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# New York chronicle

*by Jay Nordlinger*

*On the Philharmonia Orchestra of London, Verdi's Un ball in maschera, a new symphony by Steven Stucky, Don Giovanni, and more.*

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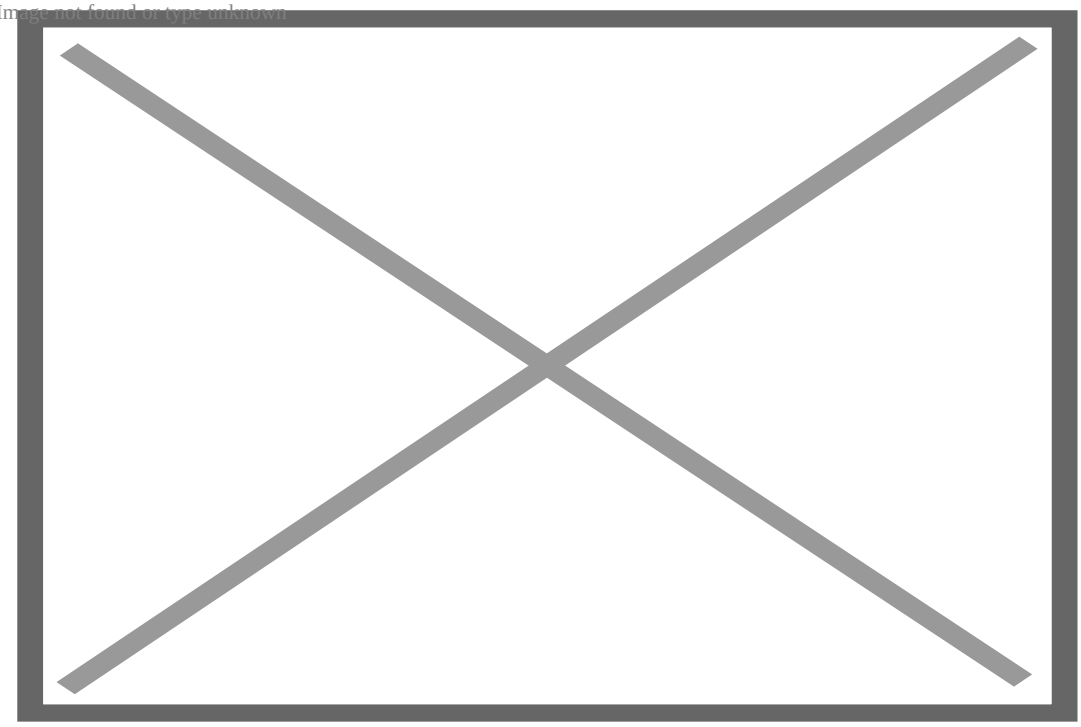

The Philharmonia Orchestra of London came to Avery Fisher Hall, under the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. It was with the Philharmonia that Salonen got his start, thirty years ago. This is one of the best "launching" stories in music. Michael Tilson Thomas was scheduled to lead the orchestra in Mahler's Third Symphony. He injured himself playing tennis. Orchestra management looked high and low for a conductor who was free—they finally found a young man in Finland. Salonen had never conducted the Third Symphony. He had never heard it, never seen the score. The concert was in three days. Now, the Mahler Third is one of the strangest and most profound symphonies in the literature. It is also the longest, as Salonen pointed out in an interview with me a few years ago. Salonen went to the library, got the score—and conducted the Philharmonia, to sensational effect.

In Avery Fisher Hall, Salonen conducted the orchestra in another Mahler symphony, the Ninth. The rap against Salonen, from his detractors but also from some who generally admire him, has always been this: cold, fast, and hard. He conducted the Ninth much this way. He is all business, even in the way he walks onto a stage, greets the audience, and gets going. He wastes no time. He seems to operate on a fast metabolism. Much of the symphony, in my view, was unfeeling, without nearly enough lingering or savoring. But there were virtues, too, and I respect Salonen's approach. He was taut, sinewy, and clear. I would rather have Salonen march through the piece coldly—not that he does this—than have someone weep in it, stupidly.

