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by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the Lorin Maazel's Tchaikovsky festival, the Cleveland Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, the pianist Ivan Moravec at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the London Symphony Orchestra & Chorus at Lincoln Center, and the St. Petersburg Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall.

Lorin Maazel, in his sixth and penultimate year at the helm of the New York Philharmonic, did something nervy: He staged a Tchaikovsky festival. Why is this nervy? Well, don't you know? Tchaikovsky is supposed to be sentimental dreck for sentimental dopes. Virgil Thomson and misguided others taught us that long ago. And contemporary music directors of major orchestras are supposed to stage festivals of Ligeti, Birtwistle, Glass—you know, the hip. Maazel's staging of a Tchaikovsky festival was destined to make establishment critics see red. And so they did. And that festival was a success, commercially and artistically.

Maazel maintains that Tchaikovsky is a well-known composer but not a well-understood one—and I share that view. Tchaikovsky was a refined, imaginative, and deep individual. He was also a genius. Moreover, though thought of as the ultimate in Romanticism, he was at least as much a Classical composer—a worshiper of Mozart, an observer of long-honored forms. Maazel maintains that Tchaikovsky's music does not suffer from vulgarities; rather, his music suffers from the vulgarities of its interpreters. One of the conductor's goals in this festival was to show that Tchaikovsky was not a priss or an hysteric—not a drama queen.

His conducting certainly reflected that goal: It was disciplined, bold, direct. Maazel programmed all six of Tchaikovsky's symphonies. The last three are heard frequently in concert halls, and the first three, much more rarely. Those three have nicknames: No. 1 is "Winter Dreams"; No. 2 is "Little Russian" (which refers, not to a short Muscovite, but to Ukraine); No. 3 is "Polish." Of the last three symphonies, only one has a nickname: No. 6, "Pathétique."

You could not endorse everything Maazel did on the podium, of course. And some performances went better than others—this is the nature of the activity. But when he was really on top of it, the music sounded fresh, original, and even cleansing. The Fifth Symphony was so vigorous—throttling, even—that Maazel shook himself afterward. On another occasion, he conducted music from *Swan Lake*, with an unusual rigor. He did not make you think you were listening to dainty ballet music; and yet the score—what a masterpiece, by the way—had all the grace it needs.

Amid the symphonic works were con- certos—big ones. And playing the Piano Concerto was Simon Trpc'eski, a twenty-eight-year-old from Macedonia. (Incidentally, when you say "the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto," you always mean the First—never either of the other two.) Trpc'eski, it's safe to say, is the leading musician from Macedonia; but it's also safe to say that he will soon be one of the

leading pianists in the world. He played the concerto stupendously. Moreover, he played it freshly—as though no one had ever even *thought* of hackneying it. There was not one trite or clichéd measure. And Trpc’eski’s technique verges on the superhuman. For example, his octaves were Horowitzian—or, if you prefer a newer term, Pletnevian.

After he was done with the concerto, Trpc’eski played an encore: “Autumn Song” from Tchaikovsky’s *Seasons*. Here the pianist demonstrated an amazing ability to sing on his instrument—to sustain notes long after they would die, in lesser hands. Frankly, his playing of this gentle, elegiac piece was as impressive as his conquering of the concerto.

Playing the Violin Concerto—there’s only one of those—was Janine Jansen, the fabulous Dutchwoman, born in 1978. She played with great imagination, command, and flair—individualistically, but with respect for the score. And the conductor, Maazel, was only too happy to collaborate with her. He seemed to have found a kindred spirit. They stretched the piece to the limit, interpretively, but did not cross some final border. Jansen can be a very pure violinist—in her Bach and so on. But she can also blaze, dance, and romp her way through the Tchaikovsky Concerto—a fine versatility.

Tchaikovsky wrote no cello concerto, but he did pen a fine piece for cello and orchestra—the Roco Variations. Playing these was Johannes Moser, a twenty-eight-year-old German. He tackled this work with uncommon zest; and this zest was catching, seeming to enliven the musicians around him. Moser highlighted the playfulness and whimsy of the Variations. That’s a side of Tchaikovsky that is perhaps undiscovered; the tragic side—the “Pathétique” side—we know well. Moser was far from a technical paragon. But the music—in particular the finale, the beloved Seventh Variation and Coda—had a graceful wildness that carried the day.

