fleat and delicate in a balalaika-esque number but shows plenty of spine in the bigger moments. Conductor Valery Gergiev has found a good fit for his particular skills. The video director uses pointless handheld camera shots and slow motion—mere distractions—and the picture and sound are not quite synched. But the opera is unlikely to get a DVD rival; this one will do fine. —William R. Braun

**Mozart:**

**Le Nozze di Figaro**

Conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the first phrases of Figaro’s overture announce the nature of the “folle journée” to come: the opening gesture becomes like a whispered bit of gossip, an intimation of the veins of erotic and political intrigue that will play out through the opera. He never loses sight of the work’s comedy, but his effervescence reading also reveals the emotional resonance that makes it a humanistic masterpiece. Take the orchestral prelude to “Porgi, amor”: the passage is played more quickly than usual, avoiding lachrymosity, but with enough deliberation to let its sentiment through. The Countess, for all her sadness, is too self-aware to succumb to tears; instead, she is poised to enter into the manic doings of the day.

This is the fourth installment of Nézet-Séguin’s Mozart series on DG; like the others, it’s derived from concert performances at the Baden-Baden Festival, this time from 2015. It features singers who combine vocal accomplishment with musical and dramatic intelligence. Luca Pisaroni is an unusually somber Figaro, one with no use for buffo mannerisms. This servant is supremely rational. The opening scene plays out as his moral education—a tutorial in the ways of the world from which he emerges sadder but wiser. In “Aprite un po’ quegli occhi,” you can hear Figaro doing the arithmetic as he explores the nature of cuckoldry in a reading both funny and touching. Pisaroni relishes articulating his native language; every word of da Ponte’s libretto is a delight.

Christiane Karg is a good match for him. Her Susanna is no soubrette but a serious young woman—a beacon of moral intelligence, albeit one with a good deal of native wit, conveyed through the alertness of Karg’s singing and the sharpness of her attack. Only in “Deh, vieni” did I wish for a little more conventional sweetness, and for a measure of melting lyricism to temper the singer’s scrupulous accuracy.

The Countess is Sonya Yoncheva, who so naturally conveys vulnerability that just her vocal tone makes the character’s plight tangible. She avoids laying on affective gestures; her singing has dignity befitting an aristocrat. Yoncheva produces one of the most beautiful sounds in opera today, making her performance as sensuously enjoyable as it is affecting.

This is the second time Thomas Hampson has recorded the Count for DG. The first time was in 1990, on the James Levine/Met set; the present release makes all too apparent the effects of the intervening quarter century. Without recourse to working legato, Hampson has to shout his way through the role. The hectoring tone, unpleasant to hear, also robs the character of complexity: the Count becomes a bully, offering no clue as to why the Countess desires his affections.

Angela Brower, as Cherubino, deploys an appealing lyric mezzo of so bright a tinge that you could mistake her for a soprano. She nicely distinguishes her two arias: the bursts of sound that punctuate “Non so più” register as unruly hormonal disruptions, while the relative pose of “Voi che sapete” shows the page summoning his best manners in the presence of the Countess.

Anne Sofie von Otter, Cherubino on the Levine set, graciously acknowledges the passage of time by taking on Marcellina. The hints of the voice’s former creaminess suggest that the housekeeper is an aging beauty rather than a simple harridan. Von Otter’s intact virtues as a singing musician justify the inclusion of her Act IV aria, a moment of delight rather than a trial to be endured before the rewards that follow. Although you’d never glean Rolando Villazón’s past career as a star lyric tenor from the evidence on these discs, his astringent present-day tone is aptly suited to Basilio, and his intelligence as a singer informs his portrait of the wily music master.

Maurizio Muraro scores comic points as Bartolo, but his voice is too worn to allow “La vendetta” to deliver its full impact. Regula Mühlemann, as Barbarina, is selectable in her brief search for the lost pin. But the show belongs to Nézet-Séguin, who offers a reading so well gauged, and so bursting with life, that it continually provoked me to think, “What a wonderful opera!” —Fred Cohn

**Johnson:**

**Considering Matthew Shepard**

This is the world-premiere recording of Craig Hella Johnson’s oratorio for chorus, soloists and chamber ensemble. Carefully considered, the piece is Johnson’s deeply personal response to a hate crime—Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998, which raised public awareness of the threats to the LGBT community. The composer has framed his assiduously conceived work as a Passion, thus establishing Shepard as a Christ figure. The texts are drawn from such diverse writers as Hildegarde von Bingen, William Blake, Sufi and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as contemporary Wyoming poets Sue Wallis and John Nesbitt. Johnson, in collaboration with Michael Dennis Brown, also contributed texts, and several outstanding poems are from Leslea Newman’s book.
October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard.

