

# The New Criterion

Music February 2011

## New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

**I**t was just an ordinary Thursday, damp and dreary too, but Avery Fisher Hall was packed for a concert of the New York Philharmonic. Outside, people were scrounging for tickets. Someone at the Philharmonic is doing something right. Should we credit the PR department? Or is it that the Philharmonic, begun in 1842, is a revered institution? At any rate, the program on this particular evening was Mozart, Mahler, and Adès—Adès being Thomas Adès, the British composer born in 1971. The program began with Mozart's penultimate symphony, the Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550. It continued with a song cycle of Mahler, the *Kindertotenlieder*, sung by Thomas Hampson, the American baritone. And it ended with a new work by Adès, for piano and orchestra (and video—more on that in due course). The order of the program was unusual. Very, very rarely does a program end with a new work. And even more rarely than that is an entire second half given over to a new work, as was the case here. Usually, a new work is tucked right before intermission. For one thing, if you put the new work after intermission, people may not come back. Most people think this is a sorry commentary on audiences. I'm more inclined to believe it's a commentary on the quality of new music in our time.

The conductor of this concert was Alan Gilbert, the Philharmonic's music director. The opening movement of the Mozart symphony was quite good: It began on little cat feet. The movement at large was alive and engaging. It was energetic without being crazy and heedless. The second movement, Andante, was a disappointment, sort of killing off the performance, in my book. The music was bouncy, jazzy, glib—without its genius. The third movement, Menuetto, was just fine: excellent, actually. Here the bounce was welcome. And the last movement was another disappointment, absurdly fast. It was buzzy, in the manner of much bad Mozart today. It sounded semi-computerized. It was also undifferentiated and boring. And Mozart, as you know, is not boring. By the way, Mozart was thirty-two years old when he composed this symphony. As far as I'm concerned, he was just getting warmed up. Vaughan Williams, when he composed his penultimate symphony, was eighty-three.

Thomas Hampson is known as a Mahler singer, and this has been a busy period for him: We “celebrated” a “Mahler year” last year, and we are doing the same this year. The composer was born in 1860 and died in 1911. That means that the sesquicentennial of his birth had to be honored, and that the centennial of his death has to be honored. Without anniversaries, concert administrators would be paralyzed. Hampson has been a star among us for about thirty years now—shall we mark an anniversary?—and he has the same frame, the same hair, and the same voice, essentially. That is extraordinary. As he stepped out for the *Kindertotenlieder*, the lights in the hall came up. This was rather unexpected. Was it so that people could read the texts in their programs? Why were supertitles not used? Hampson sang these horrible songs—and you will appreciate the sense in which I mean “horrible”—with reason and emotion. If there were bumps in his technique, these were akin to “character dings” on a car. Some of his lower notes could not be heard; his high ones were typically beautiful. A much more important observation to make is that this performance did not quite “catch.” Did not quite cast a spell, as Mahler song cycles can. The audience could not stop coughing. Avery Fisher Hall sounded like a TB ward. Those lights were on, perhaps working against a spell. Applause was perfunctory. Hampson, and Mahler, deserved better.

Alan Gilbert has the reputation of a good accompanist, and that reputation is earned. It’s a pity that the word “accompanist” has been devalued and dishonored in recent years. You’re not allowed to call an accompanist an accompanist. In the recital world, you speak of the accompanist as a “collaborative pianist” or a “collaborative artist” (even worse). Student pianists who are majoring in accompanying are majoring in “collaborative piano.” This is mainly an expression of political correctness. There has never been anything dishonorable about accompanying—ask Franz Rupp, ask Eugene Ormandy. Anyway, Gilbert handled the *Kindertotenlieder* well. The final song, however, was taken like a bat out of hell. Was this the conductor’s decision, the baritone’s, or that of both? In any case, it did not strike me as very Mahlerian or apt.

