

The New Criterion

Dispatch February 09, 2021 12:17 pm

Feeling good

by Jay Nordlinger

You may not be able to attend concerts or opera performances, but you can always watch livestreams—a blessed substitute (and I think the word “blessed” is more important there than “substitute”).

One of many livestreams is a concert by the orchestra of the Teatro dell’Opera in Rome: [here](#). The orchestra is directed by the maestro of the place, Daniele Gatti, the Italian born in 1961. (Gatti was born in Milan, not Rome, but the Romans seem a forgiving sort.)

The house—the beautiful house—is empty, which is a little creepy. But the orchestra stands all the same, when Gatti enters. I think this is nice—a maintenance of tradition, a clinging to normality. (Plus, people are looking, online.) The conductor and his players wear masks—all of them do, except for wind players.

Their program is in three parts: Bach, Ravel, and Stravinsky. The Bach is the Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B minor, bwv 1067. Not often do you hear Bach on an orchestral program. Even less do you hear it from an Italian opera orchestra. I wonder whether the players appreciated the opportunity—I wager they did.

The Orchestral Suite in B minor resembles a flute concerto, for the flute is the solo instrument, throughout. On hand to do the soloing is one of the Rome orchestra’s own: Matteo Evangelisti, born in Rome in 1985. When I saw his name, I thought, “He should be a tenor in an oratorio.” (Forgive my little joke.)

Maestro Gatti conducts the suite batonless. Many conductors like to go without a baton when they conduct Bach or other Baroque music. (Some conductors, of course, like to go without a baton all the time, à la Karajan, Masur, et al.) In the Bach, the orchestra’s playing is a little perfunctory. You hear some mechanical sawing in the strings. The playing is also a little loose. But that it is adequate cannot be doubted.

And Signor Evangelisti? A good player. Free, skillful, and sensible.

It's not often that I presume to speak for the whole world—I can barely speak for myself—but I would like to do so now: In listening to the Orchestral Suite in B minor, I think we all wait for the Badinerie, the closing movement. This is one of the most beloved, and most delicious, pieces in the entire Baroque repertory. I have heard it as a cellphone ring. I always think Bach would be delighted (and that he should be paid royalties).

The first true encore I ever heard, I think, involved the Badinerie. “True encore”? Originally, “encore” meant the same thing again—not something else, in addition. A musician repeated a movement, a song, whatever. Somewhere, many years ago, I heard the Badinerie played again, after the conclusion of the B-minor suite. Thrilling.

Evangelisti, Gatti, and their friends do not play it again. Unreasonably, I felt cheated.

The Ravel on this program is *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Excuse me if I skip over it to make some comments on the final piece: Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*.

This is a ballet, which Stravinsky penned in 1920. He based it on ancient Italian music: the music of Pergolesi. Or so he thought. Take “Se tu m'ami,” that fetching little aria. Apparently, it was written by Alessandro Parisotti (1853–1913), who passed it off as Pergolesi.

Listen, if I had written something so fine, I would have been loath to give *anyone* else the credit, for whatever purpose.

(Readers may recall that Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was known to begin a recital with “Se tu m'ami.” To hear her sing it in 1957, with Gerald Moore at the piano, go [here](#).)

Stravinsky got good mileage out of *Pulcinella*. He fashioned a suite for violin and piano, and also for cello and piano. In these forms, the music is known as *Suite italienne*. From orchestras too, we usually hear a suite, rather than the full *Pulcinella*.

Gatti and the Rome orchestra give us the opportunity to hear the full monty—singers and all. Stravinsky called for three of them. In this livestream, we hear Antonio Poli, an Italian tenor; Vasilisa Berzhanskaya, a Russian mezzo-soprano; and Alex Esposito, an Italian bass-baritone. (Interesting, that “Alex,” English style.) Each of them contributes beauty of sound and musical feeling.

Matteo Evangelisti is back in the orchestra (rather than standing in front of it), contributing much the same.

Speaking of first-desk players, Daniele Gatti has many of them stand, after *Pulcinella*, just as he would with an applauding audience. Again, the maintenance of tradition, the clinging to normality.

Pulcinella is feel-good music, I think, in addition to expertly crafted music. It makes you feel good. It is a shot—or multiple shots—of musical medicine. And there is nothing wrong with feeling

good, maybe especially now.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

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