

Joyce DiDonato Joins the MET Orchestra

By George Loomis

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NEW YORK -- There were at least two good reasons to go to the MET Orchestra's concert led by James Levine Sunday afternoon in Carnegie Hall: mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato was making one of her infrequent New York appearances this season, and a new Charles Wuorinen work, "Time Regained," a Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra, was to receive its world premiere, with Peter Serkin as soloist.

"Time Regained," which takes its title from the final volume of Proust's "In Search of Lost Time," is unlike any work I have ever heard by Wuorinen or anyone else. It has nothing specifically to do with Proust, but rather appropriates his alluring title to describe the composer's own search of the musical past, specifically, as he describes in an introductory note to the score, a span of about "250 years of musical history and development," which translates, roughly, to the period 1350-1600.

Wuorinen mentions as sources for "Time Regained" four composers—Machaut, Matteo da Perugia, Du Fay and Orlando Gibbons—but I suspect few in the audience could identify specific quotations. His approach was to synthesize their musical techniques -- melodic styles, cadential formulae, harmonic vocabularies, approaches to counterpoint -- and then construct his own hyperactive, intricate and ultimately rewarding creation for modern performing forces.

During the historical period in question, music was constantly evolving toward modern tonality, a progression that struck me as reflected in the 30-minute, three-movement piece as it unfolds. Much of the first movement, though lively, seems tinged by a Machaut-like melodic and harmonic austerity, while the warmer last movement appears to be closer to Gibbons. In any case, the underlying styles supply a listener-friendly foundation for Wuorinen's inventive flights of fantasy. "Time Regained" is at its most modernistic at the ruminative start of the third movement, which has sharper dissonances and a freer rhythmic structure than the rest of the piece but also a cool beauty. Yet soon an assertive theme from the piano signals a return to more vigorous music with intertwined textures.

There are moments when "Time Regained," a commission by the Metropolitan Opera, seems oddly akin to a late Romantic orchestral composition that reworks a folksong or other preexistent material, especially if that material is church related. Now and again it has the bravura of a Stokowski transcription. Nor does it lack humor, as when brass choirs seem to imitate modern renditions of Gabrieli or when the piece builds to its grand D-major close through repetition of a boisterous pattern by the full orchestra.

Another virtue is the way Wuorinen has fashioned from his historical precedents an idiomatic piano part that embraces both virtuosic passagework and full bodied sonorities. Serkin handled it all with characteristic aplomb. By chance, it was he and Levine who premiered Wuorinen's immediately preceding work for comparable forces, the Fourth Piano Concerto (2003), a commission by the Boston Symphony. It, too, is worth hearing, but "Time Regained" reaches out to the audience in unexpected ways.