

# The New Criterion

## Music

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### New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the San Francisco Symphony at Carnegie Hall, Daniel Gaisford at Bargemusic, the Berlin Philharmonic's Salzburg Easter Festival, Dmitri Hvorostovsky at Carnegie Hall, Julian Bliss at the Walter Reade Theater, and David Shifrin at the Rose Theater.

The San Francisco Symphony is one of America's better bands, led since 1995 by Michael Tilson Thomas. It seems like only yesterday he was just starting out, whippet-thin, leading the Young People's Concerts of the New York Philharmonic. He is still whippet-thin and youthful. He looks exactly the same, only his hair is gray and he is moving into his mid-sixties. That happens.

Tilson Thomas brought the SFS to Carnegie Hall for two concerts, each with a soloist. The soloist in the first concert was Gil Shaham, the Israeli-American violinist; the soloist in the second was Deborah Voigt, the American soprano. Shaham's piece was off the beaten path: the Violin Concerto of William Schuman, composed in 1947 (revised twelve years later). Schuman used to be a big deal in American musical life, president of the Juilliard School, president of Lincoln Center—and, of course, a prolific composer. His *New England Triptych* was an orchestral staple. It seems to have disappeared. As for the Violin Concerto, it may not be a masterpiece, but it is a fine and arresting work, and its absence from the repertoire is wrong.

At some point, Schuman and his confreres—Vincent Persichetti, Peter Mennin, Walter Piston, et al.—lost out. These were the so-called neo-Romantics, and they were shoved aside by Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez, and the twelve-tone hardliners. What a pity. Shouldn't there be room for all—all who are worthy, that is (and even for some who are not)?

Gil Shaham has done a service in showcasing neglected repertoire. Not long after his appearance with the San Francisco Symphony, he played a recital in the Rose Theater (part of Lincoln Center). His program included Walton's Sonata for Violin and Piano and Rodrigo's *Sonata pimpante*. It was a pleasure to hear these works—in fact, to become acquainted, or reacquainted, with them. Their presence somehow made the Sarasate chestnuts with which Shaham ended his recital all the more enjoyable.

For her part, Deborah Voigt sang Strauss and Barber with the SFS. Two days earlier, she had sung her first Met Isolde—in other words, her first Isolde at the Metropolitan Opera, or, indeed, in America. It did not go well, I'm sorry to report. Voigt was in poor voice, suffering from harshness and stridency, and suffering from flatness (of pitch, not of spirit).

Neither did her *Four Last Songs*, with the San Franciscans, go well—though they went better than that Isolde had. Bear in mind that Voigt is one of the great Straussians of our time. Anyone who heard her Chrysothemis, or Empress, or Ariadne will never forget it—not to mention a number of

Strauss songs. But the four “last” ones were blunt, obvious, and utterly untransporting. This was the most earthbound performance of these immortal songs I have ever heard. It was not worthy of Deborah Voigt, and I will happily forget it.

What cannot be forgotten is the account she gave of Barber’s *Andromache’s Farewell*, eight years ago, with Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic. That was Voigt at her most Voigt-like: beautifully powerful, powerfully beautiful. I can remember walls of perfect, glorious sound coming up the aisles and through the air at me. She sang this same piece with Tilson Thomas and the SFS. She showed evidence of the old Voigt, which was gratifying, even if she was not completely in the previous form. It let the worried know: She can still sing.

And, by the way, why did Barber escape the fate of Schuman, Piston, and the other mid-century American “neo-Romantics”? Maybe he was simply too good—and too beloved by the public—to shove aside.

On this same Carnegie Hall concert, Tilson Thomas programmed two symphonies: the Seventh of Sibelius and the Ninth of Shostakovich. The Seventh was Sibelius’s last symphony, and one of his last works. It was composed in 1924—and Sibelius lived on, you may remember, until 1957. He did not compose for the last thirty years, and, by reports, he did not even like to talk about music. Rossini quit early because he had made piles of money and simply wanted to retire; in Sibelius’s case, the stream seems to have dried up. And, in my judgment, the Seventh is not a good Sibelius symphony—plenty of others disagree. He appears to quote himself a lot, and at times you seem to be listening to the Symphony No. 3. Perhaps I think that because the two works are in the same key ( C).

