

The New Criterion

Music

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New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On Sergei Babayan at the 92nd St. Y; Alisa Weiler and the MET Chamber Ensemble at Zankel Hall; *The Queen of Spades*, *La rondine*, and *Orfeo et Eurydice* at the Metropolitan Opera; The King's Singer's Christmas concert and Lorin Maazel with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall; Yefim Bronfman and the New York Philharmonic at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

I had heard of Sergei Babayan, but had never heard him. He is an Armenian-born pianist who teaches in Cleveland. His public appearances are few, at least so far as I am aware. He is a bit of a legend—the sort of musician people whisper about, or trade rumors about. One day, an email came in. It was from a young pianist who studied with Babayan. He said, “I know I’m not supposed to contact critics, but I know you like my playing. And most of what I know about the piano comes from Babayan. He is playing at the 92nd St. Y on Sunday afternoon. You may wish to go.”

I went. He is indeed good. Babayan is a very confident pianist with much to be confident about. He has all the tools, or most of them. He has a big, big technique, which he deployed in sensationally hard music (Liszt, Rachmaninoff, etc.). He has great fluidity in his arms and hands, a fluidity that stays with him even when the music is percussive. No mere thunderer, he is a sensitive musician. He can make a huge sound without banging. And his *piano* is clear and singing, not muted or false. (A teacher I once knew called this “an honest *piano*.”)

On the program was a group of Schubert songs, transcribed by Liszt. Babayan rather accompanied himself in them. One or two songs, such as “Gretchen,” sagged a little—sagged in momentum and feeling. And he badly misjudged a Rachmaninoff piece—a magnificent piece, the *Moment musical* in C, Op. 16, No. 6. Warped by rubato, it did not have its structure. The house that Rachmaninoff built—his architecture—fell down.

But never mind. I don’t know when you will get the chance to hear Sergei Babayan, but, if you do, you should take it.

Audiences at the Metropolitan Opera had a chance to hear Seiji Ozawa conduct. He seldom appears in that pit, but there he was for *The Queen of Spades*, Tchaikovsky’s opera. He had some bad moments—or pages or stretches—on the night I attended: some looseness, some limpness, some mediocrity. But he also demonstrated much intelligent and impassioned conducting. He has had an uneven career, but a good one. And this night was like his career.

His Lisa was the Russian soprano Maria Guleghina—and she had a night quite typical of her. She had problems with intonation and sound; you can find purer singers. But she showed considerable operatic savvy, and she gave the role her all. More and more, I admire her: for her hell-for-leather quality, for her total commitment. She is not saving herself for later; she is doing her utmost now.

I used to say of Hildegard Behrens (another soprano), “She sings like there’s no tomorrow.” So it is with Guleghina.

The tenor, portraying Ghermann, was Ben Heppner. With him, you never know what you’re going to get. You could get a cracking mess, or you could get a tenorial paragon (virtually). On this night, the second fellow showed up, pretty much. Heppner emitted a lovely yet virile stream of sound. He is a veteran singer, and, in the middle and lower registers, he sounded his age, more or less. But when he went up top, the years melted away. His top has an extraordinarily youthful gleam.

The rest of the cast was adequate to excellent, and the spotlight should rest on Felicity Palmer, the British mezzo who portrayed the Countess. She was so good as to be exemplary. She is simply a paragon of taste: musical, theatrical, and artistic (to use the word that covers so much). The role of the Countess is usually reserved for a singer at the end of her career. Unfortunately, I never heard Elisabeth Söderström in her prime, but I had the privilege of hearing her as the Countess, when she was in her seventies. According to the calendar, Palmer is in her mid-sixties. According to my ears, however, she is far younger. It should be several more seasons before people say, “Isn’t it nice that the dear keeps going ...”

In last month’s chronicle, I sang the praises of Alisa Weilerstein, the young cellist. Let me sing a little more. She appeared in recital at Zankel Hall. And that recital included a Beethoven sonata: the one in D major, Op. 102, No. 2. (The pianist was Inon Barnatan, a young Israeli-born musician.) Weilerstein gave us big, bold Beethoven. Her playing matched the composer’s personality, or at least this sonata. There were splotches and slips, but nothing fatal. The second movement is marked “Adagio con molto sentimento d’affetto”—and that is just how the cellist played it. She sang her long lines with no sagging at all, in either pitch or mood.