Whatever the overall tenor of his account, Salonen began the final movement with warmth and pathos. And I should record that the Philharmonia's horns played very well throughout. Salonen himself is an ex-horn player. He told me that he and horn players have an understanding. They know he knows how difficult the instrument is. He cuts them great slack. "I don't even look at them," he said. "And the worse they play, the less I look at them."

In last month's chronicle, I inveighed against a common practice of conductors: At the end of a piece—particularly a profound one—they'll hold their hands in the air, often for a very long time, in order to ward off applause. They command the audience not to applaud. But if you cast a spell, there's no need to hold your hands in the air. The audience, moved, will not applaud. Salonen knows this. He is not a charlatan. At the end of the Mahler, he lowered his hands slowly, then kept them at his sides. Whatever my objections to his account, or others' objections, he had cast a spell. (Mahler, to be fair, had too.)

Over at the Metropolitan Opera, they staged Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. In the pit was the Met's regular conductor, Fabio Luisi—who was just fine, as he usually is. Competent, solid. But the score did not have its maximum impact. There is more suspense than we heard, more in the way of tremors and shivers. The conspirators' laughter, during Anckarström's humiliation, was a little blunt: missing its sardonicism.

Marcelo Álvarez sang the King, unevenly. Much of the time, he was mediocre—but then he rose to greatness. Besides which, any port in a storm, you could say: The world is not overrunning in Verdi tenors. Neither is it overrunning in Verdi sopranos. Sondra Radvanovsky did the honors as Amelia. The story of Radvanovsky is simple, I believe: When she sings out of tune, she is undistinguished; when she sings in tune, she is world-beating. She is capable of producing a splendid carpet of sound. On this night, she was at her best when it counted the most—during her aria, "Morrò, ma prima in grazia." Ably assisting was the principal cello, Jerry Grossman. Dmitri Hvorostovsky was Anckarström—and he was smooth, as usual. In "Eri tu," he showed what a raw opera performer is. But at various points throughout the evening he did some talk-singing, as I call it. He had never done this in my experience. It was not a full-blown "baritone bark," but it was not exactly singing, and not exactly Hvorostovsky.

The production was a new one, made by David Alden. When the curtain rose, I saw what may have been a Cupid, which made me nervous: Today's productions have more than their share of Cupids. I remember one from a *Marriage of Figaro* at the Salzburg Festival. He rode a unicycle and juggled (whether at the same time, I can't remember). There are plenty of familiar tricks in Alden's production: synchronized movements in slow motion, for example. I thought the defacing of the King's picture was a little juvenile. And a director should not have singers on their knees for some of the biggest, highest notes in opera. "Stand and sing" is better than kneel and sing. Several tricks, I admired—such as the emergence of the conspirators from underground.

I quite liked seeing this production, on the whole. It is "visually striking," as they say. But does it serve the opera? Is it a real *Ballo in maschera*? I don't think so. The production may be a welcome change for those of us who have seen the opera a lot, and know it well. But if a newcomer sees it, has he really seen a *Ballo*? Or has he seen something quite interesting to look at and sort of related to *Ballo*? The latter, I think.

Two chronicles ago, I spoke of *Il trovatore* and its greatness. When we play the game of "What is the best Verdi opera?" the usual nominees are *Otello*, *Falstaff*, and *La traviata*. With a renewed appreciation of *Il trovatore*, I said, "Hey, what about *Trovatore*?" And in the same spirit, I say, "What about *Ballo*?" The truth is, I suppose, that Verdi, that wily old gent, just kept 'em coming.

