The New Criterion

Music December 2012

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Coverage of Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic with Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos and Charles Dutoit, The Marriage of Figaro, and more.

The Philadelphia Orchestra matters, and, therefore, it matters who the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra is. Why does the orchestra matter? Well, it does to me, maybe I should say—and to Philadelphians, and to some others in the world. It has been a leading orchestra for a long time. A special orchestra too, given its sound. Also given its pedigree. For almost seventy years—1912 to 1980—it had exactly two music directors, Stokowski and Ormandy. The latter served forty-four years. Since 1980, the Philadelphians—the "Fabulous Philadelphians," we used to call them—have had a handful of music directors.

The latest is Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who took over this season. He's Canadian—French Canadian, obviously—and young, for a conductor: not yet forty. The world is enthusiastic for young conductors now. It used to be that age and experience were venerated. In an interview with me several years ago, Franz Welser-Möst, the Austrian conductor, called our enthusiasm for youth on the podium "a sickness of our time." I have heard Nézet-Séguin conduct admirably. (I'm thinking of a *Faust*, in particular.) More often, I have heard him conduct worryingly: with an excess of zeal, an excess of speed and peppiness, something different from real energy. Moreover, there has been a deficiency of "gravitas," to use a word sometimes hard to define. A deficiency of true authority.

In Carnegie Hall, Nézet-Séguin led the Philadelphians, and other forces, in Verdi's Requiem. The opening section was disheartening. It was affected, precious, and just so. This section, like the Requiem at large, should unfold naturally. It did not. Nézet-Séguin went in for dramatic pauses and other such gestures, reminding me of a bad pianist playing a Chopin nocturne. And there was, I'm afraid, too little gravitas. The Dies irae was effective. As a rule, Nézet-Séguin was best in loud and fast sections—sections requiring less judgment, it must be said. Sections requiring judgment were something else. Often, the music lacked suspense. In the final section—Libera me—there was far too little terror, holiness, and thrill. Besides which, the various forces became disunited.

When you see a vocal quartet onstage, the least known of them may well turn out to be the best. Perhaps he or she is not there because of reputation, but because of ability. On this night, the least known of the quartet, probably, was the mezzo-soprano: Christine Rice. I hailed her in these pages last season, after she sang a new work by John Harbison. In the Requiem, she was outstanding. She sang with a wonderful focused sound. She exhibited the Verdi style. She was very good with words—singing them as though they meant something to her. We might have asked for a bigger voice, more of an Azucena voice, but Rice gave enough. The soprano was Marina Poplavskaya. She sang impurely, even roughly. She did a hundred things wrong. But she was daring and brave, utterly exposed, and not caring about it. You could admire this.

The bass, Mikhail Petrenko, usually sings with a beautiful glow. This night, the glow was hoarse. And the tenor was Rolando Villazón, who has been hampered by vocal problems in recent years. The voice is still beautiful, though maybe smaller than it was. He gulped, swooned, and did other vulgar things—the whole array of Domingo-isms, when that great tenor is at his sloppiest. It was hard to bear Villazón's singing, actually. But he was utterly sincere (which added to the unbearability of his efforts). He sang his heart out, as though his life depended on it. I was unnerved.

At the end of the Requiem, Nézet-Séguin held his hands in the air for a very long time—longer than I have ever seen anybody do this. It seemed to go on for minutes. He was warding off applause, of course. But if the audience is too moved to applaud—they won't. There is no cause to manufacture the silence. And that's what Nézet-Séguin was doing: manufacturing, engineering, coercing. This was showmanship, and charlatanism, and fakery. Rudeness, even. As he kept his hands in the air, I was tempted to begin applauding, or to walk out. Nézet-Séguin, and others, should grow out of this habit.

Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos made his way slowly to the podium, looking somewhat frail and bent, though handsome and aristocratic. The veteran Spanish conductor was leading the New York Philharmonic. He sat down to conduct. Joining him, for the first piece on the program, was Augustin Hadelich, a violinist in his late twenties. According to his bio, he was "born to German parents but raised in Italy." Those are fine circumstances for a musician, and others. The young man has a helmet of black hair, which matched his concert-wear, the standard solid-black Mao suit.

Hadelich, Frühbeck, and the Philharmonic collaborated on Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*. The orchestra started uncrisp, which is no way to start: It creates distrust and disappointment in the audience. Hadelich started very well, playing in tune—nailing notes that are often off-center from other violinists. Amazingly, he continued to play in tune, all through. This makes a big difference. Poor intonation bothers the ear, the way sour milk bothers the palate. Hadelich tuned his instrument after at least one of the movements—and again before his encore. One gets the impression that staying in tune means something to him.