Also on the program was a Kodály sonata, this one for cello alone. It sounds clichéd to say that Weilerstein delivered a tour de force—but so she did. She handled all the sonata’s challenges, mental and physical. She kept her concentration and let this long, somewhat unwieldy piece be a whole. Even when she was raw and savage, she was beautiful—beautiful in her playing. She was rustic where called for, and even bluesy. But she remembered that this was a piece of classical music: She did not overdo rusticity, or the blues. And, as she played, she gave us a definition of soulful. The cello can do that, of course—but so can Alisa Weilerstein.

Her parents are well-known music teachers—Donald, a violinist, and Vivian, a pianist—and you could say that Alisa was destined to be a musician. But she very much seems to me a born one, rather than a taught, or forced, one. Last month, I remarked that two of the best musicians in all the world were “girl cellists” (illegal phrase). I was speaking of Weilerstein and Ha-Na Chang, both born in 1982. Think of the violinist Hilary Hahn, another twentysomething. Truth is, three of our best musicians are girl string players.

Is it beginning to look a lot like Christmas? No, Christmas was weeks ago—but let’s travel back to that period. The King’s Singers gave a Christmas concert in Carnegie Hall. They did so with the New York Pops Orchestra, conducted by Rob Fisher. Normally, the King’s Singers work alone: as the six-man a cappella group they were created to be. They need an orchestra like a hole in the head. But occasionally they have one behind them.

On this night, they were slumming a little, with their microphones and all. They were not at their crispest. Even their remarks from the stage were substandard. The bass Stephen Connolly referred to Marilyn Horne as a national treasure, which of course she is. He later said that the New York Pops Orchestra was a national treasure—um, no. Furthermore, some of their arrangements are on the schlocky side, and they can sing them schlockily. The Wexford Carol, for example, should not sound like a pop song (and not a good one).

But it's hard to go wrong listening to the King's Singers: They are a stylish and likable group. I might say, specifically, that their longtime countertenor, David Hurley, makes a beautiful sound: a notably beautiful sound.

Why should the bass have mentioned Marilyn Horne? She was there, as a soloist. Now seventy-five, she came on to sing "The Bethlehem Babe," a carol she learned as a schoolgirl in Bradford, Pa. She still sounds like herself. And she collaborated with the King's Singers in "Silent Night." (They were offstage for "The Bethlehem Babe.") This, they sang in both English and German. Listening to Horne, I experienced a flood of memories: all good. And my eye might have been slightly, just slightly, moist.

I'm afraid I have an extra-musical note to sound: The conductor, Fisher, turned to the audience to give a speech. He said that the holidays included Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and January 20 (Inauguration Day): "a new beginning for our country." The audience responded with cheers. Fisher said, "I see I'm not the only one who's ready."

They cannot help themselves, these conductors, who turn their podiums into political platforms. It happens more and more. It would take one of their own—someone on their side, politically and culturally—to tell them, "Stop."

If it doesn't look a lot like Christmas, it doesn't look a lot like New Year's Eve, either—but, again, let's travel back. Lorin Maazel conducted his New York Philharmonic in a grab-bag of pieces. These included a Verdi overture, a Rossini overture, *Danse macabre*, the Can-Can, a Brahms Hungarian Dance, and the Ritual Fire Dance. Some of these are what you might call "light classics." And we hear too few of these in concert halls these days, I believe. They should not be for New Year's Eve only—or for summer only!

And Maazel conducts these pieces seriously, enthusiastically, and well. It is one of his strengths as a conductor: his catholicity. Whether accompanying an operetta aria (as he did on this evening) or conducting Mahler's Ninth Symphony, he does his best. He gives the piece all he can. And that is being a real musician. Readers may recall that, years ago, I reviewed a big CD series called *Great Conductors of the 20th Century*. These discs showed conductors in Mahler and Bruckner symphonies, of course—but also in such pieces as the *Du und du* Waltz and the *Tritsch, Tratsch* Polka. The best conductors are complete.

