

The New Criterion

Music

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New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the 2007-2008 season.

The season is winding down, and thought turns retrospective—at least mine does. What were the highlights of the preceding months? The lowlights, we can leave by the way. Far better to remember the good. One benefit of this exercise is that it helps us answer the question, “Who or what is good in the music world today?” At the same time, I may decry a trend or two ...

Let’s begin with conductors and orchestras—and, specifically, with Lorin Maazel and the New York Philharmonic. Maazel will begin his final season with the orchestra next fall. And his penultimate season? Early on, he conducted Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 2, the “Little Russian.” And he conducted it in such a way as to make you think it was a masterpiece—which it may well be. I said at the time, “This will prove one of the outstanding performances of the year.” And so it did.

Other performances linger in the memory: and one is of Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 7. Maazel handled that as he handles so much: with rigor and clarity, style and excitement. (Bear in mind we are doing only the good.)

Among guest conductors of the New York Philharmonic, I think of Philippe Jordan, the young Swiss (and son of the late conductor Armin). He displayed maturity, musicality, and leadership. His work with the Philharmonic made you think, “All is not lost, on the conducting scene.” Kurt Masur, a former music director of the orchestra, came back to conduct Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. He did so with wisdom and what might be considered love. Leonard Slatkin led a simply splendid performance of Stravinsky’s *Firebird* (complete). It made me think he is a touch underrated (Slatkin, not Stravinsky).

Sir Colin Davis had a fine season in New York. He guest-conducted the Philharmonic and led the London Symphony Orchestra in a series of three concerts. With the Philharmonic, he conducted Vaughan Williams’s Symphony No. 4—and no one knows this composer better than Davis. He also knows Haydn and Mozart. With the LSO and associated forces, he led *The Creation* and the Requiem. I often say that Davis imparts a sense of just-rightness—that’s because he does. You do not have to worry about the conducting, or the interpreting, when he is on the podium. You can just connect with Haydn, Mozart—with music, and that which inspires it.

Another octogenarian British conductor with a title came to New York. That was Sir Neville Marriner, who led the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, which he founded fifty years ago. Like Davis, Marriner conducted Haydn and Mozart (symphonies and concertos). And, like Davis, he imparts a sense of just-rightness: of proper weight, proper proportions, proper spirit. That word “proper” sounds ... well, too proper. It implies stuffy or stodgy. And neither Marriner nor Davis is

anything but musical.

James Levine conducted two French works, both with his Boston Symphony Orchestra. One was Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (complete), and one was *La Mer*, Debussy's three-part hit. Levine injects some Beethoven and Wagner—some strength, even burliness—into his French Impressionism. And the results can be both cleansing and thrilling.

Franz Welser-Möst came with his Cleveland Orchestra, and one of the works they performed was Mozart's Symphony No. 28 in C. It was aristocratic, neat, and gratifying. Yuri Temirkanov came with his St. Petersburg Philharmonic, and from them we heard Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5. Temirkanov proved both sage and smashing (a happy combination). Sir Simon Rattle led the Philadelphia Orchestra in a little-known work by a very well-known composer: the oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* by Schumann. Rattle made a memorable case for this strange and skillful work.

Gustavo Dudamel, the young Venezuelan sensation, tripped in with his country's youth orchestra: the Simon Bolívar. What was really good in their program was Berlioz's *Roman Carnival Overture*. It was exuberant, balanced, and, naturally, youthful. A senior maestro, Charles Dutoit, was excellent in another Berlioz work: the *Symphonie fantastique*. He has lived with this piece a long time and, thankfully, not tired of it. Like Dudamel, he conducted young people—though not as young as those in the Simon Bolívar orchestra. This was the UBS Verbier Festival Orchestra.

Finally, Valery Gergiev stood before the Vienna Philharmonic for three concerts. The highlight, probably, was Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony—not drippy, not hackneyed, but a total powerhouse.

There were some commendable piano recitals, especially one by Yefim Bronfman. He was virtuosic, sometimes staggeringly so, but his virtuosity always had a musical purpose. And he once again proved himself a man for all repertoires. I had never heard him play *Gaspard de la nuit* (Ravel), or anything much like it. His was not the most French *Gaspard*, not the most scintillating. But it was fascinating, and instructive, and convincing.

