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New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

On the Europeanization of the Metropolitan Opera, Alan Gilbert's New York Philharmonic, Paul Jacobs at Juiliard, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

Well, has it begun? Is the Europeanization of the Metropolitan Opera underway? For many years, some people have longed for this development; other people have dreaded it. What do I mean by "Europeanization"? It is just a shorthand, and, like many shorthands, very loose. I mean opera productions of the sort you find in Salzburg, summer after summer. Readers of this journal are perhaps familiar with my reports from that fair town. The productions "subvert" the operas they treat, and "subversion" is a cherished word in the vocabulary of the modern director. The director likes to rip an opera from its composer and librettist and make it something all his own: often something very ugly or twisted. I once knew an editor who explained his idea of editing: "I spit in the writer's soup, so he doesn't want to touch it anymore. When I spit into his piece, it's all mine, and I can do with it what I want."

You may remember the Salzburg *Marriage of Figaro* I discussed last month. Among other "innovations," the Countess, Cherubino, and Susanna have a three-way. This is in questionable taste all by itself, but it definitely makes a hash of *Figaro*'s story. Mozart and his librettist, Da Ponte, have to stand out of the way. You may also remember a *Freischütz* from 2007: This is a Christian parable, written in the 1820s. In Salzburg, it was anti-American agitprop, complete with interjections into the libretto: in English, to denounce U.S. foreign policy. A couple of years before that, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* was barely recognizable: It was made into a hideous, incomprehensible sex show. In a public interview with me, the soprano Diana Damrau made a bold point. She said that, if people are going to depart egregiously from an opera as it was written, they should rename the opera: give it a new title, so that people know not to expect the original, or a reasonably faithful interpretation of it. That would have the benefit of honesty.

A hallmark of these "European" productions is sex, and lots of it, and the more depraved the better. Gone are subtlety, suggestiveness, and sexiness, in fact; onstage is a brutish carnality. I have seen it over and over again, and so have opera-goers throughout the Continent. It sometimes seems that sex is the main point of the modern production (and opera is sex-filled enough). I think of

something that William F. Buckley Jr. once said about Norman Mailer: Such a talented man; if only he could "lift his gaze above the world's genitalia."

Thus far, the Metropolitan Opera has largely steered clear of "European" trends, fads, and fashions. And this has made a lot of people upset: They want the Met to get with the program, to be more like everyone else. They say that the Met has been stuffy, square, "conservative." The company's productions are "hyper-literal," they claim, and that is a big word in their arsenal of abuse: "hyper-literal." I'm not exactly sure what it means. I think it means that, when Wagner calls for a rainbow bridge, some oaf of a director actually puts in a rainbow bridge. And it is not true that the Met has been conservative, or rigidly so. There has been a mixture of "traditional" productions and "modern" ones, to use, once again, terms that are too loose. Herbert Wernicke's *Frau ohne Schatten* is not "traditional"—and it is one of the best productions the Met has. Robert Wilson's *Lohengrin* is almost freaky-deaky. Robert Carsen's *Eugene Onegin* is an example of minimalist grace. In any event, I quote a wise, veteran collector of modern art with whom I chanced to talk last summer: "There are good traditional productions and bad ones, good modern productions and bad ones." Yes. What matters is taste, talent, judgment.

The director most hated and mocked by the "modern" camp is Franco Zeffirelli, who has contributed several productions to the Met. One of them is *Turandot*. A major critic once lamented that this production is "critic-proof," meaning that, much as critics try to kill it, audiences love it, ensuring that it stays on. In this case, the public is right, as I see it: The Zeffirelli production is marvelous, just as the Wernicke *Frau* is marvelous, and each in its own way. Zeffirelli also did a *Tosca* for the Met. And now that *Tosca* is gone, replaced by a new one from Luc Bondy, a Swiss director. The Met opened its 2009–10 season with this production: and it heralds, or threatens, things to come. The new administration at the Met is very much of the belief that the company has been stuffy and must be shaken up: brought into a new, more Salzburg-like world.