Regardless, Tilson Thomas and the SFS did well by the Seventh. Their performance was “organic”—to use a bit of a cliché—which is vitally important in this work, as in most Sibelius. Every page was part of a whole. The orchestra was not always perfectly together, but this was incidental.

As for Shostakovich’s Ninth, it is a very good symphony. It is not a mighty symphony, however, like certain other Nines we could name. This is Shostakovich’s Classical symphony, or Mozart symphony: a lovely, skillful hearkening back to an earlier form. In playing it, the San Franciscans were alert, on their toes. Tilson Thomas exercised shrewd control over dynamics, which is key in this symphony. And I’d forgotten what a showpiece for orchestra it is: almost like Bartók’s *Concerto for Orchestra*. Virtually everyone gets a turn, and the SFS principals (and others) delivered.

Somewhat disappointing was the evening’s encore: Tchaikovsky’s delightful, seldom-heard *Marche miniature*. This is a little toy wonder. From Tilson Thomas & Co., it was heavy and sloppy. But the conductor did something charming: Before beginning the piece, he asked the audience to go “Ah!” at the end. (It fits.) And they did. Given the character of the performance, however, they might have said, “Oy, vey!”

Michael Hersch is an extraordinary composer, and he has barely gotten started. He is in his mid-thirties and brims with ideas. A native Virginian, he now lives in Philadelphia, and teaches nearby: at Baltimore’s Peabody Conservatory. He has won a slew of awards, including a Guggenheim, the Rome Prize, and the Berlin Prize. Recently, his piano work *The Vanishing Pavilions* came out on disc. This is a visionary, sometimes apocalyptic, barely fathomable work lasting almost two and a half hours. The pianist on the recording? Michael Hersch, a considerable virtuoso.

He has written two sonatas for unaccompanied cello—both long, both visionary—and the second of them was heard on the Barge. What barge? The one at the end of the Brooklyn Bridge—Brooklyn side—where concerts take place. The Sonata No. 2 was composed in 2001, and is in seven

movements. It takes about forty minutes to play. The work is dark, demanding, world-encompassing. It sometimes seems on a quest, searching for answers. There is anger, and rancor, and even what may be construed as black humor. One portion of the fifth movement is marked “with a sense of terror throughout.” In another section, the music seems primordial, reaching back into antiquity. And all of this is uncontrived, occurring naturally (“organically,” to return to that cliché).

Words are always poor in describing music, and they seem especially so in describing Hersch’s. This may seem like excuse-making, on a writer’s part. But there you have it.

In Daniel Gaisford, Hersch has found an ideal interpreter—an ideal exponent. Gaisford is an American cellist a few years older than Hersch, and not well-known. Why this is so is a mystery—and it teaches us something about the music business. When I first heard Gaisford in Philadelphia, about a year ago, I was stunned: How could there be so good a cellist I had never heard, or even heard of? Evidently, not every master is on the covers of magazines, or the covers of CDs; some have unorthodox careers. Gaisford has a formidable technique and a formidable mind. He can make a hundred sounds: fat, thin, spiky, lyrical, rich, sickly, piercing, warm. And Hersch’s sonatas call for a great many of them.

On the Barge, Gaisford played with a grave mien throughout. He gave the impression that he was not merely performing a sonata, but doing something supremely important.

Leave New York, for a moment, to go to Salzburg: to the Salzburg Easter Festival, where the Berlin Philharmonic reigns. One evening was dedicated to Haydn’s *Creation*, that genius oratorio. And doing the conducting was Sir Simon Rattle, the Berliners’ music director. Rattle was respectable, for he is never less. But he seemed sadly under the influence of the “period” movement. Haydn’s music was often too bouncy, too fast, and too ungenerous, tonally. There might have been more savoring, more nobility, more majesty. More heft. No one is asking for nineteenth-century weight. But this is the Berlin Philharmonic, after all! And think of the middle way charted by conductors Colin Davis and Neville Marriner, in particular. There is a choice between grandiosity and gruel.

It must be said, however, that the final chorus was substantial and uplifting—that it was right. And the Berlin Radio Chorus performed admirably throughout. They were elegant in Haydn’s shouts of joy. And they blended with the orchestra, symphonically.

