." Music organizations like to quote this statement in terrible times, such as after 9/11. To be frank, I never liked this statement. I guess I found it treacly, platitudinous, and even a little pompous. These days, I may be softening on such statements.

Giving his Twitter recitals, Levit dresses casually, often in a hoodie. One of them says "Dogpound." As the days wear on, his beard grows ever fuller. He introduces his recital in German, then repeats his introduction in English. He speaks about music with great love—love and appreciation. It is all so personal to him. I've often written, "Levit plays as though he were engaged in the most important thing in all the world." For the first many Twitter recitals, he played from memory. He played the music that was in his head, and in his fingers. Then, he started using his tablet—his computer tablet—on which he has sheet music. The sound on Twitter is not great. In fact, it is not good. But Levit, and the composers, come through.

In the early going, he played a lot of Beethoven—sonatas, and sonatas with nicknames: "Appassionata," "Hammerklavier," "Tempest," etc. I will tell you a little about the "Appassionata," the Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57.

The first movement was impassioned indeed. Levit played it in a fury, missing notes here and there. He was marvelously uncareful. The second movement was a holy piece in D-flat major. Levit observed the pulse, which was crucial. He played with strictness, but a velvet strictness, if you will—a songful strictness. The transition to the third movement was alarming. What I mean is, it served as an alarm. It made your hair stand on end. And the third movement itself was all intensity: bristling intensity. The coda was practically terrifying. It would have made you think of a Romantic image of Beethoven, stormy-faced.

When the music was over, Levit slumped back in his chair. Then he got up, walked over to his video recorder, and matter-of-factly turned it off.

There was also a good amount of Schubert, at 7 o'clock. Levit played, for example, the Sonata in B flat, D. 960. This is maybe the most beloved piano piece Schubert ever wrote, for good reason. Levit taught me something about it, which is odd: like many others, I have lived with this sonata for a very long time. Readers may remember that four pianists played D. 960 in New York in the space of two weeks. Or was it ten days? And five pianists? At any rate, they can't leave this sonata alone.

From Levit, the first two movements had their profundity, their beauty, their sublimity. But then something happened. Levit took off like a shot. The Scherzo was livelier, brighter, and faster than ever. It was a dancing, foot-stomping celebration. The final movement was similar. It was driving, visceral, almost aggressive. Joyfully aggressive, or zestily joyful. At the end, Levit grinned and pumped his fist.

So, what did he teach me? I think that pianists try to hang on to the profundity after the first two movements. I think they try to impose a certain profundity on the second two—in order to get the second two movements to match the first two. In Levit's view, the third movement is a sharp departure from the first two. Schubert's mood swings—*really* swings—and a pianist must swing with it. I think this is right.

I also think a similar thing applies to another B-flat piece: Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83. Pianists, conductors, and orchestras often try to make the closing rondo "go with" the preceding three movements (which are profound, transcendent, and very, very moving). Doesn't work. The rondo is just merry, like a lighthearted reward for the drama we have been through.

One evening, Igor Levit played Mahler. Mahler, who wrote essentially no piano music? What Levit played was a transcription of the Tenth Symphony, i.e., a transcription of the one movement that Mahler left complete, as he was working on the Tenth. The transcription is by Ronald Stevenson, "one of my great heroes," said Levit. Stevenson was a Scottish composer, pianist, and writer who lived from 1928 to 2015. In Levit's hands, this music was spooky, otherworldly—apocalyptic. I thought of *Vers la flamme*, the piano piece by Scriabin. It was written in the same period: 1914. (Mahler worked on his Tenth Symphony in the summer of 1910, and died the next May.)

When he was finished, Levit held his face in his hands for a long while. (Is this permissible, in the time of corona?) Then he got up to turn his recorder off.

Move, now, to St. Petersburg—not Florida, but Russia. Maxim Vengerov, the great violinist, hosted a concert with two of his friends. But I should not say that he hosted it. He led it, being the marquee name. The concert took place in the home of Peter Laul, a pianist. Laul sat down at his Bechstein (confirming that non-Steinway pianos exist). Vengerov stood in front of bookcases, which, in addition to books, contained what I assume are Laul-family photos. A cellist was along for part of the concert: Boris Andrianov.

