

The New Criterion

Music

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by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On Maris Janson & the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestras and André Previn's 80th Birthday at Carnegie Hall; *La sonambula*, *Rusalka*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Pagliacci*, & *The Elixir of Love* at the Metropolitan Opera; and the all-Handel night with the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a famous piece of music, one of the most famous. Yet for all its fame, you seldom hear it in the concert hall. And when you do: you are reminded of its strangeness, greatness, and immortality. It helps to have a good conductor—preferably one with a moral component, for Beethoven has that, and his Ninth certainly does.

Mariss Jansons has it, too. He is one of our best conductors, but, beyond that, many people have remarked on a moral strength within him. You come away from an encounter with him rather moved, or at least impressed. I found that last summer in Salzburg, when I did a public interview with him. Jansons had very difficult beginnings. He was born in Riga in 1943 (if you can imagine). His mother was in hiding, her father and brother already having been killed by the Gestapo. As he grew up, Jansons of course faced the Communists.

In any case, he is an important conductor, and he has two orchestras to lead: the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, whose home is Munich. It was the latter orchestra that he brought to Carnegie Hall, for three concerts.

On a Saturday night, they dispatched a symphony of Haydn: No. 88 in G. And then they tackled the Ninth. Under Jansons, the first movement was sensible and muscular, and never have the final pages been more emphatic. (The final pages of this movement, that is.) The second movement, that stunning scherzo, was a little flat. It could have been tenser, spookier, and more visceral. It could have been more together, too—that is, the orchestra could have been more unified. The third movement, which is to say, the slow movement? Initially, it struck me as indifferent and awfully fast—too fast. But it was appealingly and unusually meaty, and well shaped. Over time, it grew on me.

In the last movement, as you know, we get voices: soloists and a chorus. The baritone soloist, who leads off the singing, was Michael Volle, a German. He was very expressive, and almost too much so: He savored his notes and words perhaps a little more than was good for them. But here is an aside about him: He looks rather like Beethoven, with a broad Germanic face and a prize mane of hair. The tenor (who does not look like Beethoven) was Michael Schade. And in his cries of “Froh” he was both clarion and lyrical. I wish to say about him, however, what I have said before: Those of us who value him highly hope that, as his career continues, he resists the temptation to strain.

To this last movement, Jansons imparted several good ideas. But he did not go off-script—off

Beethoven's script. He is a faithful conductor. This Ninth was not the most transcendent or involving or throttling you have ever heard. But it was satisfying. And I would like to relate something from that interview with Jansons last summer.

He recalled attending a rehearsal of the late conductor Rafael Kubelik, many years ago. After the rehearsal, he went up to the great man to ask him how to handle a particular spot in the Ninth: in the last movement, the choral movement. Jansons specified—to us, the audience—what that moment was. And when it occurred in Carnegie Hall, I thought of him and Kubelik. Jansons handled the moment expertly.

Move, now, to the Metropolitan Opera—where we had *La sonnambula*, that spiffy piece from Bellini. The Met called on Natalie Dessay, the French soprano, and Juan Diego Flórez, the Peruvian tenor. And you could do worse, for bel canto. On the night I attended, both principals were their best selves, practically on fire. They went through this difficult, treacherous, delightful music with ease and relish. Evelino Pidò led smartly in the pit. It was a memorable, smile-making night at the opera.

Dessay was thrilling, not least when she sang soft and high. She was pretty thrilling when she sang loud and high, too. One of her E flats went right through me. And she is a “singing actress,” as everyone remarks. She is one of those whom you look at even when they are not singing. But have no doubt that she can sing, superbly. The theatrical ability is gravy. Flórez does not have that ability: He acts like an opera singer (which is to say, he is stagy and obvious). But who cares (much)? On this night, he was eating up Bellini's score, and knew it. The thrill of singing was etched on his face. After one, florid aria, the Met audience roared almost animalistically—the way they do in Italy, but seldom on these shores. The roars were deserved.

The production is a new one, and it comes from Mary Zimmerman, the American director. I had heard a lot about the production before I saw it—a lot of condemnation. It was a travesty, people said, more a European production than a Met one. What did they mean? They meant the production was an offense to the piece, *La sonnambula*. So, as the evening began, I braced for the worst. And in the course of the opera, an old lesson was reaffirmed: Opera attendance—like so much of life—can be an expectations game.

