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Kristine Opolais in the title role of Dvorak's *Rusalka* with Eric Owens as the Gnome at New York Metropolitan Opera
Photo © 2017 Ken Howard

Mechanical Advantage — Issue 107, 1 March 2017

ENSEMBLE — WELL THOUGHT OUT

Maria Nockin: 'A Rusalka is a water sprite from Slavic mythology which usually inhabits a lake or river. Czech composer Antonín Dvořák wrote the music to a libretto Jaroslav Kvapil based on the fairy tales of Karel Jaromír Erben and Božena Němcová. Most English speakers know the story as *The Little Mermaid*. The Metropolitan Opera transmitted Mary Zimmerman's production of *Rusalka* live in high definition to opera fans in seventy countries around the world on 25 February 2017.

'With set designer Daniel Ostlong and costume designer Mara Blumenfeld, Zimmerman presented a realistic rendition of the old world tale. A gnarled tree grew on the bank of the ponds inhabited by the lovely sprites who sang and danced in the moonlight. Rusalka and her sisters were first seen in soft green silk tops and intriguing rose-butterfly-bramble tutus. Both singers and dancers performed Austin McCormick's charming choreography that made the nymphs come to life. The most striking of Ostlong's indoor sets was the red room and in it Blumenfeld's costumes for everyone but Rusalka were finely detailed red on red. This was a very well thought out production in which each artist matched and built upon the work of every other contributing artist.'

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Margaret Darby: 'Gioachino Rossini was twenty-one years old when he and librettist Gaetano Rossi wrote an opera based on Voltaire's tragic play *Tancredi*. Sensing what the public would like, they gave the opera a happy ending. When *Tancredi* premiered at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice on 6 February 1813, it propelled young Rossini to fame. The next production of *Tancredi* was in Ferrara a few weeks later and Rossini was asked to restore Voltaire's tragic ending. He did, using a new librettist, Luigi Lechi, to rewrite the end, but the Ferrara ending was not as popular and the Lechi version was stored away and forgotten.

'Eventually the entire opera was forgotten until the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino produced it in 1952. In the 1970s, a relative of Luigi Lechi found his long-lost manuscript which was incorporated into a critical edition by musicologist Philip Gossett. This version was used by the Houston Grand Opera in their 1977 production with Marilyn Horne singing the role of Tancredi.

'Opera Philadelphia has staged the Emilio Sagi (Lausanne, Santiago) production of *Tancredi* under the baton of their music director, Corrado Rovaris, who just happens to be an Italian Rossini specialist. Emilio Sagi himself is directing in his Philadelphia debut. Pepa Ojanguren, who created the beautiful costumes which allow the singers to move easily, was also the costumer for the Lausanne production.



Brenda Rae as Amenaide in Rossini's *Tancredi* at Opera Philadelphia. Photo © 2017 Kelly & Massa Photography

'The long trains of simple dresses flow behind pacing actresses as they express their emotional anguish with a sartorial flourish.' [Read more ...](#)

Malcolm Miller: 'Whether a composer's idea and evaluation of their work is more important than the audience's was a stimulating question asked at a special post-concert discussion with a panel of players from the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) after their superb programme of music by Berlioz and Mendelssohn at a well-filled Royal Festival Hall [London, UK] on Monday 20 February 2017, of which Sarah Connolly's ravishing account of Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'Été* was a highpoint. The focus of the debate was the little-known 1834 revision by Mendelssohn of his popular *Italian* Symphony No 4, which the OAE performed in place of the usual original: whilst the composer considered it an improvement, his musical sister Fanny, and many contemporaries viewed it as inferior tampering with a work premiered a year earlier.

'The opportunity for the audience to "listen with fresh ears" as invited by Kati Debretzeni, OAE's leader and on this occasion their dynamic conductor, afforded a wonderful chance to enjoy an intriguing alternative version of a much-loved masterpiece in a sparkling and zestful interpretation. Exposure to the composer's different approach to his musical ideas offered insight into his compositional processes, evident in radical reworking of melodies, textures and particularly structures, responding perhaps to Beethovenian models, as in the overlapping trio and minuet sections of the classically-proportioned third movement.

