

# The New Criterion

## Music

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### New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera; Gustavo Dudamel and Pinchas Zuckerman with the New York Philharmonic; Vladimir Feltsman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Marilyn Horne's 75th birthday gala at Carnegie Hall; Ricardo Muti with the New York Philharmonic; the Miró Quartet at Weill Recital Hall; Joyce DiDonato at Zankel Hall; James Levine and the Metropolitan Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

City Opera performed *Antony and Cleopatra*, Samuel Barber's opera from 1966. But it did not perform the opera on the City Opera stage. We had this opera in Carnegie Hall, in concert form. City Opera has pretty much canceled its 2008–09 season, as it rebuilds and regroups. Recent times have been dicey for the company, but the company, it seems now, will live on.

And *Antony and Cleopatra* lives on, despite a famously rocky beginning. Barber wrote the opera for the opening of the “new Met,” as we used to call it, in Lincoln Center. (The previous location was Broadway between Thirty-ninth and Fortieth streets.) He penned the role of Cleopatra with Leontyne Price in mind, and it was she, of course, who sang it when the new Met bowed. Antony was the Puerto Rican baritone—or bass (it depended)—Justino Diaz. A lot went wrong on opening night: Mainly, the elaborate scenery and costumes caused problems for the singers. And critics were unkind. Later, Barber revised the piece, probably improving it.

And it contains much wonderful music. Price sang excerpts from it all over the world, causing a sensation with, for example, “Give me my robe, put on my crown.” To me, the opera is lush, exotic, often rapturous, and finally persuasive. Others find it kitschy and tedious. Put it this way: If you like Barber, you like *Antony and Cleopatra*. But the opera is still probably less popular than Barber's other biggie, *Vanessa*.

Singing the title roles of *A & C* in Carnegie Hall were Lauren Flanigan, the American soprano who has long been City Opera's prima donna, and Teddy Tahu Rhodes, the baritone from New Zealand. (He owns the best triple-decker name in opera, and perhaps anywhere.) Flanigan is known as a “singing actress,” and so she is. On this night, she sounded frayed—battle-scarred—but was also game. Gameness counts for a lot in singing. As for Rhodes, he was smooth and virile, as he can be expected to be. But he also sounded tight.

Doing the conducting was City Opera's music director, George Manahan. As usual, he was competent and adept, clearly knowing the score. He is never unprepared. But he, and the opera, could have used more flavor and oomph. Over this entire performance hung a grayness: a mediocrity, an okayness—a sense of “Good enough for government work.” *Antony and Cleopatra*, given its troubled existence, could have used a better sell.

Gustavo Dudamel has now reached the grand age of twenty-eight, and he is about to take over the reins of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. But first he guest-conducted the New York Philharmonic. The main work on the program was Mahler's Fifth Symphony—but the program began with a recent violin concerto. This was the work written by Oliver Knussen for Pinchas Zukerman in 2002. And Zukerman was on hand to play the work on this occasion, with the Philharmonic.

The concerto is in three movements, to which Knussen has given nice, old-fashioned names: Recitative, Aria, and Gigue. The Recitative features some musical doodling, some fiddling around (perhaps appropriate for a violin concerto). In modern fashion, the music is nervous, edgy. The Aria is spooky and bleak—again in the modern fashion. You may also give this movement credit for expressing a “haunting beauty.” And there comes a rocking that resembles a lullaby. The final movement, Gigue, is one of those angry, afraid deals we so often hear: the soundtrack to a horror movie.

Zukerman gave us helpings of his prize-winning sweet sound. And he was relaxed and casual—he almost always is. This can be a virtue—there is too much tightness in music—but it can also bleed over into complacency.

Dudamel made a recording of the Mahler Fifth, with his Venezuelan youth orchestra. I praised it highly when it was released. His Fifth with the Philharmonic was less praiseworthy. There were extremes of tempo: slows that were too slow, fasts that were too fast. This might be chalked up to immaturity. Moreover, the opening funeral march is marked “with measured step,” and the conductor did not step that way: He was frustratingly halting. Parts of the Adagietto were beautifully breathed; other parts were cruelly and unnaturally manipulated. (And they complain about Lorin Maazel!) More broadly, the symphony sometimes came off as episodic, rather than as a single piece.