Bondy is no doubt a gifted man. But his *Tosca* is seriously flawed, in my opinion. It is so ugly, in its overall appearance, it must be willfully so. And the production has typical "modern," "European" touches. The portrait of Mary Magdalene that Cavaradossi paints is bare-breasted—of course. No self-respecting production would be without nudity, right off the bat. At the end of the Te Deum, Scarpia embraces a statue of the Virgin Mary and humps it. Of course. As Act II opens, he is being serviced by a trio of whores. And so on. Bondy's Scarpia is not the chilling, sinister despot he ought to be, but a mad, perverted clown. And look: *Tosca* is carnal and depraved enough as it is. Not for nothing was it dubbed a "shabby little shocker." There is no need to gild, or sully, the lily.

There is something else quite curious about Bondy's *Tosca*, and the Met's choice of it. I have said it is ugly, and so it is, but it is also gigantic—monumentally scaled. Zeffirelli's *Tosca* was monumentally scaled too. If the company wanted a different production, why not a very different production—something like the Carsen *Onegin*, which replaced grander, more "literal" ones, and very successfully? Whereas Zeffirelli gave us beautiful gigantism, appropriate to the opera, and to

the space of the Met, Bondy gives us ugly gigantism. This was a trade worth making? It was worth ditching the Zeffirelli *Tosca* for this?

Let it be known that Bondy's is a very tame production, by "European" standards. It is practically Disneyesque. In Munich, they had a *Rigoletto* in which everyone was dressed as an ape. They also had, quite recently, a *Macbeth* in which the choristers urinated and defecated onstage. Now that's putting your modernist shoulder to the wheel! Nevertheless, Bondy's *Tosca* is outré for the Met. According to reports, first-night patrons booed loudly when the production team appeared for bows. A friend of mine told me that she heard some criticisms shouted out: "Read the libretto!" and, pricelessly, "Go back to Europe!" It remains to be seen whether Met patrons will be cowed into silence. That is the word Lorin Maazel, the conductor, used in an interview with me last summer. He said that audiences in Salzburg were "cowed," intimidated into keeping their objections to themselves, even wiping them out of their minds. This is the game the modern directors and their supporters play, he noted: They paint their critics as backward, prudish, and other bad things, and they paint themselves as progressive, daring, and even heroic—heroic because they are moving the art forward, whereas the rest of us are trying to hold it back.

So, will Met audiences eventually be cowed? New Yorkers have a reputation for boldness and independence, but even the bold and independent can be worn down, especially when they are branded with the scarlet "C" for "conservative." After the premiere of *Tosca*, there was a headline in the *New York Times*: "It's a New Met. Get Over It." Exactly.

If the Met goes all "European," that will be a shame, not least for this reason: The diversity of the opera world will be lessened, if not lost. The Met has long been the home of traditional grand opera. Where else can you see this stuff? You can see Scarpia humping the Virgin Mary at any old house—that sort of production is par for the course, even de rigueur. But the Met has been something special, something apart. Why do all the opera houses have to be the same? Why does every last dissenter or holdout have to be corralled and made to "get with the program"? It's a strange fact of life that many of the people who squawk the loudest about diversity actually favor conformity, and enforce it whenever they have the power to do so.

One more word, before moving off this contentious subject: If the Met's new administration wants to revolutionize the house, fine—they're in charge. But they don't need to pretend that their predecessors were hopeless fuddy-duddies who let the place go to pot. It was a great house.

I have gone on and on about the production—and the issue of productions—and I will devote a teaspoon of space to singing. I will return to a normal balance in future chronicles. Tosca at the Met was Karita Mattila, the famous, and usually fabulous, Finn. She is not an Italianate singer, and this was an atypical role for her: but, on the night I heard her, she handled it with her customary persuasiveness, musical and theatrical. Take her "Vissi d'arte": It was a moving piece of drama. It was not a pretty prayer, such as you sometimes hear on aria albums, but it was right for the role, right for the opera, as it unfolded before our eyes.

