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New York chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On recent performances at 92nd Street Y, Carnegie Hall & the Metropolitan Opera.

Gabriela Montero, the Venezuelan pianist, has a reputation for improvisation—a reputation well deserved. As a rule, she takes requests from the audience at the end of a recital. What tunes would you like me to improvise on? They call them out, and she goes to town. At the end of her recital at the 92nd Street Y this season, she did something different, but related: she improvised to a Charlie Chaplin film of 1917. We in the audience watched the movie on a big screen at the back of the stage. She, the pianist, watched it on a little screen placed on her music rack.

This was a throwback to the tradition of organists who improvised in silent-movie houses. My brilliant and versatile grandmother did this in her hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Gabriela Montero improvises to The Immigrant *by Charlie Chaplin. Photo: Joseph Sinnott.*

At the 92nd Street Y, the Chaplin film was *The Immigrant*, showing the Little Tramp steaming from the Old World to the New. Past the Statue of Liberty he and his fellow passengers go. On the ship, he has met a girl, whom he re-meets, quite by chance, in the big city, New York. A funny misadventure or two occurs. At the end of the film (twenty-two minutes long), he carries the object of his affection into a marriage-license office, as she is literally kicking and screaming. (This was a hundred years before the #MeToo movement.)

In her improvisation, Señora Montero was natural and clever, as usual. Her playing emphasized the wacky and whimsical, the off-kilter and tart. I think Chaplin would have appreciated it.

Elsewhere in her program she played music by three important Russian composers. The evening began with the *Sarcasms* of Prokofiev, all five. Seldom do you hear all five. (György Sándor, the late Hungarian, used to play them.) You occasionally hear No. 3 (Allegro precipitato) as an encore. Daniil Trifonov has done this. He also played all five *Sarcasms* in a Carnegie Hall recital last season. Montero continued her 92nd Street Y recital with more Prokofiev: his Sonata No. 2 in D minor. This is the one with that fabulous spiky, witchy scherzo. A pianist can use this scherzo as an encore, if he wants: Yefim Bronfman has. The first half of her recital, Montero closed with Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor. A glorious work, never more so than in its slow movement, aching with Romanticism.

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Gabriela Montero is an assured pianist, with plenty of technique and a no-nonsense approach to music—no-nonsense but sensitive at the same time.

To begin the second half of her recital, she played a sonata by Stravinsky—a work he wrote in 1924. This is almost never played. Last season, in Zankel Hall, Montero played a Shostakovich sonata: the Sonata No. 2 in B minor (1943). Here is another piano sonata by a big, big composer that is almost unknown.

The night after Ms. Montero's recital, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra played a concert in Carnegie Hall that included a suite from Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird*. I got to thinking. Stravinsky lived a long life, almost ninety years (1882 to 1971). He wrote a great deal of music, of a great variety. But his fame rests primarily on three works, does it not? Three ballets he wrote in rapid succession when he was in his late twenties and early thirties: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913). Without those three scores, would we hear that piano sonata, ever? An unanswerable question, probably.

The name "Luciano Berio" is a byword for modernism—but the late composer had ample respect, and even affinity, for the past. In 1975, he produced a strange and wonderful little work: an orchestral treatment of a piece for string quintet written by a fellow Italian who had lived

two hundred years before. The fellow Italian: Boccherini. His piece: Ritirata notturna di Madrid. One morning, a concert of the New York Philharmonic began with Berio's treatment.

On the podium was Esa-Pekka Salonen, the Finnish conductor (and composer). The *Ritirata* would seem an easy piece to conduct—you beat time. But Salonen did a lot more than beat time. He calibrated the piece very well, letting it swell and subside. He had the orchestra play with lilt and charm. Altogether, this was a nifty piece of conducting.

The concert continued with a piece of his own, i.e., Salonen's own. He took up a microphone to talk about the piece. He began by quoting something that a composition teacher of his had told him: "If you talk about a piece of yours at a concert, make sure the talk doesn't last longer than the piece." Salonen went on to say the following (and I paraphrase): "This new piece of mine is twenty-eight minutes long. So, as I talk, just settle back, relax, check your social media—whatever."

As regular readers know, I tend to dislike talking from the stage. But Salonen is so charming and intelligent, even I can't complain.