“I called them, and they kindly agreed to make music,” Vengerov said to the camera. “I am very grateful that in these unprecedented times we still have music.” Laul made a statement of his own, touchingly awkward. It went something like this: “Even a week ago, I could not have imagined that I would ever have a concert like this in my home, being broadcast all over the world, with great musicians such as Maxim and Boris. We see that this virus situation brings some benefits, but this is difficult for me to describe.”



The violinist Maxim Vengerov. Photo: Classic FM.

Vengerov, Laul, and Andrianov seem to be three amigos, and they are about the same age: middle forties. Their concert was broadcast by Classic FM, a British station.

The players began with Tchaikovsky, his Trio in A minor, Op. 50. This piece is packed with emotion; and the players delivered it with great heart. Their performance was homemade, in a sense—and I am not talking about the venue. The playing was rough-and-ready, unpolished. The musicians could have been reading, for all I know. We had three friends, doing what people did for many generations: make music at home. Granted, the three in St. Petersburg were doing it at a high level.

After the Tchaikovsky, the cellist disappeared from the picture, and Vengerov and Laul played a Mozart sonata: the one in B-flat major, K. 454. Vengerov was relaxed and musical. He played richly and freely, but within Classical bounds. The pianist was adequate, but it was hard to take your ears off the violinist. He is a natural-born musician, though no doubt he has worked hard. His love of music comes through in every phrase. Mozart's last movement, Allegretto, had some of the *gemütlich* spirit you hear in his operas: *The Magic Flute*, in particular.

Vengerov played his Mozart from memory. He has surely been playing this piece since he was a boy. He also played the next piece from memory. And before they began, Vengerov said to Laul, "I actually like playing at home, don't you?"

What they played was the Schubert Fantasy in C, D. 934. Vengerov tucked into it with gusto. He did not treat the music as some precious, delicate thing. Some players do, which is unfortunate. Vengerov and Laul may have been in a drawing room, of sorts, but they did not approach the Fantasy in drawing-room fashion. The music had guts, as well as beauty and other important Schubertian qualities.

When all was said and done—and played—Vengerov smiled at the camera and said, "Please enjoy your time, as much as you can."

Orchestras, choruses, and other groups are making videos, thanks to wondrous new technologies. Players and singers are at home, in isolation, but they get stitched together, by techno-wizards. One of my favorite videos was made by Robert Kahn, a young conductor at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Kahn is from Holland, and an old friend of mine (young as he is). He arranged and conducted an instrumental version of "America the Beautiful," with Curtis students from around the world, playing at home. The performance was dedicated to healthcare workers, acting heroically in behalf of all.

As I watched—two or three times—I thought, "Kids from all over, playing 'America the Beautiful,' in an expression of thanks. How American, and outstandingly human."

The Metropolitan Opera—the mighty Met, as Martin Bernheimer would say—staged an "at-home gala." More than forty singers and other performers were at home, around the world, making some musical contribution. The co-hosts were Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Met, and Yannick Nézet-Séguin, its music director. Gelb was in his apartment in New York, a few blocks from the Met; Nézet-Séguin was at home in Montreal. The gala started at 1 Eastern on a Saturday afternoon and lasted some four hours. It was meant to raise money for the company—severely straitened, of course—and to provide a certain balm: both for listeners and for performers.

At weddings, they ask, "Who came from farthest away?" Performing from farthest away—away from New York, that is—was Anita Rachvelishvili, the Georgian mezzo, who was at home in Tbilisi. Closest were Stephen Costello, the American tenor, and his wife, Yoon Kwon Costello, who

is a violinist in the Met orchestra. Like Gelb, they live a few blocks from the Met.

Where Wi-Fi was concerned, it was fingers crossed. Would the Wi-Fi hold, in various far-flung spots? Mainly it did.

