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Arts & Entertainment

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GEORGIA ROWE: CLASSICAL NOTES

Berlin visit one to remember

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

2003 was a very good year for classical music fans, with events ranging from the historic to the sublime. Nothing topped the excitement of last month's appearance by the Berlin Philharmonic at Davies Symphony Hall, but the list of big names gracing local stages was long and stellar, with Mstislav Rostropovich, the Kirov Orchestra, Yo-Yo Ma, Samuel Ramey and the Takacs Quartet among the highlights.

In addition, the year saw local debuts by up-and-coming singers such as Juan Diego Florez and Salvatore Licita. Conductors including Valery Gergiev, David Robertson, Sakari Oramo and Bruno Weil made stops here, and audiences heard the world premiere of John Adams' gorgeous new work "My Father Knew Charles Ives," as well as the first Bay Area performances of music by Naomi Sekiya, Chen Yi and Kaija Saariaho.

The fall months brought several surprising -- and controversial -- new opera productions, beginning with San Francisco Opera's season-opening production of Virgil Thomson's "The Mother of Us All." This very American opera wasn't to everyone's liking, but many thought it was an appealing alternative to the more traditional fare usually served up on opening nights.

Along with the successes, though, there were a few events that didn't quite come off as planned. Here, then, are the best, the worst and the what-were-they-thinking disappointments of 2003:

The best

1. THE BERLIN PHILHARMONIC. After an absence of nearly 50 years, the orchestra many consider the world's best made a two-night stop at Davies Hall last month under the auspices of the San Francisco Symphony. Led by Simon Rattle, and performing music by Beethoven, Bartok, Debussy, Sibelius, Henri Dutilleux and Heiner Goebbels, the august ensemble lived up to its reputation.
2. "LADY MACBETH OF MTSSENSK." The San Francisco Opera waited until November to unveil its finest effort of the season, and it was a knockout. The company's new staging of Shostakovich's opera was sensational, with every element cohering -- stage direction by Johannes Schaaf, musical direction by Donald Runnicles, and a powerhouse performance by Norwegian soprano Solveig Kringelborn in the title role. A close runner-up was "The Mother of Us All," with a singularly focused Luana DeVoi as suffragette Susan B. Anthony.
3. JUAN DIEGO FLOREZ. The San Francisco Opera introduced a major talent to its audience during its summer revival of Rossini's "La Cenerentola." Peruvian tenor Juan Diego Florez is young and handsome, but he's also the real thing -- the kind of bel canto singer who comes along only once in a blue moon. Singing with glorious tone and moving with aristocratic assurance, he elevated an otherwise ho-hum production to the level of the sublime. Don't worry if you missed him: He returns to the Bay Area on Jan. 6 for a recital with Cal Performances.
4. "THE FLYING DUTCHMAN." The San Francisco Symphony's June semi-staging of Wagner's opera was the surprise hit of the summer. With Mark Delavan in the title role and Jane Eaglen as Senta, music director Michael Tilson Thomas achieved thrilling, dramatically cogent results at Davies Symphony Hall.
5. "AIDA." Festival Opera, the small but ambitious Walnut Creek-based company headed by Michael Morgan, took a huge chance on Verdi's "Aida" in July and came up with a triumph. Directed by Harvey Berman, the production proved you don't need elephants, or an elephantine budget, to do justice to Italian grand opera.
6. MAHLER'S NINTH SYMPHONY. The San Francisco Symphony continued its ambitious exploration of Mahler's symphonies in April's dynamic performances of the

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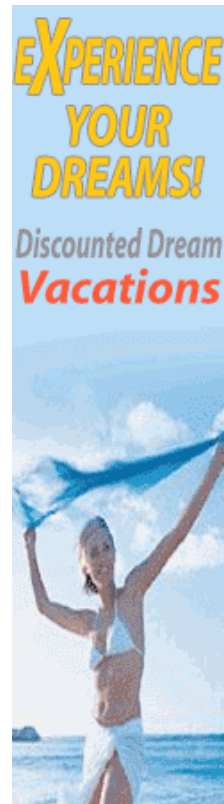
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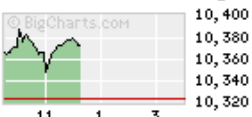
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composer's Ninth. The digital recorders were running, so look for the live CD to be released soon. Runners-up: The Berkeley Symphony's forceful performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, conducted by Kent Nagano in January; the Orchestre National de Lyon's riveting traversal of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," led by David Robertson at Zellerbach Hall in February.

7 (TIE). MATTHIAS GOERNE. German baritone Goerne, appearing with San Francisco Performances, came to the Herbst Theatre in March, presenting a rare opportunity for art song fans: Over three nights, he sang the full cycles of Schubert's "Die Schone Mullerin," "Schwanengesang" and "Winterreise." It was mesmerizing.

7. KARITA MATTILA. The same month, Finnish soprano Mattila made an unforgettable recital debut with Cal Performances, combining powerhouse vocalism and magnetic stage presence in works by Dvorak and Rachmaninoff.

8 (TIE). "JEPHTHA." Philharmonia Baroque's September performances of Handel's oratorio "Jeptha" unfolded with rare majesty under the direction of Nicholas McGegan.

8. "ELIJAH." The Oakland East Bay Symphony's massive May reading of Mendelssohn's "Elijah," with conductor Michael Morgan taking an aptly fiery approach to the Old Testament story, was magnificent.

9. CALIFORNIA SYMPHONY CHAMBER CONCERT. The California Symphony played its first-ever chamber concert at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in March, giving intimate -- and luminous -- performances of works by Bach, Copland and the late, great Lou Harrison.

10. LEIF OVE ANDSNES. Opening nights are often less about music than glitz and glamour, but San Francisco Performances broke the mold with its October gala featuring Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes. Playing solo works by Schumann and Schubert, Andsnes proved that probing artistry and season-openers are not mutually exclusive.

The worst:

1. IS THERE A TENOR IN THE HOUSE? San Francisco Opera's September revival of "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci" could have been a success -- if someone in the company had thought to engage tenors who could bring opera's famous double bill to life. In the latter production, Jon Frederic West's ineffectual stab at the role of Canio marked the season's low point.

2. AS THE SET TURNS: San Francisco Opera's new production of "The Barber of Seville" featured a fine cast of singers, but they were woefully overshadowed by the set, a mammoth multilevel house that rotated endlessly, for no apparent reason. The company's program notes suggest that Rossini's opera is all about the house. Wrong. It's supposed to be about the singing.

3. IT LOOKED GOOD ON PAPER: A new opera about Pontius Pilate? Sounds like a winning premise. In practice, Erling Wold's chamber piece "Sub Pontio Pilato" -- performed in its world premiere at ODC Theater in April -- was pretentious, long-winded and dramatically incomprehensible.

4. RIGHT SINGER, WRONG MUSIC: Baritone Thomas Hampson is a world-class vocalist, but his San Francisco Symphony appearance in September found him saddled with two negligible songs -- "Notturmo" and "Hymnus" -- by Richard Strauss. The singer returns in January in the second cast of S.F. Opera's "Barber" and for a solo recital for San Francisco Performances.

5. PIPE DOWN, ALREADY: This year's worst performances didn't all happen onstage. They came from audience members who talked, coughed, ate, rattled candy wrappers and let their cell phones ring in every concert hall throughout the Bay Area. We hate to harp on etiquette, but please try to be quiet in 2004. You're ruining it for the rest of us.

