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The Best Classical Concerts of 2019



Sir Simon Rattle conducting a rehearsal of Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier."
(Karen Almond / Met Opera)

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Maybe this is the New York catastrophizing mentality, but whenever I come off of a particularly good opera and concert year, I start worrying that a recession is on the way and all of that wonderful artistic momentum will be lost. You never know: just because your name is Cassandra doesn't mean the worst isn't happening. So the healthiest approach is to enjoy each event as it comes, and to remember that great music appears in an infinite variety of packages and sizes — and in all five boroughs.

Here's what stuck to the wall for me.

***Fire in My Mouth* at the New York Philharmonic:** The piece of the year? How about the piece of the decade? The January premiere of Julia Wolfe's work about the infamous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 immigrant women comes off even more powerfully on the recording, without the visual aids that came with the live performance. In fact, this minimalist-based composer is the master of sonic scene painting from moment one, suggesting not just imagery, but the emotions of the women who were processing them. More impressive yet is Wolfe's ability to build scenes into a state of almost unbearable tension.

The Metropolitan Opera: After some up and down years, the company is on a winning streak. Critics still disparage the Robert Lepage production of the *Ring* Cycle that was revived in the spring, but when the singing is right (Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde) and the conducting is inspired (Philippe Jordan), who cares? In the fall, *Porgy and Bess* (which I had mixed feelings about) was such a hit that performances have now been added, while Philip Glass's *Akhmaten* with Anthony Roth Costanzo was a sensation with younger audiences (though traditionalists still ask why the music has to be so repetitious). Among singers, Lisette Oropesa was a vocal dream in the title role of Massenet's *Manon*. *The Queen of Spades* had two breakout performances: by Yusif Eyvazov, loved by some for years, and who sang with a vocal and theatrical precision I never could've hoped for after hearing him last season in *Tosca*; and by co-star Lise Davidsen, who gives Wagnerians a reason to live, though she says Brünnhilde is way down the road. Meanwhile ...

Simon Rattle: The year's conducting honors at the Met go to Rattle, whose opening night of *Der Rosenkavalier* on Dec. 13 showed the conductor, newly liberated from the Berlin Philharmonic, ready to vanquish all detractors.

Rattle can get lost in the details, but *Der Rosenkavalier* has more details per square inch than anything this side of Elliott Carter. And Rattle made them all contribute to the overall characterization of what was happening onstage. Another inspired touch: The Act I music for boorish Baron Ochs was played like a Gilbert & Sullivan patter song. It takes a Brit to come up with that.

4:48 Psychosis at the Prototype Festival: Ellen Reid's opera *p r i s m* was the hit of the 2019 Prototype Festival in January, and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, putting the 36-year-old composer firmly on the map. But let's not forget *4:48 Psychosis*, an adaptation of the fearlessly unfiltered Sarah Kane play of the same title that documented her road map to self-euthanasia. Her rallying cry — "This is not a world in which I wish to live" — received new muscle on the lyric stage from composer Philip Venables and director Ted Huffman, with words that were not only sung, but also typed onto a screen with percussion accompaniment. The same pair explored this new form of narrative even further at Opera Philadelphia's O19 Festival with their *Denis & Katya*, about gun-toting Russian teenagers fending off the police.

Stonewall 50 operas: I saw five — the big one, in June, being New York City Opera's *Stonewall*, created by composer Iain Bell, librettist Mark Campbell, and director Leonard Foglia. How can you not walk in with pre-conceived notions? Though expecting something treacly, I was completely swept up by it, and looking at the production photos now brings it all back, especially the shady Mafia-controlled culture of the West Village at that time. What also makes *Stonewall* fascinating is that nobody is all that clear about how the riots unfolded. The chaos — not to mention the partying that led up to it — means that this great historic occasion was incredibly murky. And with the four one-act operas produced by American Opera Projects, you also saw how gays were so low on the social totem pole that they had nothing to lose by fighting back.

Verdi Requiem: The jury may always be out on conductor Teodor Currentzis, who made his New York debut in November at The Shed in a series of Verdi Requiem performances with musicAeterna, his chorus and orchestra, plus video from the late filmmaker Jonas Mekas. And? To some, Currentzis will always be eccentric — which is why you see his Mozart opera recordings, though praised by some critics, in the bargain bin at the

Metropolitan Opera gift shop. To me, the unforced clarity of the performance, the concentration, the detail, and the shaman-like phrase readings went to the heart of the piece in ways that eclipsed every previous Verdi Requiem I've heard. However, the hyperactive video that jumped between war ruins and blooming flowers was a meaningless distraction.

