

The New Criterion

Music

June 2009

New York chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On Chanticleer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Abbey Simon, Magdalena Kožená, and Christopher Prégardien & Michael Gees at Alice Tully Hall, Ricardo Muti with the New York Philharmonic; Bernard Haitink with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, René Pape, and Pierre Boulez with the Staatskapelle Berlin at Carnegie Hall; Emmanuel Pahud, Trevor Pinnock & Jonathan Manson at Zankel Hall; Bernard Haitink with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; and *Barber of Seville* at the Metropolitan Opera.

Readers of these jottings may well be familiar with Chanticleer, the twelve-man a cappella singing group from San Francisco. I see that they are now styling themselves “An Orchestra of Voices.” (How long has that been going on?) Actually, they’re more like a chamber orchestra of voices. In any case, they are reliably splendid, and they came for a concert at the Metropolitan Museum. Specifically, the concert took place in the Temple of Dendur—the coolest-looking, if not the most ear-friendly, venue in New York.

The group sang a program of American music, broadly speaking, and they gave their program a title: *Wondrous Free*. They sang hymns, art songs, folk songs, and some novelties, too. On the program were two pieces by “P. D. Q. Bach,” the character invented by Peter Schickele. He is a clever and gifted guy, Schickele. We hear that music education in America is declining, and, if this is so, will Schickele continue to find an audience? It takes some knowledge of music to get a musical humorist’s jokes. We might also ask whether Victor Borge could have a career today.

Chanticleer sang some early music from Spanish America—recently unearthed—and a set by Samuel Barber: his beautiful, intelligent *Reincarnations*, Op. 16. We also heard songs by Stephen Foster. He is not the most fashionable composer, but his music will always touch human hearts. He is one of those composers who are always being “rediscovered.”

All concert long, Chanticleer met a very high standard. They demonstrated excellent technique, not least in their intonation, or pitch. It is cause for amazement that they begin a piece—unaccompanied, of course—in one key, and end in that same key (if the composer so dictates). Even individuals have a hard time doing this; that a twelve-man group can is almost strange.

Best, of course, is their musical sense—their ability to find and express the character of a piece. In the Appalachian hymn “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” they were somewhat raw, buzzy, and rustic (but not comically so). Elsewhere they were refined and elegant. One thing to appreciate about this group is that they are not afraid of spirituality in music, or even of religion in music. Frankly, they seem to like it—and this is not encountered every day on the concert stage. Plus, they are a big-hearted group, which is no small part of their appeal.

Toward the end of the evening, they sang “Summertime,” with one member of the group taking the lead: Cortez Mitchell, a countertenor. His singing was extraordinarily soulful and beautiful. He seems to have solo career written on him. We also heard “Hold On”—“Keep your hand on the plow, hold on”—which Marian Anderson used to sing with perfect resoluteness. Chanticleer summoned that. In short, a concert of theirs almost never disappoints. Their fans would come no matter what, but the group never coasts or phones in. Other musical ensembles—and individuals, too—should follow their example.

Walk with me, please, down Memory Lane: I was about thirteen, and had heard recordings by Abbey Simon, the pianist. I said to my teacher—a great and formidable woman—“Do you like her?” She looked at me with some mixture of contempt, pity, and weariness, and said, “Abbey Simon’s a man.” Oh. He still is, and he played a recital at the newly refurbished Alice Tully Hall. Simon is now in his mid-eighties, and a link to another era. He was accepted into the Curtis Institute at age eight by its director, Josef Hofmann. Simon was already in his early twenties when Rachmaninoff died.

Among Simon’s awards, incidentally, is the Harriet Cohen Medal. There’s a name from the past. Cohen was a British pianist, once quite famous, now almost forgotten. She studied with Tobias Matthay, who was also the teacher of Myra Hess. Cohen made superb arrangements of pieces from Bach cantatas: I don’t know that anyone has played them since Alicia de Larrocha, and that was early in her career.

At Alice Tully Hall, Simon played an old-fashioned program, starting with Bach—the Toccata in C minor, which you never hear anymore—and then going to a sonata of Clementi and a sonata of Beethoven. Scheduled after intermission was Chopin, followed by Ravel. In other words, this was a mixed and balanced program, serving the audience a tasty, satisfying multi-course meal. This was not a one-composer evening, or a program with a “theme,” or anything else to please a musicologist. It was a feast to please a listener.

