Hilary & friends
by Jay Nordlinger

Last Friday night, the Philadelphia Orchestra played in its home away from home, Carnegie Hall. On the podium was its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, soon to lead the Metropolitan Opera as well. Serving as soloist was one of the best musicians in the world (no less).

The concert began with a suite by Thomas Adès, laying out his 1995 opera, Powder Her Face, in eight movements. It has been a big season for Adès in New York. His latest opera, The Exterminating Angel, was staged at the Met.

If you know Powder Her Face, the suite must tell the story. What if you don’t know the opera? Then the suite is just music—perhaps suggestive of a story, perhaps not. In any case, the music is sarcastic, blithe, and bawdy. Even raunchy. It has touches of Shostakovich, and a feeling of the Weimar Republic, I believe. It is full of dance.

The suite lasts a half-hour, and is a bit long, I found. I thought the suite suffered from a little monotony. Regardless, it reflects a love of music, high and low. It also provides juicy opportunities for orchestral players, which the Philadelphians took nice advantage of.

We are going into Leonard Bernstein’s centennial year—he was born in 1918—and so are hearing a lot of his music. That includes his violin concerto, which he called “Serenade (after Plato’s Symposium).” Joshua Bell played it with the New York Philharmonic in late October. Another American violinist, Hilary Hahn, played it with the Philadelphians on Friday night.

She did not put a foot wrong (as they like to say of Queen Elizabeth II). She was at the top of her game, which is a formidable game, to say the least. She was accurate, understanding, and spirited. She was perfectly comfortable with her instrument, the music, and herself. She did everything required, then added any number of intangibles. Bernstein might have wept with gratitude.

For an encore, she played Bach’s E-major Gigue, spiffily. I don’t know about weeping, but Bach would have smiled.

The concert ended with a symphony, the First of Sibelius, in E minor. That symphony begins with an extended clarinet solo—and the Philadelphia Orchestra has Ricardo Morales on hand to play it.
What a weapon, Morales is. He is like Stefan Dohr, the principal French horn of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra: a weapon that makes a top orchestra even better.

Nézet-Séguin conducted a fine performance of the Sibelius First, but that won’t prevent me from picking. The first movement could have used more contrast in dynamics. An overall loudness prevailed. In the second movement, some slower passages were stagnant, unmoving. The music should not stop.

The third movement is the Scherzo, and it was far too polite, for my taste. I like it more biting, more jolting. It could have been crisper, too—and less episodic.

But let me pause in my carping to praise the Philadelphia brass, which, though less famous than the Philadelphia strings, is worth shouting about. They can play loud—real loud—without blaring.

The beginning of the Finale ought to be anguished, in my judgment, even savage, if you like. Again, it was polite, and pretty. To jump to the very end, the pizzicatos were a mess—an amateur mess. How can a top orchestra, playing in its country’s most famous concert hall, perform so blunderingly?

But I repeat: it was a fine performance, and those in attendance were lucky to hear it, and this concert at large. I thought we should have an encore, and I thought it should be Valse triste (that brief, ghostly, wondrous Sibelius hit). But the applause was not enthusiastic or sustained enough.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at National Review.

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