The Verdi overture on New Year's Eve was that to *La forza del destino*. Under Maazel, it was taut, bristling, and dramatic. I wish he had gone on to conduct the entire (long, absorbing) opera. And the *D. Danse macabre*? Maazel and the orchestra performed it with color and panache. But Glenn Dicterow, the concertmaster, may be too nice a fellow and too sweet a player for those solos: They were short on devilry. Let me mention, too, Offenbach's Barcarolle. Don't you wish you had written it? I do. And Maazel et al. gave it to us with near-perfect beauty.

The evening's soloist was Susan Graham, the mezzo-soprano from Texas. Her operetta aria was the "Vilja" from Lehár's *Merry Widow*. Graham also sang some Mozart and the two arias from *Carmen* (Carmen's arias, that is). Even when technique faltered a bit, she was musical. Her high notes are perhaps more brittle and effortful now than they used to be—but she has compensations.

In Carmen's Habanera, she tried a little too hard to be sexy: That quality is inherent in the character, and in the music. The Séguidille was fine, though Graham missed her final high B by a mile. She returned for an encore, a pop song: "La Vie en rose." And she sang it beautifully, floating a high, *pianc piano* G at the end. Very, very pretty.

La rondine is an operetta of sorts—certainly as close to an operetta as Puccini, or most any Italian, ever wrote. It is also a delicious work, too little known, actually. We have from it one very famous

soprano aria: “Chi il bel sogno,” also known as “Doretta’s Song.” But *La rondine* contains a lot more than that eternal hit. Try the anthemic love music that caps Act II—some of the most affirmative music you will ever encounter. Once it fills you, it stays with you for a long while.

In the mid-1990s, Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna made a superb recording of *La rondine*. (The conductor, Antonio Pappano, is not to be left out.) Gheorghiu, the Romanian soprano, and Alagna, the Italian-French tenor, are “the Love Couple”—married in real life. And people like to take shots at them. Those shots tend to bounce off, however, because Gheorghiu & Alagna are formidable opera singers.

And the Met, very smartly, engaged them for *La rondine*. She sang softly, almost conversationally, for much of the show. Sometimes, you had to lean in. But she knows how to make herself heard, no matter how big the house. And when she lets out her sound, you really know it. She was not at her most immaculate on this occasion, technically. But she always sings with intelligence—musical smarts—and there is probably no one you would rather hear in this role (Magda) at the moment. Plus, she looks the part (beautiful, alluring, semi-dangerous), which is no detraction.

Alagna was in excellent voice—thrilling voice, actually—and he seemed to know it: He enjoyed the music that Puccini provided, and why not? Puccini flatters the singer who flatters him back.

As for the Met’s production, it is overseen by Nicolas Joël, and is shared with houses in London and Toulouse—and is exactly what it should be: pretty, stylish, even glorious. It would take a heart of ice—or a trendy critic—to crab about it. The Met had a worthy supporting cast, too, including the young soprano Monica Yunus, who is the daughter of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus (the Bangladeshi “micro-banker”). Another young soprano was Lisette Oropesa, who played the maid, Lisette. How often does a Lisette get to play a Lisette? She played her well, too: saucily, poutily, and winningly.

Shift, now, to the pianist Yefim Bronfman. He participated in a chamber concert with members of the New York Philharmonic at the Metropolitan Museum. The concert was crowned with one of the great works in the literature, Schumann’s Piano Quintet in E flat, Op. 44. This is almost a piano concerto (and, in my view, a better piece than Schumann’s piano concerto—which is plenty good). All the great or important pianists have wanted to play the quintet, and have. Bronfman is in a long, noble tradition.

And, with his Philharmonic partners, he played this piece magnificently. He was practically the ultimate in Classical Romanticism. He was disciplined and resolute, and yet as free as he needed to be. In the Scherzo, he was shimmering and impish, particularly in those trilly, downward scales. Elsewhere in the work, he was huge—even titanic—while remaining “chamberly.”

Sometimes, when James Levine conducts a piece, you think, “This is unquestionable. This is how the music should go—there are no other possible ‘interpretations.’” It was almost this way with Bronfman in this quintet, at the Met Museum: He was unquestionable (or nearly so). He played the music as it should be. That is not an experience you have every night in a concert hall. But you have it not infrequently with Bronfman.