Move to the New York Philharmonic—where "the Gilbert era" has begun, in the words of Philharmonic PR. Alan Gilbert has taken over the reins from Lorin Maazel. And "era" suggests that we should settle in for a long tenure. He had a big test early, conducting the Symphony No. 3 of Mahler—one of the longest, grandest, greatest works in the literature. And he passed that test, pretty much. Gilbert was solid, sensible, well prepared, correct—again, sensible. That is his usual disposition. He delivered good, capable conducting. Each line in the orchestra was clear, not getting lost in some Mahlerian soup. At the same time, the sound-picture was unified. There have been more emotional and affecting performances. But Gilbert's thoughtfulness was to be appreciated.

His singer was Petra Lang, a German mezzo. She intoned the Nietzsche song angrily and almost clinically—interestingly. Her diction was a sight to behold (so to speak): Everything was very distinctly pronounced, not to say over-pronounced. Take the word "Mensch"—you heard the "n," separately, completed, before the "sch." And "acht" was like a German lesson in slow motion. Do not let me rib this lady: She sang "impactfully," as moderns say.

It was in the last movement—that stretch of sublimity—that things broke down for Gilbert, and for the audience, and for Mahler. The music became static, and the playing became sloppy. Gilbert's breathing, or sense of pace and shape, deserted him. And I can't remember a more dry-eyed account of this closer. Frankly, it was hard to applaud after. But to conduct the first five movements of this piece ably: That is something, and Gilbert will have many more chances on the Philharmonic podium. Maybe hundreds and hundreds in this "era."

In its season opener, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presented a program with a Viennese accent: Strauss waltzes, for example, arranged by Schoenberg and his student Webern. The concert began with a Beethoven trio—the one in B flat for clarinet, cello, and piano. This is the trio with that marvelous theme-and-variations last movement, so bumptious, fun, and ingenious. On hand were three dependable musicians: the clarinetist David Shifrin, the cellist David Finckel, and the pianist André-Michel Schub. Shifrin was at the top of his game, a formidable game to be at the top of. And the three performed the last movement to satisfaction: The movement is not only fun, but funny—and the players recognized this, without descending into ham.

Elsewhere on the program was a most un-Viennese work, and a work with no ham: *The North Wind Was a Woman* by David Bruce, an Anglo-American composer. This is a song-cycle for soprano and chamber ensemble, commissioned by the Chamber Music Society. Bruce's instrumentation is exotic: There is a mandolin, for example, and cymbals are stroked by a bow (or was it just one cymbal?). The music is an amalgam: It is New Agey, folky, pop-like, "ethnic"—you sometimes seem to be on the Silk Road with Yo-Yo and his crew. It is to his credit that Bruce likes a melody, which some contemporary composers think must be shunned. To me, on first hearing, *The North Wind …* was innocuous, palatable, nice. "Nice" can be a terrible putdown, although I don't mean it that way. I once heard a distinguished critic describe, and dismiss, Roy Harris's music as "nice." It was more insulting than if he had said "execrable." Anyway, *The North Wind …* is longer than it

needs to be, in my judgment. Tedium tries to take over. One song, "The Crescent Moon Is a Dangerous Lunatic," comes as a relief: It is fast, biting, tart, short—almost the scherzo of the cycle.

The songs were sung by the woman for whom they were written: Dawn Upshaw. She likes to sing this kind of music, and is made for it (and other things). Of course, liking something is one of the things that make you for it. Much of the time, she sang in a conversational, almost folky style, which was appropriate. She retains her habit of approaching a note from below, like a pop singer. This habit is annoying to some, an endearing characteristic for others. (I cast my vote for annoying.) And she retains her ability to convey the sensation of flying, when on high notes. The sound spins and spins, races and races, gloriously, excitingly. How does she do it? If it were explainable, everyone would do it, I think.

Care for an organ recital? We should attend them when we can, for they are few, on the conventional concert scene. And the organ has one of the best repertoires in music. If only Bach, and no one else, had written for the organ, it would still have one of the best repertoires in music. And it was Bach, and only Bach, that Paul Jacobs played at the Juilliard School. He is chairman of the organ department there. And he played in Paul Hall, a smallish venue that was packed for the occasion. People stood outside, wanting to get in.

