

The New Criterion

Music

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New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra; Ann Sofie von Otter and Stephen Hough at Carnegie Hall; *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Eugene Onegin*, and *Il Trovatore* at the Metropolitan Opera; Montserrat Caballé at Avery Fisher Hall; the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center at Alice Tully Hall; Pinchas Zukerman and Marc Neikrug at the 92nd St. Y; Danielle de Niese at Weill Recital Hall; and Zubin Mehta with the Vienna Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall.

James Levine likes 'em old. In recent days, he has championed the music of Elliott Carter, Leon Kirchner, and Gunther Schuller, among others. Schuller is the baby of the three I've named, born in 1925. Carter was born in 1908 (yes) and Kirchner in 1919. Two other Levine-favored composers died in January and February: One was George Perle, born in 1915; the other was Lukas Foss, born in 1922.

With his Boston Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, Levine performed a new piece by Schuller, *Where the Word Ends*. It is no autumnal ditty. Almost a half hour long, it is energetic, sweeping, and ambitious. Schuller is not yet ready for a rocking chair, as an encounter with him will prove: whether in person or in his music. Does *Where the Word Ends* engage and keep attention? Sort of, yes. But you will unlikely be yearning for a second hearing.

This concert began with some singing by Barbara Frittoli, the tasteful, touching Italian soprano. She is one of the most appropriate Desdemonas you will ever see. She sang two Mozart pieces, the first of which was the concert aria "Bella mia fiamma ... Resta, o cara." It was lovely, sweet, and limp. Then she sang an aria—*an opera aria*—"O smania! o Furie! ... D'Oreste, d'Ajace!" from *Idomeneo*. This is one of the most fiery and biting things Mozart ever wrote.

Do you remember when I said, a couple of chronicles ago, that Glenn Dicterow—the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic—may be too nice a guy to play the solos in *Danse macabre* (which, you remember, are devilish)? Well, Frittoli may be too nice a woman to sing Elettra's aria.

Anne Sofie von Otter, who is surely a nice woman, gave a recital in Carnegie Hall. The Swedish mezzo traversed Sibelius, Hahn, and other composers. One Sibelius song, I had never encountered before: "Den judiska flickans sang," or "The Jewish Girl's Song." Extraordinary. And von Otter, of course, is extraordinary: one of the best singers of our time. She is a singing musician: intelligent, tasteful, poised, precise, learned, versatile. But I have perhaps made her sound too ... academic. She has musicality in spades, and she is both natural and trained—a winning combo, in music and many other fields.

My criticisms of her singing at Carnegie are very few. You could quibble with some of her interpretive choices: For example, I think Hahn's "A Chloris"—that stunning neo-Baroque

creation—should have a strict pulse; von Otter was fairly free in it. But she always has a case. Also, she did a lot of singing in what you might call half voice, or two-thirds voice. Is that because she wanted to, or because she has to husband diminishing resources? I am thinking, and, of course, rooting for, the former.

She likes a composer named Brad Mehldau, an American jazzman in his late thirties. Renée Fleming likes him, too. Both have advocated his music. In her Carnegie recital, von Otter sang a cycle called, simply, *Love Songs*. I don't yet see the point of Mehldau—whose music has struck me as pleasant, innocuous, monochromatic, and banal. But von Otter and Fleming are canny musicians, whose choices should not be taken lightly.

Von Otter devoted the last part of her recital to pop music, including a song called “Calling You,” by Jevetta Steele, from the movie *Baghdad Café*. What a good song, sung exquisitely, with an almost unbearable aching, by this supreme mezzo-soprano.

The day after von Otter appeared in Carnegie, Stephen Hough, the English pianist, appeared. He had a recital of his own up his sleeve: and his program was rather old-fashioned, like Hough himself. “Old-fashioned,” bear in mind, is no putdown, from some of us. He began with Bach's famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor, in an arrangement by “Alfred Cortot / Stephen Hough.” How's that for respect for the past, both its people and its practices? He also played three Fauré pieces, including Impromptu No. 5 in F-sharp minor, which many of us associate with Horowitz.

