OPINION

THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW with Alma Deutscher | By Barton Swaim

A Girl Makes Music Without Irony or Ugliness

New York

Something terrible happened to classical music during the 20th century, and especially after 1945. You may be called a reactionary or a nostalgist if you acknowledge this fact aloud, but every concertgoer knows it. Many individual composers continued writing works of enduring value, but the great preponderance of classical music written over the past 75 years is deliberately opaque and aggressively ugly.

The causes are many and complex: the abiding influence of atonal music from earlier in the century, the obsession with originality and shock value, the gradual transformation of classical music into a faux-scientific academic discipline. But the overall incoherence is undeniable. Every fan of classical music knows the feeling of seeing a contemporary composer on the program and inwardly despairing.

This youthful composer likes to speak 'directly to the heart.' Critics won't like it, but audiences do.

Some recent composers have resisted the tendency to equate serious with dissonant or difficult—Arvo Pärt in Estonia, the late Dominick Argento in America. But none have done so in quite the guileless manner of English composer Alma Deutscher. She writes music that people want to hear: orchestral and chamber works that ordinary listeners—those who aren't invested in the "serious" music industry—actually like.

Her oeuvre is small, but it includes chamber and orchestral works of inventiveness, technical sophistication, wit and, above all, melodic richness. She has performed her piano concerto and violin concerto with orchestras in Europe and the U.S.; her opera, "Cinderella," was performed by California's Opera San José in 2018 and released on DVD by Sony Classical. In November, Sony released "From My Book of Melodies," a collection of solo piano works.

Also, she turned 15 in February.

In December Miss Deutscher played a concert of her works at Carnegie Hall. The Orchestra of St. Luke's performed her violin and piano concertos with the composer as soloist for both. The performance was enthusiastically received, with the audience applauding between each movement of the concertos and standing more than once. I met her two days later at the Park Hyatt Hotel in New York.

Those who saw Scott Pelley's 2017 interview with Miss Deutscher on "60 Minutes" will know the Alma Deutscher story's rough outlines—she composed a piano sonata at 6, a piano concerto at 10, a full-length opera by 12; she has a preternatural talent for playing two instruments and a staggering ability to improvise melodies. Two years after Mr. Pelly's interview, she is discernibly older but still far from grown-up in appearance. She wears pigtails and a bright red dress.

I avoid the topic of her status as a wunderkind and ask instead about her education. "I don't go to school," she says. "I'm home-schooled. I read lots and lots of books about almost everything—history, geography, fiction, science, whatever. As long as they're interesting." Her main academic challenge just now? German. She and her family live in Vienna, so "I must learn to speak and write it. I'm reading lots in German."

She has spoken elsewhere of melodies coming to her from an early age, so I ask if they get in the way of her study. "Very often," she says. "Sometimes when I'm talking to someone or trying to concentrate on something, a melody will come. It never comes when you want it to come." But, she points out, "composition is not like inspiration that just comes out of the head and onto the page. It's work. I have studied many scores. The greatest teachers are the old masters. I've studied the scores of Richard Strauss, of Beethoven, of Mozart and many others."

That she has studied the old masters is plainly true. You will know it if you're passably familiar with classical music from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries and listen to Miss Deutscher's orchestral works without knowing who wrote them. Her music doesn't "sound like" any one composer but bears the marks of many—Mendelssohn and Mozart, for sure, but also Bach, Georges Bizet and Richard Strauss.

That, for the cultural elite of Europe and North America, is the problem. Nobody wants to go on record criticizing a child, but Miss Deutscher is not embraced by the music world's influencers. Their usually off-the-record complaint has two parts. First, that is she is one more child prodigy of the kind we see come and go all the time—exploited by the music industry and a public eager for emotionally shallow works of imitation art.

This criticism doesn't accord with her personality. Miss Deutscher speaks her mind. Her father and her agent sit nearby, but they pay no attention to what the girl is saying to me.