The Clementi sonata, I might mention, was the Sonata in F minor, Op. 14, No. 3. What a beautiful and interesting piece. No wonder Horowitz loved this composer so much—and Simon has said, by the way, that he had to get over his “Horowitz complex” before he could really take off as a concert artist. He had to rid himself of the anxiety of that influence.

On this night, as on others, Simon’s playing was individualistic: It was free, but always within musical bounds. Simon has a strong sense of rhythm and structure. Also, he can produce a beautiful and pure sound on the piano—a variety of sounds, I should say, not just one. As for technique, his fingers proved somewhat sluggish, inhibiting his turns in the Bach, for example. In general, he did a lot of smudging. But there was always a sure musicality behind his playing.

Two footnotes, if I may: Simon is a singer, meaning that he sings and groans—loudly—as he plays. Some people find this quirky and charming; I find it inconsiderate, revealing a lack of self-control. This habit should be stamped out early. Also, only a handful of people attended the recital of this honorable and important pianist. That was kind of painful to see. Yet every professional knows that you give your best to those who happen to be present, whether they are five or five thousand.

Riccardo Muti conducted the New York Philharmonic, and he did an all-Italian program. He is an excellent Verdi conductor, and some critics say he makes everything else sound like Verdi. This is untrue: but there is a kernel of truth in the observation. Muti began his concert with Verdi, the overture to an early opera: *Giovanna d’Arco*. This is not great Verdi—the overture, that is (I can’t speak for the opera)—but Muti and the Philharmonic gave it first-class treatment. Verdi often includes a military snap, as he does at the end of this overture; Muti brought that off particularly well.

Then he conducted some more Verdi: the Ballet of the Four Seasons, from *Les Vêpres siciliennes*. This is not great Verdi either; it helps to see the dancers. But again Muti and the Philharmonic

performed well. Muti is able to achieve a tightness that is not overly rigid. Sometimes that tightness bristles. And Muti can also let the music dance and gleam. He shares some qualities with his late countryman Toscanini—an observation that should not displease Muti.

Sharing the bill with the great Verdi was a composer known to be his inferior: Puccini. Be that as it may, Puccini's little *Preludio sinfonico* did not have to hang its head in shame—not on this afternoon. It is at least as good as those Verdi pieces. From Muti and the Philharmonic, it was loud, and almost unrelievedly so: Greater dynamic variation was in order. But the musicians' passion was welcome. Finally, Respighi made an appearance, with his colossal and beloved *Pines of Rome*. Muti was solid, correct, and commendable, as usual. But were we afforded maximum thrill down the Appian Way? No, I'm afraid. Lightning does not strike on every evening, or afternoon.

Another footnote: When a cell phone went off, Muti, still conducting, turned around to look askance at the audience. When another one went off, he actually had the orchestra stop for a bit, looking at the violins and gesturing annoyedly at the audience. Cell phones are a menace, no doubt. But sometimes conductors preen just a little, you may agree.

Three years ago, I did a public interview of René Pape in Salzburg, and he told me something that surprised me: He had never done a recital. The great German bass—one of the outstanding singers of this age—was then forty-one. He is now forty-four, and he has done a recital: in Carnegie Hall, singing songs of Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf. His pianist was Brian Zeger. And I will offer some generalities.

When a song required heft or brawn, Pape was nonpareil. He is very good at kingly authority. He is also very good at surliness and gruffness. Two of the Schubert songs were “Der Atlas” and “Prometheus”: You will never hear them better. When a song required sweetness, tenderness, or lyricism, Pape was less successful. Intimacy of communication was not a strong suit. And think of Schubert's little “Heidenröslein”: It is nothing without charm or lilt, which it lacked.

Also, a recital is where the rubber meets the road: A soloist must make any number of decisions, revealing himself as a musician. It's one thing to sing Sarastro under Georg Solti, or King Mark under James Levine. It's another to manage the rubato in, say, “Ständchen,” or “An die Musik” (more Schubert songs). “Ständchen” was awkwardly halting, and “An die Musik” was even worse: warped. Where the pulse of a piece is clearly supplied—written in, mandated, allowing for little personal discretion—Pape did much better.