The composer's new piece is a clarinet concerto, or rather, a piece for clarinet and string orchestra called *kínēma*. It is in five movements or "scenes," as Salonen says. If I understood him correctly, he was asked to compose a film score. Much of that score was left on the cutting-room floor. So Salonen scooped up the discarded portions and put them into this clarinet piece.

As I recall, Ned Rorem wrote just one film score in his life—for *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971). This is a movie set in New York starring Al Pacino. In the end, the director decided to use no music at all. Rorem simply left his music unheard, though the score has been unearthed in recent years. Incidentally, as I sit typing, I can look out the window and see the exact place that used to be the "needle park" of the movie's title.

In addition to speaking from the stage, Esa-Pekka Salonen wrote a composer's note for our program booklet. The note contains some very interesting sentences. In *kínēma*, says Salonen, "there's a lot of music that could be characterized as 'beautiful,' in the old-fashioned sense of the word. On the surface it doesn't sound 'modern.'" Even the quotation marks he uses are interesting.

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I will give you an overall impression: *kínēma* is horizontal, lyrical, and dreamy. It imparts a kind of wash. The dreaminess is relieved, in one movement, or scene, by some flitting around. The work at large seemed a little long to me—but, as I always admit, many new pieces do (and old ones as well). A pleasant work, *kínēma* is. That sounds like a terrible put-down: "pleasant." Modern pieces are supposed to be "thorny" and "challenging"! But I don't regard pleasantness as a sin, and there is considerable intelligence behind *kínēma*. The work could well find a place in the clarinet-and-orchestra repertoire.

The soloist was Anthony McGill, the orchestra's own—by which I mean, he is the principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic. He played superbly. He was a singer on his instrument. He delivered long, even lines. Critically, he did not show off. The piece does not show off—it has too much dignity for that—and neither must the soloist.

After intermission came a Beethoven symphony: No. 7 in A major. I was looking forward to it. I knew I could count on Salonen to be brisk, bracing, and incisive. Those are good things to be, in this symphony. And Salonen was as expected. But he never rushed or otherwise slighted the music. I had never heard the trio of the scherzo so broad. From beginning to end, the symphony was dance-like and invigorating—thrilling, actually. Esa-Pekka Salonen is not known as a Beethoven conductor. He is better known for Janáček and similar composers. I tell you frankly—because that's my job, my responsibility—that I have seldom heard a Beethoven symphony conducted so well.

The audience called back Salonen again and again. A matinée audience is generally a little sleepy. There are lots of canes, walkers, and wheelchairs in the hall. But the audience went nuts for this Beethoven—applauding longer than most New York audiences do for anything.

I always admired Maestro Salonen. But I found him a little cold, hard, and tight. As his career progressed, he relaxed his fist a little, or so I perceived. In the last ten years or so, I believe he has become a great conductor, no less. I do not use that word—the one that starts with "g"—lightly.

It is a familiar program: the last three piano sonatas of Beethoven. Pianists like to play this program—especially those who have reached the status of senior statesman. Conductors like to conduct a program of the last three symphonies of Mozart. Pianists have their equivalent in the Beethoven sonatas. They are great sonatas, too, these last three—masterpieces all. Curiously, none of them has a nickname, and nicknames abound among the Beethoven sonatas: the "Pastoral," the "Pathétique," the "Tempest," the "Appassionata," etc.

Mitsuko Uchida played the last three sonatas in Carnegie Hall. I should point out that she is Dame Mitsuko now, and has been for almost fifteen years. She played the music with obvious respect, affection, and skill. You and I might quarrel with this movement or that, this choice or that. But Uchida was having her say, with authority. There is a tradition of not playing an encore after the last sonata (No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111). It is a good tradition, sometimes broken. Op. 111 should be a last word, really. And Dame Mitsuko let it be. The audience applauded long and heartily, but the pianist had backstage personnel turn the house lights on, and she bade a fond adieu.

Mitsuko Uchida & the Mahler Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, March 9, 2023. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography, Inc.

Between the first and second sonatas—No. 30 in E major, Op. 109, and No. 31 in A flat, Op. 110—Uchida did not rise from the bench as the audience applauded. Neither did she acknowledge the applause. I thought this was misguided and borderline rude. Later, I noticed a note in the program: "At the artist's request, please refrain from applauding between the two works on the first half of the program." The wisdom or legitimacy of the request aside—how many would have noticed the note?

Let me record too that, after all these years, Dame Mitsuko still has the deepest bow in all of music. She is a model of flexibility. Young gymnasts might be in awe.

