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New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On *Showboat* at Carnegie Hall, "Summertime Classics" with the New York Philharmonic, the International Keyboard Institute & Festival at Mannes, "Pedals and Pumps: A Festival of Organ Divas" at Trinity Church, Wall Street, and the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center.

Summertime is a good time for music—along with fall, winter, and spring. And you don't have to be in bucolic surroundings to enjoy music in the summer. You need not find a Tanglewood or Glyndebourne—New York City will do just fine.

Before reviewing the summer proper, maybe we can recall the tail-end of last season? Those weeks are hot and summery anyway. Jessye Norman, the veteran soprano, came to Carnegie Hall for a recital. Her program consisted of twenty-two of her favorite songs. And, to me, this evening had the flavor of farewell. It was certainly not billed that way. This season at the hall, Norman is to "curate" a "celebration of the African-American cultural legacy." Chances are, she will sing a note or two. But, again, this recital felt a bit like goodbye.

Norman sang pretty badly—technically, interpretively, and in every other way. Much of this evening was painful to sit through. But she is an eternally lovable woman and musician. At the end of the recital, a young woman near me called out, "I love you, Jessye!" Quite so.

Carnegie Hall had a benefit for itself, and the program was a classic musical—*Showboat*, the Kern-Hammerstein work from 1927. The cast was a mixture of opera singers and Broadway singers. Sometimes the opera people sounded Broadway—like the baritone Nathan Gunn, who, as Ravenal, crooned beautifully. His partner, portraying Magnolia, was another opera singer, the soprano Celena Shafer. She, too, did a winning job. But the show was virtually stolen by a Broadway performer, Carolee Carmello. As Julie, she sang "Bill," and it was absolutely boffo—a superbly judged, stunning turn.

The best singer in the house sang nary a note. She was Marilyn Horne, who came on to speak the lines of the Lady on the Levee. She put on a compone accent, did this native of Bradford, Pennsylvania—she fooled no one. But it was grand to see her, and many of us would have killed to hear her sing just a snatch. She's a mere seventy-four years old, after all—at that age, Magda Olivero was just getting warmed up.

I now wish to remark the presence of David Fray—he is a French pianist in his mid-twenties, and he came to New York with the Orchestre National de France. That orchestra played in Avery Fisher Hall, under its *chef*, Kurt Masur. He is a man who knows a thing or two about Avery Fisher Hall—for eleven years (1991–2002), he led the New York Philharmonic. Fray played Beethoven's Concerto No. 2 in B flat, and did so with rare beauty. This account was almost a throwback, as though

the “period” movement had never come into being. The concerto was unhurried, graceful, elegant—and, again, uncommonly beautiful. This was true even of the ornaments.

I will give you some personal intel about David Fray—some non-musical information. He cuts a dashing figure, with long pianist’s hair. I thought of the Irving Berlin lyric about Paderewski: “I’m so excited when I’m invited/ To hear that long-haired genius play.” Also, Fray uses a chair with a back, à la Radu Lupu. Sometimes they lean back, which does not make them laidback, although sometimes they are.

Lorin Maazel wrapped up his penultimate season as music director of the Philharmonic. He was his usual uneven self: sometimes up (very up), and sometimes down. He conducted the Philharmonic in a sterling performance of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony (his last, if you don’t count the one complete movement he left of a Tenth). Maazel was smart, stirring, and fearless. This symphony can be rather ethereal and glowing. From Maazel, it was unusually human, with plenty of heart and grit. He is sometimes accused of being a cold machine—not on this occasion, certainly.

I was very much looking forward to his account with the Philharmonic of a “*Ring Without Words*.” This concert took place not in the orchestra’s usual Avery Fisher home, but in Carnegie Hall. And the “*Ring Without Words*” was fashioned by Maazel himself—he did this twenty years ago, at the request of a record label, Telarc. He calls this work a “symphonic synthesis,” and it boils down *The Ring*—which is fifteen hours—to about seventy minutes. Maazel did a skillful job.

