

SONYA YONCHEVA

Press Review – EN



Bad Schussenried, 02-2021

Met Stars Live in Concert

“Bad Schussenried. It is a ballroom of knowledge: the magnificently decorated and stuccoed library hall of the Premonstratensian monastery in Bad Schussenried. Very catholic, very rococo, wonderful bookcases and a ceiling fresco of the colorfully transfigured divine wisdom. Which is why here a few years ago the great writer Martin Walser presented his novel “Muttersohn” in an original reading for television. The “Swabian Spring” festival used to play here, and the concert by the legendary Guarneri Quartet from New York has never been forgotten.

But now you can experience great opera there - which is no empty phrase and has a lot to do with New York. The Metropolitan Opera, which is closed during the pandemic, has launched the online series “Met Stars Live in Concert”: concerts from special locations, broadcast worldwide as live stream, and in HD quality. At the beginning of February, for example, Anna Netrebko sang at the Vienna Riding School. And on Saturday, soprano Sonya Yoncheva appeared in the superbly illuminated library of the Schussenried monastery. The performance of the Bulgarian soprano can be watched for two weeks for 20 Dollars on the metopera.org website.

The great aria “Ritorna vincitor!” From Aida, Rusalka's “Song to the Moon”, “Habanera” from Carmen - it's a one and a half hour best-of program. It is of course not very grand opera, because it is only accompanied by a piano (pianist: Julien Quentin). The Met itself makes the painful absence of the orchestra aware: During the stream, two scenes with Yoncheva from original productions are being faded in, Desdemona's Ave Maria and the duet Tosca / Scarpia. What one also has to say is that the top soprano has a voice of a diva, sparkling, colorful, full of emotional depth. A world star in Upper Swabia: a great concert.

Jürgen Kanold, Südwest Presse

“IN THE LATEST MET STARS LIVE IN CONCERT installment, from the library in the Schussenried monastery in Germany, Bulgarian soprano Sonya Yoncheva offered what host Christine Goerke called “a cavalcade of show-stopping arias”—a strikingly eclectic program ranging from the Baroque to Verdi and verismo. Surrounded by the ornate statuary and trompe-l'oeil book-bindings of the library, Yoncheva made a highly dramatic entrance in a flowing red chiffon gown, then backed up the visual impact with a vocally and histrionically impressive performance of Aida's “Ritorna vincitor!,” creating a character of depth and substance and capturing all the shifting moods of the conflicted heroine.

“Mood lighting created a very shadowy backdrop for “Tacea la notte placida,” from Il Trovatore, in which Yoncheva moved from a gossamer opening to rich-voiced, uninhibited ardor. The admirable smoothness and plush velvet of her singing were enhanced by first-rate bel canto credentials in the coloratura passages. Following the

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Verdi arias with Mimi's "Donde lieta uscì," she reinforced the impression that she is as adept at pianissimo lightness as at full-blown romantic sweep.

The song to the moon, from *Rusalka*, paradoxically projected the cool, silver shimmer of moonlight and the red-blooded warmth of the human heart. Yoncheva avoided the temptation to revel in her own timbral beauty and show off her technical prowess with self-conscious rubato and portamentos, instead allowing the nature of the character to guide her musical choices. The closing was at once inspiring and devastating, Yoncheva's febrile intensity foreshadowing the opera's tragic ending.

Going for Baroque, Dido's lament, taken at an excessively slow tempo, was an object lesson in legato and breath control, and "Lascia ch'io pianga" demonstrated the soprano's variety of vocal coloration, exhibiting an extraordinary, almost vibrato-less purity of tone.

Puccini was further represented by "Se come voi piccina io fossi"—begun by Yoncheva in a near-whisper while strewing roses around the piano and accompanist Julien Quentin, then opening out into impassioned pleading—and a deeply felt "Un bel dì" that painted a full picture of Cio-Cio-San's imagined reunion with Pinkerton and conveyed all the geisha's vulnerability and pent-up yearning.

