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by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center, New York.

It was in 1966 that the Mostly Mozart Festival began. Actually, it was called “Midsummer Serenades: A Mozart Festival.” This was “America’s first indoor summer festival,” according to Mostly Mozart literature: no lakes, no pine trees, no soft summer breezes. Just the venues of Lincoln Center (which I am happy to report have excellent air conditioning). The festival soon became something much bigger than those early “Serenades.” It runs from late July to August 20-something, somewhere between three and four weeks. And, again according to the literature, the festival “continues to broaden its focus to include works by Mozart’s predecessors, contemporaries, and related successors.” That would be just about everybody, no?

This year’s festival included more than sixty events, most of them worthwhile. The Schola Cantorum de Venezuela gave us “Choral Music from the Americas” (including music by Elliott Carter, who lives in the Greenwich Village part of the Americas). John Adams, the composer-in-residence—excuse me: “artist-in-residence”—unveiled a new opera, *A Flowering Tree*. The Mark Morris Dance Group did its thing, accompanied by Yo-Yo Ma, the famous cellist, and Emanuel Ax, the not-as-famous, but still-famous-enough pianist.

Avery Fisher Hall is the main venue of this festival, but the festival makes wide use of Lincoln Center as a whole. For example, there are recitals in the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse, high in the sky (as “Penthouse” would suggest). These recitals begin at 10 p.m., and are dubbed—perhaps inevitably—“A Little Night Music.” The setting is cocktail-lounge-like, and you sit at tables with wine and bottled water. Outside the wraparound windows, the city lights twinkle. You can feel very urban—very New York—sitting there, at that hour. And speaking of hours: Sixty minutes (no intermission) can be a fine length for a recital.

There is a Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, but administrators bring in some outside orchestras, too. On the roster this year were the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and—a very similar ensemble—the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Throughout the festival, we experience many conductors, and, this year, they seemed very young. Apparently, administrators intended a youth movement. There is a great hunger for youth on the podium—if not from audiences, from administrators and some critics. In a public interview last year, I brought up this issue with Franz Welser-Möst, the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra. He referred to this hunger as “a sickness of our time.” Why the panting after youth, when conducting is so often a matter of experience and maturity? The sight of gray or white hair on the podium can be quite reassuring.

In any case, the conductors seemed notably—intentionally—young, and the soloists seemed that way, too. Many of them were making their New York debuts. Of course, it’s possible they simply

came cheaper.

All in all, Mostly Mozart administration—Jane Moss is the artistic director—does a commendable job. They are “imaginative”—which can be a dread word in programming, a synonym for “screwy”—but at the same time music-minded and sane. They arrange for an appetizing festival, giving music-minded New Yorkers (and visitors) something to look forward to in the summer.

In 2002, Louis Langrée became the music director of the festival. He is a French musician, and a worthy example of the breed: elegant, learned, refined. He combines discipline with feeling (to put things in the simplest of terms). Rarely does he do anything awkward, vulgar, or otherwise unmusical. Langrée has been influenced by the “period practice” movement, but he is not of that movement, I would say. He is certainly not its prisoner. Bear with me while I recall something from politics: Years ago, the first Bush—perhaps when he was vice president—was asked about his political philosophy. He said, “I’m a conservative, but not a nut about it.” (This did not sit well with many conservatives, not all of them nuts.) In that same spirit, I say, “Louis Langrée is a period-practice guy, but not a nut about it.” He would rather do that which is musical than adhere to any doctrine.

Langrée opened this year’s festival by conducting his Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in a program of Beethoven, Haydn, and—why not?—Mozart. The first piece was Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37. It has a long orchestral exposition, giving us a chance to see what Langrée and the orchestra could do. Langrée was as he usually is: crisp, incisive, and shapely. The music was clearly articulated without being clinical. The orchestra could follow everything Langrée was doing. It did not play well—but it followed. What I mean is, the orchestra’s sound was poor, its unity questionable, and its execution shaky. But in phrasing, rhythm, dynamics, and so on—they did what Langrée asked.