'Most of the revised changes affected the last three movements, a response to critical comments by Mendelssohn's contemporary Ignaz Moscheles following the symphony's 1833 London premiere by the Royal Philharmonic Society (RPS) who commissioned it. Most noticeable was the smoothing out of the second movement theme's contour, delicate ornaments omitted, and lacking some richness of harmony; at the same time proportions were elongated through more repetition, and certain points of harmonic tension over-repeated as if to exaggerate an effective chord in the original. Indeed some beautiful effects of the original appeared belaboured to the point of predictability. On the other hand, some changes showed imaginative touches, like the adaptation of the falling chromatic *staccato* string passage to a more melodic shape at the end of the slow movement, over the walking bass; and similarly intriguing were the overlapping textures linking trio and minuet in the third movement. Numerous gestures within the textures of each movement were omitted, making the revision quite distinctive, if not always persuasive as improvements.

'Whilst some audience members would have longed for the original, some clearly enjoyed the OAE's engaging, involving account for the sheer interest and explorative curiosity into a little known version that adds to our understanding and appreciation, in a similar way to multi-versions of works like Beethoven's *Leonore* Overtures or Christopher Hogwood's discoveries of versions of *The Hebrides Overture* some years ago. And the discussion was a novel and fruitful forum in which to hear the views of both players and audience.'

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Kati Debretzeni. Photo © Joe Plommer

Mike Wheeler: 'Ingrid Jacoby's return to the Sunday morning piano series at Nottingham's Royal Concert Hall saw her end the current season with a nicely unusual programme (Nottingham, UK, 12 February 2017).



Ingrid Jacoby

'Mexican composer Manuel Ponce's name doesn't come up that often, outside guitar circles, but if his *Prelude and Fugue on a theme by Handel*, of 1916, is anything to go by, there's a wealth of fine piano music out there, waiting to be explored. The theme comes from the opening movement of Handel's E minor Suite, HWV 429. Jacoby clearly identified with the Prelude's thoughtfulness, and the invigorating energy and drive of the Fugue.

'She brought an engaging variety of touch to the two French pieces that followed. The chiming figures that thread their way through Fauré's Impromptu No 1 had just enough presence without overwhelming the rest of the texture. There were more bells in *Les Collines d'Anacapri*, from Debussy's first book of Preludes. While not as swift as some performances, this had airborne grace and rhythmic vitality to spare.' [Read more ...](#)

Mike also listened to O Duo in Derby Cathedral, to the Thorne Trio, to a piano recital by Jiu Liu and to the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Louis Langrée, and joined Sinfonia Viva and students from various Derby schools and colleges in exploring 'Mechanical Advantage':

'Cog wheels, gears, levers, gravity — not obvious song material. But of course Sinfonia Viva and the Derby schoolchildren and students taking part in the orchestra's latest schools residency project aren't going to be fazed by a trifling consideration like that (Derby Theatre, 7 February 2017).

'After a short film of the project in action, it was over to Viva and the students, performing the songs and instrumental pieces they had written on the theme of "Mechanical Advantage". Composer and workshop leader James Redwood provided his usual inventive orchestral arrangements, as well as acting as the evening's compère, a welcome innovation for these concerts, as was the film.

'The imaginative structuring of the student pieces and the kids' mastery of their intricacies were impressive, as always. The count-down to lift-off of Derby College's instrumental *Diabolic Parabola* included some subtle canonic touches. *Gravity, Don't Ground Me*, sang the children of Beckett Primary School; their opposite numbers from Firs Estate Primary School introduced us to the unpleasant creatures living *On the Dark Side of the Moon*; Chellaston Academy's instrumental *Power of Five* included some impressive solo and small group moments. In another new feature, the audience had a role to play, with the "clapping chorus in three groups" in the song *Ratio 345*, about gear ratios and their overlapping patterns, as well as joining in the call "load, effort, fulcrum, distance!" that punctuated the final song, *Levers*, by James Redwood with words by Hazel Gould.'