Christian Zacharias played an interesting recital, the second half of which was devoted to Scarlatti sonatas (or *esercizi*, as the composer called them). He played with poise, understanding, and style. A notably civilized man, Zacharias. A young Lithuanian pianist provided immense satisfaction in a nicely mixed recital, from Bach to Prokofiev. That was Andrius Zlabys. His Brahms intermezzos were beautifully judged. I swear, the spirit of Backhaus was alive in that hall.

And how about Lang Lang, that maddening phenom? In a recital one night, he was maddening indeed. But he did some marvelous playing in Schumann's Fantasy in C. The third movement of this work was spellbinding, a throwback to the Golden Age.

A discussion of piano concertos might begin with Simon Trpčeski—this young Macedonian played Tchaikovsky's Concerto No. 1, and played it with huge panache and intelligence. Hélène Grimaud was suave, refined, and knowing in Ravel's G-major concerto. Pierre-Laurent Aimard turned in a first-rate performance of Beethoven's C-minor concerto: Aimard was crisp and economical without being too "period"-like. Bronfman stormed and dazzled his way through the Prokofiev Second.

And both he and Stephen Hough played Brahms's Concerto No. 1 in D minor. They were different, in various ways, and they were commanding.

If we have spoken of piano concertos, we might as well speak of violin concertos: Two young women played the Beethoven. One was Lisa Batiashvili, from Georgia, and one was Julia Fischer, from Germany. Batiashvili played this great work with exceptional humanity and warmth. In the

past, I've quoted the saying, "You play who you are." If this is true, Batiashvili is a highly admirable person. In her own outing, Fischer was little worse—maybe no worse at all.

Trp~CHESKI slew the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 with Maazel and the Philharmonic; Janine Jansen did the same with the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. The young Dutchwoman and the veteran American conductor seemed to have a ball together, and with this piece. In another hall, with other forces, Gil Shaham played the Violin Concerto of William Schuman. And he played it with control, understanding, and other necessities.

One evening—it was New Year's Eve, actually—Joshua Bell played a bunch of chestnuts. You know—Saint-Saëns's Introduction and Rondo capriccioso, Ponce's *Estrellita*, and other schlocky stuff. Only there was nothing schlocky about it: Bell played with refinement, grace, sincerity—beauty. A true Kreislerian spirit pervaded the hall.

From violin recitals, I will pluck a few things. Shaham played two relatively unknown sonatas: one by Walton and the other by Rodrigo (the *Sonata pimpante*). They were in very capable hands. And Midori, the one-named wonder, played the Sonata No. 1 by Schnittke. She was at her brainy best in this peculiar and expertly crafted piece—and her braininess included musicality.

Ten or so voice recitals stand out. And what I'll mention first was not exactly a recital. It was a traversal by Christine Schäfer of Schubert's *Winterreise*. (She sang it with the pianist Eric Schneider.) It is rare to hear this cycle sung by a woman; it is even rarer to hear it sung by a soprano; it is rarer still to hear it sung by a light lyric soprano. Could it possibly work? It worked unforgettably. On another occasion, Christian Gerhaher (baritone) and Gerold Huber (piano) performed the other Schubert song-cycle: *Die schöne Müllerin*. This was forthright and unafraid—sort of crunchy—but, in the end, duly shattering.

A banner lieder evening involved, not one singer, but three: Dorothea Röschmann, Ian Bostridge, and Thomas Quasthoff. Thinking of the Three Tenors, some of us immediately dubbed this evening "The Three Lieder Singers." They came through with distinction, perhaps especially Röschmann, who, though known for her Mozart, is equally laudable in German art song.

And before we leave the realm of this song, consider Michael Schade, who sang a group of Schumann one evening. This was exemplary Schumann. Following him on the same concert was a Russian mezzo-soprano named Ekaterina Gubanova. Did she sing lieder? Oh, no—she sang Borodin and Rachmaninoff. And she proved herself a potent young singer to watch.

In his recital, Matthew Polenzani did some fine, fine singing, as in Britten's Michelangelo sonnets. One of his encores was "Danny Boy": ethereal and perfect. In her own recital, Joyce DiDonato sang some Dickinson songs of Copland. These were fresh, natural, idiomatic. And one of her encores was "Non più mesta," a showpiece Rossini aria. She can be expected to knock it out of the park—and she did.