The piano soloist was Leif Ove Andsnes, the famed Norwegian. He is an excellent pianist, but he can be a cold customer—cold and brusque. I remember a Schubert sonata in Carnegie Hall: You could almost have scraped the frost off it. When Andsnes entered the Beethoven concerto, he was out of sorts. He was cold. And he was blunt, clumsy, and altogether unsettled. Rhythm was imprecise, passagework was ungainly, and tempo was uneven: Andsnes kept rushing. I figured we were in for a long, lousy concerto. But Andsnes eventually settled down, and he played the first-movement cadenza with special distinction.

The second movement—marked Largo, in E major—is a kind of test. It is very hard to play, very hard to shape, and pianists seldom bring it off. Not so, Andsnes. He played the beginning of the movement with a remarkable hymn-like authority. Not often will you hear this music so *religioso*. And he went on in a profound, almost transporting vein. He and Langrée chose an admirable tempo: unhurried and undawdling. The conductor made sure the music had its proper flow, taking care with both the horizontal and the vertical. Frankly, this performance confirmed the greatness of this particular movement, a greatness often obscured.

The last movement is one of Beethoven’s best rondos, and, once more, Andsnes did not begin well: He was blunt, crude, without charm or lilt. Sometimes, his playing can seem too much like work: joyless. And so it was here. But again he came alive, musically. He came to treat the music with a nice tiger’s pounce, being both angry and playful. Under these hands, this was one of Beethoven’s C-minor scherzos. In the final measures—the final measures given to the piano—Andsnes may have cheated a bit, with those octaves. They are supposed to be broken, but some pianists, going like the wind, play them without breaks, hoping no one will notice. In any case, Andsnes was exciting and triumphant, and he deserved the immense roar the crowd gave him. So did Louis Langrée.

Later in the evening, we had a singer: Alice Coote, the British mezzo-soprano. She sang Haydn’s

stirring, dramatic, fire-breathing scena “Berenice, che fai?” And she did it full justice. She had guts, smoke, elegance—tasteful passion. Just like the scena itself. Her ornamentation was exemplary, with her trills amazingly tight. Sitting in the audience, you could forget anything technical—have no technical concerns. Coote was always in the center of the note. With technique in the bag, she was free to do whatever she wanted, musically. She put on a clinic of what you might call theatrical singing, Classical division. Langrée was right with her (or she was right with him), understanding the arc of the piece, which has several parts, all needing to be tied together.

I have argued before that this is a golden age of mezzo-sopranos (and I could give you a long list of names, as I believe I have done before in these pages). A famous soprano was heard to say, “I’m really glad I’m not a mezzo right now—there are so many.” Britain’s Alice Coote is a proud member of this brigade.

Langrée ended his program with the “Jupiter” Symphony, which I was not able to stay to hear. But I understand it’s a good piece.

And that reminds me of what a friend of mine said the next night, before one of those late recitals in the Kaplan Penthouse: “Good composer.” She was speaking of Bach, whose music Piotr Anderszewski, the Polish pianist, was playing. The program consisted of two works: the Partita No. 6 in E minor and the English Suite No. 6 in D minor. Funny about that E-minor partita: It is ubiquitous now, on the programs of pianists for a number of years. There are fads, fashions, and trends in music programming—same as in other fields of life. In any event, the E-minor partita is a “good” piece. (Nice to understate things, even grossly, once in a while.)

And Piotr Anderszewski? He is a pianist of mystery. He has done some of the best playing I can remember hearing: I think in particular of his *Métopes* (Szymanowski) in Carnegie Hall. The color, sensitivity, and virtuosity in that performance are hard to forget. And he has done such playing as to cause you to think, “Remind me, again, why he is famous? Remind me how he got a career as a concert musician? Has something gone wrong?”

The late-night recital found him in generally lamentable form. In the partita, he was basically dry, mechanical, indifferent. A hardness had taken over his playing. Also, his technique was faulty, as many passages and turns were muddled and more than the usual share of notes failed to sound—that is, he depressed the key: no result. Furthermore, during the partita, he swayed back and forth, constantly, unnaturally—again, mechanically. I thought of a mesmerist’s watch, or a charmer’s snake. Yet there was too little charm in this performance.