And he has a long, enviable history with Wagner. He was the first American to conduct at Bayreuth, and—this is interesting—the first foreigner to conduct *The Ring* there. Last January, he returned to the Metropolitan Opera for the first time in forty-five years—conducting *The Ring*’s second installment, *Die Walküre*. At Carnegie Hall, he did not have his best night; he had a poor one. He was too often balky and awkward and disjointed. “Wotan’s Farewell,” he nearly choked to death. You just never know.

In a flash, the Philharmonic was back in Avery Fisher, and Maazel was conducting an opera—an opera with words and singers. This was *Tosca*, done in a concert performance. And Maazel was absolutely on fire—brilliant, stylish, and magnetic. Puccini’s score was perfectly compelling—there was nothing namby-pamby in it, not a trace of spun sugar. The music crackled, gripped, and overwhelmed.

The singers weren’t famous, but they were good and (perhaps more important) interesting. For me, the discovery of the evening was George Gagnidze, the baritone singing Scarpia. He is from Georgia. And he embodied that villain, musically and theatrically. In truth, he looked just like him—a pompous thug (no offense to Mr. Gagnidze, who I’m sure is a swell guy). To take it further, he looked like a young Mussolini, with barrel chest and broad face. He was all volatility, stuffed in that tux—I will not soon forget him.

Not long after *Tosca*, the white jackets came out, as the Philharmonic started its summer season. They do a series called “Summertime Classics,” and these concerts are led by Bramwell Tovey, whom I call “your genial host.” Why? Well, this British conductor is a genial host indeed—he talks to the audience between pieces, and does a charming, witty, mellifluous job. He is very easy to take. He’s a competent conductor, too, and sometimes better than that. Tovey’s main gig is with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, of which he is music director.

The first of his soloists in New York was Joyce Yang, a pianist. She is a Korean-born Juilliard student in her early twenties. And she played Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 2. She was graceful, earnest, and conscientious. But this was far too much concerto for her—she simply lacked the command and heft to make the thing go. This was a curiously demure, Haydnesque Rach Two (which is not Rach Two, of course). Tovey’s second soloist was James Ehnes, the excellent

Canadian violinist. He played some old-fashioned virtuoso numbers: Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* (or *Gypsy Airs*) and the Introduction and Rondo capriccioso of Saint-Saëns. In the main, he played with admirable style, a style neither too wild nor too plain.

And I will give you a semi-political note: This particular concert began with the overture to Rossini's opera *L'Italiana in Algeri*, or *The Italian Girl in Algiers*. We have always translated the title that way. In fact, we refer to the opera—in shorthand—as “The Italian Girl.” And what did the Philharmonic have in its printed program? “The Italian Woman in Algiers.” That falls on the ear like a bowling ball—a risible piece of political correctness. When I told him about it, a friend of mine said, “What did they do with *Zigeunerweisen*? Call it ‘Melodies of an Oppressed, Indigent, Nomadic People’?” (No, but I bet “Romany Airs” is not far behind.)

Soon the Philharmonic was into the parks, including Central Park, where Lang Lang was the guest soloist one night. Talk about an uneven performer: This young Chinese pianist may be the most uneven of all. I have chronicled his ups and downs ever since he first appeared, as a teenager (I believe). And he is now twenty-six. One night, I walked out on Lang Lang in disgust—it was intolerable. On at least one other night, I sat in amazement. And this concert in Central Park was another occasion for amazement—even more amazement.

Circumstances were not propitious. First of all, this was a concert in a park—with a massive, suspect amplification system. Lang Lang came out in rock-star garb, with his spiky hair and own brand of black sneaker. He had a red piano—a bright-red piano, which looked very Vegas, particularly for a pianist who has been compared to Liberace. (Liberace had more talent than people know, by the way.) This performance had a lot going against it.

