

A Quiet Logic — Issue 140, 1 September 2020

'Her voice production is secure and seemingly effortless with substantial steel in its glinting tones.'

Maria Nockin: On Saturday 29 August 2020, Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen and accompanist James Baillieu gave a *Met Stars Live* recital at the Oscarshall Palace in Oslo, Norway. Davidsen studied in Norway and Denmark and won both the Operalia and the Queen Sonja competitions in 2015. Baillieu is a professor at the UK's Royal Academy of Music and head of the Song Program at the Atelier Lyrique of the Verbier Festival Academy.

Wearing a demure green silk and lace gown, Davidsen opened with 'Dich, teure Halle', a greeting to a beautiful hall from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Immediately, Davidsen showed her voice to be all that a young Wagner singer might want. She even sang an exquisite *pianissimo*. Baillieu accompanied every nuance so that they seemed to breathe as one. They continued with a much more difficult aria from the same opera, 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau', a prayer to the Virgin which showed the singer's vocal range as well as her ability to shape lyrical phrases and spin out a melodic line with complete security. I would love to hear her sing Elizabeth some day.

Then we shared a few moments Davidsen had spent earlier among the blue and yellow flowers of the palace garden with Norway's most charming Queen Sonja. When the cameras returned to the recital space, we could still see the flowers through the windows that were topped with brilliant amber and green stained glass.

Davidsen and Baillieu's next group contained three short songs that fellow countryman Edvard Grieg wrote to thoughtful poetry. For 'Våren', (Spring) they started softly as green leaves emerge from snow and added texture as the singer's character wondered about seeing another spring. For 'En Svane' (The Swan), Davidsen's voice took on the authority of the majestic bird gliding along the water. In 'Ved Rondane' (Seeing Rondane), the singer vocally described the village as it once was, and as it is now.

Then came an amazing change. Davidsen's voice assumed different characteristics for Italian opera. Up to that point, I had the opinion that she was in the tradition of Kirsten Flagstad but that her voice resembled Birgit Nilsson's because I heard considerable steel in her tone. Nilsson sang a great deal of Italian opera as well as Strauss and Wagner, but her high notes in Verdi were similar to her high notes in Wagner. For Davidsen there are Germanic high notes and Italianate high notes, not just differentiated by language but also by vibrato and the palette of vocal colors. In 'Morrò, ma prima in grazia' from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* Davidsen is an Italian mama asking for one last embrace with her child. Tears could come easily here as they could again when she sang of Manon Lescaut's death in the wilderness.

The first of two Sibelius songs is 'Säf, säf, susa', about sighing reeds and a young girl who has gone away because people treated her badly. The colors in Davidsen's voice tell the whole story. The second, 'Var det en dröm?' (Was it a Dream?) describes a beautiful dream, a great memory, but it is still something that will never come true. The artists continue this theme with a glorious performance of 'Es gibt ein Reich' (There is a Land) from Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

The next four songs were from Op 27, the group of songs Strauss gave to his bride, soprano Pauline de Ahna, on their wedding day. With 'Ruhe, meine Seele' (Be at Peace, my Soul), they created an ambiance of calm with the beauteous flow of the song.

'Cäcilie' (Cecilia), is a love poem written by the poet to his wife. 'Heimliche Aufforderung' (The Secret Invitation) begins with 'Auf, hebe die funkelnde Schale empor' (Lift up the sparkling chalice). I loved the joy in the singer's tone and the sparkling notes in Baillieu's accompaniment. The last of the songs the composer included in his wedding present was the beloved 'Morgen' (Tomorrow), a plea in Davidsen's soft, smooth tones for better times for all people.

'Sola, perduta, abbandonata' (Alone, Lost, Abandoned) from the finale of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* again showed Davidsen's Italianate vocal treasures and innate interpretative ability.

