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New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On the Philadelphia Orchestra, Lang Lang, the New York Philharmonic & the Metropolitan Opera.

Carnegie Hall opened its season with the Philadelphia Orchestra, under its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. As the music director of the Metropolitan Opera, too, Nézet-Séguin had opened the Met season a week and a half before. (I discussed this opening, and other Met performances, in last month's chronicle.) The Philadelphia Orchestra is Carnegie Hall's home orchestra, more or less. The Philadelphians make the hundred-mile trip to New York frequently. No doubt, Yannick Nézet-Séguin is New York's maestro—near ubiquitous. He enjoys a very good press. Has there been a greater conductorial presence in New York since Leonard Bernstein?

Jaap van Zweden is the New York Philharmonic's music director. Yet he seems in the shadow of Nézet-Séguin. Van Zweden is leaving at the end of the 2023–24 season, which will make his tenure at the Philharmonic a mere six years. I wonder whether the city knows what it has in this formidable Dutchman.

The opening night of Carnegie Hall is always a festive occasion, but it was especially festive this year, in that the hall had been dark for a long time—572 days, specifically. The Philadelphians' program included Beethoven, Shostakovich, and the aforementioned Bernstein. It also included two contemporary composers: Valerie Coleman, an American, and Iman Habibi, a Canadian who began life in Iran. Nézet-Séguin called them, in remarks to the audience, "two geniuses of our time." That is a remarkable statement.

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Coleman's piece was *Seven O'Clock Shout*, which evokes a practice from early in the pandemic: when people leaned out their windows at 7 p.m. to make all sorts of noise, in tribute to frontline workers. Coleman's is a clever and enjoyable piece, with a large dose of humanity. Iman Habibi was represented on the program with *Jeder Baum spricht* ("Every tree speaks"). I will quote from

Carnegie Hall's program notes:

> Although Beethoven's own perspective was that of Romanticism, in modern terms he might be described as an environmentalist. With this in mind, Habibi wondered how Beethoven would respond to twenty-first-century climate change. He describes *Jeder Baum spricht* as "an unsettling rhapsodic reflection on the climate catastrophe, written in dialogue with Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth symphonies."

Some years ago, I identified a new genre in music: the "green piece." Green or not, Habibi's is an interesting and intelligent piece. That it is related to climate change, you could not know, unless someone told you. Nézet-Séguin programmed the piece right before Beethoven's Fifth. Indeed, he launched directly into the Fifth, without pause, making *Jeder Baum spricht* a sort of prelude. The conductor was making a point of some kind. Whether such point-making is in harmony with music is a fit subject for debate.

In his remarks to the audience, Nézet-Séguin had made a standard point—also a debatable one, speaking of that: the arts have the power to change the world. He said, if I heard him correctly, that music needed to represent a range of "communities." It was still okay to play Beethoven, he said: "Beethoven is still relevant." (What a relief.) But music needed to change, said Nézet-Séguin. Earlier in the evening, a music-industry veteran had told me that the industry would now have a focus on "social justice."

Three nights after Opening Night, Jonas Kaufmann came into Carnegie Hall, in the company of Helmut Deutsch. Kaufmann is the starry German tenor, Deutsch the veteran Vienna-born accompanist. ("Accompanist," please note, is not a putdown in my vocabulary.) They performed a recital of German art songs, or German-*language* art songs, let's say, because the program began with Liszt. I reviewed this recital at some length on *The New Criterion*'s website. (Same with Opening Night, and same with the other Carnegie Hall evening I will discuss.) Here in my chronicle, I will offer some generalities.

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Kaufmann is an uneven performer—up and down. On this night, he was way, way up. He sang a beautiful, inspired, and brave recital. What do I mean by "brave"? He was willing to leave himself exposed, going up for high *pianos*, taking other risks as well. He gave a clinic, frankly, in *Lieder*-singing. Helmut Deutsch was equally impressive, even more impressive than he reliably is. My cousin happened to be sitting next to me. She is a singer. At the first opportunity, she whispered, "My gosh, what a pianist." When I mentioned Deutsch to a pianist friend some days later, he said, "He's pretty much the goat, where accompanists are concerned." (By that acronym, he meant "Greatest of All Time.")

Once the printed program was over, Kaufmann and Deutsch performed a slew of encores—six. These were some of the greatest hits of *Lieder*: "Mondnacht" (Schumann), "Die Forelle" (Schubert), "Morgen!" (Strauss), etc. People had their phones up, as usual, taking pictures and making videos. As he sang what turned out to be his last encore—Strauss's "Cäcilie"—Kaufmann stopped and made an impassioned plea to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, I do everything for you, but please respect the rules: stop filming!" The audience responded with some of its biggest applause of the night.

