The New Criterion

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New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

On performances at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall & Opera America's National Opera Center.

Leonidas Kavakos, the violinist, and Yuja Wang, the pianist, are starry soloists. (The pianist is starrier than the violinist, granted.) But they occasionally team up, in recital. They are following the footsteps of Rubinstein and Szeryng, Horowitz and Milstein, Oistrakh and Richter, and other pairs we could name.

You may have noticed my inconsistency. I sometimes put the pianist first, sometimes the violinist. Why? It is mainly a feeling or impulse, I think. Interesting as it is, I should not let the question detain us.

Kavakos and Wang came once more to Carnegie Hall. I reviewed their recital on *The New Criterion* 's website. But I would like to say a word about their program, here. It began with Bach—the Violin Sonata No. 3 in E major—and continued with two Bach-besotted composers: Busoni and Shostakovich. The Busoni was the Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor, a strange work. I use "strange" in the sense that Harold Bloom, the late literary critic, did: unusual, individualistic—its own thing. The Shostakovich was his sole violin sonata, written late in his career. It is one of his death-haunted works.

I would like to point out, simply, that this was not a crowd-pleasing program. So, hats off to Kavakos and Wang. (They played well, too.) And the crowd was pleased, regardless. They asked for an encore, receiving one: the fifth and final movement—"Dithyramb"—from Stravinsky's Duo Concertante. That's not especially crowd-pleasing either.

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The night after, the Modigliani Quartet arrived in Carnegie Hall—not in the main auditorium, where Kavakos and Wang had been, but in Weill Recital Hall, upstairs. The Modigliani was

founded by friends in Paris in 2003. String quartets like to name themselves after artists: I think of the Miró Quartet and the Calder Quartet, too. I could not think of quartets named after Michelangelo and Leonardo. But I've googled—and there are indeed such quartets. I also thought, "A modern American would say 'Da Vinci,' instead of 'Leonardo.' " Sure enough: there is a Da Vinci Quartet, based in Colorado.

Up in Weill, the Modigliani Quartet began with Mozart: the String Quartet in B flat, K. 458, nicknamed "The Hunt." The players tucked into this music, with freedom and discipline. They did not treat their music as quaint, drawing-room Mozart. That is not Mozart at all. The first violinist, Amaury Coeytaux, played sweetly and bravely. "Bravely"? That's a curious thing to say. What I mean is, you can hear *everything* in this little hall. It is highly "exposed." A violinist is under a magnifying glass, so to speak. Coeytaux was confident and practically unerring.

If I remember correctly, the violinists and the cellist were in white shirts—but the violist, in black. He was a ringer, or rather, a last-minute substitute: Luke Fleming, from New Orleans. He was filling in for the Modigliani's regular violist, who had encountered a travel snag. Throughout the concert, the violist watched the first violinist like a hawk—and performed admirably.

The program ended with Grieg: his String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27. This was not cute Grieg, or adorable Grieg—a lovely little folkloric piece from Norway. No, it was strong and masculine and commanding. The players committed no condescension. The four of them sounded almost orchestral at times. (One advantage of a small hall?) They made an overwhelming case for this work. The final section—Presto al saltarello—was performed with abandon. (A controlled abandon, if you will.) You almost wanted to get up and dance. The saltarello, if I can borrow an American term, from our jazz age, swung.

As I left the hall, I thought, "This Grieg will prove one of the highlights of the season," certainly for me.

The New York Philharmonic has been playing in Alice Tully Hall—a chamber hall, more or less. The Philharmonic's regular hall, David Geffen (formerly Avery Fisher), is undergoing renovation. One night, the orchestra played Brahms's First Symphony. How did it sound, in that smallish hall? Magnificent. I almost regret having to return to the bigger hall. In a smaller hall, when a large orchestra is playing a work such as the Brahms First, you feel almost in the middle of the music.

On this night, the conductor was Simone Young, from Australia. She made a favorable impression three seasons ago, when she led the Philharmonic in the Mahler Sixth. The more recent concert had a concerto soloist—a cellist. I will quote the first two sentences of his bio:

> In great demand worldwide, Sheku Kanneh-Mason became a household name in 2018 after his performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at Windsor Castle was watched by nearly two billion people globally. He had already garnered renown as the winner of the 2016 bbc Young

Musician competition, the first Black musician to take the title.

