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by Jay Nordlinger

On Lorin Maazel with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, The Damnation of Faust at the Met, an evening of new music at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and Neemi Järvi at the New York Philharmonic.

A few summers ago, the German Chamber Orchestra of Bremen came to town, giving a concert at the Mostly Mozart Festival. And the excellent critic Anne Midgette, then of the *New York Times*, now of the *Washington Post*, opened her review this way: "The future of classical music is a hot topic these days. Plenty of us hold forth about the need for more new works, more variety, a more contemporary flavor." But what the Bremen orchestra provided was "an all-Beethoven concert with some of the most traditional, oft-played repertory in the book": the *Coriolan Overture*, the Violin Concerto, and the "Eroica" Symphony. "And what do you know? The crowds reached from Alice Tully Hall to the corner, and many were turned away disappointed. It looked like the event of the summer. Which should remind some of us that one thing the classical music audience does want is classical music."

Oh, yes. You may point out that Alice Tully is not a very large hall, which is true. But, across the way, Avery Fisher is a much bigger hall. And, during his tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic (2002–09), Lorin Maazel put on a Beethoven festival there. This comprised all the symphonies, all the piano concertos, and a sprinkling of overtures. And you could not get a ticket—the concerts were absolutely sold out. There is a perpetual hunger for Beethoven, and it is a hunger that Beethoven perpetually satisfies. This season, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under its music director James Levine, is doing the complete Beethoven symphonies. And the BSO came to Carnegie Hall to perform two of those symphonies: No. 6 in F, known as the "Pastoral," and No. 7 in A, which Wagner famously called "the apotheosis of the dance."

Levine did not conduct the orchestra in Carnegie Hall. He was out contending with a bad back. In his stead on the podium was Maazel. I wrote about him in these pages more or less continually for seven seasons. I never expected to be writing about him again so soon. But there he was, with the Bostonians, and he was his quintessential self: brilliant, baffling, appalling, and thrilling. When he left the Philharmonic, and I was summing up, one of the points I made about him was that you could always learn from him. He would show you something new even in a score that is ultra-

familiar. It took the cake one evening when he showed me something new—brought out something I had never noticed before—in Beethoven's Fifth. He did this with the Sixth and the Seventh, too, especially the former.

In the first movement, he used some phrasing that was wholly unconventional, and not wholly wrong—it may even have been right. Moreover, the music had unusual bite and crunchiness. This movement was not the strictly pretty affair it can be. It was in the second movement that Maazel got really weird—weird and fascinating. This movement depicts a brook, as you recall, and it is usually smooth-flowing. But not from Maazel. He pushed and pulled the music, stopped and started it, squeezed and teased it. Some of the movement was exquisite and touching; other parts were excruciating and indefensible. This was a real Maazel performance. The next two movements—the gathering of the country folk and the storm—were magnificent. With those country folk, Maazel demonstrated his uncanny sense of rhythm. In an interview with me last summer, he discussed his relationship with jazz. He said, matter- of-factly, "Like every American, I have rhythm." (That should probably be "I *got* rhythm," but never mind.) It's true. And he was especially delightful with Beethoven's syncopation. As for the storm, it has seldom had so much drama, so much aliveness.

I must say, the last movement—that shepherd's song—passed decently, no better. But that's okay: The rest of the symphony had been arresting enough.

What about the Seventh? I will mention just two of the movements—the opening and the closing. That opening movement was utterly Promethean, to use a word commonly associated with Beethoven. It was purposeful, resolute, definite—so well defined, it might have been chiseled in iron and diamond. And the final movement was exhilarating, with Maazel dancing his tail off, all charged up. He was wild like a teenager, but in complete control: of the score, the orchestra, and himself. He sometimes seems not to know he is almost eighty. And, as a bonus, he goes about his work with the most beautiful baton technique there ever was. If you don't like what you are hearing, you can at least enjoy what you are seeing.

Years ago, Maazel said that Beethoven was the best friend you would ever have: with you through thick and thin, never letting you down. And there is truth to that. No wonder we return to him over and over.