With the Philharmonic itself—the whole orchestra—Bronfman’s friend and fellow pianist, Emanuel Ax, played two pieces. The first was Szymanowski’s *Symphonic concertante*—dedicated to Artur Schnabel, of course. (He was Szymanowski’s friend and champion.) This is not a masterpiece, by a long shot, but its revival is justified. (Of course, the revival of a lot of pieces is justified.) Ax played the work with authority and relish. Then he turned to Strauss’s *Burleske*, that romp the composer penned when he was in his early twenties. Sometimes, Ax gives the impression of being the most conscientious piano student in the music school: adequate, solid, sensible, dutiful—but without much specialness. On this evening, however, in both pieces, he was very good. You have heard the

Burleske with more charm and scintillation. But Ax was unquestionably a pro in it.

And may I slip in an odd fact, or observation? While listening to Strauss's *Burleske*, you may very well hear what some regard as Bernstein's best song: "Somewhere."

Lorin Maazel, on the podium, concluded the concert with Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, in the Ravel orchestration. You can hear this piece again—and again—when it is conducted and played with high musicianship. And this, the performers provided. Maazel's pauses in the Great Gate were not for me. But then, he did not consult me, as he never does. He is entitled to his views, and almost always has a case.

I should mention, too, that he began the concert with Bach's *Brandenburg* Concerto No. 2. I have been knocking the Philharmonic's performances of these concertos throughout the season—they have not been especially good. But this one was, particularly with Philip Smith doing the honors on the trumpet. When the piece was over, the friend sitting next to me said, "Someone once said the definition of an intellectual was someone who could listen to the *William Tell* Overture without thinking of the Lone Ranger. Well, I can't hear the last movement of that concerto without thinking of Bill Buckley and *Firing Line*." Neither can I.

Two seasons ago, David Daniels sang Orfeo in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at the Met. He is a countertenor. This season, they had a mezzo-soprano. And not just any mezzo, but Stephanie Blythe, a powerhouse. She sang her role with authority, clarity, surefootedness—and, of course, power. Great power. It is hard to believe that so much sound is coming from one person. And that sound is usually of fine quality. Earlier, I spoke of an "eternal hit"—and "Che farò senza Euridice," from this opera, is another one. Blythe sang it with a power not just physical or vocal but emotional.

Danielle de Niese, a young soprano from Australia and Los Angeles, was Euridice. She is a good and smart singer with a pleasing sound: bright but with a cushion, fairly light in weight but not insubstantial. Also, she makes some movie stars and starlets look like plain Janes. If you think this is an irrelevant fact, opera administrators do not. Heidi Grant Murphy reprised her role of Amor, if not quite stealing the show, enhancing it, with her charm, agility, and unmistakable air of goodwill.

In the pit was the boss himself: Levine. He thinks *Orfeo ed Euridice* is one of the great operas, and so did Toscanini before him. It is not easy to argue with such a pair.

Two days afterward, he was in Zankel Hall with the Met Chamber Ensemble—Levine was. A young Italian soprano named Grazia Doronzo sang two song-cycles of Dallapiccola: *Tre poemi* and *Commiato*. She sang brightly and above all fearlessly—unafraid in this exposing music, in this exposing hall. (That music is difficult, too.) Fearlessness may be an underrated quality in a musician, especially in a singer. Also singing on this program was a young mezzo, Kate Lindsey—who traversed Carter's *In the Distances of Sleep*. She sang both richly and nimbly, as the music demanded. And she has a little bit of Frederica von Stade in her, I believe.

Incidentally, Carter wrote this cycle about two years ago, when he was a whippersnapper of ninety-eight. He turned one hundred on December 11, and is going very strong.

Elsewhere on the program, Levine conducted Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, in its chamber version. This was the sinewiest *Idyll* you have ever heard (Levine's Wagner can be like that)—and very effective. Finally, he conducted music of Johann Strauss, Jr., arranged by Schoenberg. Earlier, I was talking about Maazel and his catholicity—and his determination to appreciate and bring out the best in music, whatever it is. Levine has this quality, too, in abundance.

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