Then it was time for some fun with operetta. Davidsen and Baillieu performed 'Heia, heia, in den Bergen ist mein Heimatland' (Hey, My Home is in the Mountains) from Kálmán's *Die Csárdásfürstin* (The Czardas Princess). 'Johnny', a cabaret song by W H Auden and Benjamin Britten, is amusing but a bit sad because the lady has no idea that the gentleman is simply not interested. Two other charming English songs followed: 'O lovely night!' by Landon Ronald and 'When I have sung my song to you' by Ernest Charles. Davidsen and Baillieu topped off their recital with 'I could have danced all night' from Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*.

For those who have not heard Lise Davidsen before, she has the most interesting vocal instrument heard in opera for several decades. Her voice production is secure and seemingly effortless with substantial steel in its glinting tones.

READ THE LATEST FEATURES AND REVIEWS BY MARIA NOCKIN ...

Maria's recent reviews include Met Stars Live in Concert recitals by Roberto Alagna with Aleksandra Kurzak and Renée Fleming.

Giuseppe Pennisi: In my view, all international music festivals — with the exception of monographic festivals, ie those concerning the works of a single composer — should perform contemporary music and hopefully commission it. Due to the implications of lockdown and the uncertainty whether the festivals could actually be held, in Italy, this Summer, we listen to contemporary music only at the International Festival and Summer Academy in Siena and at the Festival dei Due Mondi (Spoleto Festival of the Two Worlds). There the world premiere of a new composition was performed on 22 August 2020 in the Piazza Duomo. The Festival had commissioned it from one of the most interesting Italian composers of the young generation: Silvia Colasanti. The title is *Arianna, Fedra e Didone*. I was in the audience.

The three monodramas of about twenty minutes each, to be performed without intervals for a total of about an hour, are the third and last work of a triptych. The first two — *Minotaur* and *Proserpine* — were successfully staged at the Teatro Nuovo Giancarlo Menotti of Spoleto in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

The first two works of the trilogy are strongly theatrical and characterized by a forceful dramatic character and a score like elegant embroidery with skilful orchestration and well-balanced vocal writing. The structure of these three monodramas is, to a large extent, the consequence of having to be represented not in a theatre but in a vast square, where stage action is necessarily limited.



Isabella Ferrari performing Arianna, Fedra e Didone by Silvia Colasanti at the 2020 Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto. Photo © 2020 Maria Laura Antonelli

Let the composer talk:

Love is the protagonist of the third work of my musical theatre inspired by the classical myth and composed after Minotaur and Proserpine, also born thanks to the 'commission' by Giorgio Ferrara for the Spoleto Festival: Arianna, Phaedra, Dido, three monodramas for an actress, a female choir and an orchestra. Imaginary letters of love, remoteness, death, marked by the theme of the absence of the beloved, characterized by the nostalgic tone for a happy past and the desperate desire to relive it. Heartbreaking and poignant letters, full of passion and sweetness that trace the different sentimental events showing them no longer from the perspective of the hero, but of the abandoned woman, who becomes the real heroine. Arianna writes to Theseus as soon as she wakes up, realizing that he has abandoned her by fleeing into the sea.

Phaedra, in love with her stepson Hippolytus, writes a seductive letter to induce him to give in to an impossible and incestuous love. Dido, feeling the inevitability of his destiny of death, writes to Aeneas in a last attempt to persuade him to return. The actress plays the three women, each with a story in her own right, while at the same time drawing a wonderful fresco of the female universe. In some instances, the voice of the protagonist is entrusted to a choir of women — which sings the original text in Latin — in which the actress can mirror herself, looking from the outside, investigating her different souls, or amplifying past memories making them real and close. Words dialogue with the sounds of the orchestra, which at times foretells, at times emphasizes, the different moods that follow each other and overlap in the flow of thoughts that tells in an eternal and universal way love.

This text explains the meaning of the work better than any summary. The protagonists are three: the actress Isabella Ferrari in a bright pink Valentino dress, a large symphony orchestra and a medium-sized female choir.