*The Creation* calls for three solo singers—a soprano, a tenor, and a bass. And Rattle had a top-flight trio with him. The bass—or, actually, bass-baritone—was Thomas Quasthoff. He had a rocky start, singing grossly flat. But he settled down to deliver his usual solid and intelligent performance. I wish you had heard the low D he sang on the word “Gewürm” (“worms”). It was down in his “Ol’ Man River” territory—and splendid.

Michael Schade was the tenor, putting on his customary clinic. One simply runs out of ways to praise him. In recitative, he was interesting and musical and never a bit fussy. That is a rare achievement. And his rhythm was very well-defined—for a singer, it was almost unbelievably well-defined. Let it be known that, when the chorus boomed the word “Licht” (“light”), Schade sprang from his chair, dramatically. (He was to sing shortly after.) This was a little showbiz. But, you know? If you’re going to sing as well as he, you’re entitled to stand on your head and juggle with your feet, if you want to.

The soprano was Genia Kühmeier, one of Salzburg’s own—meaning, she is a native Salzburger. At the festival, I met a young man who works in the press office. He is from Salzburg. I said, “Oh, like Genia Kühmeier and Angelika Kirchschrager” (another singer). He swallowed and said, “And Mozart.” Oh, yes—of course. Him. (Also Doppler, incidentally, of the Doppler Effect.) Kühmeier was fantastically good in *The Creation*. She was warm, correct, soothing, and appealing. Her technical control was absolute—I mean, absolute. She could do no wrong. And, when she sang, you,

in your seat, could completely relax. Seldom have I heard such natural, unerring, endearing singing. She was fresh and pure, exuding a love of the art. May she never lose it. And, if she does, may she quit.

Return to New York, but stick with singing: for Dmitri Hvorostovsky gave a recital. The Russian baritone—the “Siberian tiger” —sang his usual in Carnegie Hall: songs of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. But he also threw in some Medtner, which lent a touch of exoticism. Hvorostovsky is a very, very consistent singer: You may not love a particular performance of his, but he never turns in a bad one. You can take him for granted, so great is his consistency.

And his voice and whole being, I would say, are at their best in the Russian repertoire. The language fits in his mouth, and in his sound. In Italian—or French—he sometimes seems too contained; not in the mother tongue. Onstage, he looks like an athlete, very fit, and very well prepared. He does periodic neck rolls, to loosen up. He looks like a halfback, frankly—or maybe like a receiver. And he has almost a cockiness when he sings, which is not at all annoying. He is appreciating his own ability.

Technically, he is a marvel, and a well-known one, throughout the vocal world. In a public interview with me last summer—in Salzburg, in fact—Renée Fleming said he must have a third lung. Otherwise, how could he breathe so long? In Carnegie Hall, he occasionally sang sharp, but this tendency was trivial. And he showed extraordinary evenness of voice: a single voice, from bottom to top. Musically, he could not have been more satisfying. He treated the songs with tender loving care, but also with rigor. He did not allow them to become soup; they always had structure.

Just a single particular: In Tchaikovsky’s beloved song “In the Midst of the Ball” (as we know it in English), Hvorostovsky was surpassingly refined and suave. And his accompanist was his regular: Ivari Ilja, from Estonia. Ilja played as we have come to expect, which is to say, stylishly, sensitively, and well.

So, what do you sing after a program of Russian song? What are your encores? I once heard Olga Borodina follow an all-Russian recital with “Ombra mai fu” and “Summertime” (really). Hvorostovsky likes to sing popular Italian songs, and he gave us two: “Passione” and “Parlami d’amore, Mariù.” He can also be counted on for an unaccompanied Russian folk song—which we duly received. And it brought up the hackneyed but not unmeaningful phrase “the soul of Russia.”

Who is the most accomplished teenage musician in the world? There are several candidates, but you could make a very strong case for Julian Bliss, the British clarinetist. He is eighteen years old, and already widely hailed. He is a protégé of Sabine Meyer, the brilliant German clarinetist. Teacher has made a joint disc with student. And student made his New York debut in a recital at the Walter Reade Theater. This is an admirable venue at Lincoln Center—most comfortable seats in New York, possibly.

