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MUSIC | THE ARTS IN CULTURE 2015

The Best Classical Music of 2015



By THE NEW YORK TIMES DEC. 9, 2015

The classical music team of The New York Times shares its picks for the best performances of the year. Also read our list of the best classical recordings.

Anthony Tommasini

Opening of the Philharmonie in Paris In January, a week after the brutal Charlie Hebdo killings, the gleaming, modern Philharmonie de Paris, the new home of the Orchestre de Paris, opened with a gala concert and a weekend of free educational events. In a visionary yet risky attempt to entice new audiences to classical music, the complex is in Northeast Paris, near the ring road that separates the city center from its poorer, working-class suburbs. The free events drew thousands of people, including families with children, who waited in long lines to pass through heightened security checks for the chance to take in a concert or workshop. Recently I've been thinking of that

hopeful weekend, now that Paris is again grappling with terrorism.

Leif Ove Andsnes In a recent article, I questioned the wisdom of conductors attempting to make a big statement through a cycle of the well-trod Beethoven symphonies. The composer's piano concertos are less encumbered with extra-musical baggage. And in a project he called "The Beethoven Journey," the exceptional pianist Leif Ove Andsnes played the five works in two exhilarating concerts at Carnegie Hall in February with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, conducting from the keyboard and delivering scintillating and probing performances that had the integrated quality of fine chamber-music playing.

David Kaplan The excellent young pianist David Kaplan, who loves Schumann's quirky, wondrous "Davidsbündlertänze," a set of miniature dances, asked 16 composer colleagues to write a piece riffing on one of the Schumann dances or to create something new to be tucked into the suite. In a festive concert in March at Le Poisson Rouge, the Greenwich Village music club, Mr. Kaplan played Schumann's work and the new miniatures. The result was delightful and substantive. I admired the way he and the composers claimed this great Schumann piece as their own. Why not?

"Crossing" Seldom has an opera premiere generated such high expectations. "Crossing," by the prodigiously talented composer Matthew Aucoin, who also wrote the libretto, tells of Walt Whitman's volunteer work treating wounded Union soldiers during the Civil War. Though not flawless, the opera, presented by the American Repertory Theater in Boston in May and June, proved a taut, teeming and inspired work, with Mr. Aucoin, just 25 at the time, conducting the ensemble *A Far Cry*.

"Written on Skin" Thanks to a recording and DVD of Katie Mitchell's production of George Benjamin's "Written on Skin," it was already clear that this harrowing work, about a love triangle in the Middle Ages, is one of the first masterpieces of the 21st century. Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival

brought that production to the David H. Koch Theater in August with a riveting cast. Alan Gilbert drew a surging and nuanced performance from the Mahler Chamber Orchestra.

“Il Trovatore” What seemed at first like it would be just another revival of this Verdi favorite became instead a powerful story of personal courage and artistic dedication. The charismatic Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky, after announcing in June that he was undergoing treatments for a brain tumor and canceling his summer commitments, rallied himself for three Met performances as the Count di Luna in “Trovatore” in September and October. He sang magnificently and looked elated to be onstage practicing his art. The whole cast was inspired, especially Anna Netrebko as Leonora, and the ovations were tumultuous.

Schubert Song Cycles The supremely expressive and intelligent British tenor Mark Padmore performed the three Schubert song cycles — “Die Schöne Müllerin,” “Schwanengesang” and “Winterreise” — in October to open Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival at Alice Tully Hall. As conceived by Mr. Padmore and his distinguished accompanist, the fortepianist Kristian Bezuidenhout, this three-evening series came across as an overwhelming artistic whole.

“Elektra” in Concert I’m still waiting to see where Andris Nelsons, in his second season as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, intends to take the institution artistically. But at Carnegie Hall in October, he certainly conducted a blazing concert performance of Strauss’s “Elektra,” with an exceptional cast headed by the powerhouse soprano Christine Goerke, who simply owns the daunting title role.

“Lulu” If some of Peter Gelb’s artistic decisions as general manager of the Metropolitan Opera have been questionable, his vision was best exemplified by a new production of Berg’s “Lulu” in November. Here was an ingenious staging by the artist William Kentridge of this wrenching work, one of the greatest 20th-century operas, with a superb cast headed by the amazing

Marlis Petersen, singing the title role, one of her signature parts, for the final time.

Danish String Quartet The adventurous young members of the Danish String Quartet play almost everything excitingly. Naturally, they bring exceptional insight and character to the four quartets of Denmark's own Carl Nielsen. In November, the ensemble played them in order for a lucky audience at the very intimate Rose Studio in Lincoln Center.

Zachary Woolfe

Here, in chronological order, are the performances this year that most memorably provided what I'm seeking from and through music: excitement, virtuosity, thoughtfulness, a sense of connection to past, present, even future.

