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by *Jay Nordlinger*

On Jane Eyre performed by the Center for Contemporary Opera, Denis Matsuev's piano recital at Carnegie Hall, and Guillaume Tell performed by the Metropolitan Opera.

The Center for Contemporary Opera staged a festival of five operas, all “created by, led by, or about women.” As I see it, that is a very broad category. Thinking of Puccini alone, I would cite Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Manon Lescaut, Turandot . . .

One of cco's operas was Jane Eyre, by Louis Karchin, with a libretto by Diane Osen. Karchin, born in 1951, teaches at New York University. Osen is a writer whose father once sang at New York City Opera. Jane Eyre, as you know, is the 1847 novel by one of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte. This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of her birth.

It was a very good idea, by the way: an opera on Jane Eyre. The novel tells an operatic story. There is even disguise—Rochester as a Gypsy—which may be silly, but which is undeniably operatic. There is also a recognition scene: when the village pastor and his sisters realize that Jane is their cousin. Also, as I sat in the theater, I thought of Bluebeard's Castle. A young woman in love with her man has to put up with his haunted house, and the horribleness that goes with it.

Jane Eyre tells an operatic story.

Karchin has composed a very good opera. And some of the credit must go to Charlotte Brontë, whose story reaches through the ages. The librettist, too, deserves a bow. She has performed a feat of compression. The opera does not begin at the beginning of the story—at the beginning of Brontë's. Jane Eyre's childhood is skipped, though reviewed. The opera begins when the story gets wild and woolly. Osen's libretto is dotted with interesting couplets. I wrote one of them down: "Can I trust you with this task?" "Need you ask?"

The opera is what they call "full length," or an entire evening. It is in three acts. It is not a Cav or a Pag, in need of a pairing. It had its premiere at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College.

Karchin's score opens busy and brooding. You think, "No good will come of this tale." The music is shot through with anxiety. As regular readers know, I am always saying that the current age in classical music ought to be dubbed "The Age of Anxiety." In Karchin's defense, he is not merely following suit. No, Brontë's tale is brimming with anxiety.

The composer supplies a variety of music, because Brontë's tale is big and multifaceted. There is nightmare music. And drawing-room chatter. And love music.

This score belongs to the American school—the American school of opera writing. It has many familiar traits. Yet it is also its own man, so to speak. At one point, I heard what I described, mentally, as "Korngoldian tinkles." Or you could call these touches Zemlinskyan, if you like. The music is also Straussian, especially in its busyness. The orchestra almost never rests. It is always churning, stirring—except when it isn't, and these respites, or calmings, are welcome. Karchin often writes in "tonal-sounding atonality," to borrow a phrase from Lorin Maazel. You have jagged cacophonies. But then Karchin will come through with a white C major, let's say, which is effective.

There is one scene about which I have some doubts. It is the schoolroom scene, in Act III. It is a pleasant diversion—but almost too pleasant, in a way. This scene struck me as negligible, in an opera full of consequence. But I must say that Karchin knows what he's doing, in this somewhat unwieldy story.

He tells the story through the orchestra, as much as the singers, with their words. This is a symphonic opera as much as a vocal one. Karchin writes like a man who has lived with opera, although Jane Eyre is only his second opera, and his first full-length one. Ah, well: Beethoven wrote just one opera. So did Gershwin.

In the Kaye Playhouse, Jane Eyre was served by a very good production, overseen by the director Kristine McIntyre. Use of video was intelligent. At every turn, the production enhanced the story, libretto, and music, rather than overtaking them. The Directors' Guild may revoke McIntyre's membership.

The title role, Jane Eyre, is a big soprano role, a tour de force. It was created—i.e., premiered—by

Jennifer Zetlan, whom I first reviewed years ago, when she was a student at Juilliard. She has a lot to offer, and offered it as Jane Eyre. She sang brightly, if now and then shrilly. She demonstrated clear diction. And she was undaunted by the theatrical responsibilities of her role. She can be proud of this night, and look back on it with great satisfaction.

Rochester is a tenor, and he was portrayed by Ryan MacPherson, who rose to all challenges. Outstanding in a smaller role was Katrina Thurman, another soprano, who played Blanche Ingram: bitchy, catty, well-nigh villainous. The soprano sang with confidence and lyric power.

Karchin's Jane Eyre is an old-fashioned opera, bold in its aim, unblushing about opera's traditions. I got the feeling that Karchin was writing from the heart, as well as the head—that he was not out to impress critics or colleagues, but to write a good opera.

There is this problem, or fact: Jane Eyre is a Christian story, or rather, a story set in a Christian civilization, namely the England of 1800 or so. Therefore, the story is un-modern (if timeless). Jane refuses to go off to Italy with Rochester, because they are unmarried. Does anyone get that now? I will relate something from the premiere: In Act III, when Jane and her pastor cousin were talking of missionary work, a man sitting near me could not stop guffawing and commenting. He could not believe how much more advanced he was than these rubes.