Julian Bliss cuts an interesting figure. On this occasion, he wore one of those solid-black Mao shirts, as they all do. But he wore his untucked. He is a sturdy, pudgy fellow with a side-to-side walk. And when he talks—as he did, charmingly, to the audience—it is not with an Oxbridge accent. He may remind you of a jockey or a plumber’s apprentice. And he is utterly winning.

His program was diverse, inviting—perfectly chosen. It began with the Five Bagatelles of Gerald Finzi. He was kind to the clarinet, this superb British composer, giving it one of its best concertos. And his bagatelles are like his songs: They bear an unmistakable Finzian signature. Young Mr. Bliss did not make his best sounds in these pieces—certainly not his sweetest ones. He allowed some stridency, and some unsmoothness. But he treated these “songs” for clarinet with sympathy. And he is to be thanked for offering British music, which we hear too little of. In this same period, Kate Royal, the excellent young British soprano, came to New York for a recital. She sang nothing from

the homeland—not even a lousy Britten-arranged folk song for an encore.

No musician should be under national obligation. But if the Brits won't do British—who will?

Bliss moved on to a piece by Tiberiu Olah, a Romanian composer who lived from 1928 to 2002. This was the *Sonate pour clarinette seule*—very brief—which Bliss told us would show off the possibilities of the instrument. It did, indeed. It also showed off the possibilities of Julian Bliss—a splendid virtuoso, full of confidence. Like Dmitri Hvorostovsky, he knows he's good, and enjoys what he does.

He then played a mainstay of the repertoire, Debussy's *Première rapsodie*, which, as I always point out, is curiously not followed by a *Seconde rapsodie*. Bliss was a joy in this music: nimble, liquid, debonair. And he concluded this hour-long program with one of the two sonatas that Brahms wrote for the instrument, late in his career. Bliss played the first one, the F-minor. And he showed notable maturity. He expressed Brahms's kindly lyricism. And he was modest while still being commanding, which is something else Brahms requires.

His pianist was Bradley Moore—a name that might be familiar to you, as I have extolled his virtues in these pages before. Moore is often to be found accompanying singers. But he is not exclusive with them, as we see. And, in this recital, he conformed to every style: He was British in his Finzi, French in his Debussy, Brahmsian in his Brahms. He is a versatile, adaptable, and musical musician.

Bliss played an encore, which he announced, in a way. He said that he wouldn't name the piece, for we would recognize it. And he said that it had been transcribed for practically every instrument. The encore turned out to be *The Flight of the Bumblebee*—and from Bliss's clarinet (red and gold, by the way) it was exhilarating. At one point, we heard a fabulous little growl, which made me chuckle out loud.

Later that day—a Sunday, when many concerts take place, from morning till night—a senior clarinetist played, at another Lincoln Center venue: the Rose Theater. That was David Shifrin, who joined the Emerson String Quartet for Brahms's Clarinet Quintet in B minor (a direct descendant of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, and one of the greatest works around). I have gushed about Shifrin—his total musicianship—before. Allow me to gush again, for a paragraph or two.

In the quintet, the clarinet is usually prominent. But sometimes it is not, merely blending with the four strings. Even then, you couldn't take your ears off Shifrin. He demonstrated amazing beauty of sound—and variety of sound. Plus, there was an evenness, from the bottom to the top of his instrument. In this, he is like Dmitri Hvorostovsky. Brahms's quintet does not require a superhuman technique—which Shifrin has—but it does require some: and Shifrin was utterly fluid. Again like Hvorostovsky, he seems to have a third lung: He can breathe forever, which makes some of Brahms's phrases especially beguiling. Shifrin's attention to dynamics was exemplary. And so was his soft playing: It was neither breathy nor contrived, but natural, pure, and clean. And then there is the matter of musical intelligence: Shifrin has that to burn.

Brahms's slow movement, Adagio, is one of the most sublime things in chamber music (or in music at large). And it's possible to become paralyzed by it. But Shifrin just went ahead and played it, or sang it. You will never hear it have greater effect. And when Brahms asked for a little Gypsy, Shifrin produced it—but tastefully, with no vulgarity. I doubt that I will ever hear this quintet played so well again, at least as far as the clarinet is concerned. Maybe Julian Bliss will step up?

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