

MUSICAL EVENTS JUNE 27, 2016 ISSUE

# MAP OF THE NEW

Alan Gilbert's NY Phil Biennial.

By Alex Ross



“What composers do is, without exaggeration and without any shred of hyperbole, the most important thing that is happening in music at any given time.” So said Alan Gilbert, the music director of the New York Philharmonic, at this year’s NY Phil Biennial, a sprawling three-week survey of new and recent music in the classical tradition. In a better world, the statement would have been tediously obvious. If an art-world figure were to say, “What artists do is the most important thing that is happening in art at any given time,” an audience of gallerygoers would smirk. In classical music, though, the artistic leader of a major institution still comes across as a bit of a Jacobin if he or she pays more than minimal attention to living composers.



Gerald Barry's take on "The Importance of Being Earnest" was broad and caustic.

Illustration by Matteo Berton

The Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera have both chosen new music directors in the past few months. In January, the Dutch conductor Jaap van Zweden was named the successor to Gilbert, who will depart at the end of the next season. In May, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, was given the hallowed perch of the ailing James Levine. Neither of the appointed maestros is especially known for a commitment to new work. At a press conference, van Zweden appeared uncertain about what the Biennial was. Nézet-Séguin, when asked, by the Times, which operas he might add to the repertoire, seemed at a loss. Rather, both were hired because of their facility with the classics: van Zweden impressed audiences with a forceful, somewhat brutal version of Beethoven’s Fifth, Nézet-Séguin with an idiomatic “Otello.”

Admittedly, Levine did little to advance contemporary opera at the Met. Of the thirteen works by living composers that reached the stage during his four-decade tenure, he led only two. In the Met’s Carnegie concert series, though, Levine was a passionate promoter of the latter-day modernism of Carter, Babbitt, and Wuorinen. Gilbert’s record with new music is unambiguously formidable, rivalling that of Leonard Bernstein and Pierre Boulez, the two great visionaries in Philharmonic history. Indeed, Gilbert may have been a more persuasive advocate than either of them, since, not being a composer himself, he could not be accused of serving his own agenda. Sadly, the Philharmonic and its board seem to be falling back on a more traditional model. In coming years, the New York music scene is in danger of reverting to a pallid definition of the art: not What Composers Do but What Composers Did.

The first Biennial, in 2014, leaned too heavily on established names. This year’s edition was more diverse, more unpredictable, and, in a good way, more chaotic. More than a hundred composers were featured, more than half of them supplying world premières. The stylistic and demographic range was broader, running from Pulitzer Prize-winning elders to theory-mad experimentalists fresh out of graduate school. At times, the Philharmonic seemed almost incidental to the proceedings, as programming decisions were delegated to a range of music schools and local groups, including Yale, Aspen, the New York City Electroacoustic Music Festival, and National Sawdust. I heard thirty-five works, and caught various others on video streams.

The headline-grabbing event was Gerald Barry’s raucous 2011 adaptation of “The Importance of Being Earnest,” receiving its American stage première at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Barry, an Irish composer inclined toward manic musical surrealism, strips the Wilde play of its debonair veneer and exposes a core of punkish rage. The text is set in rat-a-tat, herky-jerky fashion, not unlike Stravinsky’s manner in “Les Noces.” Singers wield megaphones; a percussionist periodically smashes plates; the role of Lady Bracknell is given to a stentorian bass (here Alan Ewing). Just as the relentless abrasiveness of the conceit threatens to wear thin, a strange pathos takes hold, as if Wilde’s well-heeled characters were imprisoned in a postmodern madhouse. Ramin Gray provided suitably garish direction; an octet of singers and twenty-one Philharmonic players created a handsome din; the young Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov was incisive on the podium.

The most arresting of the world premières was Ashley Fure’s “Bound to the Bow,” which appeared on a program by the Interlochen Arts Academy Orchestra, at Geffen Hall. Fure, who is thirty-three, grew up on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and attended Interlochen in her teens. You may not guess her background from her music, which is steeped in the instrument-bending techniques of the European avant-garde. In the first few measures of “Bound to the Bow,” wind players vocalize into their instruments; brass players smack their lips against their mouthpieces; credit cards are scraped across harp and piano strings; and violins are instructed to produce “white-noise hiss.” Such devices recur throughout, to clear expressive purpose. Fure takes inspiration from Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”—in particular, from the image of the albatross struck from the sky. She imagines the bird not hung around the mariner’s neck but fastened to the bow of his boat. The fluttering and the clattering of the opening bars suggest a vain struggle to take flight. Three times, the disparate sounds of the deconstructed orchestra accumulate into enormous waves, then subside. I would happily have stayed in the world of this music for twice as long, not least because of the avid commitment of the Interlochen students.

