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New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

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

When I was growing up—the 1970s, chiefly—the most prominent Afro-American composer of classical music was William Grant Still. If people knew of an Afro-American composer, it was Still. Why have I used that old-fashioned term, "Afro-American"? Perhaps because I think of Still's Symphony No. 1, a.k.a. the Afro-American Symphony. It was his best-known work, and probably remains so.

Other black composers were on the periphery. I think of two women: Florence Price and Margaret Bonds. Many of us knew them for their arrangements of spirituals, sung by Leontyne Price, most notably. In fact, the great soprano, when announcing a spiritual from the stage, would sometimes say something like this: "The arrangement is by Florence Price—not a relative, just a friend."

By the way, William Grant Still and Florence Price both grew up in Little Rock. He was born in 1895, she in 1887. Both studied with George Whitefield Chadwick, the Boston composer, who was key in establishing American classical music. Margaret Bonds, born in 1913, studied with Price.

I should mention, too, that I grew up during the Scott Joplin craze—a wonderful craze. His rags were a kind of American classical music. This was especially true when they were played by Joshua Rifkin, whose LPs of the rags were phenomenally successful. The first one sold a million. People also got acquainted with Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*, composed in 1911.

Following the George Floyd protests of 2020, presenting organizations began programming African American composers with abandon. Never has so much Still been performed. Or Price. Or Julia Perry, George Walker, others. The programming of these composers has had an unintended consequence, perhaps: presenting organizations have featured "neo-Romantic" American music, mainly composed in the middle of the twentieth century. For as long as anyone can remember, neo-Romantic composers were largely shunned, in favor of modernist composers, many of whom practiced serialism. "The serial killers," Ned Rorem mordantly called them. (Rorem died last November, at ninety-nine. As a youngster, he studied with Margaret Bonds.)

Rafael Payare conducts the New York Philharmonic at David Geffen Hall. Photo: Chris Lee.

So, we have heard a great deal of Still, Price, et al. But hardly a note is ever programmed of other twentieth-century Americans, other neo-Romantics: Walter Piston, Howard Hanson, Vincent Persichetti, Roy Harris, Peter Mennin, William Schuman, Norman Dello Joio . . . I have heard these composers, live in a concert hall, almost never. Maybe they will come back one day. (Harris's Symphony No. 3 was something approaching a hit. So was Hanson's Symphony No. 2, nicknamed the "Romantic.")

On a Friday afternoon, the New York Philharmonic began a concert with a tone poem by Still: *Darker America* (1924). There are no words with this piece. It is purely orchestral. Without the title, would we know the music has to do with the black American experience? We would, actually—owing to suggestions of spirituals, call-and-response, and the blues. The piece swings, in spots. Still infuses the classical with the popular much as Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and others do. *Darker America* may not rival a Dvořák or Tchaikovsky tone poem, but it is well wrought and distinctively American.

Which reminds me: the Philharmonic's program note for *Darker America* was written by a professor who, in her bio, was identified as a musicologist "specializing in twentieth-century American and African American music." I thought that was a curious, discordant expression: "American and African American." The music associated with black Americans is as American as apple pie, baseball, and Chevrolet.

The Philharmonic's concert continued with a Beethoven piano concerto—No. 2 in B flat, the composer's most Mozartean concerto. More Mozartean than No. 1, in C major? Yes. The B-flat concerto is called "No. 2" because it was published second. But it was actually written first, in

the late 1780s, when Beethoven was still in his teens (and Mozart was still here, in the flesh). The Piano Concerto No. 1 was written in 1795, the year Beethoven turned twenty-five.

The soloist for the New York Philharmonic was Emanuel Ax, the American pianist born in 1949. I believe that, for the last couple of decades, he has been the musician most often heard in New York concert halls. What I mean is, the concerto soloist and the recitalist most often heard. Ax is perhaps tied with another pianist, Yefim Bronfman. Which makes me want to relate a story.

One night, the two of them played Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos—with the New York Philharmonic, in fact. The audience asked for an encore, and Ax spoke for the two of them. I can't remember what the encore was. But it was supposed to be played on one piano, with four hands, as Ax explained. Yet the men were having trouble fitting at one piano—so they would remain at their separate instruments. "We're both on diets," said Ax. This was maybe the funniest and most charming thing I have ever heard spoken from the stage at a concert.

When it comes to playing, Ax is up and down, in my experience. But when he is up—he is very up indeed. So he was on the afternoon he played the Beethoven concerto in B flat. His phrasing was lapidary. His *cantabile* in the Adagio was exemplary. In the Rondo, he sparkled (as the music does). This music was spicy, snazzy, and elegant. I think Beethoven himself would have stood and applauded.

