



Posted on Sun, Dec. 13, 2009

David Patrick Stearns' Best in Classical Music for 2009



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The year in classical music had two artistic hubs, when great things happened on a near-daily basis.

The first was early summer: The Crossing's Month of Moderns Festival presented three programs of new choral works dovetailing with the Mendelssohn Club's premiere of David Lang's *Battle Hymns* as part of the Hidden City Festival. The second was a mid-autumn when music I've been hearing for years roared out of routine professionalism and into fresh-minted revelations.

Other significant things happened: Though economic downturns often translate into artistic safety, lots of unsafe artists found ways to do what they needed to do - and left audiences with a broadened sense of themselves and their world.

Last Autumn. What lies beyond a magnum opus? Philadelphia composer Michael Hersch hit a peak of sorts in his 2005 solo-piano work *The Vanishing Pavilions*. Then in October at St. Mark's Church, he delved even deeper and with greater clarity in his *Last Autumn*, written for his hornist brother Jamie Hersch and cellist Daniel Gaisford. Its intricately related 41 movements form a cohesive but contentiously eventful whole.

Battle Hymns. The unlikely collaboration of the Mendelssohn Club and the Leah Stein Dance Company took over the Armory of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry in June for David Lang's *Battle Hymns*. The postminimalist language

explored war's emotional cost with choral sounds suggesting keening and death knells, underscored by Stein's quasimilitaristic choreography. The piece was later reprised in a typical concert, but the group reportedly preferred the choreographic multitasking.

Month of Moderns. Where do you start with the Crossing's Month of Moderns Festival? Founder/director Donald Nally culled and commissioned lots of pieces based on the troubled poetry of Paul Celan during May and June at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Besides yielding great pieces by Dane Bo Holten and Philadelphian Kile Smith, new forms of musical expression surfaced, such as the hallucinatory spirituality of Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles*.

Network for New Music. This month the 25-year-old ensemble offered a Hindemith/Ligeti program that was literally smashing. One of the percussion effects demanded by Ligeti's *Nouvelle Aventures* was a tray of cocktail glasses shattering on the floor of the Perelman Theater. Presiding over this glorious madness was the venerable pianist/conductor Leon Fleisher. If only more musicians aged so adventurously.

The Philadelphia Orchestra. Yes, the Gramophone magazine critics' poll of the world's top orchestras passed over the Fabulous Philadelphians. Yet the orchestra had an excellent year, especially on the winter European tour. It peaked in Luxembourg with Schubert's *Symphony No. 9* under Christoph Eschenbach, with rich but appropriate sound and edge-of-the-seat emotionality - amid the Philharmonie Luxembourg's wonderful acoustics and architecture, the blue seats suggesting ripples of water.

The Asphalt Orchestra. This cutting-edge marching band formed by Lincoln Center made a surprise August appearance here - unfortunately in Philadelphia's 30th Street Station shower-stall acoustics. The Bjork and Charles Mingus repertoire was quite a noisefest and made more sense outdoors: As an opening act for Rhys Chatham's *Crimson Grail* for 200 electric guitars at New York's Damrosch Park (critics were given earplugs), the Asphaltians were like the cartoons that once preceded screenings of epic films.

Thomas Meglioranza. The charismatic baritone displayed a delightful mania for pop-culture obscurity in an October Philadelphia Chamber Music Society recital of forgotten American songs from the early 20th century. Charming curios were mixed in with items that could have been written by your nutty great-aunt, such as a series of 30-second songs by Carrie Jacobs-Bond. I called it cultural roadkill, and meant it as a compliment.

Pavel Haas Quartet. The Prague-based outfit made a Philadelphia Chamber Music Society debut that eclipsed even its acclaimed recordings. The sound is

big but trim, gestures grand but not grandiose, and Beethoven's volatility has rarely been served with such spot-on conviction. Expect the Czechs back soon: After their afternoon concert, they went out on the town in Center City and loved it.

Madama Butterfly. Opera Company of Philadelphia has a standing date with *Madama Butterfly*, but October's production had not only an appropriately high-style production by Jun Kaneko, but also a break with the casting tradition of the title role: Ermonela Jaho's small lyric soprano lacked the usual force, but her plethora of vocal details made her a three-hanky Butterfly.

"Paul's Case" at the Fringe. Opera in the Philly Fringe Festival was often so under-rehearsed you strained to hear what was there. Greg Spears' adaptation of the Willa Cather story "Paul's Case" wasn't just staged quickly, but was also composed in a deadline-imposed heat. Yet Spears' music - in this odd tale of a young Pittsburgh dandy on the loose in New York - had solid dramatic timing, compassionate characterizations, and huge potential. It's still in development by American Opera Projects; watch www.operaprojects.org for news.

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