Changing gears again, the soprano plunged into the soul-searching of *Thaïs*. (...) though the high notes were thrilling. (...) *Carmen's* habanera, on the other hand, smoldered overtly, with Yoncheva working the red chiffon to ensnare Quentin and all observers (...) Her heartiest rendition of "Hymne à l'Amour, by Monnet and Piaf, Yoncheva proved that gallic nuance was not beyond her after all, entering into the song's fantasia with flair.

Throughout the recital, Yoncheva showed her increasing maturity as an artist, displaying extraordinary poise in both voice and presence, fully inhabiting each character."

Louise T. Guinther, Opera News

"Emulating its decorative trompe l'oeil book bindings, the Baroque library of the Schussenried Cloister in southwest Germany provided a beautiful setting for the next best thing to live opera.

With French pianist Julien Quentin replacing a full orchestra and a spectacularly lit gallery taking the place of a traditional opera stage, Sonya Yoncheva reinforced her standing as one of the world's greatest divas in a technically brilliant and movingly intimate recital of popular arias.

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The Bulgarian soprano, performing in a stunning red gown with a large ribbon, matching the handful of red roses she brought on at one point and scattered on a raised platform, was performing from the library as part of the New York Metropolitan Opera's Met Stars Live in Concert series.

A worldwide online audience missing live opera during the pandemic was treated to arias by Verdi, Puccini, Dvorak, Handel, Purcell, Bizet and Massenet in a ninety-minute recital, hosted by American soprano Christine Goerke, which included extracts from Met productions during singing breaks.

Loss and tragedy centred on love was the theme running through the programme of twelve pieces all sung with passion by a soprano who has yet to sing most of the roles on the Met stage.

The arias did however include a heart-rending *Donde lieta usci* from Puccini's *La Bohème*, where Mimi and Rodolfo agree to part as he feels he can no longer afford to care for her as her illness worsens, which Yoncheva sang for the first time at the Met as a late replacement and only four months after giving birth.

She will return to the Met stage next season as Elisabeth de Valois in Verdi's *Don Carlos*, singing the opera in the original French version for the first time.

But different languages were mastered supremely in a recital that involved switching from Italian for *Ritorno vincitor!* from Verdi's *Aida*, to English for *Dido's Lament Thy hand Belinda...* When I am laid in earth from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and to French for the *Habanera L'amour est un oiseau rebelle* from Bizet's *Carmen*.

The recital concluded not with opera but with a touching French chanson *Hymne à l'Amour* by Marguerite Monnot and Edith Piaf that ends with the line so appropriate to our times. "Dieu réunit ceux qui s'aiment" that translates as "May God reunite those who love each other".

Simon Hale, The Birmingham Press

"For Met Stars Live in Concert, Sonya Yoncheva brings emotional significance to all her words and phrases"

"Perhaps starting with arias as demanding as 'Ritorna vincitor' from *Aida* and 'Tacea la notte placida' from *Il trovatore* was risky. Given the circumstances – questionable acoustics and a clangorous piano – they still showcased Yoncheva's secure and effortless technique and how she has a host of colours in her formidable vocal armoury, as well as an all-too-rare ability to give emotional significance to the words and phrases she sings. However, 'Ritorna vincitor' was understandably diminished by being hewn from its context in the opera and Yoncheva could only hint at all the passion, anger, jealousy and concern she could bring to it on an opera stage.

Leonora's 'Tacea la notte placida' tells her confidante Inez about the young man who has secretly been visiting her. Yoncheva's rendition was nuanced, with supple long-

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lined phrases, refined trills and delicate pianissimo high notes. There was the first of several atmospheric lighting changes for this aria as the library turned blue. Mimi's 'Donde lieta usci' was deeply affecting and her character's plight was writ large on Yoncheva's open expressive face. Dvořák's 'Song to the Moon' has had several outings in recent similar concerts during the pandemic and was as radiant as expected.