Yes, the production is rather ugly to look at, and, yes, it has contemporary, modish elements that are annoying. But it has sweet, imaginative, and effective touches, too. And, by today's European standards, it is virtually Zeffirelli. It is well-nigh reverential in its traditionalism and fidelity.

A few years ago, in Salzburg, I took part in a forum, and someone asked what I thought of a new production of some opera or other. (I can't remember.) I found myself answering, “Look, I appreciate any production here where the kids get to keep their clothes on.” The festival had been on a kind of kiddie-porn trend, highly disturbing (which of course is what they were after). In any event, opera productions are to a large degree an expectations game, and we often grade on a curve. The Zimmerman *Sonnambula*—after what I had heard—was a pleasant surprise.

The Met also staged *Rusalka*, in the 1993 Otto Schenk production. This production looks, feels, and smells like Dvorák's opera (which the composer called a “lyric fairy tale”). This is part of what makes Schenk great: his ability and willingness to make production match opera. Not to spend this chronicle running down Salzburg, but one of the worst, most atrocious productions I have seen in that beautiful Austrian town is of *Rusalka*. It bowed last summer. And it features the hallmarks of the contemporary vile European opera production: including sexual violence and the contemptuous use of the Christian cross. These are little, and not so little, signatures in the contemporary European production. You could even call them clichés (a big word in the vocabulary of those who belittle “traditional” productions). The contrast between the Schenk *Rusalka* and the Salzburg *Rusalka* is

the contrast between artistic sense and dumb destructiveness.

At the Met, Renée Fleming was in the title role, and, like the Schenk production, she is a true match for *Rusalka*: lush, dreamy, and beautiful (which is not to say that she lacks incisiveness, or that Dvorák's score does). Her "Song to the Moon" (the hit aria of the opera) is not to everyone's taste: It can be heavy on the portamento, or sighing. But it is no doubt beautiful and distinctive. I have frequently written that beauty of voice isn't everything—but not nothing either. And beauty of voice aids Fleming a great deal. So do her musical instincts. From the *Rusalka* I attended, I think of a particular moment: a softly sobbing downward scale. Strikingly and memorably brought off.

Stephanie Blythe was on the stage, too, in one of her witch roles: Jezùibaba. She handled it with aplomb, as had Dolora Zajick in this production before her. Our tenor was Aleksandrs Antonenko, who sang with an appealing heartiness: very romantic. Kristinn Sigmundsson, the Icelandic bass, was the Water Gnome, and he has become an old reliable at the Met. Christine Goerke, as the Foreign (and None Too Nice) Princess, sang with scalding assurance. Jirùì Beùlohálàvek, in the pit, governed the opera with knowing hands—and not just because those hands are Czech (like *Rusalka*). He is an able musician, nationality aside. And finally I'd like to mention one of the Rhine Maidens—er, sorry, wrong show: one of the Wood Sprites.

She was the contralto Brenda Patterson. In a church some years ago—St. Bartholomew's in New York, where Leopold Stokowski began his American career, as an organist—she did some of the best Bach singing I have ever heard. Ever. Interesting to see her on the wicked—or, in this case, fairy-tale—stage.

Also in the Met lineup were *Cav* and *Pag*—Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, that punch-packing verismo double-bill. The company still uses Zeffirelli's productions—and why not? Critics slam them as too big and literal. To me, they reflect the operas; they place us visually within them. And, in *Cav*, you can practically smell the garlic, sold on the street. The Zeffirelli productions are grand opera—and the Met is the world's home of grand opera. That is not such a terrible role to play. Other houses, hundreds of them, can play other roles.

What do you need in *Cav* and *Pag*? What do you need in this type of opera? Heart, perhaps above all—and the Met's forces had it. Roberto Alagna, the Italian-French star, was the tenor in both operas. He poured out sound, poured out heart—embraced the style totally. If you're going to essay this kind of thing, you had better. In *Pagliacci*, his acting was notably good, even surprisingly good. I had never thought of him as that kind of opera singer. He made *Pagliacci* very untired. And, from his throat, "Vesti la giubba" was not a cliché, but a great verismo aria (indeed, the paradigmatic one).

