The New Criterion

Music September 2016

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

On Paradise Interrupted, Reich/Reverberations, The Winter's Tale, and The Illuminated Heart at Lincoln Center, and The Golden Bride at Kessler's Second Avenue Theatre.

The Lincoln Center Festival staged an opera called Paradise Interrupted. It belongs to a familiar category of music: the Chinese-Western hybrid. We have seen a pattern: A boy or girl is born in China. He (let's say) trains there for a while. Then he comes to America, for further study. He stays here, fusing the two traditions he has absorbed, composing those hybrids.

In the past twenty years, I have often spoken of "the Sinification of music." Not long ago, I wrote an essay called "The Twain, Meeting." And I have frequently quoted Lorin Maazel, the late conductor. When I interviewed him in 2009, I asked him about the future of classical music, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Thank God for China."

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Paradise Interrupted was composed by Huang Ruo, who was born on the island of Hainan. He studied at the Shanghai Conservatory. Then he came to Oberlin, and went on to Juilliard, where he received his Ph.D. The opera's stage director and "visual designer," to quote the program, is Jennifer Wen Ma, who was born in Beijing and eventually earned a master's degree from the Pratt Institute in New York. In 2008, she was one of the wizards behind the pageantry of the Beijing Olympics.

Paradise Interrupted is in Mandarin and lasts about an hour and twenty minutes. It is a chamber opera, though its makers have another name for it: "installation opera." In a program note, Huang says, "The word and genre 'opera' is much broader and more inclusive in the twenty-first century than it was in the past."

I'm not sure this is correct. It may be a present-day conceit. Over the centuries, opera has been very diverse, and the name "opera" has been very elastic. Think of *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, *The*

Marriage of Figaro, *Parsifal*, *Porgy and Bess* . . .

The story of *Paradise Interrupted* is a fusion of Adam and Eve and *The Peony Pavilion*, an important Chinese tale from the end of the 1500s (when Monteverdi, the composer of *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, was about thirty). Huang wrote his opera with a singer in mind: not just any singer, but the queen of classical Chinese opera, Qian Yi. It was she who performed in New York.

The opera begins with a piercing sound, as though a microphone has gone haywire. The noise lasts for an uncomfortably long time, and it hurt my ears, literally. Is this any way to begin a piece of music? Relief comes, in the form of those tinklies—those tinkly sounds that have been popular in music in recent years. Huang's score is lightly textured, often Impressionistic. One thinks of Debussy and Ravel, or at least I did. At one point, I thought specifically of the *Chansons madécasses* (Ravel). There is also some Chinese equivalent, I think, of Gregorian chant. And may I say that some Chinese sounds, with their twangs, put me in mind of our own bluegrass?

Qian Yi is a phenomenon—a brilliant performer, vocally and otherwise. She has learned a craft and is an exemplar of it. She sings fearlessly, and, by the evidence, tirelessly. Sometimes the singing is not so pretty. Nor is it meant to be, I believe. I sometimes wondered, "Is this singing or caterwauling?" Qian Yi demonstrated any number of physical movements—all stylized—and one or two of the arm movements reminded me of the "Callas salute." That salute, in our own day, has been adopted by another soprano, Angela Gheorghiu. I believe Callas would admire Qian Yi a lot (and so would Gheorghiu).

There are only four other singers in the opera, all men, though one of them is a countertenor, who on this evening made some remarkable and powerful womanly sounds.

This is an opera you must give in to. I have often written the same about minimalism, even about *Parsifal*. You must give in to it: its style, its world, its terms. If you do, you're happy. If you don't, the opposite. If the drug takes hold, you are in bliss. If it does not, you're in agony. I think that *Paradise Interrupted* is meant to hold you rapt. If it doesn't—woe betide you.

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I know you will know that I'm not contradicting myself when I say the following: On leaving the theater that night, I felt like I had been released from jail. I also admired the work, thinking it an excellent, high example of its genre. *Paradise Interrupted* is an impressive, accomplished thing, whether for me or not.

In October, the composer Steve Reich will turn eighty. The Lincoln Center Festival celebrated this milestone with a series of three concerts, Reich/Reverberations. Twenty years ago, I wrote a long piece on Reich, on the occasion of his sixtieth. I said that Reich had become "more a grand old man than the brash, badboy minimalist" who had once scandalized audiences. I also expressed my

skepticism about the whole minimalist project—but we need not revisit that at the moment. The last of the three Reich concerts had two works on it: the Double Sextet, written about ten years ago, and Music for 18 Musicians, written in the mid-1970s. The festival described these as "two dazzling masterpieces at the apex of Reich's genius." Not just masterpieces but dazzling ones. For a contrast with such speech, think of Reich's titles: "Double Sextet" and "Music for 18 Musicians." Think of "Drumming"! These titles are pleasingly plain, to me. And Beethoven did all right with such sexy monikers as "String Quartet in C-sharp Minor."

