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by Jay Nordlinger

On recent performances, including Natalie Dessay, Philippe Cassard, Wozzeck, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

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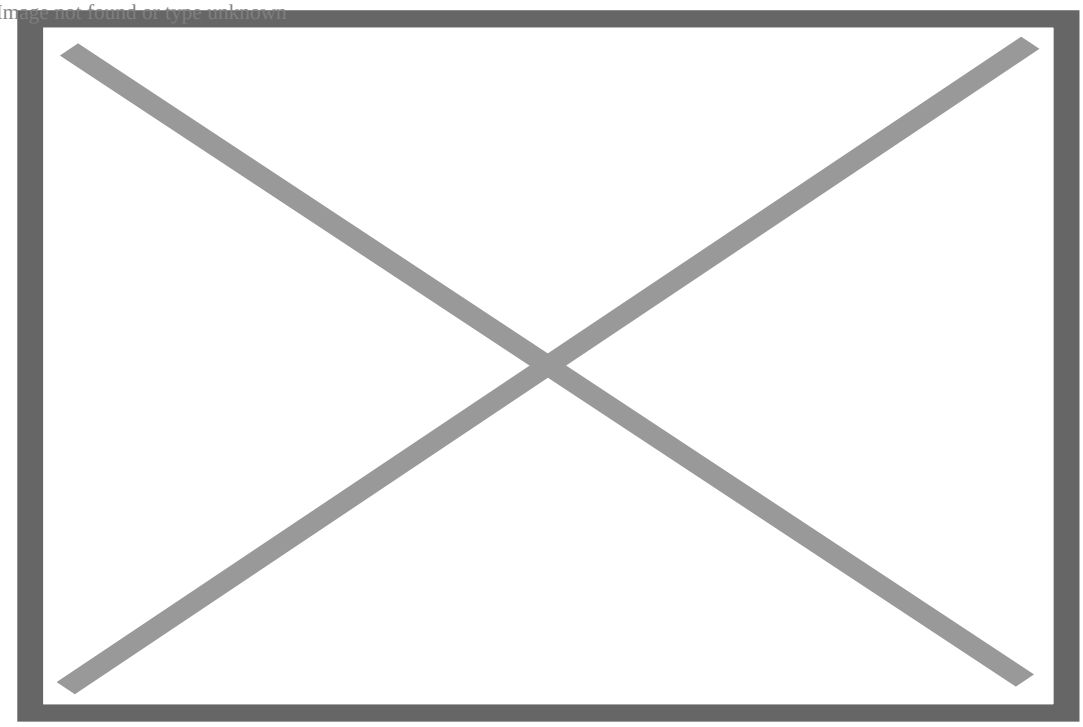

Natalie Dessay, the French soprano, gave a recital in Carnegie Hall. Her program was the kind usually disfavored by administrators and critics. There was no "theme," as far as I could tell. The program was simply an assemblage of good or great songs, intelligently selected and attractively placed. There were light songs and serious songs, fast ones and slow ones. They were in either French or German—but there was not a French half and a German half, as there often is. The languages were interspersed.

Dessay began with Clara Schumann—including her song that sets "Liebst du um Schönheit," the Rückert poem. We know this poem best, of course, from Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder*. It can be strange to hear those familiar words with other music. Then Dessay sang a Brahms group, followed by two

Duparc songs, followed by a Strauss group. To begin the second half, she sang five famous songs of Fauré. Then came *Fiançailles pour rire*, the Poulenc cycle (which ends with "Fleurs," sung so perfectly and heartbreakingly by the late Arleen Auger). The printed program ended with two Debussy songs.

Accompanying Dessay was a French pianist, Philippe Cassard, not to be confused with a more senior French pianist, Jean-Philippe Collard. Singer and pianist were obviously in sympathy with each other, and with the music. Dessay is a coloratura soprano, and that is not the kind of singer generally known for recitals. Coloraturas are known for starring in Rossini, Bellini, and so on. But they can be awfully good in recital, as Dessay was.

There were many imperfections. Dessay's line was often impure, or her intonation off. Her best sound came and went. Her breaths were sometimes shallow and short. In Fauré's "Mandoline," she was heavy on the arm gestures, which is usually a sign that the gesturer is having vocal problems. At times, I thought, "Her top is shot"—i.e., her upper register is gone.