In *Cav*, Margaret Jane Wray was Santuzza, subbing for Waltraud Meier—and she projected, among other things, "sweet strength." That is the phrase I recently applied in these pages to another American soprano, Patricia Racette. For years, I have wondered why Wray is not better known; she might wonder, too. Jane Bunnell was Mamma Lucia, and the very picture of that character: in sight and sound (if you will allow sound as part of a picture). In *Pag*, Alberto Mastromarino made a canny Tonio, with his "Si può?"—the opera's prologue—the real McCoy. By that I mean: It was a specimen of genuine Italian lyric theater. Other singers in both shows were adequate or better.

In all, an evening of grand opera, and if you didn't want that, you shouldn't have bought a ticket for *Cav* and *Pag*, certainly at the Met.

Over at the New York Philharmonic, they did an all-Handel evening: concertos, arias, and the *Royal Fireworks* music. I don't think Handel is particularly advantaged by an all-Handel evening. Why set him aside, instead of mixing him in with other composers? Why present him as a creature apart? Adding to my wariness, pre-concert, was the fact that the evening was to be led by a Baroque specialist: Nicholas McGegan, the Englishman who has long presided over the Philharmonia

Baroque Orchestra, based in San Francisco. Beware Baroque specialists, when it comes to Baroque music. But McGegan is a good conductor, and a real musician, rather than an academic case.

With the New York Philharmonic, he was emphatic, like all “period” folk, but he did not abandon taste. He was intense, as they all are, but not hyper (as many are). All evening long, he did nothing stupid. I think the *Royal Fireworks* music could have used more pomp and majesty: but McGegan did not race through it heedlessly. Will that get him kicked out of the Baroque Specialists’ Union?

Furthermore, he drew a splendid sound from the orchestra, from first note to last. This was somewhat amazing, for the Philharmonic is not noted for sound, and neither is the hall, Avery Fisher. The sound was not Baroque, and it was not Romantic. It wasn’t straw, and it wasn’t velvet. It abode in some appropriate, commendable middle ground. And since a critic spends so much time pointing out the horns’ mistakes, let me record that this particular evening saw absolutely first-rate, sure-footed hornwork.

Who sang the aforementioned arias? Christine Schäfer, the German soprano (a light lyric). (Though not a lightweight lyric.) I know a singer, a soprano, who says, frankly, “She is the best singer in the world.” There is no best singer in the world, of course—but that is not a dumb opinion, at all. Schäfer has a sky-high musical IQ, tremendous versatility, in opera and song, a beautiful, adaptable voice, and a complete, or near-complete, technique. There is not much left.

She sang her Handel arias superbly, demonstrating her intelligence, technique, and so on. She sometimes seems as much an instrumentalist as a singer: an instrumentalist with words. When an aria repeated, she gave it subtle variations, making the repeat different enough, but not too different. An exception here, I think, was “Se pietà di me non senti” (from *Julius Caesar*). In that aria, the repeat, or repeats, were too plain: too undecorated. But rare is the singer who will err on the side of plainness.

In my experience, the best Handel singing is done by those who are not Handel specialists. (You may want to check out Renée Fleming, in addition to Schäfer.) And the best Handel conducting is done by those who are not Handel specialists, or Baroque specialists. But Maestro McGegan gives satisfaction. And the Philharmonic’s all-Handel evening turned out to be a pretty good idea.

Some nights later, the orchestra had a different program, this one featuring Lisa Batiashvili, the young Georgian-born violinist. (She has lived in Germany for some time.) Batiashvili has become a fixture on the Philharmonic calendar, and an extremely welcome one. In recent seasons she has played the Shostakovich Concerto No. 1 and the Beethoven Concerto. This season, she played a Prokofiev concerto: No. 2, the one with that extraordinary, hard-to-forget slow movement. It has a beautiful melody in the violin and a tick-tock pizzicato accompaniment underneath.