Too bad for those shut out, but the hall was right for the evening's program: six Bach trio sonatas, BWV 525–530. These works are more intimate and intricate than cathedral-like. Why are they called "trio sonatas"? There are three voices, three lines, continually interweaving: one on one keyboard, one on another keyboard, and one on the pedals. Over the years, in these pages, I have had occasion to remark on the "completeness" craze in music, the feast-or-famine nature of the concert scene. You can go for years—decades—without hearing a Bach trio sonata. And then, wham, you hear six in a row, over an hour and a half. Overkill? Yes. And Bach did not compose them to be heard one right after another. One trio sonata would have been nice, followed by, or in the midst of, other pieces. Still, you could sit back and enjoy the master's angelic math: marvel at it, too.

Jacobs is an excellent player. Among his qualities are crispness, clarity, tidiness, smarts. He pays attention to details, including note values: He is not one to linger over a note—to hold it too long—but rather releases it at just the right time. This makes a difference in music. Throughout the evening, he talked to the audience, which is usually fingernails-on-the-blackboard to the likes of me. But Jacobs spoke so well, and so sincerely—he was even moving at times—you could hardly blame him. His love of music is extraordinary. And he said some memorable things, including this: He is happy to take advantage of an organ's "swell box," for which purists—early-music dogmatists—would "have my head." Good for Jacobs for bucking musicological PC.

After the six trio sonatas, he played an encore, commenting that one could follow Bach only with more Bach: and he played the famous Prelude and Fugue in A minor, characterfully and stirringly. After six relatively polite sonatas—however ingenious—he let it all hang out, to the thrill, I think, of the capacity crowd. I'm sure they could hear it outside the doors, too.

Last comes Carnegie Hall, which opened its season with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. On the bill were two concerto soloists: the first of them Evgeny Kissin, the Russian pianist. He played Chopin's Concerto No. 2 in F minor (really the one Chopin wrote first—it was merely published second). You may remember the recording of the Chopin concertos Kissin made in Moscow when he was about twelve—astoundingly good, not just for a twelve-year-old, but for most anybody. With the BSO, Kissin played the F minor appreciatively, competently, and defensibly. He was a little dull at times, falling into a ploddingness of thought, as happens to him, now and then.

But he shone in his encores—which were two. First came Liszt's Valse-Caprice No. 6, after Schubert. Kissin loves old-fashioned pieces like this—and we should love him for it. Backhaus played this Liszt-Schubert piece unforgettably, and Kissin played it well, too: like a young master. (Although he is out of his red, Soviet youth scarf, he is not yet forty.) Then he played Chopin's "Minute" Waltz, rather angrily—bristlingly—which was interesting, and effective. Was it right to play two encores after the concerto? Did the audience's enthusiasm warrant it? I think not, to be frank. But at least the crowd got its money's worth.

Later on the program was a harp concerto—yes, a harp concerto, written by John Williams, of movie fame. Williams may be the most famous and wealthiest composer in the world, outside of pop-and-rock. Maybe even including? He wrote this concerto for the BSO's longtime principal harpist, just retired. She is Ann Hobson Pilot, and she did the honors in Carnegie Hall. Williams's concerto is in two movement, the first dreamlike, otherworldly. It includes a good amount of percussion, and some harpistic noodling, too. The second movement sounds like some of the composer's movie music: It is bouncy, jazzy, revving—anticipatory, in a way. Something's coming. The entire work is interesting, enjoyable, and well-crafted, proving once again that Williams's fame and wealth are not accidental or wrong.

Ann Hobson Pilot proved a superb advocate of this concerto—her concerto. She played virtuosically and musically, in equal measure. This is a woman who ought to retire? She showed an exceptionally good sense of rhythm, and an exceptionally good sense of dynamics as well. Plus, the harp is a wonderfully capable and versatile instrument—it was nice to see it front and center, for a change.

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