As the lights dimmed at the Metropolitan Opera, the young man sitting beside me said to his companion, "Oh, my God. I'm so excited." He, and we, were about to see and hear Lohengrin, Wagner's opera. That is exciting indeed. The opera was conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's music director. He conducted Lohengrin with understanding and heart—lots of each. He made me admire Lohengrin more than I ever had (high praise).

The Met orchestra played royally. It sounded like a real Wagner orchestra. *Lohengrin* can sometimes seem a woodwind piece, and the Met's woodwinds shone. Earlier, I said that the New York Philharmonic's Anthony McGill (formerly of the Met) had sounded like a singer on his clarinet. The Met's woodwinds were singers as well, right along with the men and women onstage. The brass were gratifyingly unblaring: warm and rich. A chorus, too, plays a crucial part in *Lohengrin*. The Met's was a great, breathing organism.

In the title role was Piotr Beczała, the Polish tenor, going the Domingo route. What I mean is, this veteran lyric tenor is moving into the more lyrical Wagner roles, such as Lohengrin. On the Met stage, Beczała was a lyric *Heldentenor*, if I may. He sang in long, gleaming lines. He had plenty of volume and did not strain. He was the picture of youthful (or near-youthful) heroism. Partnering him as Elsa was Tamara Wilson, an American soprano, who was making only her second appearance at the Met: she had sung Aida in 2014. What an Elsa she made. She demonstrated excellent technical control, not least in soft passages. She made a major contribution to the dream-like atmosphere of the piece overall.

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A scene from Act III of Wagner's Lohengrin. *Photo: Marty Sohl / Met Opera.*

Ortrud is the Iago of *Lohengrin*, so to speak—the snake that destroys harmony. Christine Goerke played the role with relish and savvy. Ortrud's partner in crime is Telramund, who was portrayed by Evgeny Nikitin. He sang sturdily. And our king, Heinrich? He was Günther Groissböck, the Austrian bass. Companies keep casting him, as one can understand: he is smart, talented, handsome—utterly competent. But they keep casting him in roles a size, or half a size, too big for him, as Heinrich is, in my judgment. Brian Mulligan, an American bass-baritone, was the Herald, and he sang beautifully.

The Met was premiering a new production, that of François Girard, who, like Nézet-Séguin, is a Quebecker. His production is abstract. Audience members may feel that they are in a planetarium,

with celestial objects whizzing by. There is a "Wagner world" that dwells between the pagan and the Christian. The Girard production expresses this world.

About those celestial objects: they whiz by during the prelude. In a conversation with me last summer, Maestro Riccardo Muti said that many opera overtures and preludes ought to be let alone. That is, there should be none of the visual while the orchestra plays the opening piece. The music should be undistracted from. I agree.

A few days after *Lohengrin*, I talked with a friend of mine, a civic leader in New York. He told me that he first saw *Lohengrin* in the 1939–40 season, when his father took him to the Met. Lohengrin and Elsa were Melchior and Flagstad. F. A. O. Schwarz, the toymaker, was selling a Lohengrin outfit: helmet, sword, and shield.

The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra has a tradition of playing a three-concert stand at Carnegie Hall in February or March. This year, the vpo was led by Christian Thielemann, the German conductor. Their first concert offered two works: Verklärte Nacht (Schoenberg) and An Alpine Symphony (Strauss). Both of these works are sonic baths. And nothing can beat the combination of the Vienna Phil. and Carnegie Hall when it comes to giving you a sonic bath. The entire evening was a treat to the ear, almost indecent.

Christian Thielemann conducts the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, March 3, 2023. Photo: © Jennifer Taylor.

As a rule, conductors are confident, and practically no one is more confident than Thielemann. He seems never to be unsure. This must be a help to an orchestra. If a leader is good for anything, it's leading. Thielemann conducted both the Schoenberg and the Strauss without a score. Of his

mastery of the material, there was no question. He was businesslike in his conducting, but that is not to say unfeeling. He moved things along, without much lingering and with no waywardness. This was welcome. In his rigor or discipline—a rigor or discipline in the service of a right musicality—he reminded me of the late James Levine. What either would think of the comparison, I don't know.

Sitting in the concertmaster's chair was Rainer Honeck, the brother of Manfred, that superb conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (who used to play the viola in the vpo). In his solo contributions, Rainer was deft and sweet. An exceptional family, those Honecks.

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

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