A question: When is it time to declare a singer "great"? Not just good, not just excellent, not just *capable* of greatness, but outright great? I have mentioned Kaufmann's unevenness. I have heard nights he would rather forget. But I have also heard a great Parsifal (the title role in Wagner's last opera) and his latest Carnegie recital, plus other nights in the "great" zone. For me, at least, it is time.

How do you solve a problem like Lang Lang? You don't. He arrived at Carnegie Hall three nights after Kaufmann (and Deutsch). Lang Lang is now one year shy of forty. That means the Lang Lang wars have gone on for about twenty years. People either love him or loathe him. The truth, as I see it, is this: he is an immensely talented man whose career is a rollercoaster. He has crazy-bad nights and stunningly good ones. Lang Lang's unevenness makes Jonas Kaufmann's look like consistency. And, unlike Kaufmann, Lang Lang doesn't have the excuse of being a singer (whose instrument is physical—his own body).

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Longtime readers are perhaps acquainted with a line of mine: "Lang Lang never *plays* badly. Never. It's just that he sometimes *thinks* badly. His fingers can do whatever his mind commands." I think of another line, this one from Sam Snead, the golf champion. As an older man, he said, "In my prime, I could do whatever I wanted with a golf ball." Lang Lang can do whatever he wants with a keyboard.

He began his Carnegie recital with Schumann's *Arabeske* and then got to the main event: the *Goldberg Variations* of Bach. This performance was a rollercoaster all on its own. Lang Lang was wizardly, eccentric, maddening, and divine. He did things that no other pianist would do—and things that no other pianist *could* do. As he played, I thought, "What would Bach think?" I think the master would be amazed, appalled, fascinated—and maybe a little confused.

We speak of "playing" the piano, or another instrument. Consider that word for a moment: "playing." You may think of children and their toys. Lang Lang really does play, and play with. In his hands, the piano is a grown-up toy. I do not mean this as an insult. Perhaps the rest of us could stand to do a little more playing. If I am to give a bottom line, it is this: I do not want every pianist to play the *Goldberg Variations* as Lang Lang does. If I could take one recording of this masterwork to a desert island, it would not be his. Am I glad that Lang Lang exists and that this one person

plays the *Goldberg*s the way he does? Yes, a thousand times yes.

The talent that this guy has—even when you want to kill him—is mind-boggling.

After his Bach, Lang Lang played two encores: *Für Elise* and an arrangement, by Peter Schindler, of "Mo Li Hua," a.k.a. "Jasmine Flower," the Chinese folk song that Puccini employs in his final opera, *Turandot*—which was being revived at the Metropolitan Opera that very night. More about *Turandot* at the Met in due course.

The New York Philharmonic is not playing in David Geffen Hall this season. That hall is being renovated, due to reopen next season. One night, the Philharmonic played in—get ready, I will quote—the "Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Frederick P. Rose Hall." That must be one of the most awkward names in town. At any rate, this concert was guest-conducted by a Central American with an Italian first name and a Spanish last name: Giancarlo Guerrero, who was born in Nicaragua and grew up in Costa Rica. He leads two orchestras: one in Nashville, Tennessee, and the other in Wrocław, Poland. The guest soloist for the concert was Alessio Bax—a man who shares a last name with an English composer (Sir Arnold Bax, who lived from 1883 to 1953) but who is, in fact, Italian. Signor Bax is a pianist, and the concert began with the Schumann Piano Concerto.

Actually, it began with a solo-piano piece by Clara Schumann: a romance in A minor (same key as her husband's famous concerto). The piece takes about four minutes. At its conclusion, the orchestra and the pianist launched right into the concerto—as though the two pieces were linked. There's a lot of that going around these days.

Why? Why did this happen? Since when does an orchestra concert begin with a solo-piano piece? I think both Clara and Robert would have said, "This is nuts." Whatever the case, Alessio Bax played both the romance and the concerto in his usual fashion—which is to say, the playing was tidy and tasteful, with a dash of aristocracy. Maestro Guerrero proved himself musically adept. For one thing, he breathed along with the score. I would like to say, too, that it's gratifying to hear an orchestra—a symphony orchestra—in a smaller-than-usual hall. You can hear more. And you feel rather in the center of it all.

> "Music ought to say what it has to say and get off the stage."

Concluding the concert was a Brahms piece, but not one of the four symphonies: his Serenade No. 2 in A major, Op. 16. A work in five movements, it puts a variety of instruments on display, especially the oboe. This serenade can almost seem an oboe concerto. Liang Wang handled this role well—how could he not?—although I often wish for more pliancy from him: more of a bendy, sinuous, taffy-like quality. At Maestro Guerrero, I could pick a bit. ("Pick a little, talk a little.") But he is a competent and personable fellow, and I hope that the Philharmonic has him back—maybe in a proper symphony? (No offense to the serenade, which,

like its Mozart predecessors, has its homely charms.)