Over at the New York Philharmonic, they played a new piece by Steven Stucky, the American who has long been at Cornell University. His new piece is a symphony, his first one. The evening's program notes quoted him on the subject of writing a symphony—few "progressive" composers write one, he says. And by "progressive" composers, he means Pierre Boulez et al. Is that what they are, "progressive"? In any case, Stucky is quite right that symphonies aren't churned out today, although some of our best composers, such as Michael Hersch, have written symphonies.

On the Philharmonic's stage, Stucky did some further talking, essentially duplicating the program notes. This is the practice at the Philharmonic: When there's a new piece on the program, Alan Gilbert, the music director, comes out with the composer in tow. They are holding microphones. They will do a little pre-concert lecture, repeating the program notes, whether you want one or not. I'm not a fan of this practice, as regular readers know—but Stucky certainly talks well from a stage: clearly, succinctly, unpompously. For him, he said, writing a symphony was a way of recognizing and declaring, "I'm a big boy now."

His work tells some kind of personal story, apparently, but Stucky says he is not one to divulge what it is. He will not make a confession à la Tchaikovsky or Mahler. His symphony has four movements, and they have interesting headings: Introduction and Hymn; Outcry; Flying; and Hymn and Reconciliation. There is no break between the movements, or sections. If he had decided to call his piece a tone poem, rather than a symphony, I don't think anyone would bat an eye. A piece is often simply what a composer designates it to be.

Stucky's symphony begins with an oboe, plaintive. (How could we write about the oboe if we did not have the word "plaintive"?) Later, there is a Japanesey flute. The symphony is nicely layered. Sometimes it has a French feeling, sometimes it is Bernsteinian. It gets cinematic. There are familiar modern touches, such as those long tones, with skittishness about them. (You would recognize this trait if you heard it.) There are sound shimmers, or sound washings. There are random, or random-seeming, squiggles (very much a modern trait). I could not quite tell when one movement ended and another began. The work ends in a warm F major, I recall, although a major that threatens to be minor before the ultimate resolution.

On first hearing, I did not like this symphony as much as some other Stucky pieces—Stucky-Stücke—I have heard recently: *Silent Spring*, *Rhapsodies*, and, especially, *Son et lumière*. I thought that it was deficient in inspiration. But I would like to hear it again, certainly before issuing a hardened opinion. In his talk from the stage, Stucky said that he writes music for people, not (by implication) for colleagues or for the sake of theory. I don't know whether that makes him "progressive," but it does make him a composer.

Minutes after Stucky's symphony ended, Jennifer Zetlan began a recital at Alice Tully Hall. I mentioned her in last month's chronicle, though she was a mere bridesmaid in a Met *Marriage of Figaro*. Even in such obscurity, she shone. I have been listening to her since she was a student at the Juilliard School. In 2006, she participated in a concert with many other student singers. She was "possibly the best," I wrote (and I probably said "possibly" to be polite). "This soprano was pure, unaffected, technically secure: professional." I have heard her several times since. She has not gotten any less "professional."

Her recital had a theme, and a title: "Under Cover of Night." Fortunately, this was a good old-fashioned mixed program, wonderful in its diversity. If a singer needs some bogus theme and title to keep administrators, musicologists, and critics happy, so be it. Zetlan's recital covered many eras, styles, and languages (five, I believe). She is a high, high soprano, but she sang one of the great low-voice anthems: Brahms's "Von ewiger Liebe." She also sang a new work, *Far Away Songs*, by Nico Muhly. (Do you know this old joke? A teasing father tells his child, who is practicing the violin, "Can you play 'Long Ago and Far Away'?") Zetlan sings very well in English, which not all native speakers—as she is—can.