Thomas Adès was the soloist in his own piece. As readers of these pages know, he’s a pianist, as well as a composer, and he’s a conductor, to boot. Naturally, he and Gilbert came out to perform the piece. But not really. First, they took microphones, in order to have a little conversation about the piece. It seems to be a rule now: No new work can be performed without talk about it from the stage first. In former times, you could attend a pre-concert lecture, or a pre-concert chat, if you wished. Now they give you no choice: You’re hostage there, listening to the lecture or chat. Adès and Gilbert said nothing that could not have been learned from one glance at the program notes. Their chat was absolutely pointless, an imposition on the audience, and a condescension to it. I used to wonder why contemporary composers weren’t insulted by speechifying about their pieces. Music speaks for itself. It may succeed or fail, rise or fall, but it speaks for itself. Talk wasn’t necessary for the Mozart symphony. It wasn’t necessary for the Mahler song cycle. But I don’t feel sorry for contemporary composers anymore. It’s hard to do so when they themselves participate in these exercises. After some while, Adès and Gilbert left the stage. They returned about two minutes later as performers. It was all so unnecessary, and, to me,

so weird.

The Adès piece is called *In Seven Days* (Concerto for Piano with Moving Image). It is meant to depict, or comment on, the Creation. In addition to a “concerto . . . with moving image,” the composer calls this work a “video-ballet.” It is done in partnership with a “video artist,” Tal Rosner. His video is shown on a screen behind and above the orchestra, or at least it was in Avery Fisher Hall. In a program note, Rosner wrote that “the visuals are very responsive to the music, beating in choreographed unison as if they were an additional part of the orchestra.” The opening “visual” is of water, or at least I think it is. The substance shimmers and ripples. I have seen video-aided productions of Wagner’s *Ring* begin in just this fashion. In fact, for a moment, I thought we were in for a performance of *Das Rheingold*. Where were the Rhine Maidens? After the water, there are many kaleidoscopic images, some cartoony, some kind of groovy, or psychedelic.

In the music, we have a theme and variations. Adès is an eclectic composer, and, of course, a very talented one. His concerto includes music of varying types: whimsical stuff; jarring and ugly stuff; tuneful stuff. At one point, I thought I heard a suggestion of Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, I swear. And the concerto has a cute, surprise, abrupt ending. I’m not sure that the score really needs video. I’d like to hear it straight, at least once. Incidentally, Adès used sheet music, as he played his concerto. I have often faulted musicians for failing to memorize new music. I have said this is an insult to the composer. You play a recital, and you have all the music memorized except for the new piece. Well, I can hardly accuse Adès of insulting the composer. Also, there was no coughing at all during the concerto. Is that because the lights were down? Because people were mesmerized by the video? As if to make up for the silence in the audience, the woman next to me slowly and loudly unwrapped a sucker, then, as she was sucking on it, played with the wrapper.

Music with video is very popular now. Remember when all the highbrows looked down on *Fantasia*? Mocked and derided it? Now everyone and his brother is putting visual images to music, which makes me chuckle. Leopold Stokowski, Walt Disney, and Mickey Mouse were decades ahead of their time. They also did music-and-images better than artists do today, those geniuses did. Their 1940 movie will outlast almost every note of music written today, whether those notes have “visuals” or not.

**T**he Metropolitan Opera staged *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the opera by Debussy, based on Maeterlinck. This is one of those pieces that should cast a spell, like a Mahler song cycle—or Wagner’s *Parsifal*. It has been called “the French *Parsifal*.” It is hypnotic, lulling, dreamlike. The tenor Ben Heppner once described it as “four hours of French Novocain.” That’s not quite fair: It’s actually three hours (a four-hour evening, with two leisurely intermissions). The Met revived Jonathan Miller’s production of 1995, with its big, marbly sets. Conducting was Sir Simon Rattle, making his house debut. Everyone said that this was “long overdue.” I guess they think that every conductor of prominence should conduct at the Met. I guess I agree with them. It may be Peter Gelb’s most gratifying achievement as general manager to have diversified and improved the roster of conductors. Sir Simon brought off *Pelléas* with care, finesse, and beauty. Did the opera cast

a spell? In my view, no, sadly not. It just missed. But this was a competent and commendable reading, starting in the pit and extending to the stage.

