

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Never before had there been a Bruckner cycle in the United States of America. So said Sir Clive Gillinson, from the stage of Carnegie Hall. (Sir Clive runs the place.) What do we mean by “Bruckner cycle”? The symphonies of Anton Bruckner, 1 through 9. But hang on: it gets tricky with Bruckner, because there is a Symphony No. 0 and a Symphony No. 00. Anyway, the cycle in question included only the nine symphonies (and the last of them is incomplete, as Bruckner died before he could finish the last movement).

Over the course of a week and a half, Bruckner’s nine were played in Carnegie Hall by the Staatskapelle Berlin. The orchestra was conducted by its longtime music director, Daniel Barenboim. He did a lot of playing too. That is, he played the piano, and what he played was Mozart concertos. He conducted them as well, from the keyboard.

This is known as “play-conducting” and I have long complained about the practice. I think it’s a conceit. I think it harms both playing and conducting, and therefore the performance overall. But my complaints fall on deaf ears, as perhaps they should—who knows?

The third concert saw Bruckner’s Symphony No. 3, as you might guess, and Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 25 in C minor, K. 491. The concerto is a glorious work, but was not covered in glory on this occasion. In the first movement, Barenboim did some fumbling at the keyboard. He was not at his most assured. Also, he committed some funny accents, as he is wont to do. The main problem was that the music was without any of Barenboim’s musi-

cal power, or Mozart’s, for that matter. It was dull, pedestrian. The music was at its most awake when Barenboim was able to conduct the orchestra, with both hands. (Sometimes he settled for the left, when the right was playing.)

The middle movement, *Larghetto*, was sensible. And the closing movement had some of Barenboim’s power, and Mozart’s. But it was also sloppy and overpedaled, with Barenboim bulling his way through, in that Barenboimish way. Inner voices that ought to be subtle were blunt. Ultimately, this was a Mozart performance to forget.

But then there was Bruckner. The Third is the composer’s “Wagner Symphony,” for reasons we could elaborate. (For one thing, the work is dedicated to him.) On all evidence, Bruckner prized two composers above all: one a distant composer, Bach; and one he could talk with, face to face—Wagner.

Daniel Barenboim has lived with these symphonies for a long time, and he knows them well. He has a sure grasp on their architecture, their phrasing, their pacing—their swells and subsidings. He conducted the Third with this very grasp. The music tended to be muscular, never flabby, yet it had its due tenderness. Anyone could criticize Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin—but the criticism would be insignificant, I think. This performance was better in the big picture than in the little picture. Better as a forest than as trees. When Barenboim conducts Bruckner, you can count on a satisfying experience.

The night before this concert, Barenboim conducted the Symphony No. 2, and played

(play-conducted) Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K. 466. That night was January 20. And Sir Clive Gillinson announced that this was the sixtieth anniversary of Barenboim's Carnegie Hall debut. On that occasion, Barenboim was fourteen years old and the piano soloist with the Symphony of the Air, conducted by Leopold Stokowski. His piece was Prokofiev's Concerto No. 1.

That day, January 20, 1957, was Inauguration Day: when Dwight D. Eisenhower was sworn in for the second time. And the more recent day, of course, was Inauguration Day for Donald J. Trump. Microphone in hand, Barenboim gave a speech, touching on politics. He defended classical music against charges of elitism. And he issued the usual complaint about the neglect of the arts in America by government (local, state, and federal, I presume).

This is a big topic, and I will not take up too much chronicle space to address it. I happen to think that private funding—the basic American system—has done wonders. In any event, let me tell you something I have observed, all my life: People complain that America is a desert for the arts. At the same time, people from all over the world come to these shores to study, perform, teach, and have their careers. People vote with their feet. I have learned to watch what they do more than listen to what they say.

By sheer coincidence, I received a letter the other week from the mother of a friend of mine, relating to Bruckner. I always knew that she was of Austrian background. But I never knew the information that she imparted in her letter. Her family was from Upper Austria, Bruckner country.

My mother (1911) was born in Wels and reared in Linz. Her father (1876) was a native of Aschach, where his father was a schoolteacher and also a friend and sometime colleague of Anton Bruckner. My grandfather was a lifelong Gesangverein member and music-lover especially fond of Bruckner. Around 1926, he, with the help of Mother, solicited donations for a marker which is on the floor of the entry to the church in Saint Florian [where Bruckner studied, taught, and served as the organist]. Grandfather had the score

of a Requiem Mass which Bruckner composed on the death of a mutual friend. Unfortunately, it was lost in the chaos of war.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presented a concert of three trios—a trio of trios for clarinet, cello, and piano. Two of these trios are long-established and familiar; the other is new. On hand to play them were three worthy musicians, and more than worthy: Anthony McGill, the principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic (and before that of the Metropolitan Opera); Alisa Weilerstein, the cellist; and Inon Barnatan, an Israeli pianist whose career includes frequent collaboration with Weilerstein. The concert opened with Beethoven's Trio in B flat, Op. 11; it closed with Brahms's in A minor, Op. 114. I will comment on the musicians' playing of those, before getting to the new work.