The audience in David Geffen Hall kept applauding, but I did not think it was wise to play an encore. This concerto had been enough. And yet Ax obliged, sitting down to play a Chopin nocturne—the one in F minor. I thought this was maybe a little long for an encore after a concerto, especially when intermission beckoned. But Ax's playing of it was inarguable: so simple, so uncluttered.

Rafael Payare conducts the New York Philharmonic with Emanuel Ax at David Geffen Hall. Photo: Chris Lee.

The second half of the concert was devoted to a symphony by Shostakovich: No. 12, "The Year 1917." It had never been played by the New York Philharmonic before. Could that be true? A Shostakovich symphony never played by the Philharmonic? Yes, it is. The Symphony No. 12 is almost never played by anybody.

There are fifteen Shostakovich symphonies, the same as there are string quartets. The Shostakovich symphony most often played is No. 5. Also getting fairly frequent hearings are No. 7 ("Leningrad") and No. 10. Other symphonies played with some regularity are Nos. 1, 4, 8, 9, 13 ("Babi Yar"), and 14. But No. 12? It largely gathers dust, as far as I can tell.

Shostakovich wrote it in 1961, dedicating it to the memory of Lenin. It is a hymn to, and depiction of, the Bolshevik Revolution. The first movement is headed "Revolutionary Petrograd." The last movement is headed "The Dawn of Humanity." That gives you a flavor of the piece, in its propagandistic element. Was Shostakovich sincere, in writing this piece? Hard to tell. A double-mindedness ran through him, as it did a great many citizens of the Soviet Union.

The Symphony No. 12 is guilty of some bombast and some heavy-handedness. If the composer's reputation depended on it, we would not know him today. But it is still a Shostakovich symphony—brimmed with the genius of its composer.

I have typed a long while without naming the conductor of this concert. He was Rafael Payare, from Venezuela. When he took the stage to begin the concert, the man behind me said to his companion, "He's twelve years old." Actually, he's in his early forties, born in 1980. He came up in

El Sistema, Venezuela's network of youth orchestras. He played the French horn. As a conductor, he assisted three big names: Abbado, Barenboim, and Maazel. Today, he is the music director of two orchestras: the San Diego Symphony and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Payare is a hot property.

Have some additional information. Payare has huge hair, making Sir Simon Rattle seem almost bald. Payare sports a mountainous Afro, you could say. In David Geffen Hall, he wore old-fashioned concert tails. He often conducts with his feet together and his back very straight. (Think Stokowski.) His conducting is notably "vertical." He is married to a leading instrumentalist, Alisa Weilerstein, the American cellist.

And how did he fare in the Shostakovich Twelfth? Impressively. He almost physically enacted the symphony. To the music at hand, he always found "the gestural equivalent," as Maazel would say. He seemed connected to the music—physically, kinetically. This music can be unwieldy, but he made it orderly and compact, which was very effective. Above all, he exhibited leadership, which is perhaps the key ingredient in conducting.

Around Rafael Payare, there is some hype. It can be forgiven.

Into Carnegie Hall came the Philadelphia Orchestra, for a concert conducted by its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. The concert began with a new work, commissioned by the orchestra: Ensō, by Xi Wang. This is one of those works—one of a great many—that blend Chinese musical traditions with Western ones. I have long referred to this practice as "the twain, meeting."

Xi Wang was born in China in 1978 and completed her musical education at Cornell. She now teaches at Southern Methodist University. Carnegie Hall's program notes explained the title of her new piece, and some other things as well.

An *ensō* is found in Zen art. It is a circle, symbolizing, among other things, absolute enlightenment. The composer wanted to write a healing piece, after the trauma of the pandemic. She also wanted to tell the story of a spiritual seeker, drawing on the life of the Buddha. She composed themes to represent "different aspects of the human world." (I now quote the composer herself.) These include "joy, wonder, suffering, heaviness, lightness, humor, drama," and more.

Xi Wang, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and the Philadelphia Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. Photo: © 2022 Steve J. Sherman.

Reading this before the concert, I thought, "Does even the *Ring* cycle accomplish all this? And this lady has written but a fifteen-minute tone poem."

Well—do you know that Xi Wang's piece pretty much delivers on the promises laid out in those program notes? *Ensō* is an achievement. It is skillfully constructed and musically imaginative. Never for a moment does it lose the interest of the listener. I look forward to hearing it again, which is practically the most you can say about a new piece.

Nézet-Séguin conducted the piece with tender loving care. He has established himself as an excellent advocate of modern composers. The Philadelphia Orchestra contributed its beautiful sounds, made all the more so by the acoustics of Carnegie Hall.

Next on the program was Mozart, in the form of his Clarinet Concerto. It would be strange to say that there is a best Mozart piece—there are more than six hundred items in the Köchel catalogue. And how would you compare, say, *The Marriage of Figaro* with the Clarinet Concerto, or any concerto? Yet Paul Johnson, the wide-ranging historian, who has written a biography of Mozart, calls the Clarinet Concerto the composer's "most perfect" piece. That is a solid opinion.