On that stage was a notably intelligent and refined cast of singers. In the part of Mélisande was the conductor's wife, Magdalena Kozená, the Czech mezzo-soprano. She is one of our most versatile singers, and Debussy is definitely part of that versatility. Her Mélisande was suitably touching and mysterious. Is it my imagination or does Kozená have a haunted and hunted look in almost everything she does? Gerald Finley was Golaud, smart and suave, as we could have predicted. Pelléas was another baritone, Stéphane Degout, who sang beautifully, if maybe a little dully. This role can be taken by a tenor (as Mélisande can be taken by a soprano). I think I might prefer a tenor as Pelléas. Degout and Finley sounded very much alike, and their characters ought to be clearly distinct. Sir Willard White was Arkel, and, although he is always dignified, he can be a little stiff. On this evening, he was natural and moving, even with some roughness. The great Felicity Palmer was Geneviève, making the most of that part. Days after this performance, Palmer (a British mezzo) became Dame Felicity—as well she should be. The child Yniold was sung by Neel Ram Nagarajan, who has a striking voice and obvious nerve. Finally, I'd like to make a general comment on the cast: They all sang in tune, on pitch, which makes an amazing amount of difference. Your ears can remain calm all evening.

Some years ago, James Levine conducted *Pelléas* mesmerizingly, spellbindingly. It was a Saturday afternoon. At an intermission, I mentioned to a friend that the performance was being broadcast on the radio. She said, "Really? Won't that be a problem for people listening in their cars? I mean, won't they drive off the road? The opera is a hypnotic drug. The Met could be liable . . ."

**I**n recital at Zankel Hall appeared Christianne Stotijn, a Dutch mezzo-soprano. Among her teachers was Dame Janet Baker. I honestly don't know whether Dame Janet can teach a lick. But how can you study with a better singer? Stotijn's program at Zankel was a wonderful mixed one, high quality all the way: Grieg, Brahms, and Strauss on the first half, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Rachmaninoff on the second half. The opening song was Grieg's "Gruss," "Greeting," a fitting opener, for any recital. And it was good to see someone singing Grieg. Why don't more singers take advantage of him? Why don't more pianists take advantage of his *Lyric Pieces*? Is it because they are too simple-seeming and ingenuous? The soprano with the Christmassy name of Solveig Kringelborn sings Grieg. But, being Norwegian, she sort of has to. Another Scandinavian, the Swedish mezzo Anne Sofie von Otter, sings Grieg. (Like Kozená, she sings virtually everything, and very well.) Also, it was right that Stotijn had a Brahms set on the program. By the evidence, he was in love with the low female voice, as Strauss was in love with the soprano voice (and at least one soprano, his wife).

Stotijn did not have a happy beginning. Frankly, she didn't sound warmed up. It took a while to acquire some warmth and juice. There was an inconsistency of tone throughout her range. Some of her onsets were poor. Worst, she had a case of the flats: Flatness kept wanting to creep in, to drag the evening down. With flatness of pitch came some flatness of interpretation. But when she was

warmed up and in tune, she was most enjoyable to listen to. Her low notes were beautiful—really beautiful—and her diction was exemplary. The voice, at its best, sounded a little like Michelle DeYoung's, having that husk around it.

The pianist in this recital was Joseph Breinl, a German who proved first-rate. He always showed taste, doing nothing clumsy or thick. He was unobtrusive without being mousy. In Strauss's *Ständchen*, he rippled splendidly. Pianists have loved to transcribe this song—I'll give you three who did: Godowsky, Gieseke, and Backhaus. A Norwegian pianist, Leif Ove Andsnes, likes to play the Gieseke transcription. He also plays Grieg, let me tell you.

Puccini wrote America into several of his operas. Act IV of *Manon Lescaut* takes place in "the Louisiana desert"—where the heroine sings "Sola, perduta, abbandonata" ("Alone, lost, abandoned"). *Madama Butterfly* features the dastardly, faithless Lieutenant Pinkerton, who sails on the "Abramo Lincoln." Early in this opera, the composer quotes "The Star-Spangled Banner." And *La fanciulla del West* is a completely American opera—that is, it takes place in California, at the time of the Gold Rush. The miners greet one another with "Hullo!" "Hullo!" Just as *Butterfly* is a little Japanesey, and *Turandot* is a little Chinesey, *Fanciulla* is imbued with American, or American-ish, sounds. Puccini was a musical cosmopolitan. *Fanciulla* is a beautiful opera too, a grand opera *all'americana*, and thoroughly Puccini-esque. Andrew Lloyd Webber borrowed from this score, for his hit song "Music of the Night." He's no dummy, Lloyd Webber.