Through all three acts, I was almost never bored or indifferent, and my mind almost never wandered. The composer, and the librettist, and the stage director—and the novelist, Charlotte Brontë—had me the whole way. That may seem like faint praise. But it is not. The ending was moving, as Jane returns to Rochester, in his wrecked physical state. I thought, "This opera, in its warmth, beauty, and goodness, is brave."

Denis Matsuev, the Russian pianist, played a recital in Carnegie Hall. It was a big program, a huge program—the kind of program played by a pianist with a big appetite and a big technique. That's Matsuev. He is a virile, athletic pianist. A consuming pianist. Also a sensitive one. In any case, on with the show . . .

His program opened with Beethoven's Sonata in A flat, Op. 110. I myself do not think of this sonata as an opener (of a recital). I think of it more as a closer, or at least a closer of a first half. The sonata is profound, sublime, almost a final word. But there is no crime in opening with it, and that's what Matsuev did. In the first movement, he showed his fat, masculine tone. Artur Schnabel would have approved. So would Beethoven, I think. In this movement, Matsuev was both Classical and Romantic, as befits the music, and this period of Beethoven. In the second movement—Allegro molto—he missed some notes, but that only proves that Matsuev is mortal, and that we were not listening to a studio recording.

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bizarre, to me, even at this remove.

Jump, now, to the closing fugue. This fugue sounds visionary, bizarre, to me, even at this remove—even two hundred years after its composition. Matsuev played it creamily. Unusually creamily. The fugue was almost Impressionistic. It was slightly overpedaled, for my taste, but it was interesting and musical.

The program continued with a very big piece: Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13. I believe that the opening theme should be stated pretty matter-of-factly, without much stretching. Matsuev did some stretching, but not a gross amount. Fast etudes tended to be quite fast, and slower ones quite slow. I believe the tempos were slightly extreme, but only slightly. Matsuev sometimes failed in his articulation. And, again, I think he was guilty of some overpedaling. The last, climactic etude—*Allegro brillante*—was bulldozing and loud. It was also monotonous. Anyway, Matsuev can't be faulted for timidity, and he strode off the stage like a wrestler who had just vanquished an opponent (which, in a sense, he had).

He began the second half of his program with Liszt—the *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*. You have never heard it so fast, or at least I hadn't. Some of the notes were feinted at, rather than truly played. The waltz was exciting, in part, but it was also without some of its character. Some of its storytelling, if you will.

Next, Matsuev played a rarity, or a now-rarity: Tchaikovsky's *Meditation*, Op. 72, No. 5. Matsuev's forebears played this piece—especially his Russian forebears—and Matsuev is a throwback. That is a high compliment from me, by the way: throwback. Matsuev played the *Meditation* with affection and panache. Really, this was beautiful playing, a model.

He closed the printed program with a Prokofiev sonata, No. 7, the one with the famous toccata, marked *Precipitato*, at the end. The first movement has another interesting marking: *Allegro inquieto*. Matsuev was domineering in it, but not in a bad way. He was pulverizing in it, but, again, not in a bad way. (In a Prokofiev-like way.) In the middle movement, *Andante caloroso*, he again showed his fat, warm, beautiful singing tone. And the *Precipitato* was hellbent—and right.

At this point, Matsuev was ready for another program, a slew of encores. I'm not sure the applause—the audience enthusiasm—justified this slew, but Matsuev seemed determined to play them, and I'm glad he did. The first encore was—ready for a throwback?—*A Musical Snuffbox*, by Liadov (the Russian composer who lived from 1855 to 1914). This is a dear novelty of a piece favored by Hofmann, Godowsky, and Rosenthal, among others. Matsuev played it with delicacy and fondness. He then played a Sibelius piece: the *Etude in A minor*, Op. 76, No. 2, from *Thirteen Pieces*. It occurred to me that Leif Ove Andsnes opens his album of encores (*Horizons*, 2006) with this very piece. Matsuev played it with poise and intelligence.

Then he offered some Rachmaninoff—the *Etude-tableau in A minor*, Op. 39, No. 2. This is one of those Rachmaninoff pieces that seem to come from far away, or to think of the far away. Matsuev

played it with due mystery, and beauty.

I figured he could not end on something unshowy. And, lo, he sat down and played a blizzard of jazz. I mean, a blizzard of American jazz. The notes were so fast and furious, Art Tatum's eyes might have popped out. From this blizzard, a tune emerged: "Take the 'A' Train." Matsuev was performing a pianistic feat that made my own eyes pop out.

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And I thought, "Here is a man who simply loves playing the piano." I don't know where he was staying in New York that night. But, if that place had a piano, I can imagine that Matsuev played it, deep into the night, whether anyone else was listening or not.