Hough is an excellent pianist, as I've explained several times in these pages. He has much sensitivity, and much technique. He does have his faults, however, or rather tendencies: including a certain brittleness of sound. We heard some of that in Carnegie Hall. But we also heard exemplary sounds, including in that Fauré impromptu, which had a right limpidity. Also, Hough's filigree in a Chopin nocturne—the one in B major, Op. 62, No. 1—was delicious. At encore time, he gave us some Spanish music, which was not exactly de Larrochian, but satisfying nonetheless. There has to be Spanish music after Alicia, doesn't there?

Francesco Cilea's opera *Adriana Lecouvreur* is known for one thing, in particular: the soprano aria “Io son l'umile ancella,” which is not just an aria, but veritably a diva's anthem. There is other music in the opera too, however. And although *Adriana* does not rival *Fidelio*, it will last long after its critics. It already has. And the Met just staged it, with an experienced singer in the role of Maurizio: Plácido Domingo. This was the role in which he made his Met debut, forty years ago.

For years—not for forty, but about fifteen—I have called Domingo “the ageless Spaniard.” It would be wrong now to say he shows no signs of age. But it would be right to say that he shows remarkably few of them. Officially, he was born in 1941, but some whisper that he was born earlier. Whatever the case, he is a marvel, and he did some marvelous singing in the recent *Adriana*. Some call him a “baritenor” now—a combination of baritone and tenor. Actually, he started out as a baritone, like other noble tenors such as Caruso, Melchior, and Bergonzi. There has always been a baritonal “trunk” to his sound—and that feature stands him in good stead today.

As Maurizio, he sounded pretty much himself, doing very little wavering. He did some swooning around—some sliding between notes—but he always has (and the Latin American tenors who follow in his wake do too, I'm afraid). Many have commented on his transpositions down—the fact that he is singing things in lower keys now. That's all right with me, and if Domingo wants to end his illustrious career as Boris Godunov, I'll want to be there to hear it.

I did not especially want to go to hear *Eugene Onegin*, which the Met also staged in this period. Why? Because I lack appreciation of Tchaikovsky's masterpiece? No, not at all. It's just that, in this business, you go to quite a few *Onegins*, and I was not particularly eager to take in another one. I'm glad I did, though, because this was an extraordinary Saturday afternoon. *Eugene Onegin* was

absolutely overpowering.

This was chiefly thanks to Tchaikovsky, of course, who created something that scores again and again. But it was also thanks to the Met's cast, especially to the baritone in the title role, Thomas Hampson. The Met has another illustrious Onegin, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who is Russian, of course. I'm not sure I don't prefer the kid from Spokane—splendid as Hvorostovsky is. Hampson was at the top of his game on this day, both vocally and theatrically. His singing and his acting were carefully thought through, as they always are, but they were not studied or otherwise unnatural. You hung on his every word, note, look, and move. His abandon at the end—when Onegin pleads with Tatiana—was overwhelming. He held nothing back, going for broke, just as Onegin does. Honestly, Thomas Hampson gave one of the best operatic performances I have witnessed.

Other cast members? Karita Mattila was a smart and moving Tatiana, and Piotr Beczala, the young Polish tenor, was a superb Lenski. A longtime opera critic, who happens to be a tenor himself, said to me, "I've never heard a better 'Kuda, kuda.'" Neither have I. At the end, James Morris came on to sing that wonderful aria given to Prince Gremin. Morris did not quite pull it off, in my opinion, simply lacking the lyricism. But, given all he has contributed to opera over several decades, he deserves his twilight Gremins.

I've been talking about age quite a bit in this chronicle, more than I should. But I have to record this: Montserrat Caballé is seventy-five. And she gave a recital in Avery Fisher Hall, along with a youngish Russian tenor named Nikolay Baskov, who is a "crossover artist": He does both classical and pop. As far as I can tell, he's sort of the Andrea Bocelli of Russia. And he had many fans in the hall that night—boisterous, unruly fans, who must rarely attend a classical concert.

What did Caballé, sound like? Not like Caballé. There is vinegar in her voice, bottles and bottles of it, and that voice was painful to hear. It was curdled, somehow. But sound aside, how did she sing? Not well. Would she be the best singer in your local church? Maybe, but, frankly, not necessarily. And bear in mind that this is one of the greatest singers we have ever known.