Avant-garde audacity figured little in an evening of works presented jointly by the San Francisco Girls Chorus, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and the Knights, the Brooklyn-based chamber orchestra. Yet the program was up to date in other ways: it had a strong focus on the ambitions and insecurities of young women, which felt pertinent coming two days after Hillary Clinton’s emergence as the Democratic Presidential nominee. Lisa Bielawa’s “My Outstretched Hand” wove variegated, at times voluptuous choral textures around the 1901 memoirs of Mary MacLane, the radical freethinker of Butte, Montana. The text of Mary Kouyoumdjian’s “Become Who I Am” was based on interviews with members of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, who offered thoughts on gender roles and gender inequality as well as on the importance of music in their lives. “I want to become who I am,” they sang, and the urgency of the sound seemed the fulfillment of the wish.

The Knights also gave the American première of Nico Muhly’s song cycle “Impossible Things,” a rapt setting of poems by C. P. Cavafy, in Daniel Mendelsohn’s translation. Scored for tenor, violin, and ensemble, the piece inevitably recalls Britten’s magisterial cycles, most of all the Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings. But Muhly has found his own musical language, a lyricism underpinned by subtle tension, and it achieves uncanny alignment with the lights and shadows of Cavafy’s poetry. Nicholas Phan sang with extraordinary warmth of tone and clarity of diction. At the end, in curt, biting phrases, he delivered the line “By far the best life is the one that cannot be lived” over motoric arpeggios in the strings. Having heard Barry’s broad, caustic take on Oscar Wilde, I couldn’t help wondering what Muhly might find in the same material.

In a closing pair of concerts with the Philharmonic, at Geffen Hall, Gilbert led a quartet of twenty-first-century scores, each of them revelling in the resources of the modern orchestra. In William Bolcom’s Trombone Concerto, the brass and winds shimmied about like a big band from the swing era, emulating the jazz panache of the soloist, Joseph Alessi, the Philharmonic’s virtuoso principal trombone. In John Corigliano’s “Conjurer,” a percussion concerto, players kept pace with the sonic frenzy unleashed by Martin Grubinger, the hyperkinetic young Austrian percussionist. Many percussion concertos devolve into a numbing barrage; the most striking moment here was one of melancholy lyricism, as vibraphone blended with solo cello.

Rip-roaring as that concert was, Gilbert and the Philharmonic returned the following night with an all-out tour de force—a mighty demonstration of the undiminished power of symphonic writing in the early twenty-first century. The first piece was Per Nørgård’s Eighth Symphony, the most recent major statement of a Danish master who has received little exposure in this country. His style is sui generis, though in its complex layering of elements, from rustic dance to dissonant pandemonium, it distantly resembles that of Charles Ives. It happened to hear the world première of the Eighth, in Helsinki, in 2013; it struck me then as a somewhat murky, elusive narrative. Gilbert solved Nørgård’s riddles, finding a scenic majesty in the collision of forces.

The second half of the concert had the character of a memorial, though in a celebratory mode. First came a bow to Pierre Boulez, who died in January, in the form of his skittering “Messagesquise,” for seven cellos. Then came Steven Stucky’s Second Concerto for Orchestra, which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize but had never been played in New York. Stucky died in February, at the early age of sixty-six; among colleagues and students, he was as widely beloved as anyone in his profession. Yet that’s not the reason the Philharmonic audience responded to the Second Concerto with an immediate ovation. The work has the exuberance of the great American symphonies of the mid-twentieth century, its swaggering brass choirs and lunging string melodies well suited to the Philharmonic’s muscular sound. Gilbert conducted it as if it had been in the repertoire for a hundred years. As the Biennial came to a triumphant end, I wondered again, Why is this man leaving? ♦



Alex Ross has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1993, and he became the magazine’s music critic in 1996. [Read more »](#)

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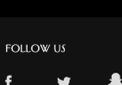
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