He is indeed a great singer, and, on balance, it was a treat to hear him in recital. He sang two encores, the first of which is maybe the most frequent encore of all, for a singer: Strauss's “Zueignung.” And the second was “Some Enchanted Evening.” The American audience went wild for this, but Pape should learn the piece a little better: Where rhythm is dotted, his was straight. And every singer—Pinza, Tozzi, Terfel—floats that final E: the final note in “never let her go.” Pape should float it too, rather than lay into it.

At Zankel Hall, downstairs in the Carnegie building, Emmanuel Pahud made an appearance. He did so in the company of Trevor Pinnock, the famed “period movement” musician—harpsichordist and conductor—and Jonathan Manson, a “period” cellist. Pahud is a flutist, and the most prominent one in the world at the moment. (If you don't count James Galway, I should say.) He belongs to the Berlin Philharmonic; but he does plenty of soloing. And isn't it interesting that, even with so famous a musician as Pinnock, he was the headliner?

They played Bach sonatas, and Pahud played a Telemann piece by himself—unaccompanied. The other two had solo turns as well: Pinnock in a Purcell suite, and Manson in a Bach suite. Pahud played in his usual distinguished way: aristocratic, endearing, and smart. He knows how to breathe and phrase, often sounding like a singer. And he can blow a palette of colors out of that flute.

Naturally, he has an astounding technical facility, although this concert was not note-perfect: There were squeaks and other imperfections, just to confirm that Pahud is human.

One Bach sonata was the one in B minor, BWV 1030. The middle movement is marked “Largo e dolce,” and Pahud played it sweetly indeed—but also purely, without sentimentalism. The movement was like a glass of cool water, fresh from some sun-dappled spring. The last movement, fleet, had a French feeling. And Pahud gave it dazzling, exquisite embroidery. Seldom will you hear such laciness in music.

This sonata’s key led me to think of the Badinerie from Bach’s Orchestral Suite No. 2. Is the Badinerie the most famous flute piece there is? I think it is—I can’t top it. One even hears it as a cell-phone ring, which is fame indeed.

Into Carnegie Hall—upstairs—came the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, led by Bernard Haitink, the veteran Dutch conductor. Haitink, who has been having back trouble, used a cane, and sat down to conduct. His program was a single (and singular) piece: Bruckner’s Symphony No. 8. I remember something he did at the Salzburg Easter Festival, earlier this decade. He conducted this piece, brilliantly, powerfully, and movingly, and, as he was walking off the stage, pumped his fists, did this normally contained Dutchman. That was a bit of unexpected and justified exuberance I will never forget.

With the Chicagoans, Haitink conducted the symphony, of course, well. The first movement was rather measured, moderate: moderate in dynamics and overall feeling. Emotion existed beneath the surface. The second movement (Scherzo) began with shivering tension, which was marvelous. And the CSO, by and large, sounded very, very good. Their sound is wholly American—something that can be heard more easily than described. There is a certain brightness, and brashness. You don’t have the warmth or glow of the Vienna Philharmonic, or even the Berlin Philharmonic—but you have other desirable qualities.

From Haitink, the third movement was fairly straightforward, but not without due mystery—in fact, the straightforwardness may have enhanced the mystery. Still, as the movement progressed, Haitink could have lent more bloom, more release. A greater expansiveness was called for. Also, toward the end of this movement, there is a Wagner-worshipping moment: dear and beautiful. Haitink might have had his players be more dear and beautiful in that.

And the Finale? It began with great galloping defiance and affirmation—and Haitink rode the music all the way home. As the audience cheered, he seemed tired but pleased, though there was no pumping of fists.

In Alice Tully Hall, Christoph Prégardien, the German tenor with the French last name, sang a recital: a lieder recital. And the last song on his program was one of the greatest ever composed: “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,” from Mahler’s *Rückert Lieder*. Prégardien sang it woefully badly: cruelly badly. This great song was pulled out of shape, stretched beyond limits, maimed, ruined. Prégardien and his accompanist, Michael Gees, showed shocking misjudgment.

I make a point of this because the Prégardien-Gees recital was absolutely stupendous. You can go many a year—many a year—without hearing a lieder recital as good. Prégardien put on a clinic, demonstrating lieder singing of the highest order. Some worry that this art is dying out. Such worries are unfounded, as long as the likes of Prégardien are around—and they are.