There was intense lyricism for 'Se come voi piccina io fossi' from Puccini's rarely-staged Le Villi. It is an aria apparently popular with sopranos though I cannot remember the last time I heard it. The lighting was now dappled and pinkish and Yoncheva entered with a bunch of the roses she proceeded to strew around the platform she – and her pianist – were on. Her repeated iterations of 'non ti scordar di me' ('do not forget me') were subtly shaded. Yoncheva's 'Dido's Lament' (in more than passable English) revealed the lower part of her voice as rich and pure and it was heart-breaking as she pleaded 'Remember me'. Taken together with her Le Villi aria it pre-empted how at the end of her recital I realised this Met concert would be high on the list of those in the series I certainly will not forget.

Following the Purcell there was more limpid melancholy from Yoncheva during Handel's 'Lascia ch'io pianga' before an 'Un bel dì' that was as ardent and touching as it was self-deluded. As Butterfly fantasises about how 'A man, a tiny speck, moves toward the hill' who watching did not believe – just like her – Pinkerton was coming back to her? Yoncheva proved – if further proof was needed – what an incomparable singing-actor she is.

Her excursions into Massenet gave us an impassioned and self-regarding 'Dis-moi que je suis belle' from Thäis as Yoncheva looked into a small mirror. It was not the singer's fault that it seemed endless and much better was 'Adieu, notre petite table' as Manon bids a sad farewell to homely domesticity. Yoncheva sang it introspectively but with such deep emotion that she wiped away (genuine!) tears at the end. Next was a surprising choice – given Yoncheva's usual repertoire – the 'Habanera' from Carmen and what a revelation it was. Fleshed out with dark mezzo-ish tones, she smouldered and was playfully seductive sitting back-to-back with Quentin – desperately trying to keep a straight face – and rubbing a rose on her dress.

Speaking earnestly and honestly to viewers (...) Yoncheva said 'I can't tell you how much I miss the stage at the Metropolitan Opera and I'm so glad we can stay in contact with this concert [...] Tonight, we are inspired by love, because love is making us feel warm, love is making us feel special, but love can unite us and today, we must be united.' Marguerite Monnot and Édith Piaf's sentimental – yet anthemic – 'Hymne à l'amour' concluded Yoncheva's programme and had such a visceral effect on her that more tears welled up during the rousing ending 'God reunites those who love each other!', whilst a little belatedly Quentin came into his own. As a closeup lingered on

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Yoncheva's piercing eyes and mobile face for one last time she gently blew a kiss to bid us all goodbye in the hope that it will not be too long before life can return to normal and we are all reunited in an opera house or concert hall somewhere."

Jim Pritchard, Seen and Heard International

"The recital which followed contained arias from popular operas and music from lesser known works that deserve to be better known. Passing between dark red marble columns, Yoncheva appeared swathed in yards of bright red chiffon, her dark hair offset by long, sparkling clear and dark red stoned earrings.

She opened with the rousing opening line of the Act I aria, 'Ritorna Vincitor' from Verdi's Aida. Having joined the chorus in wishing for an Egyptian win, the Ethiopian slave Aida realizes that victory would bring death to her brothers, and she laments her utterance. A fine actress, Yoncheva showed her heartfelt wishes in both sound and action. With barely time to catch her breath in between, Yoncheva and Quentin launched another difficult aria, 'Tacea la Notte' from Verdi's Il trovatore. This aria calls for the coloratura and flexibility of early Verdi instead of the solid strength of tone needed for his later opus, Aida, but that presented no problem for the red-clad diva.