But Dudamel is a talented guy, and he displayed much of this talent. He is always called “kinetic”—same way Valery Gergiev is called “mercurial”—and kinetic is the word. He unquestionably knows how to inject excitement. He did this, for example, at the end of the symphony, where the music courses joyously in D major. Of course, Mahler knows how to inject excitement, too: Sometimes all you have to do is conduct—or play or sing—him.

Vladimir Feltsman is another talented guy. Indeed, he is a pianist of staggering gifts. But he is uneven. One night he is world-beating—a pianist of the first rank; another night he is—okay. In his recent recital at the Metropolitan Museum, he was okay.

He began with Bach's Partita No. 1 in B flat, and he seemed very, very nervous. His fingers had a hard time staying on the keyboard. And this caused problems with tone, rhythm, phrasing, and other essential elements. One cringed in one's seat, hoping like mad that Feltsman would find his groove. He did some admirable things in the partita: The second minuet was stylish. But he never really found that groove. The closing Gigue was jarringly coarse, vulgar.

He then turned to Schubert's Four Impromptus, Op. 90, and here some of his rightful authority showed up. His fingers were able to do what his judgment dictated, more or less. But he was still not himself: in his sound, for example, which was unusually brittle. Too often he was on top of the keys rather than into them. And he closed his program with Schumann's *Carnaval*. This piece is full of whimsy, which is not necessarily Feltsman's leading quality at the piano. Throughout the work, he was mechanical and bangy, and also colorless. That is not *Carnaval*, and that is not really Feltsman, either.

I recall a recital in Carnegie Hall: Feltsman's program included the “Pathétique” Sonata and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I have never heard anyone better in either. Piano playing takes nerve, and sometimes you got it, and sometimes you don't. May Feltsman have plenty of it on nights to come.

Marilyn Horne, the immortal mezzo, turned seventy-five, and she celebrated with a gala in Carnegie Hall. This was a cavalcade of stars. On the bill were seventeen singers, including some of—many of, actually—the best in the world. They sang music, or at least composers, closely associated with Horne. The afternoon had a pair of hosts: the bass Samuel Ramey and the mezzo Frederica von Stade, both veterans. Indeed, Ramey said one of the most poignant things I have ever heard from a singer: “I’m Samuel Ramey—or at least I used to be.” It can be hard to fade from the stage.

The first half of this concert featured young singers, who have benefited from the Marilyn Horne Foundation. (The foundation is what the first President Bush called a “point of light,” in the music world.) I was especially pleased to hear Bruce Sledge, a tenor previously unknown to me. He sang a Bellini song in a remarkably easy way, and with a beautiful, fresh sound. I remember something Leontyne Price once said—to a tenor, in fact—in a master class: “It’s so easy for you. It’s like falling off a log.” There was also Meredith Arwady, a contralto: and it was nice to see a contralto on the bill, any contralto. They have not gone the way of the dodo bird after all.

After intermission, the stars came out to shine. Dolora Zajick did not sing her best “Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix”—but she floated an amazing high B flat at the end. No one does that, ever. And Warren Jones—one of four accompanists on the afternoon—played very, very well. This accompaniment is not especially pianistic, but Jones made it so: It was liquid, shimmering. Piotr Beczala, the fabulous Polish tenor, was not up to his snuff: He sang “Una furtiva lagrima” in a slidey, swoony, sloppy way. But Susan Graham was exquisitely tasteful in “Connais-tu le pays.”

James Morris sang a stretch of *The Rake’s Progress*—with theatrical and musical savvy, as expected. Then David Daniels, the countertenor, sang a Handel aria—“Cara sposa” from *Rinaldo*. He shaped it, spun it, stunningly well. One can forget—amid the hype and leather-jacketed PR about him—what a good singer he is. Dmitri Hvorostovsky sang “O Carlo, ascolta,” slashingly and dashingly. He always sounds a little contained for Verdi—one would like to bring his sound forward, and Italianize it. But he has hardly been stopped, huh?

In an interview last fall with me, Horne said she had become “so partial to Brahms.” That music “makes me feel good,” she said. And that is an excellent observation. Thomas Quasthoff sang “Wie bist du, meine Königin,” and he was a little wan of voice—but he brought out the composer’s characteristic kindness. Karita Mattila sang “Songs My Mother Taught Me,” winningly. Thomas Hampson sang “Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen,” from Mahler’s *Knaben Wunderhorn*. He judged the song superbly, and so did Jones. Von Stade and Ramey smiled their way through “I Bought Me a Cat.”