Kate Royal, the young British soprano, made her New York debut, and our audiences will want her back, again and again. (They will be right.) Isabel Bayrakdarian, the Armenian-Canadian soprano, sang an interesting recital, which included Ravel's *Cinq Mélodies populaires grecques*. She sang them, not in French, their usual language, but in Greek. Another Isabel, Isabel Leonard, sang a recital of high distinction. She is a young American who is just getting started, and if she's not can't-miss, no one is.

In Bryn Terfel's recital, there was some world-class singing, and some questionable singing. What was unquestionable was his personableness: He was so likable, so charismatic, it was almost unbelievable. One of his encores was Don Giovanni's serenade, and, as he sang it, he waded out into the audience. Carnegie Hall was absolutely in the palm of his hand. (And he sang the serenade

superbly, too.) With the death of Pavarotti, Terfel must be the most likable singer in the world. Not only that, he is one of its most likable people.

At the annual Richard Tucker Gala, DiDonato sang another Rossini aria: “Una voce poco fa.” Another knock out of the park. And Diana Damrau, the German coloratura soprano, sang something she was born to sing: “Glitter and Be Gay” (Bernstein). She hammed it up, but the piece can take it, and she made the house swoon and explode.

Bernarda Fink, the mezzo from Argentina, appeared with orchestra a couple of times. In the Mahler Second, she was magnificent. She was just as good in the aforementioned *Paradies und die Peri*. Also singing in that Schumann oratorio—and also outstanding—was Heidi Grant Murphy. She had other moments in New York, too. With the St. Lawrence String Quartet and the pianist Kevin Murphy (her husband), she sang Chausson’s *Chanson perpétuelle*, exquisitely. On the same concert, she sang *Songs from the Diaspora* by Roberto Sierra, a contemporary composer born in Puerto Rico. In this music, too, she was exquisite, and flavorful. More Chausson was provided by Dame Felicity Lott, who sang the *Poème de l’amour et de la mer* with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. “Flott” was subtle, sensuous, restrained, feeling, autumnal—just right.

And I’d like to sneak in a word here for a little singing group—the six men of the King’s Singers. They sang a concert around Christmastime, and they are upholding their brand: The technique was secure, and the singing smart. It’s nice when the popular are good as well.

Time, now, for three chamber-music concerts. The Artemis Quartet (based in Berlin) performed, and performed very well—at times, they were brilliant. Where technique might have been a little rough, musicianship came through. The Alban Berg Quartet (based in Vienna) bade farewell this season. After thirty-seven years, they are disbanding, and they gave New York an excellent final concert. Did it include the String Quartet by Alban Berg? Oh, yes—that was a must.

Also saying goodbye was the Beaux Arts Trio, one of the most honored and honorable ensembles in the world. It was formed in 1955, and the pianist, Menahem Pressler (born 1923), stayed with it till the end. Violinists and cellists came and went. Their final New York concert was not only nostalgic, it was very, very good. I have never heard Pressler—a wonderful pianist—play better.

Try a cellist now: Daniel Gaisford, who played the Sonata No. 2 by Michael Hersch. This is a long, formidable, demanding work—unaccompanied, too—and Gaisford was more than up to it. Try a clarinetist as well: Julian Bliss, the teenage phenom from Britain. In his New York debut, he was true to his reputation (big), and true to the discs he has pressed. Given the tricks of studio engineers, you never know ...

And I might take a couple of paragraphs here to mention the baneful trends I alluded to at the top of this piece. The first: Talk has become epidemic in music. Everybody is talking from the stage, and talking and talking. Program notes, handed to every audience member at the door, aren’t good enough. Those program notes have to be repeated in speeches from the stage. This kills the momentum of a concert, takes some magic out of it, deadens the hall. “Outreach” is the word of the day in music circles—and outreach means talking. To me, this is like a weed choking the garden of music.

