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by Jay Nordlinger

On Valery Gergiev, the American Composers Orchestra in Zankel Hall, A Quiet Place at the City Opera, Don Pasquale at the Met & the Tallis Scholars at Alice Tully Hall.

I"f I rest, I rust," Plácido Domingo has been known to say. He is legendarily the busiest man in music. Valery Gergiev, the Russian conductor, is not far behind him, if behind at all. And he had a very busy—maybe typically busy—period in New York. He was at the Metropolitan Opera, conducting *Boris Godunov*. And he was in Carnegie Hall, leading his Mariinsky Orchestra, from St. Petersburg, in symphonies of Mahler. He will return to New York in February to conduct yet more Mahler symphonies, this time with another ensemble, the London Symphony Orchestra. (Gergiev serves this orchestra as "principal conductor.") Why all this Mahler-ing? This year marks 150 years since his birth, and next year marks 100 years since his death. You get the impression that, without anniversaries, concert programmers would be paralyzed.

Over the years, I have remarked many times on the unevenness of Valery Gergiev. He is limp, indifferent, one night, electrifying or transcendent the next. So it was in New York. On a Sunday afternoon, I heard him conduct a Mahler Sixth that was barely there. It was efficient, competent, business-like: but the score was barely touched. You felt you had not really heard the Mahler Sixth. The next night, he conducted a *Boris Godunov* that was out of this world. Rarely, I feel sure, has Mussorgsky's score been given such royal treatment by a conductor. On Wednesday night, I heard him conduct a Mahler Second ("Resurrection"). That, too, was royal, and beyond.

Right from the beginning, Gergiev was engaged, alive to what he was doing, alive to the music. And this aliveness, of course, was communicated to all involved: to the orchestra, the chorus, and even the soloists. (It was also communicated to the audience, I might say.) You could have quarreled with some points of interpretation, as I did. I found some tempos too fast, others too slow. But they were all defensible, and, throughout the symphony, Gergiev breathed like a true musical being. The Mariinsky was not exactly a well-oiled machine, it must be said. Imprecision was routine, and breakdowns or near-breakdowns were frequent. Pizzicatos were positively hopeless. But none of these bobbles mattered in the face of what was happening musically. The musical power of the performance swept all aside.

The "Urlicht" section of the "Resurrection" is some of the most sublime music ever written for low female voice. (Maybe I should say, simply, that it is some of the most sublime music ever written.) Olga Borodina is one of the most sublime contraltos or mezzo-sopranos we have ever known. And she certainly did her job on this occasion. Her intonation was not perfect, but, like the orchestra's bobbles, it mattered little—actually, not at all. I have long lamented one thing about Borodina's sound: It is not really capturable on recording. You have to hear it in the hall. Other voices are easily and faithfully captured—I think of Renée Fleming's. This is a curious phenomenon. I might mention, too, that it was interesting to hear Borodina sing in German—a rare event. She sings in Russian, of course, and in French and Italian. German, no. I once heard her sing the Rückert Lieder—more Mahler—in recital. Other than that, I can remember no German from her, outside the Mahler Second. Surely she has done Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* somewhere? Surely she should?

Let me give you a little vignette, from right before the concert. Some ladies of the chorus were outside, smoking. I thought of a scene from *Carmen*. Inside, I glanced at the program and learned that the chorus onstage (one of them) was from Spain, the Orfeón Pamplonés. Even better!

In any case, if you heard the Mahler Second from Gergiev on this evening, you really heard it (just as you had heard *Boris* on that Monday night, in contrast to the Sixth on that Sunday afternoon). Gergiev is one of those conductors, one of those musicians, who can remind you why you thrilled to music in the first place. Thursday night, following the Second, he conducted the Eighth, the "Symphony of a Thousand." That was not immaculate, as you might imagine. But Gergiev had a handle on the scope of the piece, and brought forth its spirituality. In short, you really heard that one, too.

An evening of the American Composers Orchestra did what such evenings do: present music for orchestra by American composers. The concert took place in Zankel Hall, which is in Carnegie's basement, so to speak, and it offered three relatively recent pieces and two brand-new ones. One of the brand-new ones is not quite for orchestra. It's called *From the Other Sky*, by a Chinese-American composer named Wang Jie, born in 1980. How to describe her piece? Here is how she describes it: "a multimedia concert opera / song cycle," in "three scenes/movements." There is a story, and it concerns the animals of the Chinese zodiac, and a missing, musical thirteenth one. The main message of the story, I believe, is that music is a balm to man.