In general terms, the work is less like the opera by Colasanti (which has almost a Britten-like structure). It recalls the Requiem (for the victims of the earthquake) which, commissioned by the festival, was first performed in Spoleto in 2017 and was also heard in other cities (and of which there is a CD and a DVD). The music is tonal and the references are rather to Arthur Honneger and Jake Heggie, as well as, in the section related to Phaedra, to Straussian expressionism. The orchestration is very sophisticated. Despite the outdoor performance (which does not allow appreciating all the details), cellos and winds have played an important role in emphasizing the dark colour of three short monodramas on the desperation of abandoned women.

This was a great success in a square 'sold out' also due to social distancing that limited the audience to about six hundred spectators.

READ THE LATEST FEATURES AND REVIEWS BY GIUSEPPE PENNISI ...

Giuseppe also listens to *The Merry Widow* in Rome and to three performances at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro.

Mike Wheeler: One of the many casualties of the cancellation of live events at this year's Buxton Festival was the Early Opera Company's production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, now rescheduled for 2021. Festival artistic director Adrian Kelly talks to the company's founder and Artistic Director, Christian Curnyn, in this audio-only interview.



Sat 25 July 2020

13 - 25 Jul 2020



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Adrian Kelly & Christian Curnyn

Date	Price		
	FREE		
Sat 25 Jul 2020	Venue		
4.00pm - 4.30pm	Online		

Online publicity for the Buxton Festival film Adrian Kelly & Christian Curnyn

Kelly begins by asking Curnyn how he got into music. He started on the recorder, he says, then moved to the trumpet, and especially enjoyed playing baroque music. His father's collection of recordings by the Academy of Ancient Music reinforced his enthusiasm. He enjoyed their sound-world, their vitality and rhythmic drive, and the sound of old instruments, very different to the style of performance still prevalent in the 1970s.

Did he then go on to university? Yes, York, but he decided he didn't want to do music as a career. He enjoyed the course, 'but thought this isn't really for me'. He then started studying harpsichord with York University's baroque specialist, Peter Seymour, who at one point suggested Curnyn try and direct something. 'I thought he was mad — I'd only just started the harpsichord', but they decided on Blow's *Venus and Adonis*. 'It was great fun, I got the bug', and they put on an opera each year.

So was the Early Opera Company born in York? It's origins were there, says Curnyn, but it actually started in 1994, after he had taken a break. He was teaching piano when he saw Handel's *Ariodante* at English National Opera, and was totally blown away. The combination of 'wonderful playing, wonderful singing, amazing stagecraft' got him thinking 'this is what I want to do'.

Kelly notes Curnyn's gift for working with singers. He seems to understand them intuitively, and they feel comfortable, and free to explore things. Did he discover that with time? 'You learn on the job', Curnyn replies. What singers like the best is if you breathe with them. Having been a trumpet-player, 'I see music through breath'.

READ THE LATEST FEATURES AND REVIEWS BY MIKE WHEELER ...

Mike also reports on two other Buxton Festival online events ... Where to now for the Arts in the UK? and a film featuring mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly.

LATEST CONCERT REVIEWS

LISTINGS OF FORTHCOMING CONCERTS

FORTHCOMING FESTIVALS

Please note that some of the forthcoming events in our listings may be cancelled because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

A QUIET LOGIC – AMERICAN PIANIST KIT ARMSTRONG



A still frame from Mark Kidel's 2011 film Set the Piano Stool on Fire featuring Alfred Brendel and Kit Armstrong

Chang Sun: Twenty-eight-year-old pianist Kit Armstrong has been releasing short explanatory piano videos on his YouTube channel for some time. A prodigy throughout, Armstrong was filmed in a documentary with his teacher, the famous Alfred Brendel, in 2011 called *Set the Piano Stool on Fire*. The documentary opened with Armstrong playing J S Bach's Toccata in G major, BWV 916, and Brendel explaining that he took on Armstrong as pupil because he was just 'so extraordinary'.