On another night, the orchestra played in a hall about the same size as the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Frederick P. Rose Hall: Alice Tully Hall. The program was all-American, and it was led by a young Finn. Finland is virtually a conductor factory. Finland may have more conductors than France has chefs—and I'm not talking about *chefs d'orchestre*. This particular young Finn is Dalia Stasevska, who is the chief conductor in Lahti, a city about sixty-five miles north and slightly east of Helsinki.

First on the Philharmonic's program was a piece by Missy Mazzoli, a native of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, born in 1980. That piece is *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)*, composed in 2014. In a composer's note, Mazzoli says that her piece is "music in the shape of a solar system, a collection of rococo loops that twist around each other within a larger orbit." Her piece is like many, many other contemporary pieces. You have that woozy, drunken feeling. Soft percussion. A slow building. There is a touch of minimalism, lulling you, and then some Romantic blooming. Throughout, there are twinkling stars.

Is there anything setting this piece apart? Yes, it's a good one—a *good* piece. I look forward to hearing it again. Among the virtues of the piece is that it's the right length. It does not wear out its welcome or run on the fumes of its materials. I often quote Earl Wild: "Music ought to say what it has to say and get off the stage."

In 2006, Anthony Davis—born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1951—composed *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*. A four-movement work, it is a type of clarinet concerto. The movements are marked "Interrogation," "Loss," "Incarceration," and "Dance of the Other." Obviously, this work is telling a story, and making some points. But how can it, without words? Well, you can read the words of the title and the movement headings. Also, members of the orchestra *speak* words—the words of the *Miranda* warning, which begins, "You have the right to remain silent." When the orchestra intones the words, they sound sinister—though *Miranda*, when the decision was handed down in the mid-1960s, was held to be a great civil-rights advance.

Davis's score is eclectic, reflecting jazz, modernism, the New Age, and more. It is also thoroughly American. The clarinet part was given royal treatment by Anthony McGill, the Philharmonic's principal.

Last on the program was an old work by John Adams. Does 1992 qualify as old now? I am speaking of Adams's Chamber Symphony, which was inspired by cartoons. The third and final movement is headed "Roadrunner." The symphony is a tricky, intricate one, with many twists and turns. Rhythm is at a premium here, and you really have to count. Maestra Stasevska led the orchestra skillfully, ever alert. In my estimation, the symphony is busy, insistent, and unrelenting. It won't stop coming at you. One of Adams's best-known works is *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986). The symphony, I thought, when leaving Alice Tully Hall, is a *longish* ride in a fast machine.

About Turandot at the Metropolitan Opera, I have already written on tnc's website. Here, I will say a quick word about Turandot's "cultural insensitivities," which the Met warned about on its own website. That is the company's phrase: "cultural insensitivities." Is the composer, Puccini, truly guilty of such insensitivities? Once upon a time, he was hailed for his liberality—his cosmopolitanism, his curiosity about the world beyond his doorstep. He cared enough about other cultures and their music to incorporate some of that music into his own works. Madama Butterfly has a Japanese flavor; La fanciulla del West, an American flavor; Turandot, a Chinese flavor. Puccini was thought to be honoring these various traditions; now he is accused of dishonoring them. He is a "cultural appropriator," an exploiter, an operatic Leopold II. An Orientalist!

Look, when it comes to cultural appropriation, no one has anything on Bach—with those French overtures, Italian caprices, Irish jigs, and the rest.

The night I attended *Turandot*, a member of the low brass, in the pit, was practicing some familiar music during an intermission. Not Puccini, but Wagner: a passage from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. A run of this opera opened about ten nights later. In the pit—conducting—was Sir Antonio Pappano, the longtime chief of opera in London. The cast was about as good as can be assembled for *Meistersinger*: with Michael Volle as Hans Sachs and Lise Davidsen as Eva, for starters. I reviewed *this* show, too, on the web. But here at the end of my chronicle, I wish to wring my hands.

I am not a great worrier over classical music—its future, its viability. In fact, I frequently quote Charles Rosen, the late pianist-scholar, who said, "The death of classical music is perhaps the oldest tradition of classical music." In every generation, music is said to be dying, and yet it marches on. But: a Met *Boris Godunov*, with René Pape, no less, in the title role, was lightly attended and lightly applauded; this *Meistersinger*—this magnificent *Meistersinger*—was lightly attended and lightly applauded. I realize there is a pandemic on, or lingering. I don't want to make too much of a couple of nights at the Met. Still: the worrywarts may have a point.

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

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