The 'Addio senza rancor', a simple monologue from La bohème, may have provided a bit of respite, and it was sensitively sung with a poignant ending. Yoncheva followed it with a revealing take on Dvořák's 'Song to the Moon'. Sometimes listeners think the Czech words tell of the moon's beauty and sing its praises. It does nothing of the kind. Rusalka first addresses it as fickle. She asks it to tell her lover she is waiting for him, as she does not know where he is. That is a great deal more dramatic than the apotheosis of a heavenly body and Yoncheva brought out Rusalka's loneliness and longing.

Returning to the live program, Yoncheva and Quentin perform an amusing version of 'Se come voi piccina io fossi, o vaghi fior' (If I were tiny like you, or a wild flower), from Puccini's Le Villi. Entering with a dozen long stemmed deep red roses, the soprano launches a flower toward each corner of the stage at the end of every line she sings. The aria ends with 'Don't forget me'. She needn't worry, she is definitely not forgettable.

Ending the levity, the singer offered two heart-rending laments, perhaps appropriate for this time of pandemic: 'When I am laid in earth' from Purcell's Dido and Aeneas and 'Lascia ch'io pianga' (Let me weep over my cruel fate, and let me sigh for liberty) from Handel's Rinaldo. (...) the Handel was spot on. Loved the piano decoration in the interlude. The soprano decorated a few notes at the end, too. Yoncheva finished this group with red lighting and 'Un bel di' (One Fine Day) from Puccini's Madama Butterfly which Gelb told us she would sing in an upcoming season. I'm sure the house will be overflowing whenever she does sing it.

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The finale of the live stream began with Yoncheva singing bad girls' arias. Thais looks in a hand mirror and says, 'Dis-moi que je suis belle' (Tell me I'm beautiful). Thais may be getting old, but Yoncheva is not and her aria was lovely. She followed it with Manon's 'Adieu, Notre petite table' (Good-bye to our little table) in which the soprano says that although Des Grieux loves her, she prefers a luxurious life with a rich man.

Carmen blames the vagaries of her life on that rebellious bird called love in her 'Habañera'. (...)I did, however, love the way Yoncheva danced around the piano and sat behind Quentin on his piano bench.

At that point, Yoncheva spoke to the huge international audience saying that the 'Hymne à l'amour' with music by Marguerite Monnot and lyrics by Édith Piaf was one of her favorite pieces. It reminds us that time spent loving is never wasted. Perhaps we should spend more time loving and less time complaining.

The recital with Yoncheva was a thoroughgoing delight. The singing was captivating and powerful while the accompaniment was uplifting. Met Stars Recitals permit viewers to see two aspects of each artist. While the HD clips provide the recitalist with a much needed rest, they show that artist playing an opera role and the live program displays the same artist's ability to hold the stage alone.”

Maria Nockin, Classical Music Daily

“Streaming: Sonya Yoncheva weightless for her Met Stars Live in Concert recital

During its long closure which will last until the end of the 20-21 season, the New York Metropolitan Opera continues its online Met Stars Live in Concert series, which began in July 2020 with Jonas Kaufmann and Helmut Deutsch. Celebrities follow one another in amazing venues, such as Sonya Yoncheva and pianist Julien Quentin, who perform at the library at Schussenried Abbey in Germany. The program sweeps across the breadth of what the Bulgarian soprano does best, which is to infuse interiority and theatricality into very different roles.

She opens the dances with Verdi: first Aida (while waiting in principle for a role debut in Verona next June) (...) developing the Ethiopian slave's uncertainties, and teleporting the spirit on a scene ; then the Trovatore Leonora, in a "Tacea la notte placida ... Di tale amor" of limitless nobility, where the stake takes precedence over the game and where the symbiosis with Julien Quentin is felt. The latter initiates whirlwinds, engages in "sweet talks" or alternates weight and articulation in a kaleidoscope of musical flavors. Sonya Yoncheva then injects a reminiscence of her "OMG" debut in Mimì in New York in November 2014, in "Donde lieta uscì". She exhales in a dreamlike ideal of art, with

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long phrases, gaining intimacy, while her partner lets his touch evaporate in the twists and turns of disease. If her Butterfly initially seems more "standard" in its execution, it is when the thoughts start to separate from the words that the charm operates. The Puccini moment is completed by an excerpt from Le Villi, in which she scatters red roses on the ground as she rests her vocal support, with simplicity and lightness, while freeing herself from what she sheds.