In last month's chronicle, I discussed a performance of *L'italiana* in Algeri, the Rossini hit, at the Metropolitan Opera. I cited the composer's statement about his own posterity: "I hope to be survived by Act III of *Otello*, Act II of *William Tell*—and all of *The Barber*" (of Seville). I said that I myself would have included Act I of *L'italiana* in any canon. Regardless, the Met has now staged *William Tell*, not just Act II but all four of them. This was a devoted presentation of *William Tell*, and in its original language: French. Hence, the opera was really *Guillaume Tell*. The Met had not staged it, in any version, since 1931.

The overture to *William*, or *Guglielmo*, or *Guillaume Tell* is perhaps the most famous overture in the world. What rivals it? The overture to *Carmen*? The 1812 Overture (which, as you know, does not precede an opera but is a concert piece)? When the Met orchestra started up the last section of the overture—the "March of the Swiss Soldiers," familiar from *The Lone Ranger*—there were titters in the audience. Or so it was the night I was there. I think people were simply tickled to hear that music, coming from an opera pit. The overture is a cliché, which is a pity—because it's such a great piece.

As famous as the overture is, the opera is not. It is Rossini's last opera and a masterpiece. This opera is based on a play by Schiller about the Swiss folk hero, *William Tell*, and the struggle of the Swiss against the occupying Austrians. *Tell* is a grand opera, and not what you might think of as Rossinian: there is not really humor in it, that Rossini mirth or sparkle. In fact, one of the big arias, "Sois immobile," is virtually unidentifiable as Rossini. Yet it is an inspired and beautiful thing.

One reason the opera has been seldom performed is that some music in it is exceptionally hard to sing. The show is not easy to cast. Also, it is long, very long: Wagner length. Rossini did not like *Tell* edited, and one can hardly fault him. But, honestly, I think it is no crime to edit—to abbreviate—*Tell*.

At the Met, the title role was taken by the Canadian bass-baritone Gerald Finley. I have long known

him, and hailed him, as an intelligent, skillful singer, and a fine actor as well. I had never quite realized, until this night, how beautiful his voice is: an enviably, glowingly beautiful voice. Though *Tell* is the title role, the most music probably belongs to a character named Arnold, a tenor. At the Met, he was sung by Bryan Hymel, an American who has made a specialty of French, or French-language, roles. (He is from New Orleans, so maybe it comes naturally?) As Arnold, he was a bit pinched—airless—but he sang bravely, and his high notes were especially brave, and good.

There is a substantial soprano role, Mathilde, which has a well-known aria, “Sombre forêt.” Mathilde was portrayed by Marina Rebeka, a Latvian, whom we met last summer. What I mean is, I reviewed her from the Salzburg Festival, where she sang *Thaïs*. As Mathilde, she was sweet, strong, and flexible. “Sombre forêt” features, or imposes, long, long breaths, as in “Porgi, amor” (from Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*). Rebeka had no problem with them. And she floated some lovely high notes. Later, she demonstrated some regal coloratura. I have never written, or thought of, that phrase before: “regal coloratura.” Altogether, she was confident and secure. And the higher she went, the more beautiful her voice sounded.

A soft, gentle chorus can be as impressive as one with an anvil.

Tell is a heavily choral opera, and the Met’s chorus was a star. I thought, “You know, a soft, gentle chorus can be as impressive as one with an anvil. Or more.” The French horns in this opera get a workout, both in the pit and offstage, and the Met’s were redoubtable. The opera was conducted by Fabio Luisi, from whom I might have liked more vividness, but who was never less than sound.

At the helm of the production was Pierre Audi, the French-Lebanese director, long associated with the Dutch National Opera. I have some objections to his *Tell*. But I also have compliments, including on the use of color. I am thinking in particular of the lighting. Yet there is one choice—one choice of color—I would not have made.

Rossini ends his opera in radiant C major. You may recall that, above, I referred to the “white” of C major. That is the color associated with that key—at least by most—and I believe I would have gone with it. At the Met, the stage turned yellow. Dawn, maybe?

I have to end on the apple: the apple that William Tell famously shoots off the head of his son. I was wondering the whole time, “How are they going to do that? What technological razzle-dazzle is going to shatter the apple?” Allow me to digress with a story . . .

Tennessee Williams offered Lee Hoiby the pick of his plays. That is, the playwright told the composer that he, the composer, could make an opera of any Williams play he liked. Naturally, Hoiby thought

of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But he could not imagine how he would set one moment to music: the moment when Stanley Kowalski bellows “Stella!” Hoiby picked *Summer and Smoke*. Many years later, André Previn composed an opera on *Streetcar*. When it came time for Stanley to bellow—he simply bellowed. No music. A neat solution.

How is the big moment handled in this new *Tell*? The soprano playing the hero’s son—yes, this is a trouser role—simply shucks the apple off her head. At least it seemed that way from my seat. A low-tech solution, but maybe the neatest to hand.

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