He appreciated the *Symphonie espagnole*, which the listener, in turn, appreciated. What I mean is, you can usually tell when a performer respects and appreciates a piece. Hadelich gave no sense of slumming; he was certainly enjoying. The *Symphonie espagnole* requires charm, and Hadelich had an adequate amount of that. At times, the piece calls for more sound than this violinist generated. To his credit, he did no showing off, no clowning. He demonstrated a tasteful Romanticism. The ethnic flavor, he imparted without resorting to stereotype.

It's natural to look forward to the last movement of this work—the Rondo. It has a little clockwork opening, which, for me, always provides a thrill. I never tire of it. It anticipates something wonderful, and is something wonderful itself. Unfortunately, the Rondo was the worst of the five movements, on this occasion. Soloist and orchestra were out of sync. And energy sagged, though Frühbeck knew to pick it up (savvy veteran that he is). During the ovation, it was sort of touching to see the older man with the younger man. They seemed to get a kick out of each other. When Hadelich is a senior statesman of the violin, Frühbeck will be a historic figure, rather like Charles Munch or someone is today.

Hadelich's encore was Bach, of course—with violinists, it's always Bach, though now and then Paganini—and it was the Andante from the Sonata No. 2. This piece too has a clockwork element. Hadelich was anemic, tentative, and scratchy, which he was not during the Lalo, but he had earned his check.

In Weill Recital Hall, Marlis Petersen gave a *Liederabend*, a song recital. She is a German soprano, known for Mozart roles, among others. She was accompanied by a fellow German, Jendrik Springer. Their program had a theme: "Goethe and the Eternal-Feminine." It consisted of songs about such figures as Suleika, Mignon, and Gretchen. Though this was indeed a "theme" recital—dread thing—it had an excellent variety of music. There were famous songs by famous composers: e.g., Beethoven's "Wonne der Wehmut." There were unknown songs by famous composers: e.g., Wagner's "Gretchen am Spinnrade" (written when he was a teenager, and already operatic). There were unknown songs by unknown composers: composers such as Hans Sommer, Alphons Diepenbrock, and Hermann Reutter. There was a song by a living composer: Manfred Trojahn. There was, again, an excellent variety. If you're going to do a theme program, do it this way (please).

Each song was in German—even the Tchaikovsky song we know in English as "None but the Lonely Heart"!—and Petersen showed what diction should be in her native tongue. In general, she sang in a clean, refreshing manner. No fuzz. Some of her high notes suggested flying, as Dawn Upshaw's do. As she sang her songs, she did nothing peculiar, nothing wrong. (Neither was she boring). I was not really conscious of interpretation. Petersen was just singing the songs. If humor was required, she supplied that. If dignity was required, she supplied that. Some of her notes were thin, or thinnish—but technical flaws hardly mattered. Petersen sang with consistent intelligence, taste, and integrity. I sometimes say that a recital by Anne Sofie von Otter is an evening in the company of a civilized woman. So it was with Marlis Petersen.

Her pianist, Springer, was not a potted plant: He participated vigorously, unapologetically. The piano lid was way up, in this little hall. Springer was always confident and straightforward, if sometimes a little blunt. The last song on the program was by Walter Braunfels: his "Rastlose Liebe." Springer flubbed his last notes, but he seemed entirely unfazed: He smiled broadly. A winning personality, this pianist.

Petersen sang one encore, a Liszt song. She was out of gas, apparently—thin and flat. (Flat in pitch, I mean.) But, like Augustin Hadelich—even more—she had earned her check, and the audience had gotten its money's worth.

Shortly after the visit of Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, the New York Philharmonic had another veteran guest conductor: Charles Dutoit. He began his program with a piece I've heard him do many times. This was the overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila*, by Glinka. It went as it usually goes, from Dutoit. It was smooth, compact, and elegant—like a duck cutting through water. The timpani were unusually bold, almost savage. All the better. Was there anything wrong with this performance? Yes. It was a little mechanical, a little automatic. Too easy, almost.