And finally we get to Joyce DiDonato—who closed the show with “Tanti affetti” from Rossini’s *Donna del lago*. Oh, my goodness. I once heard Barbara Bonney say of a singer—a soprano—“She sang perfectly. *Perfectly*.” DiDonato sang perfectly—*perfectly*—too, is all I can tell you. It was one of those performances about which, afterward, you simply stammer.

Horne herself did not sing, though she gave remarks at the end—full of gratitude. You can go many, many a year without hearing an afternoon of singing so fine and enriching. And I was reminded of a pet point of mine (if I may): If you seek a golden age of singing, look about you. Not all golden singers are dead and buried, or retired.

Riccardo Muti is headed to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in 2010. And he guest-conducted the New York Philharmonic in a program heavy on the Haydn. We began with a symphony, No. 89 in F major—a symphony without a nickname (such as “l’Ours”). Muti and the Philharmonic were not a model of crispness or togetherness, but they were adequate. Haydn’s syncopations came through. Overall, this performance was a little subdued, a little conventional. Haydn is a merry, spirited fellow, and Muti can be on the stolid side. But he gets the job done. And the closing movement had

a tasteful earthiness, just right.

There was a soloist, Thomas Quasthoff, who sang four Haydn arias—opera arias. Quasthoff seems to like Haydn a lot, having recorded him frequently, and sung him onstage frequently. He sings Haydn in an appropriately robust and undainty manner. He does not handle his Haydn with sugar tongs. On this evening, he was smart and capable in almost everything he did. Do I have a criticism? Sure: At least one trill was faked, rather than genuine—simulated rather than truly executed. A German bass-baritone should not be expected to be Beverly Sills, but Quasthoff can do better.

The Miró Quartet is a fine, valuable ensemble, founded at Oberlin College in the mid-1990s. They played a concert in Weill Recital Hall, the upstairs jewel in the Carnegie building. And they told us they were presenting an all-American program: Ives, Kevin Puts (b. 1972), and Dvořák. Dvořák? Yes, the String Quartet No. 12, nicknamed “the American.” Is that cheating, saying you’re doing an all-American program and including Dvořák, no matter what the character of the piece? Yes, but such cheating is understandable.

The group began with Ives’s hymn-soaked String Quartet No. 1, which is designated “From the Salvation Army.” Actually, they began with talking. The violist gave a little lecture on the piece, deadening the concert from the start. Nothing kills a musical experience like talking—and unnecessary talking: The violist said nothing that could not be found in the evening’s program notes, for those who desired to read. In any case, the Miró played the Ives well: with richness, passion, and conviction. They showed obvious respect for the music, which is prerequisite. And each player evinced a soloistic quality, while cocking an ear to the whole.

The third movement—Offertory: Adagio cantabile—had this problem: It was overly rich, overly lush, when some sparseness was due. And the final movement—Postlude: Allegro marziale—had this problem: The players’ rhapsody spilled over into sloppiness and carelessness. Nonetheless, their abandon was to be appreciated.

You should count Kevin Puts as a courageous composer, and I will tell you why: He is willing to write beautifully, even when critics and other killjoys sneer “neo-Romanticism.” To Puts, a major third is not a major crime, or even a minor one. He is somewhat like William Bolcom, in that he is eclectic. Detractors might call him kitschy or sentimental—same as they do Bolcom. For the Miró Quartet, Puts wrote *Credo*, a work in five movements. It has some lovely things in it, including a stretch that sounds like pop music. I do not mean that as a knock. And *Credo* has a sense of play, a quality too seldom found in today’s music.

I did not hear the Dvořák quartet—why? Because I popped downstairs to Zankel Hall, in the “basement” of the Carnegie building. There, Joyce DiDonato was singing with a French original-instruments band called Les Talens Lyriques. And she was singing Handel—arias from operas such as *Teseo*, *Ariodante*, and *Hercules*. Most of these are on her recent CD called *Furore*. And furious the singing was. DiDonato was extraordinarily bold, juicy, and hot.

