The New Criterion

Music June 2022

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Have you heard any good viola jokes lately? There are lots of them. Sample: "Why is lightning like a violist's fingers?" "Lightning never strikes the same place twice." And a classic: "How can you tell whether a violist is playing out of tune?" "You see his bow moving." These jokes are absurd and unjust, of course. But I have to tell you a story. Years ago, I did a public interview of Lawrence Dutton, the violist of the Emerson String Quartet. I asked, "Why do people make viola jokes?" He gave a very surprising answer. He said that a lot of second-rate musicians gravitate to the viola, with the first-rate ones gravitating to the violin. Dutton wanted the general standard of viola playing to be raised.

I will indulge in one more joke: "How do you keep a violin from being stolen?" "Keep it in a viola case."

Second-raters aside, there are many first-rate musicians playing the viola, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center hosted a recital by one: Paul Neubauer. He has been part of cms since the 1980s. At twenty-one, he was the principal viola of the New York Philharmonic. He has spent his career, however, as a soloist and chamber musician. He played his recital along with the pianist Gloria Chien. They played in a small venue, the Rose Studio, up in a Lincoln Center tower. This venue is just right for a viola recital, or most any recital. Too many recitals get swallowed—lost—in the bigger halls.

Mr. Neubauer wrote a program note for the evening. It began,

> Paul Hindemith, William Primrose, and Lionel Tertis. In the first half of the twentieth century, these three legends of the viola were responsible not only for expanding the viola repertoire, but also for bringing the viola the recognition that it deserves as a solo instrument. This program honors these three great icons.

Neubauer ended his note by saying that, all in all, the recital would be an " 'homage' to all things viola!" I myself heard several pieces for the first time. What's more, I heard of several composers for the first time.

The first half of the program had three works, the first and last of which are relatively familiar. The evening began with a Baroque piece by Gaspar Cassadó, a Spanish cellist who lived from 1897 to 1966. I should have put "Baroque" in quotation marks. Cassadó passed offthis toccata as a piece by Frescobaldi. To conclude the first half of the recital was the Hindemith Sonata for Viola and Piano. And in between?

Another sonata, this one by Alan Paul, a Brit who lived from 1905 to 1968. He was a staff composer for the bbc, as Kathryn Bacasmot told us in her excellent program notes. "In his over thirty years of employment there," she said, "he wrote upwards of 3,700 works." And in his spare time, he wrote music such as his viola sonata.

Listening to it, and admiring it, I thought, "Why isn't this sonata played more often?" I then had to laugh (at myself): "Well, how often do you hear a viola recital?"

For twenty or more years, I have written the same things about Paul Neubauer's playing, because they are true. "He plays with sovereignty," I wrote in 2016. "There is almost an arrogance about his playing, or an aristocracy, if you like." He also has one of the best string sounds around. Often it is fat and purple. What a glorious sound this glorious instrument makes, in the best of hands. The instrument is half violin, half cello, and all viola (if that math adds up). At the piano, Gloria Chien was a more than able partner. She played with poise and musicality. She was neither mouse nor gorilla, but a true collaborator.

The second half of the duo's recital was made up of fascinating bonbons, to borrow Sir Thomas Beecham's word. (The great conductor meant brief and pleasurable pieces, usually of a light nature, though bonbons are fattening.) Among them were Two Pieces for Viola and Piano, by Francis Casadesus (1870–1954). The Casadesus clan in Paris produced a great many musicians. Robert Casadesus, the pianist, was a nephew of Francis. The uncle's two viola pieces are "Romance provençale" and "Danse." The latter piece has such a smile. It is so French, so debonair.

Speaking of debonair, Fritz Kreisler was on the program, represented by his Berceuse romantique and also by La Précieuse. (Kreisler tried to pass off the latter piece as Couperin. Nice try, Fritz.) I am used to hearing these pieces on the violin, so to hear them lower was startling, at first. But the ear adjusted and Neubauer played his Kreisler in fitting style. He was—what higher compliment can you pay?—Kreislerian.

The duo played two pieces by William Wolstenholme, an Englishman (1865–1931). He belongs to the tradition—a long one—of blind organists. And how about Mana-Zucca, born Gussie Zuckermann in New York, in 1885? How about Arthur Benjamin, an Australian born in 1893? How about Georges Boulanger?

He was no relation to Nadia and Lili Boulanger, as far as I know. A Romanian, he was born George Pantazi, in 1893. Neubauer and Chien played a piece by him for an encore. It is American Vision, an ingenious, jazzy, delightsome little thing. The duo played it with wit and accuracy—with terrific comic timing.

From the early 1960s to the late 1990s, there was a TV program: ABC's Wide World of Sports. Music is a wide, wonderful world too, and there is all sorts of repertoire to be unearthed, and re-unearthed, if it is reburied. During the intermission of the recital, I texted a violist friend of mine, to say where I was and what I was hearing. He replied, "May you come out of the recital with a renewed love of the best instrument there is."