Note this, too: All of these soloists were quite young—and they all played their Tchaikovsky with obvious joy and appreciation. We’re often told that young people don’t want music like Tchaikovsky’s, that sappy old stuff. Instead, they want “thorny,” atonal modern music—“challenging” music that graybeards keep out, protective of their hum-along favorites. This, in a word, is bull.

And while I’m waxing vulgar, let me relate a story that I may have told in these pages before. It was about ten years ago, and Kurt Masur was conducting the New York Philharmonic in Tchaikovsky’s “Little Russian.” Like Maazel, he conducted it tightly and rigorously—as though it might have been Beethoven. I liked the performance very much, finding it stirring. A fellow critic, with whom I was chatting in the aisles, disagreed—he considered it too stern. I said, “Well, maybe you could think of this as Tchaikovsky for people who don’t like Tchaikovsky.” And he said—in a loud, unmodulated voice—“Anyone who doesn’t like Tchaikovsky is an a**h***.”

I regard that as an excellent piece of music criticism, or, better, people criticism.

The Cleveland Orchestra came to Carnegie Hall for three concerts, led by their controversial music director, Franz Welser-Möst. Why controversial? Because some people like him and others say he has brought a great orchestra low. I myself have heard Welser-Möst conduct very well—intelligently and musically—and I heard him do so during these New York concerts. I have also heard him conduct indifferently, even poorly. A fair amount of the time, he is guilty of a dull correctness.

The first Carnegie concert ended with—as it happens—a Tchaikovsky symphony: the “Pathétique.” About what Welser-Möst did with it, you could have taken one of two main views. You could have said, “Maestro exercised a most musicianly restraint. He did not need to emote in this already-emotional symphony. He let the score speak for itself.” Or you might have said, “The music was barely recognizable. It had no heart, no soul—barely any life. This reading was ridiculously

polite, ridiculously pretty. Welser-Möst placed the music on a doily.” I’m afraid I leaned toward the second view—and more than leaned.

On the final Cleveland evening, there was but one work: Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, “Resurrection.” And Welser-Möst did some satisfying things in it. For example, the second movement, *Andante moderato*, breathed beautifully, and the Clevelanders produced a golden sound. (You can’t fault them on sound, no matter what.) But here too, the conductor was overly polite—too standoffish. Important moments were unexploited, or underemphasized. Welser-Möst simply let them go by. A cool, detached approach (can you approach detachedly?) is one thing; interpretive neglect is another. When the great climax came—“Ja, aufersteh’n!”—it had nothing, which is to say, was hardly climactic at all. Tears ought to flow; and I doubt there was a wet eye in the house.

Perhaps the best thing about this Mahler 2 was the mezzo soloist, Bernarda Fink, one of the outstanding singers in the world. She is an Argentine, born to Slovenian parents. And, as you might expect, she champions Latin American music (Guastavino and the rest); furthermore, she is one of the best Bach singers I have ever had the privilege to hear. She sang her Mahler royally, understandingly, sublimely. Bernarda Fink is not a marquee singer, and there is no publicity machine behind her (that I can detect); but if she is appearing near you, do not miss her.

Ivan Moravec, the septuagenarian Czech pianist, appeared at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Here is another musician without a great publicity machine behind him, but a) he doesn’t need one and b) he wouldn’t want one. His fellow musicians, in particular, know his worth. And that tells us virtually everything.

At the museum, Moravec played a program of Haydn, Debussy, and Chopin. Much of this music, he has been playing a lot in recent seasons. It’s interesting how senior musicians settle on a certain repertoire—even if they’ve played everything from A to Z in previous decades. We see this in all walks of music: among instrumentalists, among singers, among conductors. I believe that musicians wind up with music they’re especially comfortable with, or have a particular confidence in. And, of course, technical considerations—“Can I execute these pieces?”—arise.

Moravec began his recital with Haydn’s Sonata in D major, Hob. XVI: 37. This is a favorite piece among young students. I bet Moravec learned it when he was about nine. And it’s always interesting to hear our most mature musicians play this kind of work. You know Artur Schnabel’s famous quip, don’t you? “Mozart is too easy for children and too hard for adults.” But this Haydn sonata was not too hard for Moravec.