Last season, the Metropolitan Opera staged a new production of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*. Met-goers were especially interested in this production for this reason: It was fashioned by Robert Lepage, who has the responsibility for producing the Met's next *Ring*. There is scarcely a bigger job in opera than producing Wagner's tetralogy. The Lepage production will replace that of Otto Schenk, which was in the Met repertory for more than twenty years. It is one of the most beloved productions, of anything, the Met has ever had, and rightly so: It is, or was, a triumph of Wagner realization. Many critics despised it, finding it too "literal," too "traditional," too "conservative." They will much prefer Lepage's *Ring*, however it turns out, because it is sure to be

sufficiently mod.

The Met brought back *The Damnation of Faust* this year, and, before remarking on Lepage, I will remark on some singing— on the three singers in the principal roles. Faust was taken by Ramón Vargas, the Mexican tenor. He does credit to himself in French parts, making a fine Hoffmann (as in *Tales of*), for example. Vargas has an enviable instrument, which includes an enviable weight: You get a lyric, creamy sound with heft. On the night I heard him, Vargas sang Faust's music with commendable ardency. Curiously, just before the curtain rose again after intermission, a Met official came out to make an announcement for him: Mr. Vargas was suffering from an "autumnal allergic reaction," I believe was the phrase, and asked for our indulgence. The crowd tittered at that interesting diagnosis: "au- tumnal allergic reaction." And I have heard Vargas sing a lot less well without an announcement. His Marguerite was Olga Borodina, the great Russian mezzo-soprano, and yes: The word "great" is not to be used lightly. Part of her greatness is to sing with assurance and a sense of just-rightness—and so she did, as Marguerite. The voice was its usual lush carpet. That is, it was lush in the middle and lower registers. Up top, it sounded tired and strained. Borodina isn't allowed to age on us, is she? And, for better or worse, she sounded Russian—inescapably Russian—giving us sort of Marguerite as Marfa. Mephistopheles was Borodina's husband, the Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov—who always gives good devil. This is important for a bass to do, as Samuel Ramey suggested when he made an album titled *A Date with the Devil*. Abdrazakov sings with admirable evenness throughout his range. And he has both strength and refinement, a lucky combo. In addition, he has the sort of charisma that Mephistopheles needs to strut, prance, and seduce.

Lepage's production is a bit of a puzzler. It does not seem a proper opera production, which is okay, because *The Damnation of Faust* is not a proper opera. It's more a dramatic oratorio, or, as the composer himself called it, a "légende dramatique." Lepage produces a series of images, human collages, with spidermen climbing walls, ballerinas twirling around, Christs on crosses, and so on. Some find all this distracting, others find it absorbing. The production makes me think of what the animators did in *Fantasia*: providing images to go with the music. Alternatively, I think of the wave designs that can appear on your computer screen. Lepage obviously has imagination and artistry. I believe he makes a significant mistake in this production, however: When Marguerite sings "D'amour l'ardente flamme," Lepage shows a video of flames—he kind of fires up the hibachi, which makes the audience chuckle, which is not ideal at this point. But I came away from this, my second experience with Lepage's *Damnation*, curious to see what his *Ring* will be. The first installment, *Das Rheingold*, will make its debut on Opening Night of next season. Fingers crossed.

An evening of new music was staged by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The concert took place in the Rose Studio, an attractive, smallish room. On the program were five composers, and all of them were present to hear their pieces and take their bows. Their pieces were written from 1994 to 2006. And all of these composers are American, except one, Matthias Pintscher, who is German. Furthermore, these five composers are all credentialed up. That is, they

have garnered Grawemeyer Awards, Pulitzers, Grammys, Guggenheims, major-orchestra commissions, conservatory professorships, and so on. They have the seal of approval of the music establishment. Indeed, they are part of that establishment. Nonetheless, there was some very good music on this program.