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Giuseppe Pennisi: 'It would be an exaggeration to consider *Čarodejka* as Tchaikovsky's masterpiece, but it is, no doubt, one of the masterpieces of the late European nineteenth century, when the music theatre was searching for a way to merge French-style grand opera with Italian *verismo*. The extremely complicated plot is based on a fourteenth century story. The Princes of Nizhny Novgorod are attracted by the same enchantress, Natasha, owner and singer in a pub at the confluence between the Volga and the river Oka. Natasha is, of course, in love with the younger but she is enthralled by the elder Prince's money and power. The Princess (ie the wife of Prince Nizhny Novgorod) wants to put an end to this story. She is helped by a necromancer and an intriguing priest. There are quite a few other characters in the plot and in the subplots, even a peasants revolt against the autocratic Prince. Eventually, Natasha is poisoned, the young Prince commits suicide and the old Prince loses his mind and becomes mad.



Aleksej Tanovickij as priest Mamyrov in Tchaikovsky's *Čarodejka* at Teatro San Carlo di Napoli. Photo © 2017 Luciano Romano

'David Pountney and his dramaturgical team — sets by Robert Innes-Hopkins, costumes by Tat'jana Noginova, lighting by Giuseppe Di Iorio, choreography by Renato Zanella — had a brilliant idea: to move this lurid and gruesome Middle Ages story to the end of the nineteenth century when the tragedy by Ippolit Spazinsky, on which the libretto is based, was a major hit in the Russian stage theatre. Thus *Čarodejka* represents the downfall of a powerful aristocratic family with premonitions of the Revolution.



A scene from Tchaikovsky's *Čarodejka* at Teatro San Carlo di Napoli. Photo © 2017 Luciano Romano

'Young conductor Zaurbek Gugkaev, who has worked for several years with Valery Gergiev, was just excellent. While the chorus and *corps de ballet* come from the San Carlo Theatre, the soloists are mostly from the Mariinsky Theater Company. The two protagonists Nastasha and the older Prince Nikita Kurljatev have alternates: on 17 February, Ekaterina Latyševa and Ivan Novoselov sang their respective roles. All the other principals — all good — are singing in every performance. Liubov' Sokolova as Princess Evpraksija Romanovna, Nikolaj Emcov as her son, Aleksej Tanovickij in the double role of priest Mamyrov and necromancer Kud'ma, and Ljudmila Gradova as Nenila, the Princess' lady-in-waiting, all deserve special mentions.' [Read more ...](#)

Giuseppe also listens to *Kát'a Kabanová* in Turin, to Robert Schumann's oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* in Rome, and to two different *Sleeping Beauty* operas in Rome, by Respighi and Tchaikovsky.

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ASK ALICE — ADRIANA LECOUVREUR AT ROYAL OPERA

Alice McVeigh: '... I think that the Royal Opera House excelled itself, this time, with its *Adriana Lecouvreur*, last night 21 February 2017.

Not only in terms of the singing, and the playing, and — if a trifle woolly, at times — the conducting too.

First of all, Jo Knight, as guest principal cello. What a sound, what a tone, what a — sorry? There were some singers too, were there?

(Right sorry, all my fault.)

In addition to the sublime work of Jo Knight, as guest principal cello — never met her, though I *have* heard of her — there were some other people I should mention, likewise.



A scene from Francesco Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* at Covent Garden.
Photo © 2017 Catherine Ashmore

For me, after David McVicar, who directed screamingly well — and Jo Knight, guesting as principal cello — the starriest star was someone I'd never heard of called Ksenia Dudnikova.

So: what was so hot about about la Dudnikova?

Well, basically everything. She has the kind of mezzo voice that resembles the best best-possible blend between a viola and a cello (see Jo Knight, above). Her presence — you can't buy this — this is to die for — is so charismatic that she sweeps all before her, on the stage. She was so loftily perfect earlier that my husband (famous prof of music) and I were secretly united in hoping that she'd sweep in, in the final scene ... [Read more ...](#)

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CD SPOTLIGHT — SUMPTUOUS BEAUTY



'David Shuler and his choristers deliver performances of outstanding clarity and precision ...'

