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Mrs. and Mr.

by Jay Nordlinger



Yusif Eyvazov and Anna Netrebko at the Salzburg Festival.

Photo courtesy of Salzburg Festival / Marco Borrelli

On Sunday afternoon, the Salzburg Festival staged *Manon Lescaut*, the Puccini opera. I say “staged”: it was a concert performance. And a performance all the same, presented by the festival.

The two stars were husband and wife: Anna Netrebko, soprano, and Yusif Eyvazov, tenor. Netrebko is probably the biggest opera star in the world, along with Plácido Domingo. Eyvazov is known as Netrebko’s husband, to the extent he is known. That’s the way it is.

In the pit, or on the podium, was Marco Armiliato, that experienced, much-traveled conductor. Some nights, he sounds like a journeyman. Other nights, he conducts like a champ. On this night—afternoon, rather—he was excellent.

There are at least two beneficial things about a concert performance: (1) people like me can’t complain about the production (because there isn’t one), and (2) you can concentrate on the music a little more.

The day after the performance, a fellow critic and I talked about Puccini. Many people are taught to look down on him. But the truth is: what a genius, in a hundred different respects.

Yusif Eyvazov is in an impossible position: he is the husband of a supreme opera singer, and people will say, “Not nearly as good as she is.” But marriage is full of challenges, right?

Des Grieux (Eyvazov’s character) sings two arias, right off the bat. The first, “Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde,” requires grace and lilt. On this occasion, it had next to none. The second aria, “Donna non vidi mai,” you can sort of belt. Eyvazov did.

Much of the time, he sang powerfully but roughly. His very high notes were impressive—and his most attractive. Along the way, he made up some of the words, but who’s listening, really?

I must ask a rude question: Would the Salzburg Festival have hired him as Des Grieux if he were not married to the soprano star? I don’t know. As I said, it is a rude question. And Yusif Eyvazov has much to offer, regardless.

Before getting to the star, I wish to mention one other singer: Armando Piña, a Mexican baritone portraying Lescaut. And I wish to make a tonsorial point, not a musical one. What hair. What opera hair. What bari-hair. That alone should take him far.

So, Netrebko. When she started to sing, she never sounded more Russian. She was as far away from Italianate as it’s possible to be. I thought, “How can she manage the part, sounding like that? This is Puccini, right?” But the ear adjusts.

Her aria “In quelle trine morbide” was sloppy. She approached the first note from below. She continued to slop. A pop singer might have blushed. Netrebko executed an impressive diminuendo on a high B flat. But, at the end of her final note, she faltered.

Honestly, she ought to sing with more discipline, even if her talent and charisma allow her to get away with murder.

As the opera wore on, however, she grew in command. She got a handle on herself. And she is, of course, a stage animal, a soprano who fell prostrate in the love duet, even if this *was* a concert performance.

She expressed Manon’s cruelty (toward her benefactor). She expressed the manipulativeness, too. In Act II, if I may put it this way, she was 100 percent girl.

A million times, I have written, “Netrebko was far from pure—she sharpened, she missed, she overindulged—but her immense talent—vocal, musical, and theatrical—carried the day.” And so it was on Sunday.

And the next day, all over town, they said, “Netrebko, Netrebko, Netrebko.”

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

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