

## Renaissance and Medieval Hues in a Modernist Work



James Estrin/The New York Times

The mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato sang Mozart and Rossini with the Met Orchestra on Sunday, conducted by James Levine.

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“Time Regained,” the title of [Charles Wuorinen](#)’s new fantasy for piano and orchestra, is taken from [Proust](#)’s novel of that name. Like Proust in this epochal work, Mr. Wuorinen embarks on an exploration of memory, more specifically, in his words, “music’s memory of a part of its past.”



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Peter Serkin joined the orchestra for a Wuorinen piece.

It is indeed possible to hear this formidable 30-minute score as an immense edifice of memory. Yet as the pianist [Peter Serkin](#) played its premiere with [James Levine](#) and the Met Orchestra at [Carnegie Hall](#) on Sunday afternoon, it was also possible to experience the piece as a homage of a brainy modernist to medieval and Renaissance composers he reveres: Guillaume de Machaut, Matteo de Perugia, Guillaume Dufay and Orlando Gibbons. For those intimidated by some of Mr. Wuorinen’s fiercely complex compositions, this piece gave a glimpse of a contemporary musician in awe of pioneering forebears.

The danger in composing a work that blends actual bits of old music into an astringent atonal contemporary language is that you might wind up with some glib pastiche, like Respighi’s “Ancient Airs and Dances” for orchestra. But Mr. Wuorinen avoided this pitfall by drawing on “only the raw musical data,” as he put it, from the early music sources.

He disregarded the original purpose and every other element of the quoted pieces except for the notes. And sometimes the notes in Machaut, Dufay and other composers of those eras — the weird chords, the passages of ruminative modal counterpoint, the jerky contours of the mingling lines — can sound quite startling to modern ears.

In this hybrid fantasy, fragments of restless Renaissance counterpoint in the piano are filtered through an orchestral haze of modernist cluster chords; medieval melodic lines are stated in the orchestra, then toyed with, distorted and challenged by the feisty piano. In crucial passages the music seems to dwell in some spectral state where elemental diatonic and diffuse atonal harmonies come to terms in a tense standoff.

A piano concerto in all but name, “Time Regained” has a virtuosic solo part, full of spiraling flights and leaping chords, and Mr. Serkin, a Wuorinen champion, played it brilliantly. But the overall mood of the piece is reflective and quizzical, qualities captured in this compelling performance.

In a nod to Mendelssohn during his bicentenary year, Mr. Levine conducted a bracing account of the popular “Italian” Symphony. The mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato won prolonged ovations for her rich, agile and charmingly coy singing in “La Regata Veneziana,” three lighthearted Rossini songs, performed in a version with the original piano accompaniments arranged for orchestra by Douglas Gamley.

Ms. DiDonato was especially fine in [Mozart](#)’s “Ch’io mi scordi di te? ... Non temer, amato bene,” an elaborate concert aria with a prominent part for solo piano, played elegantly by Mr. Levine, who conducted from the keyboard. Even with his back to the audience, you could tell how much fun he was having.