It was said in the 1984 presidential campaign that John Glenn always got more applause on entering a room than he did when leaving it. The people greeted a space hero. After a dull speech, they applauded politely for a politician. Caballé received a thunderous ovation when she appeared—we were all screaming our heads off, for all she had done. And we were excited to see her. But after she sang—applause was polite, maybe a little confused.

You can debate till the cows come home when a singer should retire. The late Victoria de los Angeles came out of retirement when she was in her seventies, because she had financial problems—or so it was said. Why does Montsi continue? Because she needs the money, or because she needs, or loves, the public? Probably the latter, and there is no shame in that. As long as people want her, and she wants them, why should they not have each other?

I have frequently made an analogy to golf—to the Senior Tour. Arnold Palmer kept going and going, even as his scores got higher and higher. He simply loved being out there, and his fans—"Arnie's Army"—loved seeing him. Jack Nicklaus did something quite different: As soon as his game wasn't sharp, he stopped. There is no one right approach, although I myself might favor the Nicklaus way. Caballé is doing it the Palmer way. And I hope she is as happy as she seems to be, living the life she has chosen, or that was chosen for her, when she was born a soprano.

ATrovatore at the Met did not begin very well, but it ended well—very, very well. And that's the trajectory you want, if you have to have a trajectory. In the early going, Sondra Radvanovsky (Leonora) was all right, though she had a case of the flats. Dmitri Hvorostovsky (the Conte di Luna) was all right, though he was underpowered. Marcelo Álvarez (Manrico) was all right. And the conductor, Gianandrea Noseda, was all right. Dolora Zajick, who portrayed Azucena, was always

more than all right: From her first notes, she put on a clinic of Verdi mezzo singing. She was correct, insightful, and riveting. Her delirium of revenge at the end was blood-chilling. The performers around her rose to a high level, too. By the time the curtain fell, we'd had a rip-roaring Verdi experience.

I should note that the Met is sporting a new *Trovatore* production, by David McVicar, the Scottish director. How is it? I have to tell you, I didn't notice it much. That may seem like an insult, or a critic's dereliction. But I did not have the sense of witnessing a new production, or any production at all. I was simply looking at Verdi's *Trovatore*, along with hearing it. And that is high praise of the director. A director who does not insist on putting himself at the center of an opera: That is a director to hail, and rehire.

After a renovation lasting almost two years, Alice Tully Hall reopened—and a nice new, or refurbished, hall it is. It is sleekly wooden, and beautifully brown. When Zankel Hall opened in 2003, I commented on how beautiful browns can be. I was reminded of this in Alice Tully. Plus, it has that new-hall smell, which, of course, we all love: May it linger for a while.

This is the home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and, to christen their improved digs, they had a long and eclectic program. The program included two new works, written for the occasion: one by George Tsontakis, the other by William Bolcom. Tsontakis's offering is called *AnTHem*, and it is written for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. Why the funky capital letters in the title? They stand for "Alice Tully Hall." This piece is three minutes long, and the composer calls it a "trifle." That it is, but it is also playful, a little mysterious—pleasant.

Bolcom's piece is called *Shakyamuni*, and he tells us he was thinking of "the little Buddha I have in the backyard garden." He placed his musicians—about ten of them—all around Alice Tully. The piece is partly ceremonial, and it is a wee bit pretentious. It is "Oriental," as we used to say (before that word became verboten, and "Asian" came in). Also New Agey, birdy (Messiaen-like), a little minimalist. Bolcom is ever the eclecticist, and almost always worth hearing.

For Marilyn Horne's seventy-fifth-birthday gala, which I wrote about last month, he wrote a pièce d'occasion: a neat novelty, with words by Sheldon Harnick, celebrating Horne. *Shakyamuni* is another pièce d'occasion—designed, in part, or so I gather, to highlight the acoustics of the new hall. Will it ever be heard again? In any case, it served its purpose, and so, for that matter, did the Tsontakis.

