Dialogues and Discoveries: James Levine: His Life and His Music (review)

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generous number of illustrations (many from his own collection) ranging from Hayes's baptismal, marriage, and death records to concert announcements and programs, a photo of a bronze statue of a race horse (a winner) named after the diva, and a final rather melancholy shot of the singer's poorly tended gravesite. These materials provide absorbing reading and, more important, may well provide a starting point for future work in this neglected area.

Joe K. Law

NOTES

1. See Gordon N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom, 1847–1863* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), pp. 133–35. A more detailed account appears in W. J. Lawrence, "A Forgotten Thackeray Episode," *Musical Quarterly* 4 (1918): 347–52.

2. Walsh gives the date of the premiere as 25 October 1847 (p. 320), but 25 November is the date given in Carlo Gatti, *Il Teatro alla Scala: Nella storia e nell'arte (1778–1963): Cronologia completa degli spettacoli e dei concerti*, ed. Giampiero Tintori (Milan: Ricordi, 1964), p. 47.

3. Jérôme Spycket, *Nadia Boulanger*, trans. M. M. Shriver (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1992), p. 10.

4. The URL of Fenice's Web site is *http://www.teatrolafenice.it/*. See also Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera, 1597–1940*, 2d ed., rev. and corrected (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1970), p. 859. Although Walsh describes *Alberigo da Romano* as a fiasco, Loewenberg calls it the most successful of Malipiero's operas and lists two revivals in Venice, one at the Teatro Apollo (1869) and another at the Teatro Goldoni (1886). Fenice's Web site further indicates that two other operas by Malipiero were given their first performances in that theater—*Fernando Cortez* (1851) and *Linda d'Ispahan* (1874). Today Francesco Malipiero (1824–1887) is remembered principally as the grandfather of Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882–1973).

5. Gatti, *Il Teatro alla Scala*, p. 46.

Dialogues and Discoveries: James Levine: His Life and His Music

Robert C. Marsh

New York: Scribner, 1998
331 pages; $27.50

"Monologues and Obfuscations" might be more like it. Robert C. Marsh has enjoyed the privilege of extensive access to, and conversation with, the increasingly reclusive James Levine, as documented herein. One might reasonably expect some illumination about one of the most predominant and cryptic musicians of our era. Alas, what we get is heavy on bulk but decidedly light of weight.

An immediate pall is cast, on page 11, when Marsh admits that Levine vetted the final text. Given the Cheshire Cat–like persona that Levine evinces in *Dialogues and Discoveries*, the reader has reason to fear that, given the opportunity, Levine blue-penciled anything remotely revelatory. At its best—when, for instance, Norman Mailer interviews Madonna or Ned Rorem goes one-on-one

with John Simon—the interview-as-dialogue format presupposes that questioner and subject are of equal interest to the reader. That presumption is ill-applied here. For all of Marsh's eminence as a writer on classical-music performance, Levine is the inherent draw of this book, and Marsh comes as part of the package.

Like an uninvited guest, Marsh presumes badly upon the reader's hospitality, filibustering at length and seemingly uninterested in drawing any sort of substantive response from Levine. (The ostensible subject of the book complies with expansive replies like "Right" [p. 199].) One page, chosen at random, finds seventeen lines of questioning by Marsh, interspersed with twenty-four lines of reply from Levine. That's about par for the course—although, on some pages, Marsh filibusters Levine into near silence. What's more, because Marsh starts from a partisan stance, he is constantly moving to foreclose avenues of discussion rather than open them up.

There are some amusing near collisions, as when Marsh stumps for the old, corrupt editions of Haydn symphonies played by Beecham and others, while Levine disagrees as tactfully as he can (p. 92). Two pages earlier, Marsh holds his interlocutor (and his readership) hostage with a lengthy, vindictive tirade about Jean Martinon—a hash that Marsh feels impelled to settle a quarter century after Martinon's death. That's a surprisingly malignant divergence from what are usually fusty old anecdotes on the order of "Like I told George Szell 40 years ago, 'George, you gotta play some Mahler!'"

In essence, Marsh interviews himself, punctuated by the occasional demurral from Levine. Symptomatic of this misshapen vanity project is the presentation of a series of transcripts, done over a number of seasons at Chicago's Ravinia Festival and presented sequentially—not sifted for meaningful material and organized accordingly. Thus, worthwhile observations (such as Levine's descriptions of his rehearsal priorities and programming philosophies) and utter commonplaces are jumbled together.

