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★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Petrenko Directs Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*

The quick rise to prominence and thin catalog of recordings by Russian conductor Kirill Petrenko, outgoing General Music Director of the Bayerische Staatsoper and incoming chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, renders each of his forays into the classic repertoire significant. Last Sunday morning, the Bayerisches Staatsorchester gave the first of three performances of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* under his direction.

Faust in Marseille

We sat, bewildered, all of us, watching (enduring) Gounod's sweet little tear jerker as a nasty drug trip. Except for the Australian Marguerite it was an all French cast and they all gamely played along, the sophisticated verse of Offenbach's librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré clearly sailing out over an abrasive pit.

Down in flames: *Les Troyens*, Opéra de Paris

Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens* with Philippe Jordan conducting the Opéra National de Paris. Since *Les Troyens* headlined the inauguration of Opéra Bastille 30 years ago, we might have expected something special of this new production. It should have been a triumph, with such a good conductor and some of the best singers in the business. But it wasn't.

Andrew Davis conducts Berlioz's *L'enfance du Christ* at Hoddinott Hall

A weekend commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) entitled *Berlioz: The Ultimate Romantic* was launched in style from Cardiff's Hoddinott Hall with a magnificent account of *L'enfance du Christ* (Childhood of Christ). The emotional impact of this 'sacred trilogy' seemed to gain further weight for its performance midway between Christmas and Easter, neatly encapsulating Christ's journey from birth to death.

Love Songs: Temple Song Series

In contrast to the 'single-shaming' advertisement - "To the 12,750 people who ordered a single takeaway on Valentine's Day. You ok, hun?" - for which the financial services company, *Revolut*, were taken to task, this Temple Music recital programme on 14th February put the emphasis firmly on partnerships: intimate, impassioned and impetuous.

Philip Glass: *Akhmaten* - English National Opera

There is a famous story that when Philip Glass first met Nadia Boulanger she pointed to a single bar of one of his early pieces and said: "There, that was written by a *real* composer". Glass recalls that it was the only positive thing she ever said about him

Rachvelishvili excels in ROH Orchestra's Russian programme

Cardboard buds flaming into magic orchids. The frenzied whizz of a Catherine Wheel as it pushes forth its fiery petals. A harvest sky threshed and glittering with golden grain.

***Lucrece Borgia* in Toulouse**

This famed murderess worked her magic on Toulouse's Théâtre du Capitole stage, six dead including her beloved long lost son. It was Victor Hugo's carefully crafted 1833 thriller recrafted by Italian librettist Felice Romano that became



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Though Beethoven himself never heard a complete performance of this craggy mass, he considered it his greatest work. In it, he distilled techniques from an exhaustive three-year study of Western religious music since Palestrina, updating them into a style that presages his late symphonic and chamber works. The result is a sprawling work, constructed out of a dense accumulation of disparate fragments in an almost post-modern manner. Joyous exclamations sit cheek by jowl with tender laments, each painted in contrasting colors, timbres and styles.

Given, in addition, the sheer technical challenge and occasional awkwardness of the solo and choral writing, it is hardly surprising that many performers and listeners find the work unapproachable, even baffling. Yet the challenge has long attracted great conductors: most famously, Toscanini and von Karajan, both of whom tended to treat the work like a grand symphony. In recent years, early music experts Gardiner and Harnoncourt have made the case for a contemplative and less overtly romantic interpretation.

From the first note, one hears Petrenko's debt to the latter tradition. He insists on extreme transparency, tightly controlled balances, restrained dynamics, rhythmic energy and swift tempos – a gentle, other-worldly approach that projects clearly from the stage of the acoustically near-perfect Nationaltheater. At the same time, however, the warmth and polish of modern orchestral instruments accentuates the romantic side, even if at times one might wish for more expressiveness in the phrasing and exuberance in the fugal climaxes. The unique tension in the *Angus Dei*, for example, in

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Missa Solemnis

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Kirill Petrenko [Photo by
Monika Rittershaus courtesy of
Berliner Philharmoniker]

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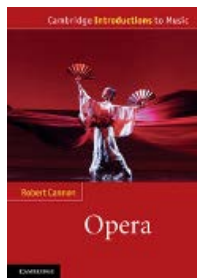
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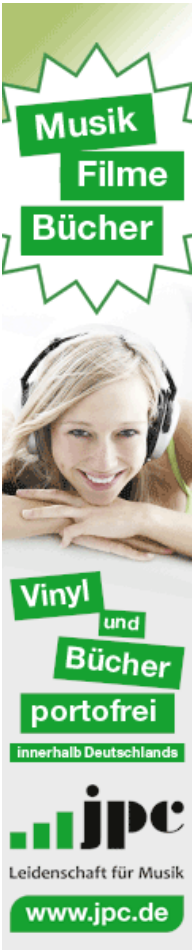
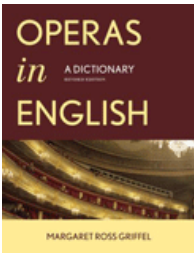
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Donizetti's fragile *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Amanda Majeski makes a stunning debut at Covent Garden in Richard Jones's new production of *Kat'a Kabanova*

How important is 'context', in opera? Or, 'symbol'? How does one balance the realism of a broad social milieu with the expressionistic intensity of an individual's psychological torment and fracture?