Sonya Yoncheva Not long after making her role debut as a dreamy, delicate Mimì in Puccini's "La Bohème" at the Metropolitan Opera last fall, this Bulgarian soprano returned to the Met in January as an irrepressible, sensuous Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata," then opened the company's 2015-16 season in September as an unusually headstrong Desdemona in that composer's "Otello." It has been a thrilling run: At the Met, only Diana Damrau and Vittorio Grigolo, scorching in a revival of Massenet's "Manon" in March, were as galvanizing this year.

Christian Gerhaher It was a lucky stretch that gave me no fewer than four performances by this peerlessly sensitive baritone. He was death-haunted in Schubert's "Winterreise" at Alice Tully Hall in February; deeply focused as Wolfram in Wagner's "Tannhäuser" at the Berlin State Opera in April; poignantly reserved in the title role of Monteverdi's "Orfeo" at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich in July; and — most intimately and perhaps best of all — a heart-rendingly subtle guide to longing in songs by Haydn, Beethoven, Schoenberg and Berg at the Park Avenue Armory in November.

Bach Portrait Send-off I won't soon forget a morning in April I spent in a living room in Princeton, N.J., listening to a farewell sung to a portrait: an extraordinary 1748 painting of Johann Sebastian Bach that was soon headed to Leipzig, Germany, where it was made. By a chance of history, the painting had hung in the childhood home of John Eliot Gardiner, the eminent Bach conductor, and he led his Monteverdi Choir in two of the master's chorales to celebrate, later capping the day on the Princeton campus with an exquisite performance of Monteverdi's "Orfeo."

"The Rake's Progress" Slyly moving, Stravinsky's operatic masterpiece riffs on Mozartean Classicism with an energy and tenderness that presses it past pastiche. The Met's elegantly stylized production, originally directed by Jonathan Miller, is one of the company's strongest, and James Levine — long a champion of the work — presided over a vivacious, all too brief revival in May. Paul Appleby and Layla Claire were fresh, youthful leads, with Gerald Finley the face (and voice) of suave evil. Stephanie Blythe did her best to steal the evening as the imperious bearded lady, Baba the Turk.

Conlon Nancarrow Festival Soon after moving into its new home downtown, the Whitney Museum of American Art unveiled its music offerings with a bang: "Anywhere in Time," an 11-day festival in June celebrating the idiosyncratic, inimitable Nancarrow, the mad scientist of the player piano. The final day was given over to a seven-hour marathon performance of his dozens of studies for that instrument. An encyclopedic exploration of the ways in which rhythms can collude and collide, it was exhausting and exhilarating.

Richard Barrett Spectrum, an intimate loft turned performance space on the Lower East Side, fosters a sense of immersion in the music being performed, an all-in quality that was rewarded in a tribute in June to this British composer, born in 1959. Featuring chamber works performed by members of the ensemble TILT Brass — in "tendrils," the sound made by rubbing a harp's strings was doubled by electronic strumming noises; "Equale," suffused with the sounds of brass instruments, morosely ebbed and

flowed — it was an engrossing look at a searching artist.

LoftOpera In the dog days of August, this youthful company drew a youthful audience of 400 to a warehouse deep in Bushwick, Brooklyn, for a performance of — lieder? I was surprised, too, as I was by the effectiveness of the production, which wove together song cycles by Berlioz and Mahler into an affecting, excellently played and sung reflection on lost love.

“Tannhäuser” Even Otto Schenk’s well-worn 1977 production took on emotional weight in the Met’s stirring, ultimately shattering revival, in October, of a Wagner opera often perceived as stolid. Peter Mattei’s Apollonian smoothness and Johan Botha’s courageous endurance are known qualities; what was more surprising was the soprano Eva-Maria Westbroek. Her voice isn’t placidly beautiful, but here it vibrated with a passion that suited this story of lust, guilt and transfiguration. The orchestra shone under James Levine, who paced the action with radiant sobriety.

Wild Up A giddy wind blew this ensemble, based in Los Angeles, eastward for its New York debut in October at Roulette, part of the American Composers Orchestra’s Sonic festival. Boisterously theatrical and exuberantly talented, the group barnstormed its way through works written by its own members, and a couple of punk-rock arrangements, too.

Paul Lewis Understated yet alert to drama, this British pianist didn’t wallow in sentiment while playing Beethoven’s final three sonatas in November at Alice Tully Hall. Yet neither did he breeze through them. Instead, as he did several years ago in Schubert’s last sonatas in the same hall, he subtly destabilized these pieces, tugging and stretching their rhythms, transforming their melancholy into cosmic yearning and their consolations into discomfitingly direct joy.

Vivien Schweitzer

National Sawdust This performance space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, has been open only a few months. But it already feels like an invaluable part of the New York music scene. Its high-ceilinged, attractive theater, with black walls covered in white panels that intersect in geometric patterns, has already hosted an array of uptown and downtown artists: Renée Fleming and Theo Bleckmann are among the disparate musicians on the calendar this month.

