

The New Criterion

Music

January 2009

New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the Kirov Orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall, Richard Egarr and Levine & Barenboim at Weill Recital Hall, Weilerstein & Maazel and *Elektra* at the New York Philharmonic, the *Damnation of Faust* and *Tristan und Isolde* at the Metropolitan Opera, *The Dream of Jacob's Ladder* at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, Piotr Anderszewski at Carnegie Hall, and Chanticleer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In his sixty-one years—he died the same day as Stalin, March 5, 1953—Serge Prokofiev wrote a great variety of music. (I will always think of him as “Serge,” rather than “Sergei,” because that’s how I grew up with him.) Among his works are ballets, operas, and film scores—and it was this music that Valery Gergiev featured in a series of concerts. The “mercurial Russian maestro,” as I can’t help calling him, brought his Kirov Orchestra to Avery Fisher Hall.

One afternoon, he conducted *The Love for Three Oranges*—a funnily titled opera that is almost unknown, at least in the West, but that contains a very famous piece: the march. It has been transcribed for virtually every instrument, including the organ. The entire opera is well worth knowing, for it snaps, crackles, and pops. (I don’t mean to be describing a breakfast cereal.) It is full of Prokofiev’s spirit, meaning that it is brash, whimsical, surprising, tender, electric. And Gergiev conducted it to the nth degree. He was 100 percent on, and when he is on, there are few like him. Here was a wizard in a wizardly score.

He had a flavorful and capable cast, too—a youthful one, which included Daniil Shtoda, who has a beautiful tenor voice, even when his character is coughing, spitting, and otherwise being sick. The soprano Ekaterina Shimanovich has an absolutely huge voice, blowing your hair back. There is room for such voices. And the bass Alexei Tanovitsky, portraying a king, was warm, rich, and kingly.

Not to be forgotten is that Kirov Orchestra, which not only exuded Russian style and sound, but also demonstrated considerable virtuosity. This is not considered a hallmark of Russian orchestras; it was a hallmark of this performance. And it was a concert performance, by the way. How good it would be to see the fantastic, imaginative *Love for Three Oranges* staged.

The following night, Gergiev conducted two of Prokofiev’s film scores: *Ivan the Terrible* (the oratorio made from this score by a man named Stasevich) and *Alexander Nevsky* (the well-known cantata, fashioned by Prokofiev himself). *Ivan the Terrible* is not a score on which Prokofiev would want his reputation to rest. It has some genuine music in it—some music worthy of Prokofiev. But it also has bombast, dullness, and sheer mediocrity. Gergiev did well enough with the score, and so did his orchestra. The brass know the trick of playing raucously while still being musical.

On the stage were a pair of soloists, one of whom was the mezzo-soprano Kristina Kapustinskaya.

(What a beautiful name, huh?) The timbre of her voice was almost the definition of Slavic-ness. The other soloist was a bass, Mikhail Petrenko, who also served as the narrator—which was unfortunate, because one could understand his English only with difficulty. When he sang, however, he did so with knowledge and character.

It was La Kapustinskaya who sang the famous “Field of the Dead” in the *Nevsky* cantata. She was daringly soft and subdued—inward, if you like—and this was nicely effective.

Richard Egarr is an English harpsichordist and conductor—a big deal in the original-instruments world, and a fine musician. Not long ago, I praised his disc of Purcell’s keyboard music—a repertoire wrongly neglected—to the skies. He arrived in Weill Recital Hall, upstairs at Carnegie, to play Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. First, he gave a little lecture on temperament: and a lovely, learned lecture it was. He spoke of the Prelude in C major, whose sound is pure, radiant, luminous. It could never be in C-sharp major—that key has “much more lemon and garlic” than C major. And of the minor keys, F minor is the saddest. (He explained why.)

About his playing, you could lodge various complaints, concerning tempo, phrasing, rhythm, and the other elements of music. And he did not demonstrate his sharpest technique. But what was unmistakable was Egarr’s love of Bach, and his devotion to him. When I think of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, I often bless the name of Herr Neefe, young Beethoven’s teacher, who gave his charge these books—*The Well-Tempered Clavier*—saying that he would learn music from them. That sent Beethoven on his way. One blesses the name of Bach, too!

Penderecki, the Polish composer, wrote his Second Cello Concerto in 1983, for—who else? Rostropovich. It was played by young Alisa Weilerstein at the New York Philharmonic—and with the Philharmonic. This cellist is astounding in any number of ways: in the sound, or sounds, she can make; in her musical understanding; in her technical ability. She is astounding in *every* way, really. And she got the most out of Penderecki’s concerto. So did Lorin Maazel, on the podium. He is very deft in these modern scores, not least in how he handles rhythm. He is, for example, an exceptionally keen observer of rests.