The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, was nothing special: It should have had more sparkle, and it might have been fleeter. But it was adequate. The second movement, *Largo e sostenuto*, was special indeed: It was almost a chorale, free, but still Classical. Moravec pedaled this music beautifully. And the entire movement breathed a contentment. The third movement bears one of my favorite markings, all-time: “Finale: Presto, innocentemente.” And Moravec played it as instructed—with a lovely, merry innocence.

After his Debussy, and after intermission, Moravec tucked into his Chopin: four nocturnes and a ballade (that in F minor, Op. 52). In these pieces, Moravec exhibited his wonderful singing tone, and, again, that ability to pedal. He knows to avoid pumping, in music like this; he used the sustaining pedal subtly. He knows how to create appropriate blurs or blendings, when to leave the pedal “dirty.” I picked up that term from Yefim Bronfman, at a recent master class. He’d tell a student, “You can leave that pedal a little dirty.” In other words, let the sounds mingle for a bit, even slightly discordantly, before letting matters resolve.

That Chopin ballade, Moravec did not quite have the virtuosic panache to bring off—but we got the point. And his encores were more Chopin, mazurkas, played with wisdom and style—an Old World

sensibility not found in abundance on today's stages. Usually, Moravec gives us music from the homeland at encore time: some Smetana, some ~DVORAK. But he stuck with Chopin. And when you left the hall, you had the feeling you always do about Moravec: a servant of music, not of self, and therefore an example.

Talking of senior musicians, and talking of servants of music: Sir Colin Davis came to town—Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center—for three concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra, and the London Symphony Chorus, to boot. The conductor had just turned eighty. A cake was duly wheeled out—which seemed to embarrass him somewhat. The first of Sir Colin's concerts was devoted to Mozart (as he himself has been devoted to Mozart—and to Berlioz, and to Sibelius, and to others—all these years). Dominant on the program was the Requiem, in the Süssmayer completion—which has not been bettered, in these two centuries-plus.

How was the Requiem? Let me see if I can sum up: It was the right size, having the right weight; it was conducted at the right tempos, neither languid nor “period” brisk; it had the right degree of freedom, and the right degree of strictness. Is there anything like that feeling of just-rightness in the concert hall, especially when the work under performance is one of the five or ten most exalted? Sir Colin did not invest the Requiem with spiritual power; he allowed that power to emerge. When he's on the podium, conducting Mozart, you don't think of conducting, or of interpretation; you think of Mozart. The music comes to you almost unfiltered, which is very rare.

The final LSO concert was devoted to Haydn—and to another of our most exalted works: *The Creation*. Here again, we heard, not conductorial ego, but the music, pure and powerful. There were mistakes along the way—faulty entrances and such. But these were of no significance, in the face of high music-making. I thought of something an older writer once told my friend David Pryce-Jones: Mistakes are but “plums in the pudding, my boy.”

From Sir Colin's baton, every aspect of *The Creation* came to life (if I may put it that way). In Part One, the text speaks of the soft beams and light steps of a silvery moon, stealing through the night. You heard that, unmistakably. In Part Two, the text speaks of creeping worms—and these were even more unmistakable.

The conductor had with him a worthy trio of soloists. And the most striking of them was the soprano, Sally Matthews. She sang brightly, with a slight duskiness, or earthiness, of sound (if you will work through the contradiction). And, though she was rich, she was incisive—which is not always the case. Passages that are easy to make airy-fairy—“From every bush and grove resound the nightingale's delightful notes”—she accorded dignity. And she did this without sacrificing lightness and joy; indeed, she enhanced those qualities. I could go on, but suffice it to say that Sally Matthews proved the complete package: vocally, technically, and mentally (and temperamentally).

As for the London Symphony Chorus, it is renowned for a reason, and Sir Colin had them singing with poise and ardor. Some of Haydn's choruses were throbbingly passionate, but never beyond taste. When the chorus sang, “For He hath clothed heaven and earth in glorious splendor,” you could practically see it, or certainly feel it. I have no idea what the members of the London Symphony Chorus, the members of the London Symphony Orchestra, Sir Colin Davis, or those three soloists believe. But their performance this Sunday afternoon praised God, memorably.