In October, I attended a memorable **National Sawdust** performance by **Roomful of Teeth**, the a cappella octet admired for its imaginative vocalizing. Many groups specialize in a particular genre or aesthetic, but these musicians have demonstrated their technical and expressive versatility in an eclectic range of styles, from Inuit throat singing to Georgian sacred polyphony.

The group, whose members include the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer **Caroline Shaw**, has championed many young composers. The lineup here showed them at their versatile best in a superb selection of works by Missy Mazzoli, Ted Hearne, Eric Dudley, William Brittelle, Caleb Burhans and Anna Clyne, whose gorgeous, harmonically luxuriant “Pocket Book VIII,” set to Shakespeare’s Eighth Sonnet, concluded the concert.

James R. Oestreich

Sonic Blossom Unlike most of the visitors accosted on an October morning in the Blanche and A.L. Levine Court in the modern and contemporary art wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I had a vague idea of what to expect when I was approached by someone dressed in black, draped with an exotic cloak, offering “the gift of a song.”

But that didn’t detract from the experience, part of Lee Mingwei’s installation “Sonic Blossom,” in which a rotating cast of gifted young singers performed Schubert songs for, and directly at, the individuals seated opposite them (who, having been selected more or less at random, accepted the “gift”).

The performances were not private, exactly, since onlookers were free to crowd around and take it all in, but the setup made for a particularly intense, almost electric connection between singer and chosen listener, another manifestation of Mr. Lee's concern in his recent works with human contact, communication and sharing. As it happens, I was nabbed by one of the most charismatic of the singers, Beibei Guan, a 27-year-old Boston-based Chinese soprano. Her beautiful rendition of Schubert's "Nacht und Träume" was captivating, so much so that I returned a week later to hear her charm others and to savor afresh the originality and effectiveness of Mr. Lee's concept.

David Allen

Frederic Rzewski This year, I heard the cellist Matt Haimovitz play Bach in the Columbia University gym, engaged in a Philip Glass opera at the Boston Cyclorama and saw a young orchestra rip through Beethoven in a London parking garage as trains drove by.

Musicians have long broken free of the concert hall, but too often there is little to tie the music they perform to the new spaces they choose. Sometimes, though, musician, music and location seem a perfect match. As in April, when Frederic Rzewski, 77, played his "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!" — the enormously complex set of piano variations on a Chilean revolutionary song that he completed in 1975 — at Wholey's fish market in Pittsburgh.

I wasn't there, though a few shaky videos are available online. The idea of it still makes me smile: a piece based on a people's anthem that enacts social togetherness in musical form, played not for the likes of me to ponder, but for people to hear as they went about their days.

After all, as Mr. Rzewski told Elizabeth Bloom of The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: "I didn't expect people to come who wanted to hear music. I expected people to come who wanted to buy fish."

Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

Rachel Podger Sometimes the performances that leave the deepest impressions are those marked by passion, drama and struggle. Rachel Podger's solo violin recital at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in June had none of those qualities. And yet her reading of Bach's Partita in D, its Chaconne sparkling with freshness and grace, became one of the most memorable renderings of this towering masterwork of the violin repertory I have heard. Ms. Podger's warm, clean sound, stenciled phrasing and rhythmic vivacity in this program of works by Bach, Tartini and Biber showed why she has become one of the leading performers on Baroque violin.

Just as lasting was the impression left by her relaxed stage presence. More than once, she addressed the audience with a pitch-perfect blend of information, self-deprecating British humor and a shared sense of excitement that invited the listener into the unfolding wonder of the music. Amid the metaphysical ruminations of "Guardian Angel," Biber's eerie finale to his "Mystery Sonatas," she directed a little smile at the audience, eyebrow raised. "Amazing, isn't it?" she seemed to be asking.

It was.

Michael Cooper

Minnesota Orchestra's Tour of Havana It was not just the mojitos, or the Beethoven and Prokofiev, or the fact that an American orchestra was at the vanguard of the nation's rapprochement with Cuba that made the Minnesota Orchestra's tour of Havana in May a high point of the year. It was also the way the quickly-put-together tour signaled that the orchestra, which

had been brought to the brink of death during a bitter 16-month lockout that ended in 2014, was back and was thinking big.

For all its immense talent and creativity, the classical-music field often seems consumed by financial struggles, companies going under, labor strife, hand-wringing over missions, and board-room battles. The Havana tour was one of those hopeful moments this year — like seeing students start an opera company to stage Wagner, or a long-forgotten Harlem Renaissance opera revived, or any number of shattering performances at the Metropolitan Opera or Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center — that offered a vivid reminder of what music aspires to.

Those mojitos were pretty good, too.

The Best in Culture 2015

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Correction: December 20, 2015

An article last Sunday about the year in classical music partly misstated the name of an opera by the composer Matthew Aucoin. It is “Crossing,” not “The Crossing.”

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