The concert began with a work by Sebastian Currier, born in 1959. This was *Night Time* for Violin and Harp. Boy, a lot of night music gets written—redundantly and repetitiously written. Currier's work is in five movements, the first of which is called Dusk. As in a thousand other pieces, we hear things that go bump in the night. The music is squirmy, scary—you know the drill. But then there are lyric outpourings from the violin, and things get interesting. The second movement, Sleepless, is well named. It's a neat little scherzo, jazzy, peppy, and plucky. The third movement, Vespers, is songful, but not sweet: It is songful and dissonant. Nightwind is another movement that sounds like its title—bracingly so. And the work ends with Starlight, which may be a little too sci-fi for you in spots, but is also nicely mysterious and twinkly.

Currier has written a beautifully impressionist work, which is just the right length and whose movements are in balance, forming a clear whole. The violin and harp make a nifty combination, and Currier exploits that combination with skill. Altogether, *Night Time* is a piece to enjoy and admire.

Matthew Pintscher (b. 1971) is both a composer and a conductor, and has a busy, successful career. It will do him no harm if I knock the piece we heard on the Chamber Music Society concert. This is *Study II for Treatise on the Veil* for Violin, Viola, and Cello. The piece is more wearisome than the title. You know those spooky-scary-ghoulish pieces? This is one of them. It is the kind of piece *Night Time* may initially threaten to be but is not. *Study II* includes squeaks, moans, shudders, glubs, heavy breathing—all the tricks in the bag. Frankly, it sounds like a parody of such a piece, a parody by some mean compositional foe. To add insult to injury, the piece is long to the point of interminability. In my view, it could serve as a soundtrack to some horror film, but does not work as a standalone piece. Also, the lights in the Rose Studio were turned way down for the piece, apparently in an attempt to enhance its effects, or to set a mood. The atmospherics were of little help.

The lights were turned back up for a work by Christopher Rouse (b. 1949). Seven musicians were assembled for *Compline*, and those musicians played a flute, a clarinet, a harp, two violins, a viola, and a cello. This work has no pauses, but it has several distinct sections. It starts out vigorous, emphatic, assertive. A rhythm drives over and over, and different licks get played around this rhythm. I thought, "This may be some wacky cousin of *Boléro*." Later, there is calm, and we hear what I must describe as Cleopatra-lounging-in-her-tent music. I was reminded, a bit, of Barber's opera. Then there is something chorale-like—fitting for a work with a religious title. Then more Cleopatra, then more vigor and assertiveness, then other things until a peaceful ending arrives. This is a slightly exhausting work, and I'm not sure it perfectly coheres. I'm also not sure its length is justified—but it was not particularly advantaged in having to follow the quite long, or long-

feeling, Pintscher work.

Libby Larsen is a Minnesotan born in 1950. And this concert featured her *Dancing Solo* for Clarinet—for clarinet alone, that is, accompanied by nothing. When you write for the clarinet, you can hardly help getting jazzy. This is especially so, of course, for an American. And it can be hard, especially when writing for the clarinet alone, to avoid mere noodling—jazzy noodling. Larsen does a bit of noodling in her first movement, but not enough to do any harm. This is a wonderful, delectable work. It's in four movements, and that first is called "with shadows." (The small letters are the composer's own.) Then comes "eight to a bar," and we do indeed hear the clarinetist count eight: eight tones. This movement, like the work as a whole, really swings. The third movement is "in ten slow circles," beautifully conceived and shaped. And the ending movement is "flat-out"—teasing, sparky, and smile-making.

I should remark, as I have been writing about length, that *Dancing Solo* is exactly the right length—with not a note too many or too few. The pianist Earl Wild once said, "Music should say what it has to say, then get off the stage"—quite so.

After the Larsen, it might have been time to go home while the getting was good. But the program ended with something highly meritorious. This was Music for Piano Trio, "The March of Folly," by Justin Dello Joio (b. 1955). Any relation? Yes, he is the son of the late composer Norman Dello Joio. And he studied with some of his father's illustrious colleagues: Persichetti, Sessions, and Diamond. This piano-trio piece is in four movements, beginning with that March of Folly. It sounds like that, too: It is jokey-macabre, a bit Shostakovich-like. It is also full of drama and character, sounding well-nigh operatic. Then we have a movement called "Respite (a cessation from suffering)"—it is not much of a respite or cessation, however, as it is very, very tense. Interesting, too. The third movement is The March of Folly: To the Abyss/Cataclysm. It is like the first movement, only madder and more cataclysmic. Has so much fury ever been packed into a piano-trio score? The last movement is Epilogue: Prayer for Chiara. It is truly beautiful and moving (and brief).