I have often wondered: When Mozart finished the Clarinet Concerto, did he put down his pen and say, "Wow. That was an especially good one. That'll last a thousand years, at least"? Or was it just another job, done? Another item for the (future) Köchel catalogue? I don't know what the answer is, with confidence. If Mozart had said "Wow" every time he wrote something great, he would have had a lifetime—brief as it was—of saying "Wow."

The Philadelphians' soloist in the Clarinet Concerto was one of their own, Ricardo Morales, their principal. Years ago, in the Eugene Ormandy days, the orchestra made a series of albums called *First Chair*. It featured principal players in a variety of pieces. Morales is a successor to, among others, Anthony Gigliotti. Morales is a great player.

He became the principal clarinet in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra at age twenty-one. The sounds that came out of that pit, from that instrument, were sometimes unbelievable. He went to Philadelphia in 2003. For a minute or two around 2012, it seemed that Morales would come to the New York Philharmonic. But he stayed in Philadelphia.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts Ricardo Morales and the Philadelphia Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. Photo: © 2022 Steve J. Sherman.

Clarinetists play the Mozart concerto over and over, the way trumpeters do the Haydn concerto, or cellists do the Dvořák concerto. In an interview, I once asked a well-known cellist whether he ever tired of playing the Dvořák. He looked offended, almost scandalized. That was a public interview—an interview in front of an audience. I wonder what he would have said in private.

One danger of playing one concerto, over and over, is that you can get too cute with it—too "personal" with it—in part to relieve your own boredom. I think that Rostropovich started to do this with the Dvořák, toward the end of his peerless career. Morales did not do it with the Mozart. He played a Mozart concerto that was utterly worthy of him—Morales, I mean, but worthy of Mozart, too.

The Philadelphians' concert ended with Mahler's Symphony No. 4. The orchestra did some beautiful playing—how could it not?—and Nézet-Séguin did some very good conducting. But his

approach was not for me: in pauses, in rubato, in pacing. I believe he was guilty of some over-luxuriating. Key moments were overemphasized. "You don't have to make a federal case out of it," James Levine used to say.

The soloist in the final movement was Pretty Yende, the soprano from South Africa. Wonderful singer. On this night, however, she was perfunctory and somewhat rough—not especially lyrical. And low notes were absent. Those hearing her for the first time did not hear the real Yende.

On New Year's Eve, the Metropolitan Opera did not do Die Fledermaus or The Merry Widow—the company put on Fedora, one of the grand operas of Umberto Giordano. He writes the "people's idea" of an opera: full of blood and guts and passion. Although Fedora is tragic—the title character dies in the end, and hers is not the only death—there is something New Year's Evey about this opera, with its high-society parties and glitter.

Fedora was once a vehicle for Mirella Freni at the Met. (And for Plácido Domingo at the same time.) In those days, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, the pianist, assumed the role of the pianist, Boleslao Lazinski. Talk about luxury casting. This year, the Met has a new production, by the man who is effectively its house director: Sir David McVicar. His *Fedora* is like his other productions: big, sensible, and fitting.

Piotr Beczała as Loris Ipanoff and Sonya Yoncheva in the title role of Giordano's Fedora. *Photo: Ken Howard / Met Opera.*

Fedora, the character, is a princess: regal, imperious—a diva. The role practically cries out for Sonya Yoncheva, the Bulgarian soprano, who indeed sang it on New Year's Eve. She was every inch a Fedora. There was a hint of a wobble high up in her voice, but otherwise Yoncheva was

secure and unimpeachable. In her soprano, there is a slight chill—a token of the East, perhaps. But Fedora is, after all, a Russian princess. Her count, Loris Ipanoff, was sung by Piotr Beczała, the Polish tenor. If he was not perfectly Italianate, he was Italianate enough, and sang with the intelligence and ardor you want.

Rosa Feola, the Italian soprano, sang the small but significant role of Countess Olga Sukarev. She was all charm and ability—plus *italianità*, i.e., Italianness. Lucas Meachem, an American baritone, was Giovanni de Siriex. He was smooth, baritonally smooth—but I would have liked a touch more sound from him.

A question: is *Fedora* a little corny? The answer is yes. But it also packs a serious punch, as it did this night, thanks to the singers, thanks to the production—and thanks not least to Marco Armiliato, the conductor leading it all. (The Met orchestra didn't hurt either. In fact, it helped a lot.)

In the men's room, at intermission, a man was humming—absent-mindedly, unconsciously—the hit aria of the opera, "Amor ti vieta." I think Umberto Giordano would have been pleased, and unsurprised.

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

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