Armstrong has a quiet and elegant performance style, especially upon comparison with pianist and musicologist Robert Levin, who played BWV 916 in an interview, sticking his elbows in all directions and raising his free hand into the sky while playing. It is not to say that Armstrong's performance is necessarily better than Robert Levin or vice versa, but Armstrong's Bach is indeed characterized by a quiet logic and a certain clarity and fluidity that drive the music forward.

It is also amazing how extremely intelligent is this pianist: his mother recounted in the documentary that when Armstrong was sent to a piano school near home, the teacher told her that her son 'doesn't belong here', and how Armstrong simply taught himself composition by reading an encyclopedia at the age of five.

Armstrong has released two albums so far. The first one is made up of his interpretations of some of Bach's chorale preludes, Bach's Partita No 1 and his own Fantasy on Bach. Armstrong's ability to enable each of the voices of the preludes to sing out clearly results in a certain magnificence that just surrounds the listeners with multiple layers of sonic experience, and his Partita is endowed with a delicacy, even fragility, coupled with pensiveness. His own composition in this album touches more on contemporary atonal sound than on Bach's baroque style, and his Ligeti is played very persuasively, with careful phrasing and a logical narrative quality.

The second album is one in which Armstrong played several of Liszt's symphonic scenery pieces. Armstrong succeeded in managing to avoid the heaviness and muddiness of so many other pianists when encountering Liszt. Instead, his style is embellished with an ephemeral lightness, and his playing does not lack a solemn balance when needed.

I believe it will be very rewarding to see Armstrong's future development as a pianist and composer, even though our era seems have become more doting on commercialized musicians.

READ MORE ABOUT KIT ARMSTRONG

THIS IS CHANG SUN'S FIRST ARTICLE FOR US. READ MORE ABOUT HER HERE

CD SPOTLIGHT – HIDDEN SECRETS

Our CD reviews this month, written by Geoff Pearce, Gerald Fenech, Giuseppe Pennisi, Ona Jarmalavičiūtė and Patrick Maxwell, feature music by William Alwyn, Johannes Brahms, John A Carollo, Frederick Delius, Peter Dickinson, Ron Goodwin, Anthony Herschel Hill, Herbert Howells, Aaron Jay Kernis, Aram Khachaturian, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Francis Lai, Witold Lutoslawski, Elisabeth Lutyens, Gustav Mahler, Jerome Moross, Carl Nielsen, Krzysztof Penderecki, Benjamin Pesetsky, Almeida Prado, Sergei Prokofiev, Philip Sawyers, Robert Schumann, Max Steiner, Joseph Summer, Peteris Vasks, William Walton and John Williams.

Our CD reviews are worth exploring in more detail than we have time to show here this month. They are all illustrated with sound samples, usually chosen by the author of each review. If you enjoy listening to these, you can usually hear an extra sample on the 'CD information page' linked from the bottom of each review. An alternative way to reach these CD information pages is via our New Releases section, where you can also find information about recent CDs, including those which haven't yet been reviewed, and this also enables you to follow the review cycle process for any particular CD.

LATEST CD REVIEWS

NEW RELEASES

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CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS

Diabelli Variations — American pianist David Korevaar completes his Beethoven project and will appear in a virtual recital at Snake River Music Festival with violinist Charles Wetherbee.

The Knights Orchestra celebrated Leonard Bernstein's 102nd birthday on 25 August with their production of his iconic opera *Candide*. The production remains available free of charge at *theknightsnyc.com/candide* until 4 September 2020.