This would-be-admiring portrait ends up painting Levine as solipsistic and work-obsessed, out of touch even with his immediate family. When Marsh describes the conductor as a "workaholic" (p. 256), the implications of that passing remark are left unexplored. One is certain that these chilling ironies are lost on the author, to judge from the surfeit of such hero-worshipful prose as "Mediocrity is Levine's mortal enemy." Does anyone seriously expect to open this book to page 176 and read, "Mediocrity is Levine's best friend"? For that matter, can Marsh substantiate his preposterous claim that "Levine has faced criticism for insisting on a high level of musical scholarship" (p. 44)? From whom, pray tell? Not from the Andrew Porters and Leighton Kerners of this world.

Not until late in the book (p. 168, to be exact) are we given a glimpse of Levine in action in the rehearsal room, taking the Chicago Symphony in businesslike, no-wasted-motion fashion through selections for the *Fantasia 2000* soundtrack. A subsequent look-in on rehearsals of Mahler's Third Symphony, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, provides an even more valuable document of

the nuts and bolts of music making. But, until this point, the reader is pretty well starved for specifics of Levine's music-making philosophy, his rationale for his choices regarding performing editions, cuts, or indeed virtually any specific insight whatsoever. When Levine offers some gloomy home truths, near the very end of the book, on the contemporary state of education and cultural coverage, one has the belated sense of the mists lifting and the long-concealed quarry finally ambling into one's sights.

In his wok-cooking approach of scrambling together seemingly random, unedited material into something resembling a book, Marsh's recipe is heavily reliant on two parts interminable fatuity, leavened with one part unendurable PR babble, as when he writes of Levine at "the temple of music called the Metropolitan Opera House": "There he continues his unceasing search for beauty and artistic truth, which is itself an act of worship" (p. 60). My favorite pensée comes on page 103, where we are informed that "real opera is the only kind of opera the Met has to offer these days." Huh? As opposed to all that "phony opera" purveyed by Gatti-Casazza, Johnson, and Bing? Do tell.

If there's any leitmotif to this book, it's the relentless positing of Levine as the One True Heir of Toscanini (which, for overreaching, doesn't hold a candle to the unsubstantiated claim for Levine as "the direct heir to Haydn and Wagner" [p. 153]). For that, we'll need a lot better criteria than "Toscanini's guiding spirit is in his blood" (p. 160). We are meant to uncritically buy into Marsh's contention that, of Riccardo Muti, Claudio Abbado, Bernard Haitink, and Levine, the latter is "the only one of the group to represent the Toscanini tradition" (p. 160). This at a time when, for instance, Muti's *Neue Sachlichkeit* purism can make Toscanini seem laissez-faire.

But partisanship for Levine is not the only issue at work here. Marsh is one of the last surviving members of that band of Toscanini disciples who had the run of Riverdale and the ear of The Maestro. As a result, this book is the latest salvo in the "I Owned Toscanini" war that has raged for lo, these many decades betwixt Marsh, B. H. Haggin, Walter Legge, Samuel Chotzinoff, and others. The characteristic moment in these broadsides comes when Toscanini allegedly confides, "Ah, [Haggin/Legge/Chotzie/fill in the blank] only you truly understand me."

Assuming—and a mighty big assumption it is—that the Romantic tradition espoused by Furtwängler, Koussevitzky, and others is dead and only Toscanini's legacy lives on, is this necessarily a good thing? If Toscanini's style was forged in reaction to the excesses of his time, wouldn't the utter prevalence of that style call for yet another counter-reaction? And, just because Levine was—until recently—a regular presence at Bayreuth, how does that mean that "Toscanini again is the dominant influence in that pit" (p. 142)? For the answers you will have to seek elsewhere. You won't find them in *Dialogues and Discoveries*.

What is offered is sometimes just hoary rhetoric. When the excesses of contemporary stage directors are discussed (albeit using a thirty-year-old example), Levine counter-proposes what seems to me merely an excess of a different order:

"But if my long-range goal is to have productions that reflect my ideas of fidelity to the composer and the librettist, then I have to create an atmosphere in which productions of that type can also be realized. The new *Così fan tutte* . . . was carefully planned to yield what I was after, and the whole team—everybody—worked together to achieve that . . . not something being provocative in all the wrong ways" (p. 147).