Returning to heaven: The Cardinal's Musick at Wigmore Hall

The Cardinal's Musick invited us for a second time to join them in 'the company of heaven' at Wigmore Hall, in a recital that was framed by musical devotions to St Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary.

Diana Damrau's Richard Strauss Residency at the Barbican: The first two concerts

Listening to these two concerts - largely devoted to the music of Richard Strauss, and given by the soprano Diana Damrau, and the superlative Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in the second - I was reminded of Wilhelm Furtwängler's observation that German music would be unthinkable without him.

***De la Maison des Morts* in Lyon**

The obsessive Russian Dostoevsky's novel cruelly objectified into music by Czech composer Leos Janacek brutalized into action by Polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski beatified by Argentine conductor Alejo Pérez.

La Nuova Musica perform Handel's *Alcina* at St John's Smith Square

There was a full house at St John's Smith Square for La Nuova Musica's presentation of Handel's *Alcina*.

Ermonela Jaho is an emotively powerful *Violetta* in ROH's *La traviata*

Perhaps it was the 'Blue Monday' effect, but the first Act of this revival of Richard Eyre's 1994 production of *La Traviata* seemed strangely 'consumptive', its energy dissipating, its 'breathing' rather laboured.

Vivaldi scores intriguing but uneven *Dangerous Liaisons* in The Hague

"Why should I spend good money on tables when I have men standing idle?" asks a Regency country squire in the British sitcom *Blackadder the Third*. The Marquise de Merteuil in OPERA2DAY's *Dangerous Liaisons* would agree with him. Her servants support her dinner table, groaning with gateaux, on their backs.

***Porgy and Bess* at Dutch National Opera - Exhilarating and Moving**

Thanks to the phenomenon of international co-productions, Dutch National Opera's first-ever *Porgy and Bess* is an energizing, heart-stirring show with a wow-factor cast. Last year in London, co-producer English National Opera hosted it to glowing reviews. Its third parent, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, will present it at a later date. In the meantime, in Amsterdam the singers are the crowing glory in George Gershwin's 1935 masterpiece.

***Il trovatore* at Seattle Opera**

After a series of productions somehow skewed, perverse, and/or pallid, the first Seattle Opera production of the new year comes like a powerful gust of invigorating fresh air: a show squarely, single-mindedly focused on presenting the work of art at hand as vividly and idiomatically as possible.

which forlorn pleas for peace echo above an oddly warlike undercurrent, hardly registers. Still, Petrenko's compromise is surely preferable to the confused bombast or harsh precision this work often elicits.

The orchestra responded brilliantly, following every command – even at some remarkably swift tempos. As a full-time pit band, they naturally command operatic techniques, such as an aura of rapt transparency by attacking chords at the marked dynamic and then having all but the solo parts fall away. The Staatsoper chorus, too, displayed rare subtlety and blend, even if Petrenko's restraint and Beethoven's challengingly high vocal lines sometimes pushed the sopranos to the brink.

The difficulty of Beethoven's choral writing is exceeded by what he gave the four vocal soloists. Petrenko appears to have selected these singers, which includes notable interpreters of Baroque and modernist works, to complement his understated interpretation. Outstanding was the contribution of Marlis Petersen, who approaches the harrowing soprano part with no apparent strain, perfect intonation and – almost uniquely, in my experience – a warm yet focused tone right up to the top of the voice. Young mezzo Olga von der Damerau responded with equal passion and warmth, if slightly less solid technique. Tenor Benjamin Bruns negotiated the punishingly tessitura clearly and sweetly, despite a tendency (at least early on) to approach notes from below. In any other company, young Bass Tareq Nazmi might have seemed underpowered – one did wish for more passion in the *Agnus Dei* – yet nonetheless projected with precision and feeling.

It added up to as fine a performance of this great work as one is likely to hear these days. The sold-out crowd of Sunday morning spectators remained utterly silent during the work and responded enthusiastically afterwards.

Andrew Moravcsik

Cast and production information:

Marlis Petersen, soprano; Olga von der Damerau, mezzo-soprano; Benjamin Bruns, tenor; Tariq Nazmi, bass. Kirill Petrenko, conductor. Chorus of the Bayerische Staatsoper. Bayerische Staatsoper. Nationaltheater, Munich. 17 February 2019.

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Opera as Life: Stefan Herheim's *The Queen of Spades* at Covent Garden
'I *pitied* Hermann so much that I suddenly began weeping copiously ... [it] turned into a mild fit of hysteria of the most pleasant kind.'

***Venus Unwrapped* launches at Kings Place, with 'Barbara Strozzi: Star of Venice'**
'Playing music is for a woman a vain and frivolous thing. And I would wish you to be the most serious and chaste woman alive. Beyond this, if you do not play well your playing will give you little pleasure and not a little embarrassment. ... Therefore, set aside thoughts of this frivolity and work to be humble and good and wise and obedient. Don't let yourself be carried away by these desires, indeed resist them with a strong will.'

***Burying the Dead: Ceruleo* offer 'Baroque at the Edge'**
"Who are you? And what are you doing in my bedroom?"

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