Rusalka's Song to the Moon beautifully captures the distance between the princess and the star of hope. The singer communicates the physical remoteness with an almost desperate but incredibly assertive appeal, and the spiritual closeness of a prayer in dialogue with oneself in the second verse. The watercolor hues extend in the majestic currents that Julien Quentin wonderfully deploys in all directions. This sublime plunge is not the last because the baroque quarter of an hour which is about to come is the high point of the evening, in particular thanks to a Dido's death (taken from Purcell's work) on a textured timbre all the way to extraordinary guttural low notes. The framework is there, the liberation from the rules too, while the astonishing horizontality of the piano gives the soprano plenty of time to build the length of the lament without letting the notes individually resonate. If she means to perform a more sparkling "Lascia ch'io pianga" (Händel's Rinaldo), she does not neglect its muted vulnerability. The rubato filato and the mezza voce spin the perfect love.

The Bulgarian star changes face all of a sudden with the naive light of the role of Thaïs, accompanied by Julien Quentin's astute detonations). On the other hand, she is even more at home as Manon (Adieu, notre petite table). As the piano periodically puts her back on the path of her affects and her doubts, she never loses depth. Carmen's habanera is a hypnosis session in which the imprints of the first beat of each bar prepare the seductive suspense of the third and fourth beats in the piano part, of which Sonya Yoncheva takes advantage to literally take possession of the listeners. ! "Love unites us all," she says in her sweet (spoken) voice, before concluding the concert with a "Hymn to Love" marked by passion for text and instrumental storytelling. In times of a pandemic, this is probably what keeps things going: continuing to tell the stories so that they will be even more beautiful tomorrow."

Thibault Vicq, Opera Online

"Sonya Yoncheva offers an evening retracing her career in various colors, at the Baroque Library of the Abbey of Schussenried (Germany), accompanied and supported by pianist Julien Quentin, who played in an immaculate and crafty manner.

For her recital in partnership with the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, Sonya Yoncheva offered a multifaceted evening, with no other unifying thread than her (already) rich career, at the crossroads of several styles, eras and tessituras.

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The singer began her recital with Aida's first aria ("Ritorna vincitor!" Verdi)... . The voice (...) immediately seduces. In addition to the recognizable timbre, it is the attention given to the word, the great clarity of the diction that make it possible to take advantage of what is at stake from a dramatic point of view, a quality that will be found in all the other languages she deals with (...) The artist appears in good shape and offers a touching ride among several characters whose musical and theatrical dimensions she masters with great intelligence. (...)

The Baroque arias (Dido and Aeneas, Rinaldo) are sung with taste and empathy (...) Nevertheless, sung like lullabies, they are moving, just like the French repertoire she admirably masters. Her Thaïs is full of splendor and anguish, while her Manon almost moves her to tears, which she barely manages to hold back before ending the recital with Carmen's famous aria of Carmen ("L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" Bizet)

The pianist, Julien Quentin, is scrupulous and attentive, and all the more deserving because he knows how to switch from one style to another quickly and efficiently. His variations in Rinaldo's aria blend very well with the singer's, a communion that can be detected in their eyes and in the Hymn to Love, their only encore, where the complicity of the two artists is thrilling."