By the way, it’s a curious fact of modern musical life that two of our very best musicians are girl cellists (if you will excuse the expression): Weilerstein and Han-Na Chang, both born in 1982.

To open this concert, Maazel conducted a handful of musicians in the *Brandenburg* Concerto No. 6. Whether someone needs to conduct these concertos is open to question. What is not open to question is that the musicians, on this morning (yes, morning), played woefully. One or two in the band came through—but it’s better to forget the episode entirely. After intermission, however, came the Fifth—Beethoven, of course. And Maazel conducted this symphony thrillingly: intelligently and thrillingly. Longtime readers may have heard me say that Maazel has a way of showing you something new in a score. Even the Fifth? Yes, actually.

And I’m reminded of a statement attributed to Robert Graves: “The thing about Shakespeare [I paraphrase] is that he really *is* good.” And the same is true about the Fifth Symphony.

At the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine conducted Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust*. You may argue that this is not an opera. We’ll save that argument for another time. Levine loves Berlioz, and conducts him lovingly. This *Damnation* was stately, lulling, logical, dream-like. It was at times more restrained than it needed to be. You know that horse ride into hell? Levine can conduct it hair-raisingly. On this occasion, hair stayed pretty much on head. But Levine is obviously a man for Berlioz.

And Susan Graham, the mezzo-soprano, is a woman for Berlioz. She made an elegant, tasteful Marguerite. The tenor, our Faust, was someone you don’t normally associate with French roles:

Marcello Giordani, an Italian stallion. At his worst, he was pitifully strangled; at other moments he was satisfactory. He showed a, to me, surprising little head voice: lovely. And always, always, he kept his dignity.

The production comes courtesy of Robert Lepage, and people were quite curious about it. Why? Because it is he who will do Wagner's *Ring* after the Otto Schenk *Ring*—one of the most successful productions in the Met repertory—is retired. That will happen at the end of this season. In his *Damnation*, Lepage uses video and other devices of our day. Some of his ideas are congenial—probably most of them are. One or two of them are a little laughable (a picture of an ardent flame to accompany “D’amour l’ardente flamme”). Everyone and his brother wants to see the Schenk *Ring* one last time. Let Lepage's at least do credit to the house, and to Wagner's supreme tetralogy.

Levine joined Daniel Barenboim for an evening, or late afternoon, in Weill Recital Hall. These men are pianists and conductors; on this occasion they were pianists—duo-piano partners. They began their program with Schubert's Sonata in C, Op. 140. And Barenboim was in one of those moods. He thumped, he pounded, he poked, he jabbed. He was at his most blunt and vulgar. And remember that this is a man who can play the piano superbly, even sublimely. Much of the time, you couldn't hear Levine, so dominant was Barenboim. But when you did hear him: He was musical, as usual.

The second half of the program was given over to Brahms—to the *Liebeslieder-Walzer* and the *Neue Liebeslieder*. Barenboim was more palatable, and the maestros had with them a quartet of young singers from the Met. This quartet was strong and able, but they could have used more charm, more whimsy, more sweetness. It would have helped them, and the music, to be more relaxed. They were terribly earnest—but that is not, of course, the worst thing in the world.

I should tell you that you have seldom seen a more star-studded house—and Weill is a very little house indeed. There were famous conductors (other ones), famous singers, famous impresarios, famous others. Court must be paid to Barenboim and Levine. Too bad the crowd—famous and unfamous constituents alike—did not get a better concert.

Seven years ago, the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, high on the Upper West Side, was damaged in a fire. The church has now been restored. And this rebirth was celebrated in an Advent service. Music was plentiful, including a new piece by Lee Hoiby, commissioned for the occasion. Hoiby, best known as a song composer, has written a healthy amount of church music. And the new piece was *The Dream of Jacob's Ladder*, scored for choir, brass, and organ. It is warm, humane, hopeful, filling—touched with a sense of wonder. This is typical of Hoiby. And his piece is exactly what the doctor ordered. I don't know how much the church paid for *Jacob's Ladder*, but I can't believe they didn't get their money's worth.