That the three played Beethoven's trio commendably almost goes without saying. So I will confine myself to an objection. A common problem in music-making is underemphasis. Far less common is overemphasis. These three players were extreme in their rhythm and dynamics, I would say, and sometimes in their tempos. Everything was stark and obvious—as though they were afraid the audience wouldn't get it. At times, they seemed to be bending over backward not to let the music be dull. But they needn't have worried: Beethoven is such a genius.

In the Brahms, they sang wondrously. This is particularly true of the clarinetist and the cellist, but even the pianist did his part. (His instrument is less amenable to singing.) Weilerstein was extraordinarily rich, soulful, and Brahmsian. This performance, from all three of the participants, was one of the highlights of the entire New York season thus far. But I want to pick at Brahms for a second—yes, Brahms. Listening to the fourth and final movement, I once again realized why this great composer has attracted his critics over the years: it is throw-away Brahms, full of Romantic gesturing, a paint-by-the-numbers movement.

Now that I have knocked one of the geniuses of the ages, I will move on to Joseph Hallman, of Philadelphia, P-A. He has composed a number of pieces for Alisa Weilerstein,

and he composed the trio heard between the Beethoven and the Brahms. It has a name, *short stories*. (Small letters have been popular in music-titling for years.) The work is in five movements, each of them with a title. In the program notes, Hallman was quoted as saying, “Each movement’s title is meant to serve as a prompt for listeners, who are called upon to imagine their own ‘story’ inspired by the musical content of the movement and the title.”

I think a composer should be very specific or else be quiet. What Hallman has done is neither fish nor fowl. Why tease the listener with “prompts”? Either music is programmatic or it isn’t. Yet Hallman is entitled to his own view, needless to say—and speaking of titles, his five are as follows (complete with his capitalization, or non-capitalization): “the Breakup”; “familial memories at a funeral”; “black-and-white noir: hardboiled with a heart of gold”; “regret is for the weak”; and “the path of the curve.” I will tell you a bit of what I heard.

The first movement, or short story, is agitated. It is also quirky and jazzy. Mainly, however, it is agitated. When the second movement began, I thought, “The obligatory bleak movement following an agitated movement”—yet this movement soon turns puckish. There is more puckishness in the next movement, which is like a scherzo. It has a corkscrew quality. The fourth movement is slow, moody, and soft—with violent outbursts.

As the work moves to a close, there is plucking. The piano plucks, the cello plucks. How does the piano do it? The pianist reaches into the body of the instrument to pluck the strings. When it’s *his* turn, the clarinetist stutters or stammers. Each player ruminates and noodles.

On this first listening, I had the feeling that the work means more in the composer’s head than it could to an audience. I myself did not imagine stories. Was that a failure of my imagination? In any case, Hallman’s trio succeeds as music, stories aside. It is intelligent and sincere. There is no fakery in it, which counts for a lot.

The Russians keep coming, the Russians keep coming—young Russian pianists, that is. Another one played a recital in Carnegie Hall. This

was Dmitry Masleev, who is almost thirty but who looks more like twenty. He won the Tchaikovsky Competition in 2015. In Carnegie Hall, he played a diverse and appealing program. It began with Scarlatti—four of the sonatas, or *esercizi*, all of them in minor keys, interestingly enough.

Masleev did some beautiful playing, some pianistic playing: he let the modern piano be the modern piano, rather than trying to evoke a harpsichord. He pedaled freely (and intelligently). He was rounded, smooth, and even quasi-Romantic. He also showed himself a neat triller. When the music was faster, he was sometimes a little inarticulate. The Sonata in D minor, K. 141, is famous for its fast repeated notes. These could have been fierier. They were a bit tame, in addition to a bit muddled. But overall, Masleev’s Scarlatti was satisfying.

He moved on to a Beethoven sonata, the one in E flat, Op. 81a, nicknamed “Les adieux.” The first movement is labeled “The Farewell.” The second is labeled “The Absence.” And the third, “The Return.” Hey, is Beethoven prompting us, à la Joseph Hallman? He may well be. Masleev played the first movement sensibly, and I appreciated his resistance to overdramatizing. What he could have used, however, was a richer, fatter tone—more of a Beethoven tone. In the second movement, he could have used more mystery, or *I* could have. Yet the closing movement—“The Return”—conveyed the happiness it should.

