

The New Criterion

Dispatch May 14, 2017 12:03 pm

Lamentations all around

by Jay Nordlinger



Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Photo: Official Website of Yannick Nézet-Séguin

As far as I know, Yannick Nézet-Séguin has no official role in New York, but he has been ubiquitous in this city. At the Metropolitan Opera, he conducted a run of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*. He also participated in the Met's gala a week ago. (The company was celebrating fifty years at Lincoln Center.) And there he was again at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday, leading the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Which makes sense: he is the music director. (And he'll take over the Met in 2020—a year in which one should expect especially clear vision.)

The Philadelphians' concert began with a Bernstein symphony, the first, dubbed "Jeremiah." Bernstein wrote it in 1942. In the second movement, I hear some of the coming *West Side Story*, I swear—in particular, the immortal song "Somewhere."

From the Philadelphia horns, there was warm, strong, accurate work. The same could be said for the strings. This is a royal orchestra, really. I don't know whether they produce the fabled "Philadelphia Sound," but they produce a *very good* sound, whatever you want to call it.

How much should I attribute to the fabled acoustics of Carnegie Hall? Almost nothing, I think. Orchestras troop through Carnegie all the time, and they seldom sound like the Philadelphians.

The “Jeremiah” Symphony requires a soloist—a mezzo-soprano—and that was Sasha Cooke, who sang with understanding and assurance.

Nézet-Séguin conducted with the same qualities. If I have a complaint—and I do—it’s that there was too little dynamic variation throughout the symphony. There was a sameness that is not inherent in the symphony, I believe. (But if it was a sameness, it was a very fine sameness.)

The Bernstein was followed by a Mozart piano concerto, that in C minor, K. 491. The soloist was the famous Radu Lupu, who turned seventy not long ago.

He was relaxed, in his usual fashion. As Nézet-Séguin and the orchestra began the concerto, Lupu leaned back in his chair—he always uses a chair with a back, not a bench—and folded his arms. In the first movement, he made some pearly sounds and played some lovely phrases. Overall, his approach was autumnal or retiring. This music has some heft and fire, and Lupu was very, very gentle in it.

The evening’s cadenzas were of Lupu’s own devising, and they were both interesting and fitting.

In the middle movement, *Larghetto*, Lupu was gentle, and limp, too. The music was like a bland soup.

As for the closing movement, it was dutiful. Pedestrian. Sleepy as Lupu was, Nézet-Séguin didn’t help. When he had the opportunity, he refused to give the concerto a little life or structure. He played along with the soup. It is very hard to rob Mozart’s C-minor concerto of its excitement and appeal—of its blood and nature—but these guys did.

At some point, a man near me was snoring loudly, drawing looks from other audience members. I said—a little too loudly, according to the friend sitting next to me—“I agree with him.” (The lady in front of me, reported my friend, cracked up.)

I thought long and hard about whether I could defend this performance. (Lupu’s, not the snorer’s.) Was it elegiac? Was it eccentric and personal? No, it was comatose. It was not within even the most generous bounds of interpretation.

Radu Lupu is a great pianist. He proved so in Carnegie Hall as recently as four years ago, when he played Book II of Debussy’s *Préludes*. Rarely have I heard piano playing so refined, so skillful—so *perfect*.

But what happened on Tuesday night was a disgrace. Musicians such as Radu Lupu and Maurizio Pollini will be hired over and over by the swankiest places, because of what they did in the past. But they still owe the audience—today’s audience (the newcomer, for example)—something. And they still owe the composers something. And themselves something.

I look forward to hearing Lupu again—as his superb, real self.

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

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