Then a soloist took the stage, the Russian pianist Nikolai Lugansky. He would play one of the greatest of all Russian concertos: Rachmaninoff's D-minor concerto. Dutoit started with one tempo; Lugansky entered with another one, a slower one. The two men had various coordination problems all through. Lugansky played his opening notes—those unison notes—together. It seems like such a simple thing. In fact, it isn't. As the concerto unfolded, Lugansky continued to play cleanly, well-nigh immaculately. Some of the second movement had the transparency of, say, Debussy. Back in the first movement, the cadenza was stupendous. Lugansky is a smart pianist, with fabulous fingers.

I will now issue some criticisms. He did not make a Rachmaninoff sound, really—a sound appropriate to this concerto. He was too bony. The left hand, in particular, lacked richness and heft. He was occasionally guilty of rushing. There was some poorly judged rubato in slow, dreamy parts. Some of the second movement needed more bite and snap—the kind Horowitz gave, and de Larrocha too. That lady brought to this concerto an element of Albéniz and Granados! From Lugansky, the final movement needed more abandon and excitement. More blood. It was, frankly, boring—which the score surely is not. Very few musicians can have the spirit for everything: the spirit for a Scarlatti sonata and this concerto. I wonder whether Lugansky has the spirit for everything. Whatever the case, he has the spirit for enough.

After intermission, Dutoit conducted the *Enigma* Variations. This was a Grade A, first-class performance. The conductor was brilliant, and the orchestra played better than I had heard it play in ages. I could go into enthusiastic detail—for example, the Presto variation was dazzling. But let me give my one complaint (complaining being a specialty of mine): The Finale was wrongheaded. It started too big and grew ponderous, pompous, bloated. That is not Elgar, no matter what his detractors say. Nonetheless, I left the hall with greater respect for Dutoit, a conductor I've always

respected. He's famous for good reason.

Midori is famous too—for good reason. The latest New York recital of this one-named violinist took place in Carnegie Hall. Initially, the space seemed too big for her, too big for what she was doing. She needed a venue more like Weill. But eventually she drew you in, or at least she did me. This is something any musician worth his salt must do. Her pianist was Özgür Aydin, an American of Turkish origin. Their program featured the A-major violin-and-piano sonatas of Beethoven, all three of them—ending with the "Kreutzer." Interspersed were works by Webern and Crumb: from the former, the Four Pieces, Op. 7, composed in 1910; from the latter, the Four Nocturnes, composed in 1964.

Since we have heard so much about the famous Midori over the years, I might spend a second on the pianist. Aydin was impressive—almost a find, I would say. He is a supple player, with a splendid touch. I usually avoid this word "touch"—lazy, and a little vague. But it came to mind, as I listened to Aydin. He made some pearly sounds. (There's an old-fashioned word, "pearly.") At one point in the recital, I heard some dogs not barking: no banging, no misplaced accents. Aydin has a true sense of line. I look forward to hearing him in a solo recital.

He and Midori were a good match, sharing what might be broadly termed "sensitivity." They both have fine ears and refined taste. Midori is especially good in modern music, always has been. And if I'm referring to Webern as modern, I must laugh at myself: He composed those violin pieces more than a century ago. But we know what we mean. Midori's braininess, sensitivity, and self-effacement are particularly helpful in much modern music. She played her Webern delicately but not tremblingly, which is key.

Of her Beethoven, you could have asked for more heart, more strength, more boldness. Midori can be a little polite and demure. The Adagio of Beethoven's Op. 30, No. 1, is one of the most beautiful slow movements he ever wrote. His full label for it is "Adagio molto espressivo." Midori sang it nicely, of course, but she could have sung it more warmly and gratifyingly. In any case, her brainy tastefulness is welcome in most any music.

As the lights dimmed, I said to the friend sitting next to me, "If the overture's no good, I'm leaving." Laughing, she said, "That's ridiculous. It's a long opera. And what if the cast is fantastic?" "I don't care," I said. "If the overture's no good, the evening is spoiled. You've got to get that right." It wasn't. It was weak, limp, and unsparkling—and it was the *Marriage of Figaro* overture, of all overtures. It practically sparkles on its own. We were at the Metropolitan Opera. And the rest of *The Marriage of Figaro* was much like the overture. Not bad, exactly—not bad at all, actually. Just gray. Flaccid, la-di-da, humdrum. More generously, you could say that the performance was measured, sensible, judicious. I lean toward the less generous school, however.

David Robertson, the conductor, has had more inspired nights, and will again. Much of Act III, let me record, was not gray: was more like its Mozartean self.