Due to the virus pandemic, music festivals scheduled over the last few months have had some difficult decisions to make. Those decisions have recently become a little more complex, with a third option of providing modified, socially distanced outdoor and indoor performances, but for many months it was simply a matter of postponing until 2021 or going online. In Scotland, Edinburgh International Festival's digital programme *My Light Shines On*, filmed primarily in empty venues throughout Edinburgh, attracted a global audience with 1,013,000 video views following its premiere on what would have been the opening weekend of the Festival. From Saturday 8 to Monday 10 August 2020, the International Festival also lit up the sky above the capital with over 750 beacons of light from thirteen venues, illuminating dark performance spaces across the Festival City. In order to create the spectacular display both on and offline, the International Festival engaged over five hundred artists and arts workers during August. Further information: *eif.co.uk*

The Three Choirs Festival — the world's longest-running non-competitive classical music festival, decided to postpone its Worcester 2020 festival until 24-31 July 2021, whereas nearby Presteigne Festival in Welsh border country decided to go online with *Presteigne Digital*, available free-of-charge with a requested donation until 31 December 2020. Its eleven videos feature seven new works — almost all of the new commissions which were to receive their first performances at the festival. There are also three literary events filmed in the Presteigne area. The festival has been able to repurpose most of its funding, allowing a string orchestra recording and a 'Presteigne Winter Festival Weekend', 27-29 November 2020, by when, no doubt, the COVID-19 guidance will have shifted yet again. Further information: *presteignefestival.com*

September highlights from Naxos of America: new releases from BIS include Tchaikovsky Gold Medal and Grand Prix-winner pianist Alexandre Kantorow in recital and the latest installment of their ongoing series of recordings devoted to music by Finnish composer Kalevi Aho; there are Kodály and Ligeti sonatas with cellist Gabriel Schwabe on Naxos; the latest from violinist PatKop and II Giardino Armonico on ALPHA; and Mozart violin concertos with Latvian violinist Baiba Skride on Orfeo. From the historic vault: Hans Rosbaud conducts Mahler (SWR). Finally there's *HĪBER*, a digital-only release on Dacapo from Icelandic composer/bassist Bára Gísladóttir. Further information: *naxosusa.com*

The George Enescu International Competition in Bucharest began on 29 August with a gala concert held in an empty Romanian Athenaeum with an online audience, followed by the first round of its cello section, with fifty-four mini online recitals from cellists all over the world. The competition has violin, cello, piano and composition sections and continues until 20 September 2020. Further information: *festivalenescu.ro*

Harold Rosenbaum, conductor and artistic director of New York Virtuoso Singers and Canticum Novum Singers, has announced dates for their Fall 2020 concert season online events. Regardless of whether the choirs can perform live this coming season because of the pandemic, Rosenbaum will offer thirty virtual sessions/workshops/webinars via Zoom, with an emphasis on helping singers, conductors and composers. Singers from NYVS will assist Rosenbaum in presenting several of these Tuesday evening events, which run from 15 September until 15 December 2020. All the sessions are free of charge, but donations will be accepted. Further information: *nyvirtuoso.org* and *canticumnovum.org*

On Friday 23 October 2020, cellist Diana Golden will release *Tanbou Kache*, an album that celebrates Haiti's rich and fascinating art music traditions, on New Focus Recordings. *Tanbou Kache* (Hidden Drum) outlines the stylistic and chronological trajectory of key composers within this tradition from the twentieth century to the present, painting an ever-changing, historical picture of the leading composers of the Haitian national school of classical composition. Recorded with pianist Shawn Chang, the album highlights Haitian cello and piano music by Jean 'Rudy' Perrault, Daniel Bernard Roumain, Julio Racine, Carmen Brouard, Frantz Casséus, Werner Jaegerhuber and Justin Élie. The album cover artwork was painted by Haitian-American artist Gina Samson and the liner notes were written by Claude Dauphin, a leading scholar of Haitian music. Further information: *goldencello.com*

Four hundred years since the Mayflower set sail from Plymouth, four composers from nonclassical, the London-based music promoter, record label and events producer founded by composer Gabriel Prokofiev, will present a multimedia piece that takes journeys, migration and cultural identities as its themes. The project, which has been commissioned by the City of London Corporation for its *Our City Together* programme, will stretch across sixty-six days — the duration of the Mayflower's journey to North America. Each of the four composers from nonclassical will collaborate with another artist — Lola de la Mata with Britta Thie; Blasio Kavuma with Jess Nash; Dan Samsa with Alison D'Souza and Yfat Soul Zisso with Sasha Balmazi-Owen. The works will be premiered online on 16 September 2020 at 6pm BST (5pm UCT/GMT), marking the day the Mayflower set sail, carrying her passengers — often referred to as the 'Pilgrim Fathers' — who were escaping religious persecution under James I's reign. Further information: *nonclassical.co.uk*