Alas, the final result was provocative in no way at all, just a standard-issue, generic *Così* production, and what Levine describes sounds as depressingly straitjacketing as being locked into a rigid directorial concept. Some explanation is vouchsafed by a lengthy reminiscence in which Levine waxes nostalgic for the representational form of operatic staging that prevailed during his mid-twentieth-century childhood (pp. 141–42). That would certainly account for a long line of Met stagings that harken back to a hokey, pre-Wieland Wagner sensibility, as purveyed by Franco Zeffirelli, Otto Schenk, Sonja Frisell, and other reactionaries.

For that matter, when Marsh indulges in a long, vague, and ultimately uninformative description of the ill-received Alfred Kirchner/Rosalie *Ring* staging that Levine conducted at Bayreuth, it begs a rather obvious question: How did a self-proclaimed conservative like Levine find himself conducting a *Ring* where, for instance, the Rhinemaidens cavorted in running shoes? Was he an active participant, an opponent, or just someone who passively went along? And how does he square that with his self-proclaimed artistic philosophy vis-à-vis the Met?

More illuminating is Levine's philosophy of playing Wagner, in which "you must keep phenomenal tension in details or the line will go slack" (p. 138). This says a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of his style of Wagnerian performance. Levine is similarly good at pinpointing that element in Richard Strauss that calls for the pruning shears ("a tendency to overwriting in the *Papiermusik* sense" [p. 107]). But one must do better than simply describe *Turandot*'s conception as "amazing" (p. 114) and leave it at that. How is it amazing? We laymen need to know these things.

As for Marsh, someone who's been around long enough to have personally lectured Bruno Walter for having omitted exposition repeats in his Brahms symphony recordings (p. 130, an incident in which Marsh perceives no retrospective humor or irony) might be expected to do better than recycle old stereotypes. If today's Brünnhildes are more kinetic than Kirsten Flagstad ("limited acting ability and a minimal sense of theater [*sic*]" [p. 41]), have any of them seriously challenged her vocal abilities, and have we really profited from the tradeoff? (And what would Marsh say about Jane Eaglen?) One of the best examples of non-thought comes when (p. 114) Marsh seeks to excuse the relative absence of bel canto repertory from the Met stage by lumping together the retirements of Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland from staged opera—events that occurred a quarter century apart. This is capped with the assertion that "the revival begun by [those two] appears to have slowed down since they left

the stage." Au contraire! A casual survey of the repertory of most major opera houses proves exactly the opposite.

Even the Met, which was slow to capitalize on the presence of Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, and their heirs, which napped through the Rossini revolution, and which still treats Donizetti as a marginal composer, is mounting new productions of *Norma*, *La sonnambula*, and *Il pirata* as part of the Bellini bicentenary. The true issue would appear to be a lack of interest in bel canto on the part of various Met intendants, Levine included. Indeed, the latter volunteers the opinion that "the bel canto operas were never intended to be long-lived," equating them with the oeuvre of Andrew Lloyd Webber (p. 115). "Possibly if we produced a lot more of this repertory," Levine muses, "we would discover more voices, but I'm not so sure." Why not? This is precisely the rationale Levine has used for keeping the big Wagner, Verdi, and Berlioz operas onstage in times when the necessary voices were in short supply—that, by doing the works, the necessary singers eventually emerge. "Even if you could suddenly find enough singers to do all the bel canto repertory around the world," he continues, "my guess is that you would still not do all of it." So? The same could be said of many types of repertory. Is the solution to simply throw up one's hands, declaring the issue null and void?

This unwitting hilarity is prefaced by an exchange in which Levine alludes to the state of the Met when he took power in 1973. Marsh replies, "And we know what you did" (p. 104), then quickly gets away from that subject! He follows with a segue subito into "Where do you get your batons?" Whew! Boy, nothing like injecting some real substance into the discourse. Better yet, we then get a gripping discussion of the pros and cons of white tie and tails. And, no, we don't "know what you did." That's why we're reading this book: To find out, fer crissakes! This kind of clubby, entre nous chitchat grates beyond description.