A word about the Double Sextet, leaving the more famous Music for 18 Musicians to one side: I will say again that you have to give in. To minimalism, to *Paradise Interrupted*, to *Parsifal*, to other things. I can groove with Reich for a while in the Double Sextet. But then, I'm afraid, I lose my groove (while he keeps going). I'm awake—annoyingly awake—when it might be better to be numb.

But I value Reich, and one of the things I appreciate about him is that he dares, if that's the word, to write happily. Dark has been the rage for many years. Light, I suppose, connotes unseriousness, in the minds of some. In about 1930, Harold Arlen wrote one of his hit songs, "Get Happy." You want to get happy? Try Reich's *You Are (Variations)*, from 2004.

I don't know whether Reich himself is content, though I would guess so. There are happy people who write darkly and unhappy people who turn out happy stuff. This is an interesting subject in arts and letters.

One guest of the Lincoln Center Festival was the National Ballet of Canada (whose artistic director is the great ballerina, or ex-ballerina, Karen Kain). The company danced The Winter's Tale, composed by Joby Talbot and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon. Both men are English, and they have developed a collaboration.

Not before has there been a ballet on this Shakespeare play. Nor has there been an opera, to my knowledge. There has certainly been an opera—more than one—on another Shakespeare play that features jealousy, and its destructiveness: *Othello*.

Talbot is an eclectic composer, or a versatile one, if you like. His pieces include pop arrangements, TV scores, an opera about Mount Everest—and, intriguingly, an additional movement for Holst's seven-movement suite, *The Planets*. How about *The Winter's Tale*? I'll tell you what I heard.

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job of depiction.

Act I has, among other things, Orientalism. Or snaky chromaticism. I thought of *Le Coq d'or*, the Rimsky-Korsakov opera (also made into a ballet).

Furthermore, Talbot creates an air of antiquity, and he does this without being hokey.

His score includes something like minimalism—a running line, providing a musical motor. Much of the music is "shimmeringly tonal," as I think people say. Yet it is also off-kilter. Talbot queers his tonality. He creates suspense, especially with rhythm. And he does a fine job of depiction.

What he depicts is the King's jealous madness, the dizzying loss of mind, with everything spinning out of control. He also depicts Hermione's desperation. Shakespeare conjures up chaos, confusion, and evil, and Talbot follows suit. When shepherds appear, Talbot has them pipe, a little cornily. But this perhaps cannot be helped.

I'm always complaining that new music is busy: busy busy busy. Talbot's score is ever active, but, amazingly, it does not seem busy. There are not too many notes for notes' sake.

Altogether, Talbot is bold, confident, and sure-footed. He gives the sense of composing unafraid, not overly concerned with what other composers may think.

He uses the whole orchestra, availing himself of anything and everything. The instrumentation includes the sarrusophone, the heckelphone, the flugelhorn, and the Wagner tuba. There is a great deal of soft percussion, in the modern fashion. And Talbot uses it effectively. You have bells, chimes, marimba, xylophone, glockenspiel, vibes . . .

I spied, or heard, some influences, although perhaps these were my imagination. It seemed to me that Talbot had spent a fair amount of time with Mahler. And that he knew *Boléro*. I also thought of Bernstein's score for *On the Waterfront*. And of another movie score, written some forty years later: Jerry Goldsmith's, for *Basic Instinct*.

In Act I, Talbot is telling a story, or supporting a story. In Act II, he is supplying dance music. It is gay, festive. There is lots of flute playing, and it occurred to me that Sir James Galway would like to participate. But the music also struck me as a little monochromatic, for stretches. In time, things in the story go wrong, and Talbot goes atonal. They all do this, don't they? All composers employ this gambit.

In any case, Joby Talbot has written a commendable score, and it was gratifying, to me, to applaud something new. It was gratifying, after Act I, to look forward to Act II. It is gratifying to look forward to seeing this ballet again. Incidentally, could there be a suite from it? An orchestral suite, for concert purposes? I don't see why not.

Di Goldene Kale, or The Golden Bride, was a hit of 1923. A Yiddish operetta, it was composed

by Joseph Rumshinsky, who was born near Vilnius in 1881 and died in Kew Gardens, Queens, in 1956. The show played at Kessler's Second Avenue Theater on the Lower East Side. (Kessler was David Kessler, himself a leading light of the Yiddish theater.)

The Golden Bride has been revived by the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, and it has played at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, not on the Lower East Side but as low as you can go and still be in Manhattan: Battery Park City. You could row just a few strokes to Ellis Island.

Speaking of that: the story of the opera is fairly typical. A beautiful girl grows up in a shtetl. She is an orphan, cared for by another family. Suddenly, she comes into a fortune. Everyone wants to marry her. First, though, she insists on finding her mother. She sails to America, and . . . At any rate, the ending is happy, as is the show at large.