When she took the stage to begin the recital, the audience applauded heartily, as an audience might do at the end of a successful recital. Obviously, they knew her, and expected big things. She started with a Handel aria, and sang uncertainly. But she soon hit her stride, singing with great confidence, and enjoying what she was doing, to the hilt. Her sound tends to be bright and forward. Often, it is not pretty-pretty; sometimes it is even strident. But it's always interesting. Her voice is at its most beautiful when it's high and loud, an enviable condition, I think: Some singers' voices are at their worst when high and loud. Mainly, Zetlan is a smart singer, and an endearing one. She has the special ingredient of lovability (as do Joyce DiDonato, Diana Damrau, and others we could name). A light seems to come from within.

A Met *Don Giovanni* featured two husbands of starry Russian opera singers: Ildar Abdrazakov, who is married to Olga Borodina, and Erwin Schrott, who is married to Anna Netrebko. I have a feeling they have interesting talks about their wives. In any event, Abdrazakov was Giovanni and Schrott was Leporello, and they performed well both singly and together. Between them, there was more chemistry than between any other Giovanni-Leporello pairing I have seen (and I've seen many).

Abdrazakov was intelligent, musical, and altogether compelling. His Giovanni was neither an outright monster nor a clumsy roué, but something in between, and something just right. As I remark frequently, Abdrazakov has an uncanny ability to sing in tune. Even in the Champagne Aria, he sang in tune, and Giovannis seldom do. They don't even sing the notes, in an honest way. As for Abdrazakov's Serenade, it was a thing of beauty (like the piece itself). Schrott made a natural Leporello: charismatic and funny. Very charismatic, and very funny. I laughed out loud once, which I rarely do in the opera house (other than critically). Schrott was not a clown, but a sly Leporello. He put his own stamp on the Catalogue Aria, but not in a way that detracted—in a way that enhanced. At the end of the night, a friend of mine said of Schrott, "He reminded me of Johnny Depp." An apt observation.

The many other singers in the cast ranged from excellent to okay to "Better luck next time." Let me mention David Soar—whose last name ought to belong to a soprano, but, in this case, belongs to a bass. He was Masetto, and a most unusual one: not a total bumpkin, but a man of appropriate pride, dignity, and awareness. Masetto was never more a man, in my experience, than as portrayed by Soar.

Leading the opera in the pit was Edward Gardner, an Englishman. All night long, he seemed determined to be energetic and intense, which is, of course, fine. But he was also slightly frenetic, choosing tempos that sometimes scanted the music. Speed is no substitute for energy or intensity, as we know. And the gravitas of *Don Giovanni* was too little in evidence on this occasion. Maybe twenty years ago, fast-fast tempos became the fashion in Mozart. I look forward to the passing of this fashion. With some regularity, I complain about the Champagne Aria, in particular: Does no one want to enjoy it? It's such a charming piece, but people want to rush through it, leaving it unexploited. So it was on this night, though Abdrazakov managed to sing the notes, and in tune.

Giving a recital at Alice Tully was Andreas Scholl, the famed German countertenor. The first half of the program was all in English, and the second half all in German. The program consisted of some of the greatest songs in the entire literature: "Come again, sweet love doth now invite"; "An Evening Hymn on a Ground"; "Abendempfindung"; "Du bist die Ruh"; and on and on. It was a parade of greatest hits. Can a performer get away with that these days? No Birtwistle or Harbison to excite the hearts of the critics? I guess they can.

Scholl is a singer to praise, for he is unfussy, straightforward, honest, sincere, tasteful, and clean. On this occasion, he was flat more often than is comfortable, but technique was no great problem.

If there was a problem, it was this: that Scholl was a little careful, measured, polite, bloodless, dull . . . Some notes and phrases cried out for more warmth and color than he gave. Purcell's "Evening Hymn" is a work of almost painful spirituality. This singer barely laid a glove on it, making it mundane. His simplicity is commendable, of course. His eschewal of histrionics is welcome. But there is more to music-making than that (as he knows, I hasten to say).