Mariss Jansons: The Latvian maestro, who died at the end of November at 76, had been on borrowed time for decades after his 1996 heart attack in Oslo while conducting *La Bohème*. And though this might sound like swan-song sentimentality, I think that the conductor — as heard on [the WQXR broadcast of his final concert](#), Nov. 8 at Carnegie Hall with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra — knew that he was leading his last Brahms symphony. When the concert's intermission went on much longer than expected, many wondered if Jansons would make it back at all. But he did — with music-making that felt like a matter of life and death. More generally, his distinction was his catalogue of polished, middle-of-the-road performances of standard repertoire. His recordings are ones you can live with over time.

George Crumb: Was it my imagination or was Crumb, who turned 90 this year, preparing us for the end of the world with his new *KRONOS-KRYPTOS* for percussion quintet? Premiered in April by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the piece's apocalyptic sensibility was strong even by Crumb's explosive standards, with silence followed by smatterings of sound suggesting pulsating bits of civilization still kicking but unaware that the end has happened. The work ends with the folk song "I Am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger." That about covers it, right? A great new piece — with more to follow.

Meanwhile, the **JACK Quartet's Elliott Carter string quartet marathon** was in a partly conflicting time slot at the Morgan Library, but I did catch some of it, and what a joy it was to hear that great music played so well and so comprehendingly.

Lara St. John: The Canadian-born, New York-based violinist went public over the summer with accounts of sexual misconduct and rape by a teacher during her student years at the Curtis Institute of Music. Later, in September, she was the focal point of *We Believe You: Solidarity Concert for*

Lara at the Gallery MC on West 52nd St. As a violinist, St. John scored a musical knockout with the super-virtuosic *Čoček* by Milica Paranosić. The evening's emotional peak, though, was an 11-minute digest of the 400 emails she had received from women who had been similarly abused. The name of her perpetrator, Jascha Brodsky, surfaced repeatedly. Now St. John is talking to many of these women in person for a documentary titled *Dear Lara*.

The **Trinity Wall Street Candlelight Baroque** series defied Halloween night chaos with a program of mostly 17th-century music by two of the most adept early musicians out there: cornettist Bruce Dickey and soprano Hana Blažíková. Blažíková has great vocal agility, plus the kind of tone resources that allow her to blend amazingly with Dickey. She's also a captivating presence. Some of the composers they performed, such as Merula and Carissimi, are often thought to be second-tier, though on Oct. 31 they never sounded that way.

Cappella Pratensis: For those who know Renaissance polyphony, Jacob Obrecht's expansive *Missa Maria zart* is a significant event, and even more so in the authoritative performance by the Netherlands-based Cappella Pratensis on Oct. 27 at Corpus Christi Church. The eight-voice group sang from a single book hand-copied in original notation, prompting certain kinds of vocal blends. And if you noticed the individual members giving each other hand signals pointing up and down, it was to solve chromatic note questions in the thick of performance. Presented by Music Before 1800, the concert was more proof that this repertoire is every bit as monumental as Beethoven and Brahms.

Vox Luminis: The Belgian group brought its unmistakably luminous sound to Domenico Scarlatti's *Stabat Mater* in October at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin (presented by the Miller Theatre), but with the kind of tone that's more adaptable to changing repertoire than that of, say, the Tallis Scholars. This is sound that's truly backed by smarts. How do they maintain it? Anytime there's an opening, I'm told, many are auditioned but few are chosen.

Alexander Melnikov: The main draw at the Nov. 20 Alice Tully Hall concert of Beethoven's Op. 30 violin sonatas may be been violinist Isabelle Faust. But the major revelation was her collaborator, Russian pianist Alexander

Melnikov, who was a font of interpretive ideas, but kept within a small frame that never stole focus from Faust. In fact, he opened new worlds with every phrase.

Joyce DiDonato: On Dec. 15 at Carnegie Hall, DiDonato delivered an inspired concept for Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*: Normally sung by men, DiDonato portrays the protagonist's beloved as she reads his journal — each song one of the entries written as he trudges towards self-imposed isolation and death. Having sung Rossini for years, DiDonato gave the music great precision, warmly hugged by Yannick Nézet-Séguin's rubato-prone pianism. But in the final song — a terrifying hallucination of a broken-down hurdy-gurdy man — the journal book was put away, with DiDonato experiencing it as if seeing the angel of death claiming her beloved. A stroke of genius. [It's available on video replay on Medici TV through March 16.](#)

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