Needless to say, she sang well, because she is scarcely capable of doing otherwise. All the bedrock requirements were fulfilled; the fundamentals were in place. But once those things are taken care of, we are in the realm of taste. And, to me, DiDonato was too hot, too mad—too furious. Musical sense should have pride of place. DiDonato rather chewed the scenery, even though there was no scenery on this concert stage. In my view, she was in danger of becoming an opera cartoon. Then again, life, people may claim, is like that.

*A Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera was not too hot, not too mad—indeed, it could have used some additional drama. As with the *Antony and Cleopatra* discussed earlier, a mediocrity hung over this performance (although maybe it is better to say a so-so-ness). The title role was sung by Roberto Frontali, who was sturdy, rugged—a little rough. He had some terrible vocal struggles, but then

Rigoletto struggles too, so ...

The Duke of Mantua was Giuseppe Filianoti, a worthy tenor. He was warm, virile, and Italianate. But he was also full of effort. Like Frontali, he struggled, vocally, and the voice pinched badly “under pressure,” to borrow a phrase from my colleague Martin Bernheimer. Gilda was sung by a Polish soprano, Aleksandra Kurzak. She had some uncertain vocal moments, but she was endearing—a lovable person onstage, as Gilda should be. And the conductor was making his Met debut. He was Riccardo Frizza, and he was all right—serviceable. So was this entire *Rigoletto*.

As I was leaving the house, an adjective occurred to me: “B-listy.” I also wondered whether the ticket-buyer—whom the critic (who is a freeloader) should always bear in mind—got his money’s worth. Well, he certainly got *Rigoletto*, that splendid work of art. And he got that serviceable performance. I think of a favorite expression from golf: “It’s not how you hit the good shots, it’s how you hit the bad shots.” A great house should have off nights that are not abominable but adequate. And the Met generally succeeds on this score. Perhaps that’s how we should judge houses: on their worst performances, not their best.

The ticket-buyer on a particular Sunday afternoon in Carnegie Hall definitely, definitely got his money’s worth. The Met Orchestra was conducted by its leader, James Levine. And the concert included two soloists. The first was DiDonato—she was everywhere—who sang Mozart’s concert aria “Ch’io mi scordi di te? ... Non temer, amato bene.” They say that, if you can perform Mozart, you can perform anything: He is the ultimate test. Whether this is true or not—and I lean toward yes—DiDonato passed with flying colors. She was a model Mozartean, and so, of course, was Levine—who took the piano part, as well as the conductor’s. He played with notable purity (though he might have “sung out” a speck more). Madame Lhévinne, his long-ago teacher, would have been pleased.

It should also be said in DiDonato’s favor that she comes ready to sing: She needed no warm-up—no onstage warm-up—either in the Met Orchestra concert or in the Horne gala. “But don’t they all come ready to sing? Isn’t that a professional must?” Oh, what a sweet, naïve question.

Also on the program was a new work by Charles Wuorinen, called *Time Regained*, a Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra. If you did not see the name in the program, you could probably not have guessed that this was a piece by Wuorinen. He is normally the “thorniest” of modernists. But this piece is rather simple, tuneful, “accessible.” It has an innocence about it, and dollops of charm. I hate to tell you, but I was reminded of Dmitri Kabalevsky. I’m not sure that the material can bear the work’s length: thirty minutes. But I would like to hear *Time Regained* again, which, as you know, is high praise.

Serving as piano soloist was Peter Serkin, who was intelligent and committed. He has long suffered some stiffness of hands and arms—but this caused little trouble in the Wuorinen.

After intermission, DiDonato returned to sing some of her friend Rossini. She sang *La regata veneziana* with tremendous flair, as well as technical soundness. You should have seen Levine: Rarely has a conductor had so much fun. He was eating up every second of it. When La DiDonato positioned herself for an encore, you knew it was going to be one Rossini aria or the other: either “Una voce poco fa” or “Non più mesta.” It was the latter, and DiDonato dazzled in it, as usual.

Levine closed out the program with a Mendelssohn symphony, the fourth one, called the “Italian.” He was very Germanic in it—but the symphony is “German” too, of course. Levine combined merriment and strength, just as the symphony does. The Andante was a clinic in lyrical sensitivity. The Saltarello was not too fast—Levine is too shrewd for that. Yes, the ticket-buyer got his money’s worth, even if he paid a scalper’s price.

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