The gala began in the Stockholm archipelago, where Peter Mattei, the Swedish baritone, was in his summer home. He sang the serenade from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, accompanied by Lars David Nilsson, his regular pianist—who was playing the accordion. Then the gala went to suburban Paris, where Aleksandra Kurzak, the Polish soprano, and Roberto Alagna, the Italian-French tenor, sang a duet from Donizetti's *Elixir of Love*. They are a married couple, those singers. Kurzak was in fine form, but the husband stole the show, I'm afraid. Alagna was in splendid voice, and his comedic sense was right-on.



A screen capture of members of the Metropolitan Opera's orchestra and chorus during the "at-home gala." Photo: Joshua Barone, Coronaawareness.

In Munich, Jonas Kaufmann, the German tenor, sang the aria from *La Juive* (Halévy): "Rachel, quand du Seigneur." This is an aria that Caruso made famous, a hundred years ago. Kaufmann had a first-class accompanist, the veteran Helmut Deutsch. About 250 miles southwest of Munich, in Lugano, Ambrogio Maestri and Marco Armiliato are neighbors. The former is an Italian baritone, the latter an Italian conductor. On the piano, Armiliato accompanied Maestri in "Nemico della Patria," from *Andrea Chénier* (Giordano).

No one in this gala was more impressive than Erin Morley, the American soprano—a coloratura—accompanying herself at the piano in New Haven, Connecticut. She sang (and played) music from Donizetti's *Daughter of the Regiment*, and she was at her high-flying, acrobatic best. As she played the chorus, she called out, humorously, "Sing along!"

Rather more soberly, but beautifully, Michael Volle, the German baritone, sang “The Evening Star Song” from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*. Volle was in Berlin. When I hear this song, I think, “Why didn’t Wagner write 200 of them?” Songs, that is. But he had other priorities, chiefly operatic (almost exclusively so). Elza van den Heever, the South African soprano, was in Montpellier, France. Unaccompanied, she sang an Afrikaans song, one she often uses as an encore.

What did Matthew Polenzani sing? This American tenor is the foremost contemporary singer of “Danny Boy.” And that’s what he sang, accompanying himself on the piano at home in Pelham, New York. When he was finished, his family, off camera, applauded enthusiastically. In Wales, the great bass-baritone Bryn Terfel was accompanied by his wife, Hannah Stone, a harpist. Terfel sang a song he loves to sing—an American song, written by Alma Bazel Androzzo, a black Philadelphian who lived from 1912 to 2001. That song is a kind of hymn: “If I Can Help Somebody.” Terfel sang it in his usual stout, straightforward, openhearted manner.

Like her fellow mezzo, Anita Rachvelishvili, Jamie Barton is a Georgian—but from the American South. At home in Atlanta, she sang “O don fatale,” from Verdi’s *Don Carlo*. When she was through, she said, “Ooh, it’s fun to get to sing again!” That was one of the freshest moments of the gala. In Dresden, René Pape, the great German bass, sang the aria he is perhaps best known for: “In diesen heil’gen Hallen,” from *The Magic Flute*. The voice is as beautiful as, say, twenty-five years ago.

Nothing in this gala was more distinguished than a performance of the Meditation from *Thaïs* (the Massenet opera). Through a video hook-up, David Chan played with Maestro Nézet-Séguin. Chan is the concertmaster of the Met orchestra, and Nézet-Séguin was playing the piano. The Meditation was neither slow nor soupy nor sentimental. It was brought off with excellent taste. Chan and Nézet-Séguin gave a lesson in musical maturity.

Accompanied by the Met violists, Joyce DiDonato, the mezzo from Kansas, sang “Ombra mai fu” (from Handel’s *Xerxes*). Violists? Why them? This was a tribute to Vincent Lioni, from the Met’s viola section, who died of the coronavirus on April 4. He was beloved of his colleagues. When the show “kicked back” to the hosts, Nézet-Séguin had tears in his eyes.

An opera gala can be a motley, strange, moving thing. This one was.

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

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