He is a lyric tenor, and, at fifty-three, no babe: but that voice has held up beautifully well. And Prégardien showed no little stamina, in the course of his challenging recital. He was fresh as a daisy, right through to the end. And this lyric tenor has a serious lower register: solid, resonant B flats, for example. Prégardien’s technique all-around is exemplary. And his German is a pleasure to hear: as

in the words “phantastische Nacht.”

Even better than Prégardien’s voice or technique, however, is his musicianship. For one thing, he knows how to tell a story: and, in an interview with me last year, Marilyn Horne said that Lehmann stressed this—Lotte Lehmann, that is. Every song must tell a story. Prégardien obeyed this rule, and yet he did not “overtell” his stories: He remained a musician. He united music and poetry almost seamlessly. He assumed the nature of each song before him. And Michael Gees did the same.

Normally, I am against an encore after “Ich bin der Welt ...”: That song should be the final word. Similarly, no pianist should play an encore after Beethoven’s Op. 111, his last sonata. But, these days, they do. And Prégardien gave us three encores after the Mahler song. I’m glad he did—because a great recital deserved a distinguished ending.

Shall we have a dose of opera? Last season at the Met, El?na Garan?a, the young Latvian mezzo, sang Rosina in Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. And that was a bit of a shock: Garan?a is an elegant singer with a smoky Balto-Slavic voice. She had been known mainly for Mozart. Could she portray Rossini’s saucy little chick? Oh, yes: She was Balto-Slavic, all right—not the least Italianate—but agile, commanding, and, when it came to acting, hilarious. This season, she was back as Rossini’s Angelina, or Cenerentola (Cinderella). And this time her triumph was expected. When you first hear the sound, you think that the singer is going to sing Tchaikovsky romances. But Garan?a can move through Rossini’s music like nobody’s business. And her acting is so good, she could very well succeed in the non-lyric theater (perish the thought).

Garan?a has an embarrassment of gifts: physical beauty; voice; technique; versatility; a striking artistic intelligence. And she is making the most of those gifts. Her tenor—her prince—in *La Cenerentola* was Lawrence Brownlee, the young American. He is sweet-voiced and nimble. And we need him: for, when it comes to Rossini tenors, man cannot live on Juan Diego Flórez alone.

Back at Carnegie Hall, Pierre Boulez conducted the Staatskapelle Berlin in Mahler’s Symphony No. 3. Here is the positive spin on his account: It was cool and Apollonian, eschewing great emotion, letting the music speak for itself. Here is a far less positive view: It was cold and heartless, eschewing emotion, and therefore eschewing Mahler. That is certainly the way I heard it. You know the expression “There was not a wet eye in the house”? To add insult to injury, the orchestra was sloppy, with more bloopers coming from the brass than really overlookable. In the good-news category, Michelle DeYoung was the mezzo soloist, and she sang her lines with earth-motherly excellence. Still, given the Boulez approach, I left the hall feeling that I had really not heard Mahler’s Third.

One footnote: During this week, James Levine was conducting Wagner’s *Ring* (at the Met, as you may assume). This night—the Boulez-and-Mahler-3 night—was one of his nights off. And Levine attended the concert.

The last word will go to Magdalena Kožená, who gave a recital in Alice Tully. This Czech mezzo started with British repertory: Purcell songs “realized” by Britten—jazzed up by him, too. The songs in these arrangements are much bigger, and more romantic, than they are as Purcell conceived them. The pianist plays up a storm. And, in “Music for a While,” Kožená sounded like Ethel Merman in *Gypsy* or something. And yet it was satisfying to hear this set, in this way. The impurity of it was kind of audacious. But there was no real impurity because Kožená was musical, as was her pianist, Karel Košárek—as was Britten.

Kožená went on with a Schumann cycle, and then with Duparc and Berg. We first knew her, however—the musical public first knew her—for Bach. She sang in cantatas for the British conductor John Eliot Gardiner, and there was a solo album, too. Kožená is now famous, an opera star, with her “personal life” buzzed about. But I hope she does not forget Bach. Opera stars and

celebrities are a dime a dozen. Bach musicians are worth their weight in gold.

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 June 2009, on page 53

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

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/New-York-chronicle-4120>