Rumshinsky's score has traces of the Strauss family, klezmer, jazz, and more.

Seeing it was like going to a museum of anthropology, right? *The Golden Bride* is an unearthed fossil, right? I didn't find it so. I found it fresh and winning, not particularly bound by time—or place, for that matter.

I have called the show an operetta, but you could call it a musical, too. It is, in any case, a specimen of the Yiddish lyric theater. Rumshinsky's score has traces of the Strauss family, klezmer, jazz, and more. In order to make certain points, he interpolates a popular song or two, such as "Over There." And this show includes one hit—a hit single, if you will: the song "Mayn Goldele."

The cast in Battery Park was a mixture of classical and Broadway singers. The performance I saw had *esprit*, and *esprit de corps*. Neither singers nor instrumentalists gave any hint of slumming. They relished what they were doing as much as anyone in the theater. My complaint is a complaint I have about America in general: the singers were miked, and everything was too loud—far too loud for the size of the theater. Ridiculously, and unmusically, loud. I have written frequently about "the overamplification of American life," as I call it. Nobody listens to me—perhaps because they can't hear me over the amped-up noise?

The golden bride herself was a proper opera singer, Rachel Policar, a soprano from Seattle. She was accurate and graceful, and, in some of her coloratura, she sounded like Snow White. I don't mean this as a putdown: I have no doubt she was singing Rumshinsky's tra-la-la's just the way he wrote and meant them.

I wonder how many in the audience knew Yiddish. I can tell you that one man sang along to a tune—probably "Mayn Goldele," I don't remember—during the overture. The show includes a lot of talking, in addition to singing—which leads me to my next point.

Maybe this was wrong of me, but I expected the singers to have Yiddish-speaking relatives: to be the children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, grand-nieces, and grand-nephews of Yiddish speakers. Surely some of them were. But equally surely, some were not. (I think in particular of Cameron Johnson, the leading man, whose ancestors never saw a shtetl, I can all but guarantee.) They learned the show—speaking and all—the same as they would learn any other show in a foreign language.

People sometimes say that a show is "feel-good," and they don't mean this as a compliment. *The Golden Bride*, for me, was a feel-good experience. And it felt good, I can tell you, to feel good.

This summer, the Mostly Mozart Festival celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. It kicked off the celebration with an evening dubbed The Illuminated Heart. Huh? This is a production of hits from Mozart operas: arias, duets, and ensembles. A program of excerpts from Mozart operas seems obvious. Strangely—maybe I should get out more—I had not attended one, that I can remember.

There are sixteen items in *The Illuminated Heart*, beginning with the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*—it's hard to beat that—and ending with the ending from the same opera. (So, those are nice bookends.) Onstage at Mostly Mozart were nine singers: some of them famous, some of them little known, and some of them in between. Indeed, most were in between. Leading the concert was Louis Langrée, the French conductor who has been the festival's music director since 2002.

Netia Jones is responsible for the production end of *The Illuminated Heart*. Her bio describes her as "a British director/designer and video artist." Her Mozart show has a clean look, but at the same time it is not skimpy. It is smart, and in accord with Mozart's pieces. Surtitles—if that's the right word—appear on a back wall. There is no bowing or applause from one number to the next, making the show neat and swift. Which is welcome.

A program of excerpts from Mozart operas seems obvious.

One cast member was Marianne Crebassa, a French mezzo who is known in Europe but less known here. She sang "Parto, parto," from *La clemenza di Tito*, and she sang it creditably. Her partner in this aria was the fine clarinetist Jon Manasse. Her partner in "Ah perdona al primo affetto," the duet from *Tito*, was Nadine Sierra, an American soprano. This duet is one of the most melting things in Mozart, and therefore in music. On this occasion, sadly, there was no melt.

Toward the end of the program, Christine Goerke, the dramatic soprano, sang Elettra's dramatic aria from *Idomeneo*. Her singing was not always pretty, but it was powerful and effective, and Goerke added some high notes to the end. That, I had never heard.

Outstanding in this show was Matthew Polenzani, who, with his back against the wall—literally—sang "Dalla sua pace," from *Don Giovanni*. His tenor was sweet but substantial,

and, with Maestro Langrée, he shaped the aria impeccably. A "Dalla sua pace" that is not overslow and warped is a pleasure.

Speaking of pleasure, I have a memory from 2006: the whole year. This was a big "Mozart year," marking the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth. The music world was saturated with Mozart. Like others, I made some snarky comments about this at the beginning of the year, or even starting in 2005. I stopped snarking in about mid-2006. It was marvelous, and edifying, to hear so much Mozart, and by the time New Year's Eve rolled around, I loved him all the more.

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 35 Number 1 , on page 89

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