The prologue (three tracks) begins with the immortal Prelude in C Major by J. S. Bach, who composed the most famous and powerful Passion in history. After the chorus delicately joins in, Johnson jumps to a quick couplet from a cowboy song (complete with yodeling), followed by the first number, “Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass” (with a vivid text by Sue Wallis), celebrating the joys of Wyoming’s open spaces. When we get to Johnson’s setting of “I’m alive! I’m alive, I’m alive, golden,” it’s impossible to be unmoved; the irony cuts deep. The second number in the prologue (“Ordinary Boy”) introduces Matt (as his friends and family called him) as an actual person, not just a symbol of antigay violence. The more we learn about Matt, the more deeply we grieve. It’s hard to listen to his mother, Judy (Helen Karlowski, with a heart-tugging tremor in her voice), singing about him without welling up. Then we hear Matt himself singing excerpts from his own high-school journal: “I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy.” Tenor Matt Alber sings Matt with appealing ingenuousness and the exuberance of a young man facing a bright future. Johnson’s musical vocabulary, here and throughout, is comfortably consonant, an impressive union of country, folk/pop, gospel, plainchant, hymn and blues with a touch of musical theater. His skill at writing for chorus, and for Conspirare in particular—he is the founder and music director of this superb group—is always apparent.

In the Passion itself (the bulk of the work), we hear, surprisingly and movingly, from the Fence to which Matt’s killers tied him and left him to die. The Fence, of course, is the only witness to Matt’s death, and its presence as a character in retrospect seems inevitable. “His face streaked with moonlight and blood / I tightened my grip and held on,” laments the Fence, in one of its four songs (with texts by Newman). The odious Westboro Baptist Church also makes an appearance, providing a bone-chilling reminder that its members protested at Matt’s funeral. The phrase “Kreuzige, kreuzige!,” sung by the women, accompanies the male chorus as an ostinato; the crucifixion reference solidifies Shepard’s status as a Christ figure.

After this we need some relief, and it’s provided by a wonderful blues number called “Keep It Away from Me,” in which the irresistibly swinging music delivers on the title’s imperative. This song is rendered with great idiomatic feel by Laura Mercado-Wright and a perfectly blended backup vocal trio. (All the well-cast soloists are members of Conspirare.) Another memorable number, haunting in its starkness, is “I Am Like You,” which dares to contemplate the almost unthinkable possibility that each of us might have a little of the killers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, in us. After all, each of us has “come unhinged, and made mistakes and hurt people very much.”

The subject of this work makes it difficult to criticize, but at a certain point, I felt I had heard too many numbers with sweetly reverential music, easily-listening harmonies and celestial choral singing. However, many listeners will find themselves in tears at points. Johnson makes the work optimistic and uplifting, best embodied by the hymn/spiritual “Meet Me Here,” the first number in the Epilogue, which ends with the quatrains “We’ll sing on through any darkness, / And our Song will be our sight. / We can learn to offer praise again / Coming home to the light.” With such movements, Johnson turns Shepard into an icon of love, hope, forgiveness and peace.

—Joshua Rosenblum

Debussy/Orledge: Poe Operas


IN 1908, MET GENERAL MANAGER
Giulio Gatti-Casazza commissioned a double bill of Poe-inspired one-acts from Claude Debussy—one of the great might-have-beens in opera history. (Multiple bills were an easier sell at the turn of the twentieth century; the Met launched Puccini’s Tristano in 1918.) Although at one point performances were announced for Paris’s Opéra Comique, very little music was ever even sketched. In 1977, musicologist Carolyn Abbate, then a student at Yale, presented in New Haven an amalgam of speculative orchestrations of some of the sketches and spoken dialogue from the libretto of The Fall of the House of Usher. The next year, she presented a somewhat expanded and altered version of this material in New York. More work was done by Juan Allende-Blin. Every so often, more material will surface, because Debussy’s widow used to give away single pages of his manuscripts. But very little workable material survives after the opening scene of Usher; for The Devil in the Belfry, there is far less.

Almost none of the above information is found in the booklet note for this release, which is billed as the two operas “completed and orchestrated by Robert Orledge.” With so little description of what Orledge has done, we are apparently meant to judge the pieces only on what we hear. On those terms, the Belfry is a write-off. It sounds like the early genre scenes of a Massenet opera without ever arriving at anything. There’s some humor in Orledge’s music, but it doesn’t match the humor of the libretto.

The case of Usher is more complicated. Any Debussyan will be fascinated to hear the opening two hundred bars, which Debussy sketched in short score (that is, with notations about orchestration). Things become more speculative as the piece goes on. Far more speculative than in the cases of the completions of Lulu and Turandot, which can more fairly be called “completions.” On first hearing, it’s striking how much of the music sounds unlike anything Debussy ever wrote. On second hearing, it’s more striking that there are a few places, especially in Roderick’s final monologue, where it momentarily does sound like Debussy. But Orledge’s use of harp,