Not being an amateur, he did some praiseworthy things: For example, the Courante had some neat syncopation, a touch of Bachian jazz. But mainly Anderszewski was dull, incomprehensible, or insulting. In the final piece of the partita, the Gigue, he jabbed out the notes angrily and painfully—insultingly. You can be severe in that gigue, but Anderszewski’s approach was hard to justify, musically.

Happily, he was better in the English suite. No. 6, you may recall, is the one with the two famous gavottes. Anderszewski played these in clipped and ugly fashion. Elsewhere, however, he was far more musical, far more satisfying—and he swayed much less.

Two nights later, Anderszewski was in Avery Fisher Hall, serving as soloist with the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, this time under a guest conductor, Edward Gardner. Anderszewski, and they, played Mozart’s Concerto No. 18 in B flat, K. 456. This concerto is not heard terribly often. As a rule, we hear No. 9 in E flat (the “Jeunehomme”), No. 12 in A (the “little A-major”), and then No. 20 in D minor through to the end—No. 27 in B flat. But they are all (well) worth hearing, they are all by Mozart. No. 17 in G is particularly glorious—a clear masterpiece. And here is an opinion—more like a fact, I might say—about No. 18, Anderszewski’s concerto: Its middle movement is absolutely

first-rate, one of the best Mozart composed.

Anderszewski did some decent singing in this movement. And, here and elsewhere, he displayed some lovely inwardness. This was in quieter moments. But, as in the penthouse, he was problematic. Right off the bat, in the first movement, he indulged in some strange accentuation and strange rubato—not really serving the composer and his music. In the last movement, he showed his bad habit of sort of slapping at the keyboard. (Sometimes he slaps, sometimes he pounds—and sometimes he plays like an angel.) Also, he could have been far more mirthful in this last movement. That was true of the conductor and the orchestra, too. This is gloriously jokey music, Mozart in one of those moods.

In the main, Maestro Gardner did his part with musical sense. In that middle movement, he caught some of Mozart's sighing poignancy. The orchestra, however—particularly in the last movement—was quite sloppy.

Gardner is an Englishman in his mid-thirties. He is music director of the English National Opera—the outfit that performs all operas in English (even the English ones). He began this Mostly Mozart concert with an overture: that to Mozart's *Magic Flute*. He managed the opening section with appropriate breadth. But, when the music switched gears, he exemplified a modern habit: fast, fast, fast. The music was simply too fast to articulate, savor, and enjoy. When will conductors, and other musicians, understand once more that exuberant need not mean fast? In addition, the orchestra was ragged, and this account was altogether mediocre.

Later in the concert, we had a performance of one of Benjamin Britten's best works: his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*, Op. 31. Our singer was Toby Spence—a name that could come out of Shakespeare, no? Spence is an Englishman in the tradition of English tenors. In the *Serenade*, he came off a little fey—that is almost inevitable—but he revealed a lovely voice. He also revealed an evenness of voice: a voice that did not change essential character from the bottom through the middle to the top. I could not understand a word he sang, but that is perhaps a discussion for another day.

Our hornist was Lawrence DiBello, principal horn of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra. He wrestled with his instrument—and, much of the time, the instrument won. That is, it rather defeated its player. But DiBello did some smooth and nimble playing in the “Hymn” section of the *Serenade* (which does not sound very much like a hymn, in fact). And we forgive hornists a lot, for they must wrestle with a bear.

Wielding the baton, Gardner helped convey the nature of the work. Did that quintessential English ethereality settle in, as it should or might? Some of it, yes.

