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Salzburg chronicle

by *Jay Nordlinger*

On the annual classical music festival in Austria.

"Are you going to the Anna Netrebko concert?" asked a friend of mine. It took me a while to figure out what she meant. Then I knew: Was I going to the concert of the Santa Cecilia orchestra, conducted by Antonio Pappano? The first half consisted of a Haydn symphony; the second half consisted of Rossini's Stabat Mater, which requires four vocal soloists. The soprano was Netrebko—hence, "the Anna Netrebko concert." I don't think I've ever heard a greater tribute to her star power.

The Santa Cecilia orchestra—formally, the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia—showed up in the second week of the Salzburg Festival. They are probably the leading orchestra in Italy, but, as William F. Buckley, Jr., asked in a different context, "Isn't that like celebrating the tallest building in Wichita, Kansas?" I should not joke, however: Santa Cecilia is a fine band, and they've been led since 2005 by a very fine conductor, Pappano. His other and bigger job is at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. For many years, Pappano has been my candidate to replace James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera, when that dread day comes. (Has it?)

Like Levine, Pappano is adept both in the opera pit and on the symphonic podium. His Haydn symphony in Salzburg was the very last—the 104th. In it, Pappano was commanding, sensitive, and even thrilling. As the Minuet played, you could imagine the most graceful couple on the floor. The Finale (marked "Spiritoso") began with what I can only describe as happy tension. In tempos, phrasing, and other matters, Pappano exhibited a quality that I have always linked to Levine: "just rightness."

And so it continued in the Rossini. Pappano and his forces were both grand and nimble, like the Stabat Mater itself. Of the four soloists, just one wasn't famous, internationally. She was Marianna Pizzolato, and she was very good. She is a throwback of a mezzo. A throwback to what? To the golden age of Italian mezzos and contraltos. The tenor was Matthew Polenzani, who owns one of the sweetest sounds in creation. His serenade in *Don Pasquale* last season at the Met lingers in the memory. Could it really have been so smooth and easy? It was, yes. The bass in this quartet was

Ildebrando D'Arcangelo, dark and glowing.

How about the star, or rather, superstar? She, too, was dark and glowing—or, better put, dark and shining. Her technique was in good order, with spot-on high C's, for example. And she evinced a thorough understanding of her music. Netrebko may be the biggest sexpot in opera, but she can do liturgical music, no doubt about it.

Stay with liturgical music for a moment: Since 1927, the Salzburg Festival has had a tradition, offering Mozart's C-minor Mass in the Church of St. Peter's Abbey. It was in this church that the mass had its premiere, in 1783. Patrons of the festival love this tradition: The church is so beautiful, and you feel that you are witness to something authentic. Too bad the acoustics are lousy.

This year, conducting duties fell to Giovanni Antonini, who is a "period" specialist. In addition to conducting, he plays the recorder. That's the kind of person they give the C-minor Mass to these days—they think it's correct. Antonini's rendering of the mass was relatively inoffensive. It certainly could have been richer, fuller, less bouncy, less brisk. Sitting in my pew, I remembered something Leontyne Price said to a student in a master class once. The great soprano asked for more feeling, or some speck of liberalism, in a particular Mozart aria. She said, "It's not anti-Mozart, you know." No, it isn't. One good thing about these bouncy, brisk C-minor Masses, à la Antonini? You get out of there in under an hour.

The soprano soloists were bright spots—appealing and touching. One was Roberta Invernizzi, a veteran Italian; the other was Julia Lezhneva, a Russian newcomer. The latter was particularly endearing. I would mention the men—the tenor and bass—but they have so little to do in this work. Does the bass even get a check?

Grigory Sokolov, the Russian pianist, seldom appears on American shores, but he is a staple and favorite in Salzburg. Some people consider him the best pianist in the world, no less. He is like a musical monk, complete with long fringe of hair and bald ring. His stage manner is peculiar: He makes a beeline for the left side of the piano bench, not looking left or right. When I say "left side," I mean that he makes a beeline for the back of the bench, as seen from the audience. When he gets there, he bows politely and stiffly. At the keyboard, he plays with intense concentration, inhabiting his own private Idaho. He seems unaware that an audience is there.

He gave a recital in the Great Festival Hall, beginning with Bach—the Italian Concerto, which is often thought of as a student piece. It's a masterpiece, regardless. Sokolov played with a mix of "piano style" and "harpsichord style." He detached notes, which is fine, but he also clipped notes, which is not so fine. And some accents were simply harsh and wrong. What's more, he missed some notes, especially in the first movement. I had a memory of a pianist who took great comfort in the fact that the great virtuoso Horowitz missed notes in Clementi sonatinas.