I found this work utterly involving; Dello Joio had me every step of the way. And let me say something especially personal: It was gratifying to be moved by a new piece of music, something I have experienced too seldom. And, from now on, when I hear the name Dello Joio, I will perhaps think of Justin as much as of Norman.

At the New York Philharmonic, Neeme Järvi took a turn as guest conductor. He is a septuagenarian Estonian who served twenty-two years as conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony (1982–2004) and fifteen years as conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (1990–2005). Then he went to New Jersey for a few seasons. He has also been in many other places, on many other podiums. He is now conductor of the Hague Philharmonic. And his two sons are conductors, one of them being Paavo Järvi, who conducted the Bremen all-Beethoven concert mentioned at the beginning of this chronicle.

Neeme Järvi has made a name for himself, and he has also made a mass of recordings—something like 400 of them. He has not had exactly an obscure career. But some of us think he should be an even bigger name, and that he should have had some bigger podiums. He is one of the most capable, most understanding, and most versatile conductors around. Years ago, when I was green, I thought that the music business was a meritocracy, with the cream rising to the top. Then I grew up and realized how much politics and other non-musical factors come into play. Perhaps the only real meritocracy is to be found in sports, and individual sports (e.g., tennis or golf) at that. In any case, Järvi has had a fine career, and he needs no boo-hoos from me. The homepage of his website features a statement from him: "I love all the time, every day. From morning till evening, I love music."

He opened his Philharmonic concert with Beethoven's overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*. In essence, Järvi let it be its spirited, sinewy self. Then the program stepped back a little in time, for Mozart's Symphony No. 38 in D, known as the "Prague." Järvi gave a fine, solid account, even if it was a little workaday. Here and there, it was sluggish, not of tempo or of execution, but of spirit. And I will relate something interesting about stage manners. At the end of the first movement, the audience applauded, as it is wont to do. Rather than spitting on this, or stewing in silence, or yawning, Järvi turned around and gave a little nod-bow—very old-school, very nice.

The second half of the program was given over to a major work by a composer half-forgotten, Alexander Zemlinsky. This was his *Lyric Symphony in Seven Songs* (texts by Tagore). Zemlinsky was a Viennese who ran afoul of the Nazis, who labeled his music "degenerate." Then he, or his music—for he died in 1942—was subject to "a second dictatorship," as the music scholar Michael Haas once said: The modernist establishment scorned him in terms not dissimilar to the ones the Nazis used. In any event, Zemlinsky has his champions, especially the conductor James Conlon, and it might be better to say that Zemlinsky is, not half-forgotten, but half-remembered.

The *Lyric Symphony* is rugged, Romantic, sometimes blowsy, often Straussian (or is Strauss Zemlinskyan?). Its seven songs are for baritone and soprano, alternately. The relation of the *Lyric Symphony* to an earlier work, Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, is obvious. But Zemlinsky's piece is its own man, so to speak. Doing the singing for Järvi and the Philharmonic were Hillevi Martinpelto, a Swede, and Thomas Hampson, the star from Spokane. The soprano's sound was somewhat pillowy, and her intonation was sometimes approximate. But she was touching and even transporting in the way she sang. She was better mentally than she was vocally, which is a creditable way to be. As for Hampson, he gave little less than a clinic of singing.

Järvi, too, was masterly, providing an example of intelligent Romanticism on the podium. He was feeling and disciplined—passionate but mature, if you will. He made an excellent case for the *Lyric Symphony*, and an excellent case for himself, although this latter case has been redundantly made. By the way, starting next season, he will return to the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, where he was music director from 1963 to 1979. He will be music director again. And may both Järvi and the Estonians enjoy the homecoming.

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.

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