GMA, Ôlyrix

"Fortunately, with "Donde lieta uscì", she is back in familiar territory and reiterates the miracle of her 2018 Bohème on the Met stage. Finally, the clear timbre of the soprano works wonders in Rusalka's Song to the Moon,

After that, the Villi's aria, for which the singer appears in pink lighting, a bouquet of flowers in her hands which she spreads around the piano, shows how much at home she is in Puccini. The emotion is at its height in a heartbreaking Dido's lament which highlights her low register, undoubtedly the peak of the evening, followed by a "Lascia ch'io pianga" of an infinite melancholy whose daccapo she tastefully varies. Two arias that recall that at the beginning of her career, Sonya Yoncheva had brilliantly distinguished herself in the Baroque repertoire. This part of the concert ends with the inescapable "Un bel dì vedremo" which precedes another break: this time, it is the end of Act Two of her 2018 Tosca that is offered to us.

The last part of the program is dedicated to French music, which Sonya Yoncheva approaches with a thoroughly intelligible pronunciation. Of the two pages of Massenet offered to us, Manon's Petite Table, which she sings with poignant accents, attracts our attention for a long time. (...) Finally, the soprano is as mischievous as possible in Carmen's Habanera before lamenting during a brief intervention the current situation

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and the lack of contact with the audience resulting from it, this audience to whom she dedicates at the end the famous "Hymn to love" by Edith Piaf with a voice charged with emotion."

Christian Peter, Forum Opéra

"Live from the library of the Baroque abbey in Bad Schussenried, Baden-Württemberg, the Metropolitan offered a recital by Sonya Yoncheva on Saturday, February 27. The artist, whose New York beginnings only date back to 2013, had the opportunity to demonstrate that she could do almost anything, handling the most varied styles through a program spanning four centuries of music.

(...) The *Trovatore* Leonora (in which she was announced at the Met in May 2021) displays her as an accomplished Bel-canto singer, the voice being at the point of optimal balance between the essential agility - without having to slow down the slightest vocalization, as some alleged singers of this role do - and the magnitude expected for this character.

Then it's time for the first of the three Ps who will mark the concert: Puccini, to whom we readily associate the soprano who, before turning to *Tosca*, sang a lot of *Bohèmes* and offered a very beautiful (and very theatrical) Mimi's "Farewells". Before the broadcast begins, Peter Gelb revealed some of Sonya Yoncheva's upcoming engagements at the Met, including a run of *"Butterfly"*; It should come as no surprise that the program features "Un bel dì vedremo", very committed, as well as, and much more original, "Se come voi piccina io fossi" from *Le Villi*, performed with a bouquet of red roses in her hands. In other words, the thing is clear: Yoncheva in complete control of Puccini. The recital being divided into three blocks of four arias, the first part concluded with a sensitive interpretation of the Song to the Moon from *Rusalka*, another work in which the soprano should have made her debut, also in New York, in March 2021. The second part reminds us that Sonya Yoncheva has long been performing Baroque, and that she is one of the few who can boast of alternating *Otello* at the Met and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in Salzburg under the direction of William Christie. In other words, Yoncheva knows Baroque, and she proves it with the second P of the evening: Purcell and a heartbreaking rendition of Dido's death. The soprano continues in the same vein with "Lascia ch'io pianga",(...)

The last part of the concert is sung in French, the Bulgarian soprano having worked a lot in our country at the beginning her career (and it is in our language that she is supposed to sing, in February 2022, in *Don Carlos* that the Met will perform for the first time in the 1867 original version). If *Manon* suits her perfectly, (...). *Carmen* appears as a concession to the public, since the artist leaves her comfort zone - she was Micaëla in London in 2015 - to approach the title role, with great rhythmic freedom, flirting with her

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pianist, the excellent Julien Quentin, very present throughout this recital and adapting brilliantly to the different styles.

And it ends with the third P: Piaf, whose “Hymne à l’amour” Sonya Yoncheva sings with a very operatic voice, distilling with distinction lyrics like “Je me fous du monde entier”. Undoubtedly a way also to prepare us for her next disc, to be released on March 12 at Sony, Rebirth, where she offers, accompanied by the Cappella Mediterranea, an anthology of popular songs spanning five centuries, with a detour through 17th century opera.”

Laurent Bury, Concertclassic.com