The second movement of the Italian Concerto, that D-minor miracle, ought to cast a spell. It did no such thing on this occasion, as Sokolov clipped and clunked his way through it. The concluding

Presto was surprisingly not-fast—interestingly not-fast, too. Sokolov brought out some inner voices in an unusual way. But, overall, this Italian Concerto was rather unimpressive and dull. Where was the legendary Sokolov?

As the audience applauded, he neither rose from the bench nor looked up. He continued with more Bach, the French Overture in B minor, which, despite its title, is a grand suite of pieces, beginning, of course, with an overture. Here Sokolov was sweeping and magisterial; he was warmed up now, mentally and physically. He played some of the most beautiful phrases you can ever hope to hear. But these are dances, most of these movements—and Sokolov was repeatedly slow, lovely, and monotonous. The dances simply lacked the life inherent in them. I was reminded of something that Ned Rorem once told me in an interview: "The minor mode didn't even mean sad 200 years ago." I asked for an example. He promptly supplied "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen."

The second half of Sokolov's recital was all-Schumann—and, oh, did he play well. He started with the *Humoreske*, which was utterly fluid, perfectly sculpted. I made a note in my program booklet: "Clarity within Romanticism—a beautiful thing." Here is another note: "Eccentric without being a nut." Indeed, the line between eccentricity and nuttiness is a crucial one, and it can also be very thin. After the *Humoreske* came the four pieces of Op. 32 (Scherzo, Gigue, Romanze, and Fughette). Have one more note, please: "Intensity of thought, manifested in fingers." Rarely does piano playing get more intelligent or musical.

Midst the ovation, a lady in one of the front rows offered Sokolov a bouquet of flowers. I feared he would not take them, as it would break his routine. To my relief, he did, graciously. Then he launched into a second program of encores.

The first two were by Rameau: *Le Rappel des oiseaux* and *Tambourin*. He was precise, lively, elegant. When he snapped his turns, he reminded me of Alicia de Larrocha. Then came some Brahms: the Capriccio in D minor, Op. 116, No. 7. Then some more Rameau—*L'Egyptienne* and *Les Sauvages*. More elegance, more fluidity, more perfection. The hour was getting later and later, and the audience was getting thinner and thinner. But a core would not stop clapping. Finally, Sokolov appeared for a sixth and final encore.

It was another Brahms piece from Op. 116, the Intermezzo in A minor. In this, the pianist did his best playing of the night. The music was transporting and scarcely human. Sokolov may not be the best pianist in the world, but he is one of them, no argument.

One of the operas onstage was *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, by two of the festival's founders: Strauss and Hofmannsthal. But it was not quite *Die Frau* we saw; instead, it was a production by Christof Loy. I will try to summarize the production: The people onstage are singers making a studio recording of *Frau*; the story of the opera and the stories of their own lives become mixed in their minds. All of this is unknowable to the person sitting in the audience; it requires the

reading of CliffsNotes, so to speak. If someone showed you the Loy production, but allowed you no sound, you would have no way of knowing—none—that it was *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. There is no clue.

After about forty-five minutes, I resolved to stop being vexed by the production, and feeling cheated by it, and to treat the evening as a concert performance. It was a superb such performance, too. That was mainly because of the orchestra in the pit, the Vienna Philharmonic, and the conductor in front of them, Christian Thielemann. Some years ago, Thielemann made *Frau* almost his own. He understands every twist and turn of the opera, and the vpo expressed it magnificently under his baton. They sent the senses every which way. When we talk of singers, we sometimes use the phrase "luxury casting." In a sense, the vpo, in most any opera, is luxury casting.

Portraying the Empress was Anne Schwan-ewilms, who has some qualities essential to the Empress: warmth and goodness. The Dyer's Wife was Evelyn Herlitzius, who was brave, daring, and all-out. Giving a similar performance was Michaela Schuster, in the role of the Nurse: first imperious, then chastened. As for the men, they were all adequate, and usually a notch above that. Still, the evening belonged to the orchestra and conductor, who did total justice to the opera (total sonic justice, at least).

András Schiff did justice to Schubert. The Hungarian pianist played the Sonata in G major. He sports long, stout hair, good for a pianist, somewhat reminiscent of Brahms. And when he plays, he purses his lips, kind of half singing. Schiff is one of the great uneven pianists in the world, sometimes ghastly, sometimes sublime. When he is off, it's usually because he is distorting the musical line, grossly: poking, jabbing, banging.