Take one more orchestra, and one more conductor, who came to New York for three concerts—these in Carnegie Hall. I'm speaking of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, led by Yuri Temirkanov, its longtime chief. In 1988, he replaced an even more longtime chief, Yevgeny Mravinsky—who served in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad, sadly) a cool fifty years. This is a record, certainly among major conductors, and major orchestras.

Maestro Temirkanov is an interesting chap. He is what is known in the trade as “mercurial.” On

some occasions, he is ordinary, pedestrian, uninspired. And on others, he is wizardly, magnetic. He can wrap you in a spell, as he goes about his business. And he is almost always fascinating to watch. Though short of stature, he stands tall on a high podium, looming over an orchestra—and weaving in and out of it, swiveling, dancing, without a baton. Many years ago, after Temirkanov had conducted some piece, the critic sitting next to me said, “He’s so weird”—and he did not really mean it negatively. Temirkanov is an idiosyncratic, and very musical, man—he does not come from a cookie cutter.

And neither does the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, having a distinctive sound, not polished, but warm, darkish, growling, and wonderful. Very Russian. The St. Petersburg Phil. can be savage, and they can also be angelic. But even when they’re angelic, the angels have a touch of earth, a bit of a burr. In any event, this orchestra’s third concert—all-Russian—gave plenty of opportunity to display characteristic sounds.

The program began with the *Small Triptych* of Georgy Sviridov, who lived from 1915 to 1998, and was a student of Shostakovich. The *Small Triptych* was composed in 1964, and is exactly as advertised: a small triptych, lasting just under ten minutes. But Sviridov has a lot to say in these three pieces, and they are neatly crafted. The music ranges from mystical—almost holy—to explosive. It shakes your nerves and rattles your brain (which is not a Russian song, as far as I know). It is sweeping, in its small way. And the work seems more Soviet than Russian. Temirkanov has championed it for years, and you can see why: It’s an impressive product from a composer all but unknown, certainly in the West.

This evening continued with a very well-known work: the *Songs and Dances of Death* by Mussorgsky (in the orchestration by Shostakovich). And doing the singing was Larissa Diadkova, a Russian mezzo. She is a formidable singer, one of the best Azucenas around. (I refer to the role in Verdi’s *Trovatore*.) Diadkova showed her own characteristic sound: a sound not unlike the St. Petersburg Philharmonic’s, actually. And, like the orchestra, she can vary her sound: She does not have one color, one key, one note. She sang the Mussorgsky set powerfully and rivetingly—operatically, but not in a vulgar sense. She is a savvy performer.

Now, there were many technical slips—including some marked flatness. But these did not detract from the overall effect. Diadkova’s singing of this music—to use one of my favorite bits of recent slang—“creeped you out.”

In the world today, there are three great singers of the *Songs and Dances*—which is a lot. I mean Olga Borodina, mezzo-soprano; Ewa Podlesī, contralto; and Dmitri Hvorostovsky, baritone. And yet there are others, too: including the baritone Sergei Leiferkus, and this mezzo, Diadkova. The fall of the Iron Curtain gave the world at large many musicians we might not have heard, or even heard of. And among them are a couple companies’ worth of singers.

Yuri Temirkanov closed his Carnegie Hall stand with Prokofiev’s *Alexander Nevsky*—the concert cantata, Op. 78. And in this score Temirkanov was slightly, and surprisingly, subdued. Maybe it’s better to say that he was restrained. This music is not without bombast, not without its propagandistic element. Maybe it’s better to say that it is movie music (rendered in concert form). At any rate, Temirkanov succeeded in mitigating the bombast. And he let inherent drama come out, without any forcing, without resort to brute strength—which would have backfired.

Toward the end of the cantata comes the famous “Field of the Dead,” always called “haunting,” and rightly so. Diadkova sang it, and she suffered from some terrible flatness. Also, I believe it was a mistake to place her at the back, with the chorus. Even her formidable mezzo did not emerge with enough power. But to say that she failed would be absolutely wrong.

The final piece here is “Alexander’s Entry into Pskov,” which I’ve always thought of as

Christmassy. More specifically, it contains a kind of carol, complete with jingle bells. What, a Christmas carol, in a score for a Soviet film, composed in 1938, while the Terror raged, and meant to glorify Stalin? Sure.

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