So, what did she have to offer? A package: a complete singing package. She provided a definition of "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." She found the essence of the music, and she was delightful, engaging, and moving.

At encore time, the pianist, Cassard, played Debussy's "Clair de lune," and played it well. Then Dessay sang the same composer's song of the same name. She next switched things up with Rachmaninoff—the song we know in English as "How Fair This Spot," or "Where Beauty Dwells," or "Here All Is Just Right." In any case, it's Op. 21, No. 7. To end the evening, she announced that she was going to sing something from *Lakmé*, the Delibes opera—though not the Bell Song.

I can tell you with lengthy specificity what was wrong with this recital. I can't tell you so specifically what was right with it. The truth must be that Dessay is a genuine musician (much as she wants to be an actress and other things).

A great conductor has no specialty, and great conductors certainly include James Levine. He is a man without specialty, a man for all seasons. But he is very, very adept at the Second Viennese School—Schoenberg and his progeny—and he likes Berg's opera *Wozzeck* a lot. In a recent outing at his Metropolitan Opera, he was almost explanatory. I have never before described conducting as "explanatory." Levine seemed to be explaining *Wozzeck* as he went. The score was extraordinarily clear: You could have written it down, from this conducting. Yet the conductor did not stint on drama; the conducting was not clinical. *Wozzeck* had its array of qualities, including intensity, sweetness, and horror.

The Met orchestra played extremely well for Levine, or at his instigation. Seldom has this opera sounded so orchestral, at least to me. It was virtually a concerto for orchestra. I think every first-desk player gets a turn, from the piccolo to the tuba (so to speak—and maybe literally, I'd have to check).

There were singers present, yes. The title role was taken by Thomas Hampson, who may not be the first person you would think of for Wozzeck. He is a glamorous baritone, renowned for portraying such aristocrats as Giovanni and Onegin (and nasty aristos at that). Wozzeck is a wretch of wretches. Could Hampson pull him off? He did. He is a fine actor, and he knows music and its uses. He did not produce much voice on this particular night. According to press reports, he was coming off a bout of bronchitis. Marie was sung by Deborah Voigt, the great—indeed, immortal—soprano. She gave what she had, which was mainly intelligence, musical and theatrical. Vocally, her Marie was an unusually steely, scalding, and biting one.

Among the supporting players, Tamara Mumford stood out, as she so often does. She is a mezzo-soprano from Utah, and she was Margret in *Wozzeck*. I was going to say that she never disappoints, in whatever role she fills. It's nearer the truth to say that she always satisfies and impresses.

One word about the opera itself: If I made a list of unbearable operas, *Wozzeck* might appear at the very top. What I mean is, the story is so cruel, so inhumane, it's almost impossible to take. Of course, the same is true of any number of operas—*Traviata*? *Butterfly*? Lorin Maazel once told me, "When I conduct that opera [*Butterfly*], I can't look at the stage for the last five minutes—when she gets ready to disembowel herself. I can't bear it. . . . The music is so powerful."

In Carnegie Hall, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra played an unusual concert, and an unusually long one—three hours, two intermissions. Leading them was a veteran maestro, Zubin Mehta. The program was an appetizing mélange of Viennese styles—from Mozart to the Strauss family to Webern (in a nutshell). There were old favorites, plus music off the beaten path. As I said, appetizing.

The evening began with the Overture to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Nicolai). It was decently shaped, but rather dull, and uncrisp. No worries, though: We were just getting started. Next came Webern's Six Pieces, Op. 6, and those pieces were well executed. Then we had three choral pieces in a row: the Moon Chorus, from that same *Merry Wives*; *Der Feuerreiter*, by Wolf; and *Ave verum corpus*, Mozart's prayerful gem. The New York Choral Artists did the honors, along with the VPO. Mehta went from one choral piece to the next, without waiting for applause—which was odd. The pieces have no connection to one another.

They were all dull, however—sleepy, bland, draggy, and dull. There was no juice, no musical life, on the stage. I had said earlier to the friend next to me, "Maybe they'll repeat the *Ave verum corpus* ," as sometimes happens. It is very short, and audiences hunger to hear it again. On this occasion, once was more than enough.