There was none of that in the Schubert, particularly in the first movement. Schiff was both compact and lyrical. He was full of fervor and conviction. And he sang in exemplary Schubertian style. The second movement, Andante, was a little effortful, but still admirable. The ensuing Minuet could have given us more whimsy and pleasure, but its Trio was suitably angelic. And the concluding Allegretto did just what it should: burbled along innocently, spreading its contentment and peace. The audience in the Great Festival Hall applauded Schiff as Madison Square Garden would the Rolling Stones.

After intermission, Schiff was joined by two singers for Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*—piano version, of course. Here, unfortunately, the bar lines returned. What I mean by that is that Schiff reverted to marking his rhythm, emphasizing the beginning of a bar, making everything all too obvious and blunt. Bumps and thumps and jabs abounded—and not well placed ones, either. Daniel Barenboim does this too, especially when he is ill-prepared. Overemphasis of rhythm, structure, and so on is a way of covering up sloppiness, or trying to do so. I think it gives a pianist the illusion of command.

The tenor soloist was Piotr Beczala, that gleaming and lyric Pole. He was reading his music (as was Schiff) and sometimes a little dull and unnuanced. That was a particular shame, because the piano

version of *Das Lied* provides for greater nuance. It gives a singer room for more songfulness, or certainly more intimacy. Beczala occasionally fought for pitch, but in general he was in fine voice, and he did not have to strain, having a piano behind him instead of a Mahlerian orchestra.

Most of the time, a mezzo takes the other part, but sometimes a baritone does, as one did on this night: Christian Gerhaher, the formidable German. New Yorkers may remember the *Schöne Müllerin* he gave in Weill Recital Hall, with his regular piano partner, Gerold Huber—A-1. In Salzburg, Gerhaher looked like a madman, and sang like one too. I'd better explain. He came out unkempt, disheveled, with a weird and wild look in his eye. You would have given him wide berth on the street. He sang with almost freakish involvement, living and dying with every word and note. (He sings a model German, by the way.) He was totally involved even when Beczala, not he, was singing. Gerhaher made *Das Lied* more exotic, more interesting, and more moving than ever. I think Mahler would have smiled with satisfaction.

As for Schiff, he wasn't all bad in this work—just not the pianist who had played the Schubert sonata. Even accounting for the great differences in the compositions, this is a mystery.

Peter Steiner's production of *Macbeth* is the opposite of Christof Loy's production of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: Loy gives you no clue what the opera is; Steiner's production is every inch a *Macbeth*. It looks, feels, smells like *Macbeth*. This is too "literal" for some; it came as an utter relief and joy to me (if the word "joy" can be used in the context of *Macbeth*). And Steiner took full advantage of the Felsenreitschule, his stony, spooky venue in Salzburg.

Conducting Verdi's opera was Riccardo Muti, who has said this will be his last opera in Salzburg. They require a great deal of time, and the maestro wants to occupy himself with other things. On the night I attended *Macbeth*, he tightly controlled the score, maybe too tightly at times. But he conducted rivetingly. The highest tribute I can pay him is this: Much as I revere Verdi, I have never really liked *Macbeth*, thinking it embodies the composer's worst tendencies: silly oompah-pah, happy, peppy music when the words and subject are dark or horrible. Muti made me understand the work much better, and respect it much more. In his hands, it sounded like a masterpiece, or close to it.

Macbeth was Željko Lucic, solid and sturdy as usual. His lady was Tatiana Serjan, who smoked, smoldered, and scalded her way through the role. She could not have been darker, and she was wonderfully effective. Her soft high notes in the Sleepwalking Scene were astounding—virtually Caballé-esque, or Gheorghiu-esque. Let me note, as an aside, that Lady Macbeth has to speak some lines, and that Serjan did so in heavily accented, almost comical Italian. But I had this thought: "I can barely understand the Scots when they speak—so maybe this is perfectly appropriate."

Six nights after Schiff played the Schubert G-major sonata, Arcadi Volodos, the Russian pianist, played the same sonata, on the same stage. I thought of something that Artur Rubinstein said, many years ago. He loved the Schubert sonatas, of course, and played them through at home. But

he didn't think he could program them, because "the public would not accept them": too long and esoteric. So, we've come a long way, baby (at least in some respects).