To most of us Yanks, "the Duke and Duchess of Sussex" are "Harry and Meghan." Also, Kanneh-Mason has "mbe" after his name: only twenty-two, he is a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In any event, with the New York Philharmonic, he played the most famous and popular cello concerto of all: the Dvořák. In an interview, I once asked Steven Isserlis, another British cellist, "Do you ever tire of playing the Dvořák concerto?" He looked at me with something like horror and said, "No!" From Sheku Kanneh-Mason, there was occasionally a lack of polish in the concerto—blemishes here and there. But there was never a lack of heart. Kanneh-Mason gave a loving and lovable account of the concerto.

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After he was finished, the audience rose as one for him. He played an encore: a version of "I Say a Little Prayer," which Burt Bacharach and Hal David wrote for Dionne Warwick in the 1960s. Kanneh-Mason not only played, he also whistled. A talented and musical being, this young man.

About that Brahms symphony, under the baton of Maestra Young: it was a standard Brahms First. That sounds like a putdown; I don't mean it that way, at all. What I mean is that it was Brahmsian—naturally and faithfully Brahmsian. It was rich, sweeping, majestic, moving—what you want a Brahms First to be, for which: bravos to all.

On a subsequent night, the Philharmonic was conducted by Dima Slobodeniouk. Who? He is the music director of the Symphony Orchestra of Galicia. Russian-born, he went to Finland as a teenager and is a Finnish citizen. He was making his New York Philharmonic debut. Slobodeniouk is good, really good. I want to say, "A star is born," but all that would mean is that I myself had never heard him before. Now in his mid-forties, he has been conducting for a long time.

He is fluid—very fluid. He finds the "gestural equivalent" of the music at hand. (I have borrowed language that Lorin Maazel once used with me in an interview.) When the music is slow—an Adagio movement, let's say—he goes without a baton, or so he did on the night I heard him. In faster sections, the stick is in his hand. He is immaculate—clean and tidy. At the same time, he is amply expressive. He has an obvious, though not showy, musical intelligence. He has a sure sense of rhythm, and he knows the value of notes. What I mean is, he cuts them off at the right time, not lingering, thoughtlessly.

Under his baton—or fingers—the New York Philharmonic sounded very warm. Warm and rich. Was this our Phil.? (No offense.) Did the warmth and richness result from the hall, i.e., Alice Tully? Or from other variables?

The concert began with the Shostakovich Violin Concerto No. 1. The soloist was Karen Gomyo, who was born in Tokyo and grew up in Montreal. She studied at the Juilliard School with Miss DeLay (the legendary pedagogue Dorothy DeLay). The Shostakovich concerto had its vividness in Gomyo's hands—and in Slobodeniouk's, and in the Philharmonic's. You could smell the fear, coming through the notes. Sight and hearing made for a striking contrast. Before us was a glamorous young woman, in a sparkling blue, shoulderless dress, expressing the fear in a (great) "Soviet" concerto.

During the cadenza—a passacaglia that bridges the Scherzo and the Burlesca—you could have heard a pin drop. I was impressed by the audience—but by the violinist too, who made the audience soundless. For my taste, the Burlesca was a little mechanical. I like it played with a heightened sense of crazy desperation. But it was good enough, and the performance overall was very good.

After intermission, this Finn named Slobodeniouk conducted Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1, a.k.a. "Winter Dreams." At the end of the evening, as people were filing out, one woman said to her companion, "That was great." He agreed: "That was great." They were right.

Let's have some singing—courtesy of Willsonia Boyer, a soprano I have discussed, and praised, in these pages before. She sang a recital in Marc A. Scorca Hall, at Opera America's National Opera Center. Accompanying her at the piano was Marijo Newman. Their program was an eclectic one. It began with patriotic songs—"America the Beautiful" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Then there were art songs familiar and more off the beaten track. An example of the former: "Widmung" (Schumann). An example of the latter: "J'ai frappé," by Nadia Boulanger. Eventually, the program turned all-American.

This portion of the evening began with "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," in the arrangement of Ned Rorem. Boyer also sang a song by Adolphus Hailstork, born in 1941: "My Heart to Thy Heart." The words are by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), the poet after whom the famed Dunbar High in Washington, D.C., is named. The program concluded with three spirituals.

The last of these was "Hold Out Your Light," in an arrangement of Lena McLin. Born in 1928, she is still with us. So is Ned Rorem, born five years before. His centennial, coming up shortly, should be a happy affair, or year.

Best about Willsonia Boyer's singing, I think, is the sincerity that comes through at every turn: sincerity, warmth, and goodness—"goodwill toward men." There is an old saying: "You play who you are," or sing who you are. If that is true, this lady's singing speaks very well of her.