After the first intermission, the orchestra played something by Franz Schmidt (1874–1939): the Intermezzo from his opera *Notre Dame*. Then they played something by Theodor Berger (1905–92): his tone poem *Legend of Prince Eugene*. More dullness, I'm afraid. I thought of Christa Ludwig, the great mezzo-soprano, and a remark I reported in my March chronicle. In a recent master class, she

broke in and said to the singer and pianist, "*Kinder*, I can't sit here, it's too slow." Moreover, the VPO's playing was sloppy. Were they sight-reading? And if so, couldn't they sight-read better than that?

The prospect of relief was offered by Gil Shaham, who came out to play the Korngold Violin Concerto. His recording of this work with André Previn—world's foremost Korn-gold conductor—is one of the best. With Mehta and the VPO, he was all right, and so were they. Something recognizable as music was coming from the stage. But the last movement, which ought to be exciting, was feeble.

You will forgive me for not having stayed for the last third of the concert—though I bet things were livelier with the presence of Diana Damrau, the ebullient soprano. The first two thirds had been stupefying. There had been the most amazing absence of energy. Think of a lizard, sunning itself on a rock. Mehta is a conductor who has demonstrated greatness time and time again. The Vienna Philharmonic is just about the most celebrated orchestra in the world. How could they have phoned it in (and badly)? Did they not care about their standards? A musician friend said to me, "They probably just didn't feel like playing, and they probably thought, 'Well, the stupid New York audience won't know the difference. '"

I really don't have an answer. Write the concert off as an anomaly. Too bad for the ticket-buyers, though.

A very Fisher Hall was packed to the rafters, for the Los Angeles Philharmonic—more specifically, for Gustavo Dudamel, the conductor, and Yuja Wang, the pianist who would serve as soloist. They are rock stars of classical music, and this is especially true of Dudamel. His program began traditionally, i.e., with an OOMP: an obligatory opening modern piece. This OOMP was called *Blow bright*, and the composer is Daníel Bjarnason, an Icelander. According to our program notes, Bjarnason "works the borderless world of new music." *Blow bright* was commissioned by the Los Angeles orchestra, and is supposed to evoke the Pacific Ocean.

It resembles a lot of other contemporary pieces. It is slightly psychedelic. There is much percussion. There is an aspect of Walt Disney. You hear some jungle or forest sounds—hoot owls? But *Blow bright* is a cut or two above your average OOMP. It is elegiac, trying to tell a story of some kind (I think). The piece almost becomes a violin concerto, so prominent is the concertmaster's part. The music is pretty, and sad, and engaging. You would not think of an ocean, I bet, unless you were told—and maybe not even after you were told.

I would like to hear *Blow bright* again. And, by the way, when Bjarnason came out for a bow, he looked about ten feet tall.

Many years ago, my colleague Fred Kirshnit and I joked about writing previews, rather than reviews: We would simply say what the concert promised to be like, thereby sparing the reader the need of attending it. We were joking, of course: One of the greatest elements of concert life is the

element of surprise. Nonetheless, I had a strong feeling about the way Yuja Wang would play Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 3.

The concerto would be precise, crystalline, very, very clear. You would hear more notes than ever before. She would play every note Rachmaninoff wrote (which most pianists don't, and can't). The playing would seem almost pointillistic. Some of the music would be Impressionistic, Debussyan. Fast parts would be super-fast, and dazzling. Wang would not make a big sound: a deep, lush, Rachmaninoff-like sound. She would be on the thin side. But she would find ways of compensating.

I must not pat myself on the back—this was an easy call. Wang played exactly as predicted. Where sound is concerned, I thought of something that Matthew Polenzani, the lyric tenor, once told an audience, in a Q&A with me: "I could sing Siegfried [the Wagner role], every note. But you wouldn't hear me," over the orchestra. Again, however, Wang was able to compensate. She was musical, virtuosic, and cagey. The last movement, she took like the wind—never has it been faster. A man sitting near me kept saying, "Oh, my God." The last few pages were tremendously exciting, and the audience went nuts. Rightly.