What was he performing, incidentally? Tchaikovsky's Concerto No. 1—and that was another thing working against the performance. This piece is viewed as hackneyed and trashy (however unfairly—and it is not only unfair, it is unpardonably ignorant). Let me cut to the chase: Lang Lang was stupendous. He was absolutely jaw-dropping. What he did with the piano, and that concerto, is impossible to do, technically—and nearly impossible artistically. You can go many, many years without hearing the piano played at that level.

A thought came to me as I was sitting in the park, on that warm July night: Lang Lang could finish as a great pianist. I mean, a member of the pantheon. He has always had greatness within him, or, put another way, he has shown flashes of greatness. But I now believe he could go down as a pianistic immortal—you should have heard it.

The concert was conducted by Alan Gilbert, who will become the Philharmonic's music director in September 2009. He is a “New York story,” and a Philharmonic story, because both of his parents played in the orchestra. (His mother still does. During remarks to the audience, Gilbert turned to the violin section and said, “Hi, Mom.”) Philharmonic officials have noted that Gilbert will be the first native New Yorker to be music director—which has nothing to do with music, but which makes some people feel good.

After the Tchaikovsky concerto, Gilbert conducted Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, *Finlandia*, and the *William Tell* Overture (the most popular section—this was an encore). He did many things very well, and some things less well—we can talk about him later, when he takes over the reins. And I might mention that 63,000 people— *63,000*—attended this concert (which was free, but even so ...). We are sometimes told, by critics and others, that what the public wants is contemporary music: Cage, Birtwistle, and the boys. We must emphasize the contemporary in order to “save” classical music. People will not stand for the “Classical Top 40,” especially the young, who yearn for the avant-garde. This is wishful thinking, of course, and nothing but.

What happens if you're the New York Philharmonic and offer Tchaik One, Beethoven Four,

Finlandia, and *The Lone Ranger* in Central Park? More people come than attended the All-Star Game, which took place in Yankee Stadium on the same night. (To be sure, the Great Lawn holds more bodies than the stadium.)

What we used to call the Mannes School now has a highly awkward—and unmusical—name: Mannes College the New School for Music. At any rate, there it sits on West Eighty-fifth Street, and every summer it hosts the International Keyboard Institute & Festival. IKIF was founded by Jerome Rose, a pianist who teaches at the school. And he invites a slew of his fellow pianists, for master classes, recitals, and other events.

One of his invitees was Menahem Pressler, long of the Beaux Arts Trio. The trio was formed in 1955; it disbanded just last month. Over the decades, the trio had different violinists and cellists, but only one pianist: Pressler (born 1923). They played their New York farewell in April, and, as I remarked, I had never heard Pressler play better. At the Mannes School, the major work on his program was Schubert's Sonata in B flat, Op. posth. I had my objections: too much stopping and starting, for one thing, instead of a Schubertian flow. But Pressler's general mastery was unquestionable; and so was his extraordinary love of music. Jerry Rose once said to him, "Menahem, you love playing so much, you should pay *me* to listen to you."

Another invitee was Philippe Entremont, the French star—or former star. He was a very big deal in the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies. But then his career went kind of quiet, by his own choosing, one hopes (and imagines). He started conducting quite a bit—holding minor posts, including with chamber orchestras. But he can still play, as he proved at the Mannes School. He does not have the technique he once had: When technical demands were anything like heavy, he could not quite express himself. But when technique was not an issue, Entremont was his elegant, tasteful, very musical self—particularly in the French rep (Debussy, Ravel). You could say that he is now a better musician than a pianist, and that is not the worst thing in the world.

The last recital was given by a sort of Frenchman—Marc-André Hamelin, of Montreal. "The harder the piece, the better he plays," remarked a colleague of his to me—and it's true. He never seems so relaxed or in control as when he is playing impossible—unplayable—literature (e.g., the Alkan Concerto for solo piano, or the Godowsky Grand Sonata). The biggest piece on his Mannes program was the "Concord" Sonata of Ives, formally known as the Piano Sonata No. 2, "Concord, Mass., 1840–60." The movements are named after Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts, and Thoreau. This is a vast, sprawling, quirky work, and Hamelin played it with technical brilliance and idiomatic understanding. Perhaps most impressively, he made this piece—which can be too sprawling for some—cohere.