Pinchas Zukerman, the now-veteran violinist, gave a recital at the 92nd Street Y—and he did so with his longtime piano partner, Marc Neikrug. They began with a Mozart sonata, the one in B flat, K. 454. And Zukerman began with one of the ugliest sounds you've ever heard—it was a bucket of nails in your face. This is noteworthy, because Zukerman is famous for his sound: usually a very sweet one. And, needless to say, he went on to make better sounds in the Mozart.

But this was not his best Mozart. Zukerman was strong, robust, and bold, which is fine. But he was also rough, indifferent, and very, very impure. You can only have so much messiness with your Mozart. Also, the sonata was short on humor and lilt—on felicity, which should imbue the whole thing.

Before you knew it, Zukerman had switched to a larger instrument: the viola. And he and Neikrug played Shostakovich's viola sonata, which is the composer's last work. Both performers showed that they understand this work, which is half the battle—more like three-quarters. The other quarter is execution. And that they did fine. Theirs was not a performance of immaculate care—both musicians were a little shaggy, technically. But, to their credit, they did not approach the sonata tremblingly. They did not regard it as a holy relic. They just played it. And, in the closing Adagio, they achieved transport, which is just what we—and the sonata—want.

Danielle de Niese, the young soprano from L.A., performed a program in Weill Recital Hall. Let it be said that de Niese is so pretty, she could knock most movie stars off the screen. I trust we are all grownups here: and that we acknowledge that this matters in the world of opera, which de Niese inhabits.

And she is a worthy and interesting musician. She began with Handel, which has been her bread and butter: two arias from *Semele*. The voice was breathy, perhaps affected by early-recital nerves. The technique was adequate, with ornamentation and passagework competently handled. Best was the singer's overall musicianship—including the spirit she expressed. In "Myself I Shall Adore," she was the picture of narcissism.

After Handel came Grieg, whose songs are too little heard in recital. These were selections from *Haug, Haugtussa*—and they included "Blåbaer-Li," or "Blueberry Hill," which is not to be confused with the Fats Domino hit. During her Grieg, de Niese sang quite a few bad notes: ones whose phonation was interrupted, for example. Several onsets were unclear. This was not singing of the polished type. But it was singing of the convincing type—for de Niese knows how to tell a story, and how to gauge a piece of music. Moreover, her love of singing is obvious—and this is a love you catch, while listening in the audience.

She sang a Wolf set, and one song was quite unfortunate. This had nothing to do with the singing of it. In "Wie lange schon war immer mein Verlangen," from *The Italian Songbook*, de Niese put on some Gloria Swanson moves that were grotesque. A recital hall is not an opera house. And even in the opera house, there are limits. But never mind. De Niese is a pleasure to hear. The voice may not be first-rate, and the technique may be deficient. Impurities may abound. But this is a smart, smart singer, and winning too, and the prominence she has attained is deserved.

You never know who will stand in front of the Vienna Philharmonic—they have no permanent conductor, but endless guests. In Carnegie Hall, for four concerts, it was Zubin Mehta, who has stood before the VPO many times. In one of these four concerts, he conducted Bruckner's final symphony, the Ninth. He knows this piece cold, and so does the orchestra.

It is said that Bruckner's symphonies are "cathedrals in sound." When the VPO is playing them, they are cathedrals lined in velvet. It goes without saying that this orchestra has an exceptionally beautiful sound: warm and glowing. It fills you, and can even have a physical effect. The orchestra put its sound to good use in the Bruckner Ninth. Mehta shaped phrases lovingly (as critics like to say), and sometimes too lovingly: It can be wise to let a Bruckner symphony simply unfold. Let it march on, almost inexorably. What's more, the VPO committed many mistakes, which is not like that ensemble. Too much looseness was present in this account.

Best of the three movements was the middle one, the Scherzo. It had its proper contrasts, and exuded much life and grandeur. Least successful, probably, was the closing movement: which was earthbound, untranscendent. I imagine every eye was dry. But Mehta is a fine and talented conductor, and the Vienna Phil. is a world-class orchestra, and they were playing the Bruckner Ninth, dedicated to "the beloved God." There are worse ways to spend an evening.

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

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