Masleev ended the first half of his program with another sonata, this one by Prokofiev—his Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14. This is the one with the famous and diabolical scherzo, which is occasionally used as an encore (by Yefim Bronfman, for example). On the evidence, Masleev does not see this scherzo as I do. I like it spiky and impish. Masleev went through it basically like a lawn mower. It was undifferentiatedly loud. In the final movement—Vivace—Masleev demonstrated some nimble diabolism. Yet he did not make nearly a big enough sound.

You see what critics do? Too loud, not loud enough . . .

The second half of the program began with a slew of Rachmaninoff pieces. The first of them was the *Elégie* in E-flat minor, Op. 3, No. 1, from

Morceaux de fantaisie. Masleev played it beautifully, dreamily. He sang like a baritone with his left hand while providing a lacy accompaniment with the right. Then he played the Prelude in C-sharp minor—yes, that piece. It was Rachmaninoff's most famous piece during his lifetime, as people all over learned it in their living rooms. Rachmaninoff was always required to play it, or expected to play it, to the point where it became an albatross around his neck. So hackneyed is this piece, you can almost forget that it is beautiful, and, moreover, interesting. Masleev reminded me of this. Evidently, he does not regard the piece as damaged at all. He regards it as marvelous, which it is.

As Masleev played his Rachmaninoff pieces, the audience tended to applaud, after each one. Masleev did not glare at them or ignore them. He stood up and bowed, briefly. He is a polite young man. He also realizes that these pieces are not a series, designed to go together. This is a very un-modern realization, and a right one.

At the end of his Rachmaninoff set came three Etudes-tableaux. The last of them was the one in D major, Op. 39, No. 9—one of the most thrilling, and most difficult, pieces in the entire piano repertoire. I believe that the opening notes should go off like alarms. From Masleev, they were pretty mild. He did not play this piece with full command, but I was glad to hear it, as pianists shy away from it—except maybe in the recording studio, where, lo and behold, it comes out okay.

Ending the program was that old devil Liszt, his *Totentanz*. In this piece, Masleev showed incredible fingers, leading me to quip in my head, "He practiced his Czerny." Masleev was all fluidity, with nothing obstructing his ability to traverse and dance upon the keyboard.

This was a young man's program, in addition to a diverse and appealing one. In their later years, pianists usually don't play such a program. They play programs that they think are profound, even as they think of themselves as profound. It could be so. It could also be that they just can't play anymore (if they ever could).

"Name me one good composer today, and don't say Arvo Pärt!" Someone accosted me with that several years ago. We all have a right to ask ques-

tions, but we do not get to dictate the answers. Arvo Pärt is a good composer, and better than good. A revered composer of reverential music, he was born in Estonia in 1935. I suspect his music meant even more to people under Communism than it does now. Like other Balts, the Estonians are a musical people, and in particular a singing people. In fact, their independence movement in the late 1980s and early '90s was dubbed "the Singing Revolution."

There was a concert of Pärt's music at St. Ignatius Loyola Church, under the auspices of Sacred Music in a Sacred Place (a program of the church). Doing the singing was the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, under the direction of Kaspars Putnins.

Say, that's a Latvian name, isn't it? It is. We see how broad-minded the Estonians are.

The concert offered eight pieces for chorus and one piece for organ. The pieces come from varying times, and are in slightly varying styles, and, in the case of the choruses, are in several languages—including English. As far as I'm concerned, the high point of the concert was *Nunc dimittis*, a chorus in Latin. It is outright holy, and it was movingly sung.

Each of the choruses, I value or love, but I did not truly love the concert. How could this be? The concert had a monotony, through no fault of Pärt's. I grew restless. There was a surfeit of the gentle and mystical. Pärt did not write these pieces to be performed one after the other. He wrote them to be performed singly. If you said to him, "Hey, Arvo, I'd like to do a concert of your music," he might say, "Okay, give me five years and I'll give you ten pieces, which would make for a good concert"—balanced in tempo, mood, etc.

The choir performed an encore, and it was a jolt to the ears because it was not Pärt. It was "Blessed is the man" by Cyrillus Kreek, an Estonian composer who lived from 1889 to 1962. It is very different from Pärt, and a charmer. But why did the choir veer from Pärt after an all-Pärt program?

I don't know. I remember that Aldo Ciccolini, the late Italian-French pianist, would perform an all-Impressionist program, and then play a couple of Scarlatti sonatas—it sort of cleared the air. I was ready for more Kreek, and, after a decent interval, more from the master, Pärt.