Batiashvili played the concerto, all of it, as we have come to expect: with authority, smarts, and soul. As I have remarked before, there is a nobility about her, even a morality—this, she shares with Jansons. Some sort of spiritual strength comes through her, and when the composer has that, she is a transparency for it.

In the first movement of the Prokofiev, she was exciting yet measured, precise yet alluring. Moreover, her playing had great integrity and focus. Batiashvili does not let her mind wander; she concentrates on the business at hand; every measure counts, with nothing wasted or indifferent. The slow movement, she played with perfect pliancy, sumptuousness, and soul. (There’s a word that’s hard to get away from when writing about this violinist: soul.) She also displayed a strong rhythmic sense, so necessary for Prokofiev, and others.

You might describe Prokofiev’s last movement as “Soviet”—and Batiashvili played it just that way. She was unnerving in it, as she had been, seasons before, in the last movement of the Shostakovich.

In her hands, Prokofiev's music was daringly extended and marcato. She never let go of your attention. When she was finished, string players in the orchestra put down their instruments and applauded.

Return to the Met, please, for *The Elixir of Love*. Years ago in this house, the "Love Couple" appeared in it: Angela Gheorghiu, the Romanian soprano, and Alagna (who are husband and wife). The snarksters of the opera world love to hate them. And the couple can misfire, to be sure. But they can also fire superbly—as they did in that *Elixir*, those seasons ago. This year, Gheorghiu was back as Adina, but Alagna was not her Nemorino—he was busy with *Cav/Pag*. Nemorino was Massimo Giordano, a tenor born in Pompeii.

Gheorghiu met a very high standard, showing her special nimbleness, sauciness, and flair. Also, her technique was exemplary on this afternoon (despite at least one bout of flatness). Her high notes, in particular, were very secure. And one not-so-high note, a G, practically made my face numb. That's how loud and penetrating it was. Why do I mention this curious detail? Because Gheorghiu can be soft to the point of near inaudibility, particularly in a house so large as the Met. And yet, she can focus her sound and make it drill right through you—as Kathleen Battle could, in her shining prime. (Battle was a famous Adina at the Met.)

Giordano—not the composer Umberto, but the tenor Massimo—was a wonderful surprise, at least to me. He has a fine, chocolaty voice, and it is larger than you often get for Nemorino. But that voice can move easily through Donizetti. And Giordano conveyed the earnestness of his character touchingly.

The Met's production? Still the famous one from John Copley, which bowed in 1991. It looks like an old-fashioned Valentine's Day card—full of "clichés." Full of truth, too.

At Carnegie Hall, they've been celebrating the eightieth birthday of André Previn. They have been doing this with a variety of concerts, showing Previn as composer, conductor, and pianist—a composer, conductor, and pianist who can compose, conduct, and play almost anything (jazz very much included). They don't come more versatile than André. And he seems perpetually young, or at least fresh. Hearing about the Carnegie series, my mother emailed me, "Previn's 80? A week ago, he was 30."

On a Tuesday night, he led the Philadelphia Orchestra, a group with which he has not been associated in his long career. He started with Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491—conducting from the keyboard. Previn has always been a prize Mozartean, having the requisite qualities: finesse, purity, orderliness, esprit—taste. His playing of the concerto had little fire or bite; it was autumnal. But Previn made a beautiful, elegant piano sound, and he brought his own cadenzas. These cadenzas were beautifully conceived, and a pleasure to hear. They were both new and familiar: new because we are unused to hearing them; familiar because they go so naturally with the concerto.

After intermission, Previn led the Philadelphians in Richard Strauss's *Symphonia domestica*, a symphonic study of the composer's home life. (Incidentally, Previn has been married five times. I myself wouldn't bet against a sixth.) Previn sat down to conduct, as did Stokowski in his last years, as have others. Previn needed to be helped to and from the stool—somewhat jarring to see. But he conducted the Strauss piece magnificently. His account was clean, logical, and precise, but also amply feeling—those qualities are not at war. Previn has always combined them.

The Philadelphians are on hard times now—the financial crisis has socked them—but they sounded like their old, great selves under this conductor. Previn demonstrated his typical unshowy, unmistakable musical leadership. Some people, when they think of a model and complete musician, think of him. That is not a bad thought.

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