Second, there is hype. I realize we have always had hype in music, as elsewhere, and I will even defend a fair amount of it: There is a commercial aspect to music, and you of course have to sell the product. But it seems to me that hype and publicity have gone ape. We are always told how great and special everything is, and we are sort of ordered to like it. This may be especially true of new music. Why don’t they just play it, or sing it, and let people decide for themselves?

At one point this season, as music hype in New York reached its apex, I thought of a phrase from

Solzhenitsyn: “revolting invasion of publicity.” It comes from the 1978 commencement address at Harvard, titled “A World Split Apart.” Solzhenitsyn said, “The human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today’s mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music.”

I will begin our section on opera with conducting—conducting alone. Lorin Maazel returned to the Metropolitan Opera after forty-five years, conducting Wagner’s *Walküre*. I could spend several pages on this extraordinary performance. Suffice it to say that it was unusual and masterly. Another Wagner high was supplied by James Levine, who conducted *Tristan und Isolde*. On the night I have in mind, his singers couldn’t sing, at all. So he and the orchestra took over, superbly. And at Carnegie Hall, Valery Gergiev led his Mariinsky Theater forces in a concert performance of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Snow Maiden*. He made you think, “Where has this opera been all my life?”

Back to the Met, for some singers. Renée Fleming was so good in Verdi’s *Traviata*, it was almost unbearable. What do I mean? *Traviata* is a terrible, wrenching story; and when it’s well done—especially by the soprano—you can hardly stand it. Fleming was similarly “unbearable” as Desdemona, in Verdi’s *Otello*. Also having an outstanding Met season was Diana Damrau—who was exemplary as Pamina (in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*) and the same as Konstanze (in his *Abduction from the Seraglio*). You know Konstanze’s killer aria, “Martern aller Arten”? Damrau killed it.

You may not think you can see another *Bohème*, but Angela Gheorghiu was such a compelling Mimì, the opera seemed new. Besides which, Puccini knew what he was doing. On the night of this particular Gheorghiu triumph, the director of the Met’s production, Franco Zeffirelli, was honored. The Met had a little ceremony for him after Act II. Audiences have always liked Zeffirelli far more than critics have. On this, I’ll side with the public.

The mezzo-soprano Susan Graham was wondrous in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*—giving a lesson in that sort of singing (or any). Also in *Iphigénie* was Plácido Domingo, defying age. Dolora Zajick gave her own lesson in singing: as Adalgisa in Bellini’s *Norma*. Elina Garan~CHA made a winning Rosina in Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. She was Slavic, and a little dark, and extra-imperious—but a total treat. Nonetheless, the show was practically stolen by the Dr. Bartolo, Bruno Praticò. He was a hoot, and artful.

The Russian tenor Vladimir Galouzine outdid himself in Prokofiev’s *Gambler*. Ferruccio Furlanetto is one of the best singing actors of our time, and he confirmed this as Silva in *Ernani* (Verdi). The tenor Richard Croft shone in Philip Glass’s opera *Satyagraha*. And at the end of the Met season, we got a production of Donizetti’s *Daughter of the Regiment*, starring Natalie Dessay, the French coloratura soprano, and Juan Diego Flórez, the Peruvian coloratura (so to speak) tenor. Dessay was a joy to hear and watch, and Flórez almost matched her. The British mezzo Felicity Palmer excelled in a secondary role, as she had in Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, too. She is unfailing.

Let me conclude by saying which performances I found most impressive this season. One I have already mentioned: Maazel in *Die Walküre*. There was also Hilary Hahn in Bach. The young violinist played Bach’s Sonata No. 2 in A minor, and if I have ever heard a better Bach performance—by anyone—I cannot remember it. Though she is young, she has been great for a long time. Chanticleer, the twelve-man a cappella singing group, gave its annual Christmas concert. Some of it was transcendent. I think particularly of a small Bruckner piece, *Virga Jesse*. And David Shifrin, the clarinetist, was sublime in a sublime work: Brahms’s Clarinet Quintet (in which he collaborated with the Emerson String Quartet).

Finally, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa gave her farewell recital. She has come in for a lot of critical grief over the years; she has deserved some of it (or a little of it). But, you know what? She has been an extraordinary singer—and she sang extraordinarily as she bade farewell to New York. She sang

better than some singers—actually, than most singers—do in their prime. I wish I could hear her again. And again.

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