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She is also ambitious—determined to get her point across in a way that an exploited prodigy would not be. She relishes talking about her work and at several points puts questions to me ("Where were you sitting in the hall? Could you hear the violin properly?"). She is writing another opera, she says, this one commissioned by the Salzburg State Theatre, though she coyly refuses to reveal the subject. Does she plan to compose a symphony? "Yes, that's one of my next projects," she says, glad I asked, and adds that she's already written one movement. "Since I was 6, I wanted to write a symphony. I'd read a novel in which Nannerl Mozart"—Wolfgang Amadeus's sister—"secretly writes symphonies, and she wasn't taken seriously because she was a girl. So I thought, I want to write symphonies and I want people to take me seriously."

The second, more serious criticism of Miss Deutscher is that as a composer she is a mere savant—capable of producing ersatz versions of the canonical works of Western music but in no way saying anything new or original or interesting.

The first thing to say about this is that she is 15. Mozart's and Mendelssohn's compositions from their childhood years don't compare favorably with their mature works. But Miss Deutscher's urbane critics don't fault her for a lack of technical sophistication. They dislike her music for the same reason audiences love it. They object to its traditional tonality, its straightforward emotional appeal, its refusal to acknowledge the repugnance of human life.

Miss Deutscher is keenly aware of this criticism, and at Carnegie Hall she addressed it straightforwardly. Before the evening's final work, she spoke from the stage. "Now, I've always wanted to write beautiful music," she told the audience, "music that comes out of the heart and speaks directly to the heart. But some people have told me that nowadays, melodies and beautiful harmonies are no longer acceptable in serious classical music, because, in the 21st century, music must reflect the ugliness of the modern world." You could hear people in the audience laughing with her. The rubes! "Well," she went on, "in this waltz, instead of trying to make my music artificially ugly in order to reflect the modern world, I went in exactly the opposite direction."

In the piece, "Siren Sounds Waltz," the music moves from the dissonant sounds of Vienna's city center, with its noise and ambulance sirens, to a buoyant big-hearted waltz in which the "sirens" are made to sound like Homer's rather than Vienna's.

Because of her youth, her despisers can't openly spurn her music. That will soon change. She's an ill fit for the present age. Her pronunciation and gait suggest polish and privilege. She embraces the best of the past and speaks of beauty without irony or resentment. Just by being who she is, she's bound to provoke a fight.

Is she aware that she's taking sides in a long-running argument about the nature and role of music? She answers indirectly: "I think it's quite simple. I just want to write music I myself enjoy. I wouldn't want to write music I don't enjoy right at the moment. If I had to write music I didn't like, I would prefer to be in a different profession—to be a travel agent or something. I don't see what there is to justify writing music I don't like."

Miss Deutscher is careful not to dismiss atonal or "ugly" music. The Metropolitan Opera, a few blocks away, has just finished its run of Alban Berg's lurid opera "Wozzeck" (1922), about a poor soldier who kills his common-law wife. I ask about this and other dissonant masterworks, but she doesn't take the bait. "I'm very happy for other people to write whatever music they like or find beautiful," she says. "And if some people want to go to those concerts, fine, wonderful. But for myself, I'm not yet really interested in this type of music. The important thing for me is that I write what I like. And who knows? This might change in 10 years. But I'm not worried about that."

Even Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), who famously invented a dissonant musical language called serialism, remarked that there is still much good music to be written in C major. Miss Deutscher agrees: "I have more to say, a lot more to say, in this musical language," she says, sitting erect and speaking volubly. "If I were to write a novel, I would write it in English," she says. "I wouldn't try to write a completely new language. I would try to think of a new story to tell, and I would tell it as best I could, but I would tell it in English. I wouldn't write it in some imaginary language I invented."

In October, Miss Deutscher received the European Culture Prize. In her acceptance remarks, she suggested that perhaps "a more tolerant age is dawning, when melody and beauty will once again be permitted." One may surely hope. She said she wants to be taken seriously. Does she worry that music critics won't? "I don't even read the reviews about myself," she says with a laugh. "I don't read the internet."

She does have a website, complete with quotes from laudatory reviews. But she says she plays for the audience, not the critics: "The people, did you see them? The people loved it. The audience stood many times. They were elated, uplifted. What matters is what the audience thinks. What the critics write—and I don't read it anyway—it doesn't bother me. . . . I see the reaction of the people. They say what they mean, they clap when they want to clap."

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