The brightest spot in the cast, for me, was the bass in the title role, Ildar Abdrazakov. Like young Hadelich, he has a knack for playing in tune, or singing in tune. Even the tricky intervals are spot-on. He sang Figaro with confidence, sense, and glowing beauty. The evening was always less gray when he opened his mouth. For a while, he was known as Olga Borodina's husband, but that should not be the case anymore. (Not that she isn't a historic singer, of course.) Susanna was Mojca Erdmann, who was a little chirpy for the role, but ultimately winning.

The Count and Countess were Gerald Finley and Maija Kovalevska. He was as he usually is in this role: smart, virile, and convincing. She had a difficult night, though she was game and thoroughly professional. "Porgi, amor" was a bit under pitch. "Dove sono" was weirdly fast—and misshapen, and inelegant. Apparently, Kovalevska was in vocal distress. But her problems did not affect her acting, which was better than the operatic norm.

Singing Cherubino was Christine Schäfer, who was no Cherubino—and not just because she's a soprano. (This role usually goes to a mezzo.) "Non so più," from Schäfer, was soft, gentle, pretty—a little slow. Like something from the Romantic era. "Voi che sapete" was even more so—a Romantic ballad. It was all rather enjoyable, actually, even if not Cherubino-like. I should not have said she was no Cherubino. Better to say she was not a traditional Cherubino. Tradition is not the last word in musical, or operatic, performance.

Before I leave the subject of this *Marriage of Figaro*, I might mention Maurizio Muraro, the evening's Dr. Bartolo. The Italian out of his mouth is absolutely delectable. Sometimes there is no substitute for nativeness. I should mention the Marcellina too: Margaret Lattimore, a hoot in her frilly pink dress (though her Marcellina was not cornball). One more singer—and actor? Philip Cokorinos was Antonio, the gardener. He was almost a scene-stealer. You had sympathy for this tippling wretch, who is disbelieved and contradicted, but truth-telling. While I'm at it, one more singer: Jennifer Zetland, just one of the Bridesmaids—but this shining soprano shone even in that tiny role.

Return to the New York Philharmonic, for one more veteran guest conductor. When he faced the audience for his initial bow, the woman behind me said, "Is that Kurt Masur? I thought he was dead." No. He was leading, once more, the orchestra of which he was music director, from 1991 to 2002. He is frail now—seemingly half his former size—but he keeps going. He still stands, when he conducts. And he conducts well. His gestures are minimal. But his six decades on podiums around the world have taught him a thing or two about communicating.

His program was all-Brahms, and it began with the Double Concerto. The violinist was Glenn Dicterow, the Philharmonic's longtime concertmaster. The cellist was Alisa Weilerstein. Dicterow acquitted himself with honor, making some of his sweet sounds along the way. He has something in common with Pinchas Zukerman: casualness, which sometimes suits the music in question, sometimes not. Weilerstein was probably the dominant player in this concerto—in part because she wielded the bigger instrument. But it's the lower one too, isn't it? She sometimes seemed to be tamping down her sound, not wanting to cover up her partner.

She is made for Brahms, and he for her: He is lush and soulful; so is she. Her playing is Brahmsian even when the music isn't Brahms. Her soft singing in the slow movement of the concerto was beautiful. A few nights before, in a hall across the street, Alice Tully, her soft singing in the slow movement of the Chopin Sonata was similarly beautiful. In the first movement of the Brahms, she had to pause for some string repair. I heard her murmur, "Sorry. It's cold outside." Then she, and everyone else, resumed as though nothing had happened. If she was rattled, she gave no evidence of this.

Masur wanted to begin the last movement sooner than she did: She wasn't ready, and wasn't looking. That was somewhat awkward. This last movement never really cohered. It was tame, timid, and messy. The players muddled through.

For the concerto, Masur used the score. For the symphony on the second half of the program—Brahms's Second—no. He conducted this piece nobly. It was packed with wisdom and strength—angelic strength, to use a Coleridge phrase. At the outset of this chronicle, I spoke of "gravitas" in a conductor. Masur has enough for several conductors. In the final movement of the symphony—rather as in the concerto, but worse—the playing broke down. This last movement was sloppy and undistinguished. The performance deserved a better ending. But the crowd gave Masur a big hand, and he smiled at them, looking beatific, as he has looked for several years now, when beaming that smile.

Before the symphony began, the woman behind me said, in her honking New York accent, "I don't think he'll be here next year." I don't know. I bet he will.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

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

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 31 Number 4 , on page 59

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2012/12/new-york-chronicle-7509