Next month, the Bard Music Festival (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, USA) joins forces with The Orchestra Now (TŌN) and the Bard College Conservatory to present *Out of the Silence: A Celebration of Music*, a series of four free live-streamed concerts for string orchestra, piano and percussion, 5-26 September 2020, coming to UPSTREAMING, the Fisher Center's virtual stage. All programs are free, but reservations are requested. Pairing works by Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák and Bartók — all past subjects of the Bard Music Festival — with music by ten prominent Black composers — ranging from Classical pioneer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges to contemporary Americans Alvin Singleton, Adolphus Hailstork and Jessie Montgomery, the series celebrates Bard's commitment to neglected rarities and the unquenchable joy of music-making. All four programs will be performed without an audience and with appropriate safety measures on Bard College's idyllic Hudson Valley campus by its unique graduate training orchestra, TŌN, under the leadership of Music Director Leon Botstein and other members of the TŌN artistic team. Hailed as 'a highlight of the musical year' (*Wall Street Journal*), the Bard Music Festival is the inspiration for Bard's annual seven-week SummerScape festival, whose devoted fans will no doubt enjoy the chance to experience virtually some of the adventurous Bard music-making they have been missing. Further information: *fishercenter.bard.edu/bmf*

On 21 August 2020 the Grossman Ensemble at the Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition (CCCC) released its debut album, *Fountain of Time* on its own imprint, CCCC Records. The recently formed Grossman Ensemble, founded by composer and director Augusta Read Thomas, is a 'supergroup' of thirteen Chicago-based contemporary music specialists, exclusively performing new works from leading and emerging composers at the CCCC. The ensemble engages in a unique workshopping process focusing on interaction between composers, musicians and conductors. To date, CCCC has commissioned thirty-six composers for the Grossman Ensemble and *Fountain of Time* features five premiere performances from the ensemble's first two seasons, including Shulamit Ran's *Grand Rounds*, Anthony Cheung's *Double Allegories*, David Dzubay's *PHO*, Tonia Ko's *Simple Fuel* and David Clay Mettens' *stain, bloom, moon, rain.* The album was recorded and engineered by multiple GRAMMY-winning engineer, Christopher Willis. Further information: *cccc.uchicago.edu*

Music and poetry unite and collide across centuries, from the Medieval to the Enlightenment to the present day. This year, the Oxford Lieder Festival (10-17 October 2020) will present *Connections Across Time — a brief history of song*, a thrilling and innovative programme comprising more than forty events streamed over eight days. At the heart of the festival will be a series of live-streamed concerts by international artists. Artist in Residence Ian Bostridge gives two concerts, a talk and a masterclass over the course of the Festival, and Carolyn Sampson returns to perform a new song cycle by Oxford Lieder's Associate Composer Cheryl Frances-Hoad on Tuesday 13 October. Other international artists include Sarah Connolly (10 October), Lucy Crowe (12 October), James Gilchrist (13 October) premiering a work by Michael Zev Gordon, Professor of Composition at the University of Birmingham, Roderick Williams (16 October) and Christoph Prégardien (17 October). Chamber music includes the contemporary quartet The Hermes

Experiment (13 October) giving the first performance of a work by Philip Venables. Each evening recital will begin with a short group of Schubert songs performed by singers who have arguably been hardest hit by the current crisis — artists who are already forging careers but not yet at a stage where they can view the current crisis as only a temporary setback. Further information: *oxfordlieder.co.uk*

We mark the passing of musicians including Erich Gruenberg, Anatoly Ivanovich Duda, Julian Bream and Leon Fleisher. **READ MORE ...**

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