Gerald Fenech: 'Born around 1510 in Bethune in the French-speaking part of Flanders, Pierre de Manchicourt was educated and trained as a chorister at Arras Cathedral, and by 1539 was director of the Tours at Tournai Cathedral, following which, in 1556, Bishop de Granvelle, Secretary of State to both Charles V and Philip II, made de Machincourt a canon at Arras. Throughout his eventful career, the composer found himself serving, almost uninterruptedly, these two Spanish Emperors, but despite finding royal favour, his music was superceded by other composers whose ideas were more forward-looking. Indeed, names such as Guerrero, Rogier and Victoria made Manchicourt's music sound rather old-fashioned, and by 1600, thirty-six years after his death, his life's work was largely forgotten.'

'Music from his years with Philip remains unedited, alluding to the rapidity with which his compositions were stored and forgotten, but of late, Manchicourt's fortunes are starting to change. Indeed, this Franco-Flemish composer has at last emerged from oblivion to take his place among the foremost composers of his time, and this timely issue will certainly cement his fame further.' (*Pierre de Manchicourt: Missa Reges terrae*, MSR Classics MS 1632)

Gerald also listens to songs for tenor and piano by Franz Liszt (*Forgotten Liszt*, MSR Classics, MS 1538), to piano quintets by Granados and Turina (*Granados | Turina: Piano Quintets Perianes, Cuarteto Quiroga*, harmonia mundi HMC 902226), to music by Schoenberg and Portera (*Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire; Portera: Red Music*, Continuo Records CR114), and to piano music by Guy Ropartz played by Stephanie McCallum (*Guy Ropartz: Piano Music*, Toccata Classics TOCC 0326).



'... an almost instinctive sense of interplay between the players ...'



'Juliet Petrus has a very fine voice and whose vocal timbre really sits well with these songs ...'

Geoff Pearce: 'The first group by Huang Zi (1904-1938) reveals a songwriter of considerable polish and depth. He studied in America and also toured and absorbed as much as he could on a trip to Europe. He was, alas, taken from us all too soon. These pieces are fairly restrained, and the first three are quite nostalgic. The fourth is joyous, and the last reflective. They are beautifully performed, and these artists — Juliet Petrus and Lydia Qiu — show an instinctive partnership.'

'The happy *Flower Hunting in the Snow* is one of the loveliest little songs on this album.'

'Xiao YouMei (1884-1940) studied in Tokyo and in Germany, and spent quite a bit of time in Leipzig — Richard Strauss was one of his teachers. He is another well-polished composer of songs, and *Query*, recorded here, shows some

German influence.

'Qing Zhu (1893-1959) also studied in Germany, and *I live at the Top of the Yangtze River* is a lovely heartfelt piece with voice over a rippling piano — true *Lieder*.

'The next group of songs, entitled *Water-Colors*, are by John Alden Carpenter (1876-1941), who studied in the US and in Rome, with Elgar! Even though he was a part-time composer, his music is quite charming and warrants greater familiarity. The Chinese influences come principally from the text, here translated into English.' (*A Great Distance* — *Juliet Petrus and Lydia Qiu*, MSR Classics MS 1495)

Geoff also listens to Mahler songs arranged by Schoenberg (Naxos 8.573536) and to songs by American composer Vincent Persichetti (*Vincent Persichetti: Legacy of Songs*, MSR Classics MS 1558).

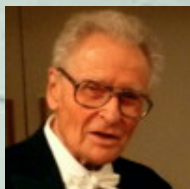
The late **Howard Smith** listened to Jennifer Koh playing 21st century violin music (*Rhapsodic Musings*, Cedille Records CDR 90000 113) and to Julian Marshall's *Out of the Darkness* (MMC Recordings MMC101).



'... an almost instinctive sense of interplay between the players ...'

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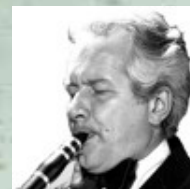


Stanisław Skrowaczewski

Royal Albert Hall Trump-ets Gender Equality for Aspiring Musicians.

We mark the passing of Jórunn Viðar, Stanisław Skrowaczewski and Gervase de Peyer.

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Gervase de Peyer

BACKGROUND IMAGE

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This newsletter, edited by Keith Bramich, is a monthly taster for Basil Ramsey's high quality and colourful online classical music magazine, published every day since January 1999.

The editorial and advertising copy deadlines for our April 2017 newsletter are both Monday 27 March 2017. [Details here.](#)

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