

# The New Criterion

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## Three amigas

by Jay Nordlinger

“Three Divas,” is what the Metropolitan Opera calls its latest livestreamed concert, purchasable [here](#). And who are they? Three Americans: the sopranos Nadine Sierra and Ailyn Pérez, and the mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard. They are accompanied by Vlad Iftinca, Romanian born. He may have the coolest name of any accompanist outside J. J. Penna.

Their program is one of opera arias, duets, etc., and the final portion is devoted to songs in Spanish. All three singers are of “Latin American heritage,” as Isabel Leonard says in remarks to the audience, i.e., remarks to the camera. “Isabel,” sure. But “Leonard”? Yes, her maternal roots are Argentinian.

The venue of this concert is a pretty classy one: the Royal Opera of Versailles—France, not Kentucky.

Speaking of France, Nadine Sierra opens the program with “Je veux vivre,” a.k.a. Juliet’s Waltz, from Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*. She sings it with accuracy, clarity, and girlish enthusiasm. At the piano, Iftinca replicates that enthusiasm, especially in his closing bars.

Then Leonard comes on to sing “Voi che sapete,” from Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*. I often described Frederica von Stade’s voice as “wet.” You know it when you hear it. Her voice could be absolutely sopping, and marvelously so. Leonard’s voice, too, is wet in this aria—lush, juicy, glistening. At the end, Iftinca contributes some stylish trilling.

In 1981, there was a French movie called *Diva*. It starred an American soprano, Wilhelmenia Fernandez, who sang an aria from the opera *La Wally* (1892), by Alfredo Catalani. It made the aria famous all over the world. Other sopranos had sung it—Victoria de los Angeles, outstandingly—but Fernandez and *Diva* put it on the map. That aria is “Ebben? Ne andrò lontana.”

From Versailles, Ailyn Pérez does the honors, singing with heart and soul.

Incidentally, I have now watched livestreamed, audience-less concerts for a year and two months. I am mainly used to no applause at the end of big arias—but not entirely. The silence still seems to

me awkward.

Bel canto has a moment onstage when Pérez and Sierra sing “Mira, o Norma,” followed by its cabaletta showstopper, “Sì, fino all’ore estreme” (from Bellini’s *Norma*). In my judgment, the cavatina is draggy and the cabaletta could be spryer. Also, Pérez sometimes fights the flats in this concert. But the Bellini is competently brought off.

Have you ever heard the Trio from *Der Rosenkavalier* (Strauss) accompanied by a piano? I had not. You have an opportunity—if that’s the word—in this concert. (I mean no offense to Mr. Iftinca. He, too, would prefer the music with orchestra.) Once more, the performance is competent.

Before the Spanish-language music, we have some Spanish-inflected music—in the form of the Séguidille from *Carmen* (Bizet). Isabel Leonard sings it absolutely deliciously. Then she tackles the “Canzonetta spagnuola,” that amazing Spanish song by Rossini. The key to this song is pacing—building—plus voice (plus ornamentation). Leonard delivers in every category.

“Estrellita” is a famous song by the Mexican composer Manuel Ponce. But, you know? I think I’ve heard it more on the violin—in Jascha Heifetz’s arrangement—than I have from the throats of singers. It is a cherished violin encore. In any event, it *is* a song, and it is sung for the Met by Ailyn Pérez—who does an excellent and touching job with it.

The most famous Mexican songs are “Bésame mucho” (Consuelo Velázquez) and “Cielito lindo” (Quirino Mendoza y Cortés). Our “three divas” end their concert with these songs, treating them as trios—all three sing each song together.

Overall, this is a concert of good feelings. And much elegance and distinction.

Needless to say, the concert is not a competition, and it is not a race. It is a warm presentation of people who call themselves “amigas.” Still, the standard that Isabel Leonard sets, whenever and whatever she sings, is remarkable.

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