The work is by turns whimsical, campy, tragic, haunting. At times it seems a novelty, almost a "private" piece, meant for friends at a party, not for the public. Shostakovich used to write this kind of piece. In fact, I was thinking that he would appreciate *From the Other Sky*, as I sat in Zankel Hall. But then, a seriousness of purpose is conveyed. The work has an element of agitprop. For example, characters hold up signs, one of which reads "Bailout Plan." *From the Other Sky* strikes me as an exceptionally personal piece, something with a deep meaning to the composer—a meaning beyond what the audience can grasp, at least on a first hearing and viewing. The music is not memorable, I would say, but it fits each thought and scene. Incidentally, the composer herself participated in this premiere performance: She played three different keyboards and underwent

several costume changes.

In the middle of the concert, an official with the American Composers Orchestra took the stage, to give a little speech. He thanked and flattered the audience. "All credit to you for coming," he said, and, "Blessings on you for seeking out the unfamiliar." Attendance was a virtue, you see: not merely a choice, but a virtue. The official congratulated the audience as an adult might congratulate a child on liking vegetables. Also, we learned that the orchestra has a program called "Playing It UNsafe," which involves "five cutting-edge composers." The conceits of the new-music crowd seem to know no bounds. May I suggest a way of playing it unsafe? Stop kissing the backsides of the new-music audience, and the "cutting-edge" composers, and let music rise or fall on its own merits. One well-composed waltz or galop is worth more than yet another uninspired exercise in the "cutting edge."

For her piece, Wang Jie wrote one of the most charming program notes I have ever read. She spoke of "insistent muses who command me to write down their music." She continued, ". . . if you find yourself elated by tonight's performance, the credit goes to them. If you hate it, well, it's only 15 minutes long." Before her piece was performed, a video was shown, in which she was interviewed. And, during this interview, one of the most remarkable and moving things I have ever experienced in a concert hall—or in any public forum—took place.

Wang said that her father was a musician who survived the Cultural Revolution. At least, I believe I heard her correctly. At eleven, she herself was sent to a music school, far from their home in China—again, if I heard correctly. She was the youngest girl in the dormitory, and she was alone and miserable. "Nobody liked me," she said. She had as her companions two cassettes, which she listened to over and over. They contained three pieces of music: Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. When she named these pieces, the audience—the much-flattered new-music audience—laughed. Or at least chortled. It was a chortling that said, "What sugary, silly, hackneyed pieces, poor girl." Then, on the video, Wang said, "It kept me alive." Listening to this music was what "kept me alive." The hall shut up, right quick.

And I will add a footnote: Several years ago, I did a public interview of Valery Gergiev, and I asked him what first hooked him on music. He said it was a recording of *Scheherazade*. Why wouldn't it?

City Opera staged *A Quiet Place*, Leonard Bernstein's only full-length opera. It contains—or "incorporates," to use the standard language—an early one-acter, *Trouble in Tahiti*. *Tahiti* is the show that includes the zany aria "What a movie" and the simple, affecting "There is a garden." Naturally, these are highlights of *A Quiet Place* as well. The opera is about a family with many and acute problems: with "issues," as people would say today. Bernstein himself knew issues, family and otherwise. *A Quiet Place* is one of those works that damn suburban life: "the sterility of suburbia," to use the cliché. (People must be attracted by the alliteration.) This type of work had its apotheosis in the repulsive 1999 film *American Beauty*. There was a similar film made in 2008,

Revolutionary Road, based on the novel by Richard Yates. You see, people who live in cities—especially New York and L.A.—never have any problems. They are very well-adjusted, happy, and fulfilled.

City Opera's program essays hailed *A Quiet Place* as a "masterpiece" that has never received its due. It was premiered "in the conservative city of Houston" and, worse, in the Age of Reagan: 1983. Reagan's America couldn't possibly be expected to be receptive to so fine and daring and truth-telling a work as this one. You could have written this program material yourself, along with every undergraduate trying to get an A from his bien-pensant professor. (By the way, sneer at Houston all you want, but they did premiere *A Quiet Place*—didn't they?—along with a thousand other American operas, some of which deserved no premiere.)

Bernstein's score is pure—or impure—Bernstein. It is a Bernsteinian mishmash, made up of bluesy atonality, outright jazz, neurotic meanderings, Broadway outbursts, and more. Much of the score, I find pretentious: chatter for the chattering classes. Some of it, I find irresistible and gratifying. If you're not warmed by "There is a garden," you are hard to warm. As I have said, this is a simple song—rather like "Somewhere," from *West Side Story*. You and I could have written either one of them. Except we didn't. Bernstein ends *A Quiet Place* on a C: with the simple, pure note of C. It's as if he is washing everything—in the story and in the score—clean.

City Opera's production was in the hands of Christopher Alden, and his production could hardly be better: It is smart, slick, attention-keeping, and occasionally touching. I have complaints, of course. Here is a small one: In Act I, the character known as "Junior" has a stripteasing aria—it's that kind of show—and he is too far backstage to be heard properly. Here is a less small complaint: The sexual business, elsewhere in the opera, is all too bald and gross. I don't know why modern directors eschew suggestiveness. Do they think that the audience is too dumb to get it—or that an audience in this age of porn must have it explicit?

