

# The New Criterion

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## Music off the beaten track

by Jay Nordlinger

From Bridge Records comes an album called *Piano Protagonists: Music for Piano and Orchestra*. (I still call them “albums,” although that term is perhaps obsolete. It is certainly musty.) The protagonists, as far as I can tell, are three.

There is Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Korngold? The composer of that violin concerto, the opera *Die tote Stadt*, and all those movie scores? A piano man?

There is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov—you’re kidding, right? The composer of *Scheherazade*, *Capriccio espagnol*, and other lasting orchestral works?

Finally, there is Frédéric François Chopin. Now we’re talkin’. *There* was a “piano protagonist” if there ever was one.

The contents of this album are Korngold’s Piano Concerto in C-sharp for left hand, Op. 17; Rimsky-Korsakov’s Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor, Op. 30; and Chopin’s Variations on “Là ci darem la mano,” Op. 2.

Conducting all this is Leon Botstein, who has made a career of programming and promoting rarities. The Chopin piece is not one, but the other two are. Botstein’s orchestra—in a more literal sense than usual, for he founded this one, in 2015—is The Orchestra Now, known by the acronym “t?n.” The line over that O is important, because otherwise you might say “ton,” as in “Thanks a.” “Tōn,” or “tone,” is more musical.

According to PR materials, the orchestra “is a group of seventy-two vibrant young musicians from fourteen different countries across the globe.” They “share a mission to make orchestral music relevant to twenty-first-century audiences.”

Ah, “relevant”—the great buzzword of our time. The great nonsense word of our time. Music is neither “relevant” nor “irrelevant.” It exists, like dance, humor, and sports. It always has, and always will. It will always be available for those who want it. And those who don’t—are welcome to pursue their thing, whatever it is.

Our fourth piano protagonist—the soloist in the works on this album—is Orion Weiss, an American about forty.

Korngold wrote his left-hand concerto on commission from Paul Wittgenstein, the great commissioner of such concertos: by Ravel, Prokofiev, and a who's who of other composers. Wittgenstein was a pianist who lost his right arm in World War I. He was a brother of the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Korngold's concerto is Korngoldian, in a word. It is sweeping, imaginative, and beautiful. Also, it's interesting. "Interesting" may seem a weak word, but I regard it as quite strong. Does a work engage your interest? Does it hold your attention? That is a high bar, in my estimation.

Again, Korngold's concerto is in C sharp; Rimsky-Korsakov's is in C-sharp minor. Those are unusual keys for concertos. I think of the Scriabin Piano Concerto, which New Yorkers had a chance to hear at the end of 2019, when Daniil Trifonov played it with the New York Philharmonic, under Jaap van Zweden. That concerto is in F-sharp minor.

Rimsky-Korsakov undertook to write something Lisztian. Liszt's two piano concertos were models for his own. Indeed, he dedicated his concerto to Liszt—who was in his seventies, near the end of his life. (Rimsky-Korsakov was in his late thirties.)

Lisztian or not, the Rimsky-Korsakov work is strongly Russian. It is also freely Romantic. If the composer's reputation rested on his piano concerto, we probably wouldn't know his name. But I must say, the final section is a jolly, spirited thing.

According to some, the concerto is seldom programmed because of its brevity—it's just under fifteen minutes or so. It does not fit neatly into a conventional orchestra program. But there ought to be room for brief pieces, if they merit hearing (which surely any Rimsky-Korsakov work does, masterpiece or not).

Chopin's "Là ci darem la mano" Variations are pretty brief too—about seventeen minutes in the Weiss/Botstein recording. Probably, most pianists and conductors would rather play one of Chopin's two concertos (in E minor and F minor). But the variations should not be overlooked—they are ingenious and stirring.

Chopin wrote them when he was seventeen. It is the piece that caused Robert Schumann to say of him, "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius." Quite so.

I did a little mathematical exercise. Chopin wrote these variations in 1827. And let me remind you that the tune—"Là ci darem la mano"—comes from *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's opera. Which premiered in 1787. So, Chopin was forty years away from the birth of the tune.

Today, we are forty years away from 1981—which doesn't seem so long ago. At least to some of us.

Here at the end, I should say something about the performers: Weiss/Botstein/t?n. Let me say merely that you are in good hands. The point of the album, I should think, is to hear the music. I am very glad that I did.

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