Back in the penthouse, we heard Claire-Marie Le Guay in recital. She is a French pianist—blonde, thin, and quietly glamorous—and she was making her New York recital debut. According to her bio, she is “established as a major soloist in Europe, Asia, and America.” Major, huh? Then what is Yo-Yo Ma? On her bill were Haydn and Mozart. And she immediately killed the evening, or took some air out, by talking: by making some comments about Haydn and Mozart, and the connection between the two. These remarks were totally unnecessary. Music alone would have talked nicely.

Before he left New York, having finished his tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic, I had an interview with Lorin Maazel. I asked him about this business of talking from the stage—so common, almost *de rigueur*, these days. He critiqued it as a scourge of our times. And he made an analogy to “a guided tour through a picture gallery”: “I've seen the greatest pictures destroyed in three minutes of description.” The point of music, or painting, is to experience something that “cannot be expressed in words.”

Le Guay began her playing with Haydn's Sonata in E flat, Hob. XVI:49. This is a piece full of the composer's wit and grace—but the pianist apparently did not see it that way. She was oddly earnest, even severe. In the first movement, her playing sometimes bristled, wrongly. She was making the music into something it fundamentally is not. To her credit, she showed a good sense of dynamics, and she made good use of rests—a key part of Haydn, and other music. The middle movement (Adagio e cantabile) was adequately executed, and capably embroidered. But, like the first movement, it was overly earnest, without sufficient play or lilt. Was she trying to prove that Haydn can be serious and grand? Well, we know that—but he is not those things here. In the Finale, Le Guay was rightly matter-of-fact, but also blunt—too blunt. In sum, she played this sonata with a certain competence. But a “major soloist”?

Next came Mozart's Sonata in B flat, K. 333. Here, too, Le Guay was earnest and competent—I would say studenty. At the beginning of the middle movement (another cantabile movement), you could feel every beat, and not in a good way. Le Guay needed more horizontality, a better sense of line. And in the third movement, she was harmfully tentative, going in for little hesitations, most of them ill-advised. Sometimes it is wise merely to let the music speak, in time.

But she was not done for the evening. She favored the audience with an encore, neither Haydn nor Mozart nor anything else Classical: She played a Liszt “légende,” the one about St. Francis walking on the water. She unveiled a big technique—a little tight and effortful at times, but big, and amazingly accurate, especially in the octaves. She shaped the piece intelligently and movingly. And she did what she could to trim Lisztian excess and bombast. This was admirable and enjoyable Liszt playing—and I left the hall, or rather the lounge, thinking that Claire-Marie Le Guay could be a major soloist after all.

The next concert of the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, I will touch on lightly—it was not a concert to remember. Its conductor was Yannick Nézet-Séguin, a French Canadian who is music director in Rotterdam. He also works regularly in London and his native Montreal. His program in New York began with Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella*, complete. Such a delightful work (in all its guises): gay, sharp, sparkling, Italianate, irresistible. It received a tremendously disappointing performance at the hands of the Festival Orchestra and Nézet-Séguin. The conductor's tempos were often sluggish, and the music overall missed its spine and spirit. The orchestra played maybe as badly as possible. Its sound was woeful, its execution no better. Would a good high-school orchestra have done worse? I mean that seriously, not rhetorically or flippantly.

There was a soloist on the second half of the program, and he was another French pianist, Nicholas Angelich. His concerto was Mozart's No. 20 in D minor. The orchestra, happy to report, was much better than in the Stravinsky (which would not have been hard). But Angelich? He is a good pianist, I think, who had a bad outing. Prissy hesitations ruin Mozart—and Angelich committed many of them. Like Le Guay, he could not leave a phrase alone. Indeed, he was worse in this department than she. The music had little chance to speak, straightforwardly, in his hands.

In the Romanze, Angelich chose an excellent, breathable tempo. But where was the line—the elegance, the lyricism? In the rondo, he repeatedly disfigured the main motive, and he slapped and rushed, to boot. The D-major section that concludes the work—an instance of heavenly gaiety—was oddly, absurdly fast.

Nézet-Séguin ended the concert with Mendelssohn's “Italian” Symphony. I had left the hall by then. And the next day, I was off to the Salzburg Festival—about which I'll have something to say in this space next month.

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