The opera has, if not a cast of thousands, a cast of many—and I will say of City Opera's cast what I have said of Alden's production, essentially: It could not have been better. The minor characters were superbly appropriate and the major characters were superbly appropriate. Take two of the minor ones: the Analyst and Mrs. Doc (who is married to Doc, not the Analyst!). Jonathan Green was right out of Central Casting, in the best sense. Victoria Livengood, a bold mezzo-soprano, was Horne-esque, and Blythe-esque. Now take three of the major characters: Dinah, Dede, and Junior. Patricia Risley, in the first role, was poised, capable, and intelligent. She did not quite have the oomph or sizzle for "What a movie," but she had everything else. Sara Jakubiak was Dede—and totally winsome. This lyric soprano melted, endeared, or delighted every time she opened her mouth.

As for Junior, he was Joshua Hopkins, a baritone born in Ontario. He owns a gorgeous voice: a voice with gold in it. I am not talking about its bankability, but rather its tone. A couple of days after Joan Sutherland died in October, I spoke with Marilyn Horne, who sang with her so often.

She said that Sutherland was the epitome of silver. There is gold, too, she noted (Milanov, for example, or Eileen Farrell). Also brass! Well, this young Hopkins is one of those golden singers, and he filled the Koch Theater with this gold, this glow: though not so much when he was too far backstage.

Conducting all this was another youngster, Jayce Ogren, who was alert, energetic, and sensitive all through. You may not like *A Quiet Place*—and I can certainly understand that dislike. But City Opera made just about the best possible case for it.

Don Pasquale is really funny—not just opera funny, or acceptably funny, but really funny. Sonya Friedman's translation of the libretto, seen in the Met's seatback titles, is a joy. The audience laughed all the way through. What did Met audiences do, at something like *Don Pasquale*, before titles? Just sit there? It's hard to remember. At this recent *Don Pasquale*, I believe that the cast, conductor, and orchestra enjoyed themselves as much as the audience did. They were reveling in their talent and in Donizetti's opera. Every time Levine swiveled his chair my way, he was beaming. As my colleague Martin Bernheimer says, it was one of those nights at the opera—only this was a Saturday afternoon.

In Alice Tully Hall, there was an afternoon of a much different character. This was a program called "Magnificat," performed by the Tallis Scholars, an a cappella group from England. They were conducted by their founder, Peter Phillips. For me, the most off-putting thing about the Tallis Scholars is probably their name: Are they scholars or musicians? Is not scholarship sometimes at war with musicianship? The group is composed of ten singers, five of each sex. They sang a program of early music—Palestrina, Allegri, Praetorius, Byrd, and, of course, Tallis—and a living composer, Arvo Pärt. He fits in beautifully with these, his forebears.

The Tallis Scholars are at least as musical as they are scholarly. They do not sing "musicologically." But I'm not convinced they have to be quite so dry, spare, or hooty. Vibrato is not a sin. I will take musicality over correctness, and, indeed, maintain that musicality is the ultimate correctness. Nonetheless, the overall excellence of this group is not to be denied. The one Tallis piece on the program was *Miserere nostri*, which had a marvelous consoling quality. I thought of the hymn that starts, "Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish." One of the Pärt works was *Sieben Magnificat-Antiphonen*, from which "O Weisheit" is sometimes excerpted. The Tallis Scholars sang the entire work proudly. In "O Adonai," the basses—or was it just one?—went down for a low C. It rumbled and buzzed superbly, and you don't hear that every day.

This concert of sacred choral music was a "hot ticket," as a Lincoln Center official said to me. There was a long line of people waiting to get in. And the audience applauded the Tallis Scholars like a stadium crowd for Billy Joel. Incidentally, a reader once wrote me to say, "Name me a first-rate composer of today, and *don't say Arvo Pärt*." What a silly, intolerable restriction: Pärt, an Estonian in his mid-seventies, is a world treasure.

As you have seen, I heard a lot of excellent music-making in this period, but perhaps the best was from Willsonia Boyer, a soprano who sang a recital in Merkin Hall. The recital was in honor of Dorothy Maynor, the soprano who lived for almost the whole twentieth century and was one of the first black Americans in music (classical music). Late on the recital program were four spirituals, beginning with "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Honestly, I have never heard it better—not from any of the greats, and they have all sung it. Willsonia Boyer sang with a perfect blend of churchly soulfulness and classical refinement. As she sang, an audience member played with a piece of paper, loudly. Was he or she trying to open a candy or lozenge? It was maddening, yet could not spoil the singing. Such was the power and impregnability of the moment.

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

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