Soon enough, Barenboim was in the pit for *Tristan und Isolde*—this was at the Metropolitan Opera. He is a famously uneven conductor, even as he is an uneven pianist, and I am reliably told he had a fabulous opening night. I attended the second night. And in the first two acts, he was off-track, leaving the music disjointed, lackluster, and unflowing. Logic was missing. So was emotional sweep. The Love Duet was an outright bore, which is a rare achievement. But a new conductor appeared for the third act—Barenboim, leading Wagner's opera with sovereign musicality. Certain performers are like the New England weather: Wait a while.

Singing the title roles were Gary Lehman and Katarina Dalayman. Lehman got through the first two acts, if barely. But in Act III he was positively heroic: Like his conductor, he was a new man, singing Tristan's lines with startling assurance. Dalayman is a beautiful singer with a beautiful voice—a soft husk can appear on its surface. She could not supply much power as Isolde, but she supplied other things: such as intelligence—even psychological complexity—and sincerity. Whatever her faults,

she was a touching Isolde.

King Mark was René Pape, the Mark of our day—some people think of any day. He did not have his best outing, even if his voice was its marvelous self. Intonation wandered a bit from him; parts of his monologue seemed affected. But he is René Pape nonetheless. And Michelle DeYoung is Michelle DeYoung—singing Brangäne with sisterly warmth and also with resoluteness, when called for. She is a dependable singer, seldom letting you down—more like San Diego weather.

A shocking event occurred at Carnegie Hall. Piotr Anderszewski is a fine pianist, and one who has demonstrated greatness. Readers may remember a *Diabelli Variations* performed in this hall: one for the ages, really. But in his late-2008 recital, he was shocking. He did not have his fingers, and he did not have his head. In the opening work, Bach's Partita in C minor, he did some good playing, but precious little of it. Mainly he was rushed, sloppy, inarticulate, jumpy, blurred, and incomprehensible. The partita was a mess. And the following piece—Schumann's *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*—was little better. In fact, it was worse. Anderszewski was simply dismaying. Rarely does so capable a musician lay such an egg.

But this is the mystery of concert life, of athletic life, and of other types of life. I did not stay for the second half (Janáček and Beethoven), disheartened as I was—even a little shaken. Did Anderszewski pull a Barenboim, rejuvenating himself? It seemed very unlikely. And I look forward to the next recital, and a new-old Anderszewski.

You can set your watch to Chanticleer's Christmas concert in the Medieval Sculpture Hall of the Metropolitan Museum. In a program ranging from earliest (musical) times to the present day, they give a clinic in purity, balance, cohesion, and other desirable qualities. They also, not infrequently, transcend. The best of their concerts are as much spiritual events as musical ones. And so it proved last month (though Homer nodded now and then). A high point was *My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord*, Op. 40, No. 1, by Pavel Chesnokov, the Russian liturgical master who lived from 1877 to 1944. (Can you imagine being a liturgical master after 1917?) The program ended with a medley of spirituals, beginning with "Everywhere I go, somebody talkin' 'bout Jesus"—and, at Christmas, Chanticleer does.

The farthest thing in all the world from a spiritual Christmas concert is Strauss's opera *Elektra*—carnal, animal, and mad. And a stunning masterpiece. This may be Strauss's greatest work, and it is one of the greatest operas we have. Lorin Maazel programmed it with his Philharmonic. He can be a dynamite Strauss conductor, as he proved in a *Salome* Final Scene a couple of seasons ago. Who was the soprano on that evening? It's irrelevant, I'm afraid, as Maazel simply ate up the score. It was unbelievably exciting Strauss. And he has, of course, had many another Strauss evening. In early September, I wrote a season-preview piece for the late *New York Sun* (2002–2008). I said that Maazel's *Elektra* could be the one not-miss event.

I'm glad I didn't miss it. This opera is almost made for this conductor, and he judged it superbly—getting from it all its madness and horror, and also the intense human love. Strauss includes that as well. Elektra was Deborah Polaski, who filled the bill, despite a problem or two (flatness on high notes, a shortage of gas at the end). Anne Schwanewilms was a radiant, affecting Chrysothemis—a most lovable sister. Jane Henschel was a powerhouse of a Klytämnestra, exploiting her part to the full without chewing the scenery (if there had been scenery—this was a concert performance). As Orest, Julian Tovey exuded brotherly regality.

Way back in 1937, Artur Rodzinski conducted the Philharmonic in *Elektra*, with Rose Pauly in the title role. This was dubbed "the event of the season," and a prized recording exists. Let us hope that someone recorded Maazel's Philharmonic *Elektra* too.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*, writing on a variety of subjects.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 January 2009, on page 53

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/New-York-chronicle-3987>