Volodos, let me say without a blush, is a great pianist. That is now clear, after all these years. His playing of the Schubert was surpassingly beautiful and profound. And talk about the quality of "just rightness": Volodos applied exactly the right weight to every note and phrase. Tempos were neither sluggish nor rushed. The overall conception was inarguable. Volodos, oddly for a pyrotechnical virtuoso, was trained as a singer, and he brings singer-like qualities to the piano. These are extremely helpful in Schubert, of course. On the second half of his program, he played another, much different sonata, the Liszt. Since he never breaks a technical sweat, he could concentrate solely on the music, and he made pretty much the best case possible for this work.

His four encores included a Schubert piece and a Liszt piece, but they also included Spanish music, for which he has a great affinity. I am using the term "Spanish" loosely. He played some Mompou, but also Lecuona's *Malagueña*, in his own arrangement. (Lecuona was essentially a Cuban.) Volodos is one of the leading arrangers and transcribers of today, and if you haven't heard his *Rondo alla turca*, treat yourself: a dazzler. The Salzburg Festival has long had its regular pianists, its pet pianists. I think of Alfred Brendel and Maurizio Pollini. Volodos is attaining the same status, and it is well-deserved. Same with Sokolov, for that matter.

Mariss Jansons is a frequent visitor too, leading the Vienna Philharmonic. One morning this summer, he conducted them in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, that singular ballet. The music was basically as you want it: taut, rhythmically accurate, and kaleidoscopic. It also had its simplicity, you could even say a naivety. But this reading was somewhat moderate—*Petrushka* can be wilder, ruder, brasher, weirder. During the "Russian Dance," I thought of an anecdote told by Leon Fleisher in his recent memoirs. George Szell says to his players, "Like the Philadelphia Orchestra!" He meant lush, Romantic, maybe a little syrupy. Similarly, I wanted to cry, "Like the New York Philharmonic!"—meaning brighter, harder, uglier. You know the ending of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3, brilliant, white, blinding, and percussive? That's the kind of thing I'm talking about.

After the Stravinsky, Lang Lang joined the orchestra for Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1. He played with finesse, and also that improvisatory quality that Liszt demands, and that he himself had in abundance. Jansons and the vpo did their parts with all their hearts. I hope lovers of this concerto will forgive me, but I thought of something that George F. Will said, long ago, about Pauline Kael and the movie *Popeye*. This vaunted critic had reviewed this light Hollywood offering at length. Will asked, "Isn't that like playing 'Mairzy Doats' on a Stradivarius?"

To end the concert, Jansons led the orchestra in *La Valse*, Ravel's take on the Viennese dance. If the Vienna players were at all offended—at all affronted by the French effrontery—you would not have known: They played the piece with relish. *La Valse* can be jazzier—it did not quite swing—but it was enjoyable, and the humanity of Jansons comes through everything he does.

He was in attendance that same night for two Russian operas, performed in concert. They were Stravinsky's first opera, *The Nightingale* (usually know by its French title, *Le Rossignol*, though its libretto is in the composer's native Russian), and Tchaikovsky's last opera, *Iolanta* (not to be confused with the Gilbert & Sullivan show *Iolanthe*). *The Nightingale* is a fairytale, courtesy of Hans Christian Andersen, and it involves the Chinese imperial court and a Japanese delegation. How many times have you heard Puccini knocked for chinoiserie (*Turandot*) and japonaiserie (*Madama Butterfly*)? Stravinsky somehow escapes knocking for these same effects.

At any rate, the conductor, of both operas, was Ivor Bolton, the hard-working and praiseworthy Englishman. *The Nightingale* did not quite cast a spell, did not achieve a dream-like state, as it can, but it was commendably done. Singing the title role was Julia Novikova, who was secure, poised, and clear, way, way above the staff.

The title role of *Iolanta* was sung by Anna Netrebko, who had a stellar evening. She was slightly uncertain at the start, but she found her groove, pouring forth her black soprano, which gleamed like obsidian. Alone among the cast, she sang without a score. She did some acting, too, tasteful and helpful. Her tenor partner was Piotr Beczala, who, as you know, brings an extraordinary instrument of his own. When the two sang together, they were ardency itself. Their voices locked and soared, under Tchaikovsky's power. Netrebko's final high note was a knockout, reminding you of the thrill of opera.

At the beginning of this chronicle, I mentioned the friend who referred to the Santa Cecilia evening as "the Anna Netrebko concert." Well, in a way, this two-opera evening was truly an Anna Netrebko concert.

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

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