"Nowadays," Levine muses, "many serious professional musicians, in lieu of real issues, are worried about incredible superficialities, theoretical issues . . ." (p. 127), to which one can only respond, "Such as?" We want real issues, but this book tends to "incredible superficialities [and] theoretical issues" in lieu of substance. A prevalent sloppiness manifests itself as what might be called "Factual Errors and Dubious Assertions." Piano pedagogue Rosina Lhévinne gets a sex-change operation (p. 27), and soprano Ingrid Bjoner becomes "Bjoerner" (p. 30). Marsh writes that Levine's 1973 Met performances of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* "probably followed the traditions of the house with respect to cuts and staging" (p. 36), whereas they most definitely interpolated "Tanti affetti" from *La donna del lago*, displacing "Contro un cor" for the benefit of Marilyn Horne—and a splendid idea it was, too. The author states that Levine's 1975 *Barbiere* recording was his last encounter with the score, then, further down the same page, says he conducted it in 1978 with Cincinnati Zoo Opera. (Did Scribner's employ signifying monkeys as book editors on this project?)

No, Levine has never presented "the original version" (p. 166) of Verdi's *Don Carlos*. Heck, he's never even done it in French. George London never sang

Verdi's Iago (p. 182), and the Three Tenors do not perform a number called "Torna a Sorrento [*sic*]" (p. 244). Incidentally, a play-by play of one 3T concert in the course of this book is perhaps tolerable, but two of them seems like too much of a not-so-good thing. Value judgments are subjective, but many of Marsh's seem to come clear out of left field, beginning with his assertion that Renata Tebaldi's final Met Desdemonas (bemoaned by even her most ardent admirers) were the "greatest moments of the [1972–73] season" (p. 35), the same season that saw Marilyn Horne, James McCracken, and Leonard Bernstein collaborate on a new, re-studied *Carmen*.

Moving along, Marsh touts the virtues of stable casting, irrespective of quality and circumstance. Is the prospect of umpteen *Tosca*s with Maria Guleghina, James Morris, and a superannuated Luciano Pavarotti, say, really preferable to Rudolf Bing's speedy rotation of divas and divos? For that matter, the tenure of Joan Ingpen as Metropolitan Opera casting czar was widely bemoaned, then and since, as a regime of calcification, mediocrity, and predictability, with a grinding inflexibility that Levine grew to regret. Marsh's take: "Her vast knowledge of singers and their resources ensured that the Met would henceforth engage individuals who had a special gift for projecting the roles they were to play. There resulted a closer bond between the audience and the stage" (p. 41). It's a free country, but few who experienced that era firsthand shared Marsh's enthusiasm, then or now.

If "no group was more excited than the members of the [Chicago Symphony] orchestra" (p. 48) to be working with Levine, their bored rehearsal demeanor—as witnessed in 1985, 1986, and 1991—suggested they were taking the experience altogether too much for granted and would rather be out golfing. We are told that the New York Philharmonic "has had no such long-term association with a conductor of Levine's particular talents" (p. 185). What about a fellow named Leonard Bernstein?

Then there is the incredibly uninformed and derogatory characterization of early-twentieth-century singers as "stupid or unmusical . . . not trained musicians. Many could not read music, fewer still could teach themselves a part" (p. 258). Anybody who believes that blather, let alone writes it, should stay away from the subject of opera. As for the subsequent contention that singers of the Toscanini era "were singing machines who had roles drilled into them by coaches and were taught to go on the stage and obey the conductor," that sounds a lot more like what is taking place today—or in some of the collations of has-beens, never-weres, and never-would-bes that dominated Toscanini's own opera broadcasts (with the occasional Albanese or Warren the exception to the rule).

Marsh's discussion of Levine's Met telecasts is uncritical boilerplate, save for one sentence ten months pregnant with unwitting ambiguity: "Characteristic Met casting makes the [1989] recording of *Aida* representative of the current standards at Lincoln Center" (p. 261). Five pages on, we are told that Levine's conductorial style is not discernible from his recordings. This would seem a

damning statement, save that—at least for myself—I've found a number of them identifiable when heard "blind," whether through the intensity of phrasing and "body heat" of orchestral timbre in his Sibelius Fourth Symphony (DG) or the plethora of repeats and overabundance of strings in his Mozart "Jupiter" Symphony (RCA).

Marsh throws in a "10 Best" list of Levine recordings that, in the absence of any supporting criteria, seems arbitrary and meaningless. Why the Vienna recordings of the Brahms symphonies and not the earlier Chicago ones? Why *The Rite of Spring* but not its companion *Pictures at an Exhibition*? Speaking of Stravinsky, would Marsh really have us believe that conductors like Pierre Monteux and Georg Solti played Stravinsky's pre-1947 versions of *The Rite of Spring* "to avoid paying royalties" (p. 273)? Did it really take Levine until 1991 to be "persuaded that there was an audience for Verdi on CD" (p. 269)? And, yes, Levine's *Barbiere* recording includes "every note that legitimately belongs to the score" (p. 268), plus quite a few that don't! At a few years' remove, some comments in this book are quaintly obsolescent. Three Tenors impresario Matthias Hoffmann's 1996 contention (pp. 228–29) that "the Three Tenors are totally, totally underpaid" obtains inadvertent hilarity in light of his subsequent prosecution for tax evasion on behalf of 3T. Sadly, Levine's excellent health of that same year is now a thing of the past as well.