The pianist in this recital was Tamar Halperin, and she has a great gift: a sense of line. Related to this is a sense of weight and accentuation. In the various songs, she was limpid, astute, humorous—as when she ended a jokey song by Thomas Campion (a contemporary of Purcell). Technically and musically, she hardly put a foot wrong. "Music for a While" can be more insinuating. I don't know why she socked the opening note of the "Evening Hymn." (I think she just stopped thinking for a split second.) The opening of "Du bist die Ruh" should obey a stricter tempo, in my view. Other than those cavils, I can say nothing—except, "This is a real pianist."

Back to the Metropolitan Opera, for another Mozart opera—this one, *La clemenza di Tito*. Our conductor was another Englishman, Harry Bicket, well known as a Baroque specialist. The evening started unfortunately, with a botched opening chord. The rest of the overture was so-so, which, again, was unfortunate: The *Tito* overture is one of the most delicious things Mozart ever wrote. Bicket conducted the opera with knowledge and assurance, which he can be expected to do. But he was also somewhat perfunctory. A soprano-mezzo duet, "Ah, perdona al primo affetto," is a moment of supreme sublimity. In these hands, it was nothing special, really. It was mundane, to use a word I just used above. For one thing, the duet was too fast. (The singers actually slowed things down when they could, whether consciously or not. Then Bicket would reassert his pace.) But it also lacked its radiance. It passed by ordinarily, mundanely, which is not this music at all.

While I'm on my soapbox, I don't believe that an orchestra in Mozart has to sound skimpy. It can have a fuller sound without violating some Mozartean code. Much of today's Mozart conducting makes this assumption: that such men as Beecham, Walter, Krips, Szell, and Böhm had no idea how to conduct Mozart. I don't buy that at all. Neither does James Levine, I'm happy to say (and he is scheduled to return to the Met next season, after a long stay on the disabled list).

For all my soapboxing about conducting, the Met had assembled an excellent cast for this *Tito*. This is something easier to do these days than in former days: assemble an excellent Mozart cast. Assembling a Verdi cast is far more challenging. I will mention just two of the cast members, starting with Russell Thomas, the tenor in the title role. I first heard him as the First Prisoner in *Fidelio*, six years ago. He opened his mouth and produced a "melting trumpet," as I wrote. He still has that instrument, a beauty: but on this night he was not always able to stay on pitch, or to sing lowish notes. An English soprano, Lucy Crowe, was new to the Met, and she sang Servilia. She was both correct and touching. Moreover, she acted well, including while she was not singing, which is maybe more than you have a right to expect from someone who can also sing.

Finally, Chanticleer—which gave its annual Christmas concert in the Medieval Sculpture Hall of the Metropolitan Museum. I thought of a story about George Szell. I'm going from memory, but I think I have it about right. One fall, he returns to Cleveland to begin the new season. At the first rehearsal, he says to the orchestra, "Gentlemen, when I was away from you, I imagined that you were this good. But I was afraid it was merely my imagination. I'm glad to see that you are, in fact, this good." Most years, I hear Chanticleer just once, at Christmas. And as the concert approaches, I think, "Maybe they're not as good as I think they are. Maybe their abilities have been exaggerated in my memory." Then they sing again, and lo . . .

In this chronicle, I've made a great deal of singing in tune—and Chanticleer is a model in this regard. These guys would rather slit their throats than sing out of tune. How can twelve people, unaccompanied, do a better job of staying in tune than most soloists in recital? And, as a friend of mine pointed out, the soloist has the benefit of a piano. Whatever Chanticleer's technical precision, this precision is strictly at the service of musical expression. Across the range of periods and styles, they grasp the essence of what they are singing. I don't know whether these guys are believers or not. But they sing Christmas music like they are. If they're not, they fake it superbly.

I could strain to criticize. I thought "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" was slow and effete. But "O Come, All Ye Faithful"? This ancient carol was newborn, thrilling. Chanticleer sang its usual encore, the Ave Maria of Franz Biebl. One singer who had a solo line had no voice left. His sound was actually on the ugly side. But, baby, he was in tune—right in the center of the note.

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

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