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Did I say "all-American"? Leon Botstein conducted an all-American program at Carnegie Hall. His orchestra was t?n, which stands for "The Orchestra Now." You need that little line over the O in order to get "tone," as in music, rather than "ton," as in two thousand pounds. The concert began with a work by Julia Perry, who lived from 1924 to 1979. She was one of the multitudes who studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. In the early 1950s, Perry wrote a Stabat Mater, which is what Botstein and his forces performed. It sounds like a lot of American music from the middle of the last century—which is no disparagement, I hasten to say. Perry's Stabat Mater has a variety of tempos and moods, and is full of drama, full of churning, appropriate to the subject matter (obviously). The work requires a singer—who was the mezzo-soprano Briana Hunter. A beautiful voice she owns. It is rich, lush, with some cutting power. Hunter had some trouble on high notes, but this was a minor issue.

In the middle of the program, there was a world premiere: of a violin concerto by Scott Wheeler, dubbed "Birds of America." Yes, birds make their appearances, although the work is not ornithological—it is thoroughly musical, with some birdy touches. There are three movements, the middle one of which is marked "Adagietto." You don't see that much, outside Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

I will not assess this concerto because the composer is a friend of mine. Yet I can recommend that people seek out the concerto for themselves. It is a combination of learning and talent, experience and inspiration, craft and spark. Also, it clearly reflects a love of music. But don't all compositions? Not so as you would know it, no. With t?n, the concerto was played by Gil Shaham, its dedicatee, who was in very good shape.

A question for you: Who was America's first classical composer? Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869)? Or George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898)? Or someone else? Let's call it a tie. In any event, Botstein and t?n performed Bristow's Symphony No. 4, "Arcadian." It was commissioned in the early 1870s by the Brooklyn Philharmonic for a hundred dollars. According to a note in our program, this was the first symphony commissioned by an American orchestra from an American composer. As I listened to it, I thought, "Sounds awfully Romantic." Then I thought, "It was written in 1872 or so. What's it supposed to be, Jay? Serialist?"

Although there are no words—no singer or narrator—the symphony aims to tell a story. The first movement is headed "Emigrants' Journey across the Plains." The second: "Halt on the Prairie." Then "Indian War Dance." Finally, "Arrival at the New Home, Rustic Festivities, and Dancing."

Concerning this symphony, there were three separate notes in our program. One of them—"Reevaluating Bristow in 2021"—began,

> Keeping the original, troubling movement titles in George Frederick Bristow's Symphony No. 4, *Arcadian* , offers audiences today an important window into the process by which composers, like Bristow, participated in justifying and culturally normalizing the violent expansion into Indigenous homelands by

the United States.

On it went in this vein. My main thought about the note was, "If this is the price that must be paid in order to perform the symphony, so be it. Better than excluding the symphony altogether. But will there come a day, soon, when the symphony will be flat-out verboten?"

In the past twenty-five years or so, Leon Botstein has introduced me, and many other people, to music of the past we would otherwise have never heard. He has rendered a great service. So did Eve Queler, and her Opera Orchestra of New York. From them, I heard Donizetti's last opera, *Dom Sébastien*. It is never staged, for reasons I can't fathom. Speaking of opera: New York City Opera has staged a lot of works that otherwise would have remained under a bushel. How about Dukas's version of *Bluebeard's Castle*? City Opera put it on in 2005, with Botstein in the pit.

Let's end back at the New York Philharmonic, where Joshua Bell teamed up with Jaap van Zweden, the orchestra's music director, for Beethoven's Violin Concerto. About the conductor, I could go on for several paragraphs, but maybe I will write just a few sentences: He conducts Beethoven in basically the same manner as Szell did, or, later, Levine (who had apprenticed under Szell). You don't really hear conducting, or interpretation. You hear . . . Beethoven, as is.

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Joshua Bell played his heart out—not forgetting head, to go with heart. He was disciplined and feeling, correct and soulful. There were hiccups or smudges here and there, but we weren't listening to a studio recording, thank heaven. The middle movement, Larghetto, sounded like an arioso, beautifully sung. Like his great predecessors—Joachim, Auer, Kreisler, Wieniawski, and Milstein among them—Bell has written his own cadenzas. They are first-rate. They allow for virtuosity, but virtuosity is not the main point of them: music is. They go with Beethoven but are distinctive, at the same time. In the first movement, Bell modulates freely and smartly. He seems to spend a fair amount of time in B flat. He also introduces a touch—just a hint—of dissonance, which pleases the ear.

When I was young, I knew a pianist who, when a college student, had turned pages for Dame Myra Hess in a recital. In the green room, she asked him what he was working on. He named a Mozart concerto. She said, "Wonderful. Whose cadenza are you using?" The young man gulped and said, "Well, I've written my own." "Splendid," replied Dame Myra. "I'm not gifted that way."

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