Return to Carnegie Hall, where Leif Ove Andsnes, the Norwegian pianist, played a recital—all-Beethoven. There were three sonatas: one earlyish, one middle-ish, and one latish. There was also a relative rarity: Six Variations on an Original Theme in F major, Op. 34. That earlyish sonata was the one in B flat, Op. 22. Its opening is tricky, easy to botch: Andsnes did not. He played the first movement with his usual discipline, tidiness, and smarts. There was something lacking, however: a spirit of fun. Andsnes can be a cool customer—too cool. In the second movement, Adagio, he showed a marvelous combination of solidity and lyricism. This is an Andsnes signature. Jumping to the last movement, the Rondo, it was affectionate and playful, not too cool—and not silly either. Andsnes does not condescend.

Say this for him, too: He knows that music doesn't necessarily stop after the last note of a movement (let's say) has ceased to sound. He lets the music hang in the air for a bit, where appropriate.

Next came the "latish" sonata, the one in A major, Op. 101. While Andsnes played, I basically sat back and listened, unconcerned. Nothing would be wrong. Andsnes had complete security. There was not a hair out of place, and, at the same time, the playing wasn't sterile. The march, for example, was stirring. And the big fugue was imaginative, arresting. Andsnes is a player almost made for Beethoven.

Those variations, Op. 34, he sculpted gracefully. He knows just how to breathe in them. And the final sonata, the "Appassionata," was well-nigh perfect—until the last movement. Andsnes did not bring the heat or electricity that this music requires. Absent was that animal quality, possessed by Rubinstein and Horowitz, among others.

In a recital like this—all-Beethoven—what do you play for an encore? I was thinking "Für Elise," the most famous piano piece in the world, I guess, after "Chopsticks." Instead, Andsnes played a different bagatelle, the one in E flat, Op. 33, No. 1. And then he did something that floored me: He played the closing movement of Beethoven's Sonata in F, Op. 54. Why did this choice floor me? Because I always thought that this exciting, fast, ingenious movement should be used as an encore, but had never heard a pianist do it. And Andsnes did it very well.

For his third and final encore, he departed from Beethoven, playing another composer. Why bother, after three sonatas, one theme and variations, and two encores? In any event, Andsnes chose Schubert's *Moment musical* in A flat, D. 780, No. 6, and played it with due wistfulness and sublimity.

Finish up at the Metropolitan Opera, where the company staged *Andrea Chénier*, Giordano's opera of the French Revolution. What does it need? Voice, and lots of it. There is much nuance in this score, and tenderness, but what it really cries out for is power: verismo power. The last time *Andrea Chénier* was staged at the Met, the company had Violeta Urmana and Ben Heppner in the principal roles. Their singing was not always pretty—Heppner committed a few of his cracks—but it had the desired impact. This time around, the Met cast Patricia Racette and Marcelo Álvarez. They are essentially lyric singers (with strength and thrust).

Earlier this season, Racette sang Tosca in this same house. She was admirable and compelling, as usual, but wobbly on high notes. So it was in *Chénier*. Álvarez was adequate, or better than that: Often, he sounded like Plácido Domingo, complete with Spanish accent (which is especially marked in Italian). Our baritone was Željko Lu?i?, the sturdy Serb. If he is not a true-blue Italian baritone, he is something close. The problem with the first two acts, or two and a half acts, was simple: There wasn't enough power or oomph coming from the stage. The opera was too tame, too subdued.

There wasn't enough power or oomph coming from the pit either. The orchestra needed a fatter, bigger, grander sound. Serving as conductor was Gianandrea Noseda, the worthy Italian. The art of conducting is mysterious, including where gestures are concerned: There are conductors who expend a lot of energy—who practically flail—yet get very little from the orchestra. Other conductors seem to be doing the minimum, yet get a lot. Noseda was very energetic, physically, as he usually is. But the sonic payoff was unimpressive.

Before it was all over, though, it was clear that Racette and Álvarez had saved up some power. Her aria, "La mamma morta," was an example of verismo—the real McCoy. And in the final act, both singers let loose genuine power, as did the orchestra, to a degree. *Chénier* can give you more of a visceral thrill. But this crew rose to the occasion, and so did Giordano: He may not be Verdi, but his operas will long outlast their critics. *Chénier* is now 120 years old, and in excellent shape.

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

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