Ready for the most charming name or title of the summer? "Pedals and Pumps: A Festival of Organ Divas." This was a series of organ recitals at Trinity Church, which is on Broadway at Wall Street. The recitals took place at 1 o'clock on Thursdays, and lasted an hour. This was a rewarding musical experience, especially when the recitalist was top-notch: as she was, on the two occasions I attended.

You have gathered from the name of the series that only women recitalists were involved. I am usually against the intrusion of "gender"—and, even worse, race—in music, but this seemed relatively harmless. Trinity Church literature said that the series highlighted "contemporary female musicianship"—a most unfortunate phrase, given that musicianship is neither male nor female, but good, bad, or in between. Nonetheless, any series of organ recitals is to be applauded—for the repertoire of that instrument is vast and impressive, and has somehow been slipping away from us, these past several decades. Same with choral music (a subject we will save for another day).

The recitalists I heard were Jane Watts, of Britain, and Joyce Jones, of Texas. The latter calls herself "the accidental organist." Why? When she was an undergraduate, she sprained her hand, badly. So

this piano major turned to the organ, during her six-week recovery period. She did pedal exercises—and her course was set. “So, on every recital, I play a piece that features the pedals, which is my way of thanking God for showing me what He wanted me to do with my life.” You don’t hear something like that at every musical event, I assure you.

By the way, Trinity Church “webstreams” these recitals, which is to say, makes them available to an unlimited audience on the Internet. That is the future, and it is good. How producers will make their money is a little uncertain (will people pay for their “streamings”?). But for consumers, this future is very good indeed. And, finally, I’d like to share a thought that occurred to me during Joyce Jones’s recital—and please remember where we were. The thought that occurred to me was, “How nice to hear a woman pealing out Bach in a church so near the place that Dark Age monsters targeted, seven years ago.”

The granddaddy of all New York summer festivals—or series—is the Mostly Mozart Festival, held at Lincoln Center. They have been going since 1966; and, since 2003, the music director has been Louis Langrée, a French conductor. He is a solid musician, about whom there is (usually) no funny business. At the Mostly Mozart Festival, you conduct a lot of Mozart—and Langrée, fortunately, is especially good at this. He is a natural phraser, among other things.

On his opening program was Mahler’s *Lied von der Erde*, but in the chamber-ensemble version. Schoenberg fashioned this version, or rather started it—it was completed years later by a man named Rainer Riehn. Langrée’s two soloists were Paul Groves, tenor, and Anna Larsson, mezzo (or, really, alto). Groves was smooth, lyrical, and clean—technically assured. And Larsson, I have never heard better, in many hearings (particularly in Mahler). She was wise, soulful, and moving. Whittaker Chambers once described Kirsten Flagstad’s sound as emerging from the center of the earth. I thought of that, listening to Larsson in this work. I imagine Mahler, an exacting judge, would have approved.

He would have approved of Christiane Oelze, too. She is a German soprano, much better known in Europe than in the United States. With Langrée, she sang Mozart and Webern—and did so with abundant wit, taste, and expertise. She does not make the most beautiful sound in the world—but she has a hundred assets, all adding up to musicianship. I apologize in advance to the singing breed, but it’s not often you hear a singer and say, “This is a true musician.” Oelze strikes me as a musician who happens to sing, rather than a singer—a throat—who makes a career in music.

Lionel Bringuier will have a very big career indeed. He is a French conductor, aged twenty-one. And he made his New York debut with the Mostly Mozart orchestra. He is the real McCoy, this child, and after hearing him twice—the first time in Switzerland—I am prepared to say that he could be the most estimable French conductor since Monteux or Munch. You may say that’s not saying very much. And you may be right. Suffice it to say, Bringuier is a highly impressive fellow, whom it is good to have in the ranks. His countryman, Langrée, isn’t so bad either. And neither, may I repeat, is the New York music scene in the summer.

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