It's comparably depressing to read that the conductor who once stated, "I don't spend my time on planes. I'm proud of that" was hopscotching back and forth between Bayreuth and the traveling Three Tenorial circus via Concorde.[1] Marsh endeavors to rationalize Levine's participation in the 3T jamborees, but roughly 10 concerts, at $500,000 a gig, tends to rationalize itself. (Ironically, the commercial cachet of the Three Tenors proved its own downfall, as the box-office udder was tugged dry, resulting in poor turnout for some concerts, cancellation of others. What began as a rare, blockbuster event was downgraded into a routine touring attraction, with comparable financial results.)

Finally, it would have been better for Marsh to have steered clear altogether of the subject of Levine's much-speculated-upon private life. It doesn't belong here, especially not when dealt with in such pachydermic daintiness. The galumphing euphemisms that Marsh resorts to in dealing with this touchy topic underscore the inadvisability of even going there in the first place. I don't want to read about it and certainly could have done without the following emetic: "If it looks as if James is really tired, hurting, drained, vulnerable, protective curtains instantly descend and he is whisked to a quiet place of safety and serenity. The way it is done does not suggest the protection of valuable property but the most sincere kind of caring on the deepest human level. Needs are sensed and met. Everyone, deep in the psyche, wants caring of this type, but few experience it as adults" (p. 59). Bleah! Maybe that is what everybody wants, but let's acknowledge that the guy leads a privileged existence, one that insulates him from the problems faced by single mothers on welfare, AIDS patients who have been bled financially dry by their HMOs, and sundry other people who can

barely afford to put food on their table, never mind buy a $250 ticket to a Three Tenors concert. Which is to say that Marsh might profitably have exercised some tactful, even ironic distance from his subject matter, sparing us maudlin excesses like the passage quoted above. There may be an operatic aria (in Cilea's *L'Arlesiana*) beginning "It's hell to be a mother," but "It's hell to be a well-paid, superstar conductor" is never going to make a hit tune.

While the Levine of this book may have pulled a vanishing act worthy of Lewis Carroll's famous feline, he can be captured on the page, as David Hamilton and Bernard Jacobson have shown.[2] Perhaps one of them can still get the substantive Levine out into the open. What it will require is someone of their ilk, more interested in posing substantive questions and hearing the answers than in basking in the sound of his own voice. Besides, Marsh fails to ask the one really burning question, in re *Fantasia 2000*: Did Levine get to shake hands with Mickey Mouse? I'd have it written into my contract, if I were he.

David McKee

NOTES

1. Michael Walsh and Barry Hildenbrand, "Maestro of the Met," *Time Magazine*, January 17, 1983, pp. 52–61.

2. The short list of required reading on Levine includes Hamilton's dialogue with him, "Leading Moses to the Met," *Opera News*, vol. 63, no. 8 (February 1999), pp. 33–35, and a chapter on performing Mozart and Verdi in Jacobson's *Conductors on Conducting* (Frenchtown, N.J.: Columbia, 1979). Another excellent colloquy was conducted by Gordon Gould for *Chicago Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 7 (July 1985), pp. 140–53.

Opera Viva: Canadian Opera Company: The First Fifty Years

Ezra Schabas and Carl Morey

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2000
312 pages, $49.99

A rather unconventional measure of the success of an opera company is the number of glossy coffee-table tomes documenting its history. These volumes are commonplace for the greatest opera houses in the world: Covent Garden, La Scala, Wiener Staatsoper, Paris Opéra, Metropolitan Opera—the list goes on. If one were to use such a criterion of success, however idiosyncratic, then the Canadian Opera Company has finally "arrived," after fifty years in the business. Originally scheduled for publication in conjunction with the company's fiftieth anniversary celebrations in April 2000, *Opera Viva* arrived a few months later, in September 2000, to coincide with the start of the new season.

Given that the Canadian Opera Company is the oldest and arguably the most important of the opera companies in Canada, it is surprising how little has been