

# The New Criterion

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## Roars, earned

*by Jay Nordlinger*

On Thursday night, the New York Philharmonic gave a very good concert—an exceptionally good concert. On the program were two composers: Britten and Shostakovich. Some people think these are the last two great composers we have had. (Britten died in 1976, Shostakovich the year before.)

Our conductor was Jaap van Zweden, the new music director of the Phil. And the soloist was Simone Lamsma, the conductor's fellow Dutchman—Dutchwoman?—born in 1985. She is tall, as you might expect, coming from the country that has the tallest people in the world. (Yes, that includes East Africans.)

What was Lamsma the soloist for? The Britten Violin Concerto, composed in the late 1930s and revised on several occasions later. I will get to the soloist in a moment, but first, the conductor.

Van Zweden was extraordinary in this concerto. Rather, he was how he usually is. He was ever alert, allowing no laziness, or even casualness. With him, music is serious business (though not necessarily grim). The Britten concerto is a peculiar piece. Van Zweden acknowledged this peculiarity without indulging it, if you know what I mean. He kept an order about the piece. And the way he built the sound and the emotion after the cadenza was masterly.

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Simone Lamsma had all the tools—technical, mental, etc. She knew her own mind and was confident in everything she did. She was not a stranger to the piece—she had taken it within herself. Her sound was excellent and adaptable. That is, she applied different sounds to different moments, meeting different musical needs. Sometimes she was like a light lyric soprano with a penetrating voice—think Kathleen Battle. Battle could drive a laser beam through your head, and so can Lamsma. The Britten concerto has many moods, and Lamsma reflected them all: now she was puckish, now she was biting. She brought due passion. This is not one of those cool Britten pieces, but a fairly hot one, I would say.

I'll confess to you that I have never much liked this concerto. But I certainly did from these forces: Lamsma, Van Zweden, and the Phil. I have never heard the piece better represented. I wish the performance had been recorded.

Lamsma played an encore, and she did something remarkable before she began: she spoke to the audience clearly and distinctly. No one ever does that. They all mumble thoughtlessly, basically. Also, she waited for the murmuring—the reaction—to die down before she started. No one ever does that either. Lamsma is obviously a higher kind of professional.

What she played was the last movement of a Hindemith solo-violin sonata. (I'm sorry, I can't remember which one.) She played like a mad virtuoso. One of the violists in the orchestra was looking at her the whole time as if to say, "What the . . . ?" It was that impressive. I'll tell you this, though: I would not have asked for an encore after the Britten. I would have asked for that performance to linger into intermission. I wanted to live in that music—the Britten—a little longer.

But that is a minor complaint. It's a little like complaining about one more course in a superb, satisfying meal.

All right, what about Shostakovich? He was represented by his Symphony No. 7, the "Leningrad." This piece is right up Jaap van Zweden's alley. It requires discipline, drive, exactitude, concentration. The first notes were not so much played as carved. The music was martial, Soviet. All through, the symphony had its momentum. Tension was maintained. Fear was present, too.

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The woodwinds have a lot to do—a *lot* to do—in this symphony, and the Philharmonic's did it well. The unison playing in the strings was very good. What the strings could not quite do, when necessary, was summon warmth. Perhaps

Van Zweden—a notable violinist himself—could work on this during his tenure at the Phil.

Not long ago, I said that Van Zweden had exhibited "strategic patience" in a Bruckner symphony, I believe. (This is a term I borrowed from foreign policy.) He showed it once more in the "Leningrad." But may I say that, when I was a youth, I found the symphony too long and that I still do?

The ending is a typical Shostakovich, a truly Soviet, ending: giving a feeling of forced happiness, or sort-of triumph, or at any rate a determination to press on or to make the best of things. However we might describe this feeling, Van Zweden and his orchestra captured it.

Look, the Phil. has a great conductor, and these are "the good old days." Whether people will appreciate this is another question. The audience on Thursday night certainly appreciated the performance of the "Leningrad," which was exciting as hell. They roared and roared.

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

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