The Met revived *Fanciulla*, in the 1991 production of Giancarlo del Monaco, son of the tenor, Mario. The younger del Monaco would not mind my saying so. He is not shy about his affiliation—his filial affiliation. The first words of his official bio—the bio on his website—are, "Giancarlo del Monaco, the son of the famous tenor Mario del Monaco . . ." You have to admire a man who is forthright, instead of touchy, defensive, or bristling, about such a relationship. In my view, del Monaco's *Fanciulla* looks just like this opera should. It is a grand production for a grand opera. If Franco Zeffirelli had fashioned it—which he might have—the critics would be harder on it than they are. The Polka Saloon has a big old moosehead, or at least I think it's a moose. By the way, are there moose in California? It also has spittoons and an oval portrait of our sixteenth president, Abramo Lincoln. By the way, would Lincoln have been known by those California miners in 1849–50, the years in which the opera is set? Never mind . . .

This is a manly opera, with hardly any women in it, and the Met's male chorus sang with virile ardor and beauty. The role of Dick Johnson, the hero, was sung by Marcello Giordani, the Italian tenor. He's just about the manliest singer in all of opera. The guy may not sing pretty, on many an evening, but there is no doubting his testosterone. On this particular evening, he let it all hang out. Still, his singing was not without some refinement. The big tenor aria here is "Ch'ella mi creda"—one of those Puccini arias that are both brief and superb. Giordani was rough in it, very rough, but you could admire his honesty and guts. An Italian baritone, Lucio Gallo, was the villain, Sheriff Jack Rance. The singer's name means cock, and, as Rance, he was indeed a cock o' the walk.

There was excellent villainy in both his singing and his acting. The conductor was Nicola Luisotti, who treated the score with what I must call tender loving care. Often, you can tell when a conductor loves a piece, and when he does not. Luisotti brought you, swept you, along with him.

The big female role is, of course, the title role: Minnie, the Girl of the Golden West. Like Turandot, this is a famous voice-wrecker of a role, as Leontyne Price found out. (She recovered quickly, of course. And she made a famous recording of Minnie's aria, "Laggiù nel Soledad.") The Met's Minnie was Deborah Voigt, who is a natural for the role. She is a totally winning personality, and a very American personality. And, of course, she's smart as hell. She was natural in everything, from her Italian to her dismount from a horse. (In this, she was markedly better than Giordani.) Her vocal problems are well-known and need not be rehearsed here. Musical intelligence lives on, no matter what is happening to the instrument.

I will end this chronicle as I began last month's chronicle: with a concert of the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Colin Davis. On this particular bill were two composers, Mozart and Elgar, both of whom Sir Colin knows well. He knows many others well, too. One of the Elgar pieces was the rarely heard Introduction and Allegro for Strings (Quartet and Orchestra), Op. 47. The Philharmonic had last performed it in 1959, with Sir John Barbirolli on the podium. The piece is wistful, elegiac—almost uniquely British. And Sir Colin had the Philharmonic play it like sons and daughters of his native soil. The piece flowed seamlessly. One was hardly aware of individual phrases. Squirmy bits were played with accuracy. The tempo changes, which can be awkward, were accomplished faultlessly, part of the overall seamlessness. And the Philharmonic's string sound—which I have often criticized, along with the orchestra's sound in general—was unimpeachable.

The other Elgar piece on the program was the Violin Concerto, with Nikolaj Znaider as soloist. Do you know this violinist, one of the best today? One way to get to know him is through his recording of the Brahms sonatas, with Yefim Bronfman. It is an important contribution to the Brahms discography, and to the general discography. Znaider, Sir Colin, and the Philharmonic gave a memorable performance of the Elgar Concerto. It was the best performance I have heard, of anything, all season. The violinist was authoritative in his mind and in his fingers. And the conductor, of course, was authority itself. Znaider was bold and sweet, no-nonsense and angelic. He was imperturbable, unflappable—but not too cool, not unemotional. The performance was "organic," to use a cliché I find it hard to avoid. As in the first Elgar piece, one was not really aware of phrases, pages, or sections. At a certain point, I stopped reviewing—stopped reviewing mentally—and simply listened. Simply appreciated. This does not happen often. When the concerto was over, the members of the orchestra put down their instruments and clapped for the soloist and conductor. This is very rare. About six years ago, in December 2004, there was another memorable performance of the Elgar Concerto—with the same conductor and the same orchestra. The soloist was Hilary Hahn. Both Hahn and Znaider are in their thirties. Don't let anyone tell you that these are not good musical times, at least in some respects.

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

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