

The Top Ten Performances of 2015

Wed Dec 23, 2015 at 5:17 pm

By Lawrence A. Johnson



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

[1. Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande*](#)

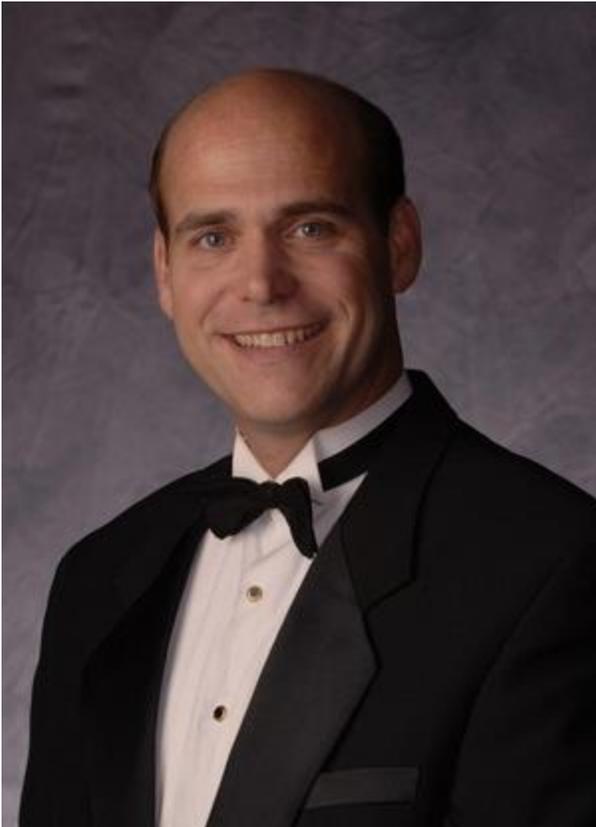
With late substitutions of two major roles, things didn't look promising for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's concert performances of Claude Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* in May. In fact, the cast from top to bottom proved first class with Stephane Degout and Jenny Carlstedt affecting as the doomed, child-like title lovers and Willard White commanding as the brutish Golaud. Playing Debussy's opera complete for the first time, there was a magical sense of freshness and discovery from the CSO musicians. Esa-Pekka Salonen conducted a haunting and memorable performance of Debussy's only opera, bringing out all the luminous half-tones as well as the psychological disequilibrium in the finest event of 2015.



Photo: Russell Jenkins/Ravinia Festival

[2. Igor Levit at Ravinia: Bach's Partitas](#)

In a marathon three-hour performance of Bach's complete keyboard Partitas in July, pianist Igor Levit displayed remarkable artistry, holding the Martin Theatre audience spellbound and bringing a finely terraced array of expression, tonal coloring and emotional depth.



[3. William Ferris Chorale: Requiem masses by Pizzetti and Somma](#)

The William Ferris Chorale performs just a handful of concerts every year but under music director Paul French, the programming and performances are invariably of the highest order. In February, French led the Chorale in a pair of early 20th-century requiems by two little-known Italian composers, Ildebrando Pizzetti and Bonaventura Somma. Coming just days after the death of John Vorrasi, the concert served as an apt memorial to the Chorale's cofounder, and French and his singers provided glowing and deeply felt advocacy to these beautiful, neglected works.



Photo: Andrew Cioffi

4. [Lyric Opera: Berg's *Wozzeck*](#)

The Lyric Opera of Chicago had its artistic ups and downs in 2015—see below—but the company's clear high point came in November with its first *Wozzeck* in over two decades. All of the edgy, astringent drama of Alban Berg's 1925 tragedy came through with riveting power and impact, propelled by David McVicar's grim, darkly efficient staging and extraordinary debuts by Tomasz Konieczny and Angela Denoke leading a world-beater cast.



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

5. [Northwestern Opera Theater: Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*](#)

Lyric Opera's ongoing embargo on any American opera that is not *Porgy and Bess* continues to baffle and dismay. Fortunately, Chicago audiences finally had the opportunity to discover Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* fifteen years after its San Francisco debut, courtesy of Northwestern University Opera Theater in February. The powerful performances by the student singers and effective staging made for a compelling and devastating experience that rivaled anything seen on local professional stages in 2015.



Photo: Elliot Mandel

6. [Collaborative Works Festival—American Song](#)

The brief respite between the summer and fall music seasons was once again filled in wonderful style by the Collaborative Works Festival. American song was this year's theme, and the terrific program at the Poetry Foundation—concentrating on composers influenced by the Transcendentalist movement—was highlighted by the sensitive and illuminating performances of Nicholas Phan and Nicole Heaston.



Photo: Norman Timonera

[7. Carlos Kalmar and the Grant Park Orchestra—Adams and Haydn](#)

One could pick almost any Grant Park Orchestra program led by Carlos Kalmar this summer for both inspired programming and vital and communicative performances. Among the finest summer nights was the “Harmony” program in August, offering a buoyant take on Haydn’s “Harmoniemesse” and a blistering performance of John Adams’ rocking *Harmonielehre*.



[8. Anne Sofie von Otter and Angela Hewitt at Mandel Hall](#)

The Swedish mezzo and Canadian pianist proved wonderfully simpatico partners, warming up a chilly January afternoon with a delightful selection of German and French songs and piano works for the University of Chicago Presents series.



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

9. [Evgeny Kissin](#)

The enigmatic Russian pianist has announced he is taking an extended break from U.S. touring, unfortunate news for his many local fans. But Kissin provided a worthy local sendoff with a memorable April recital of favored composers (Beethoven, Prokofiev, Liszt and Chopin) and a strikingly fresh and thrilling October [performance](#) of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with Andrew Davis and the CSO.



10. [North Shore Chamber Music Festival–Tchaikovsky’s Piano Trio](#)

Having reached its fifth season this year, the Northbrook festival, directed by married couple Vadim Gluzman and Angela Yoffe, continues to serve up exceptional performances mixing chamber cornerstones with lesser-known works. The opening program in June brought notice of the talented young Ariel Quartet, as well as an electrifying account of Tchaikovsky’s Piano Trio from Gluzman, cellist Mark Kosower and pianist William Wolfram.

Honorable Mentions

Riccardo Muti’s dueling Tchaikovsky and Scriabin cycles with the CSO peaked in June with an iridescent account of Scriabin’s *Poem of Ecstasy* and a full-blooded performance of Tchaikovsky’s sprawling *Manfred* Symphony that brought out the craggy, brooding drama. Tatiana Serjan gave a heartbreaking performance as the imperiled heroine in Lyric’s bleak and bizarre staging of *Tosca*. Kalmar and the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus provided an imposing local premiere for James Macmillan’s ambitious *Quickening* along with works of Wagner and Mendelssohn.

Also Hans-Peter Konig and the Grant Park Orchestra in a rich and eloquent account of Bruckner’s Symphony No. 6; Yefim Bronfman’s powerful cycle of Prokofiev’s complete piano sonatas at Ravinia; Muti’s CSO program of Hindemith and Prokofiev; Music of the Baroque’s performance of Haydn’s *Mass in Time of War* under Jane Glover; Kalmar’s performances of Randall Thompson’s Symphony No. 2 and Strauss’s *Heldenleben* with the Grant Park Orchestra; Thomas Hampson’s Ravinia recital of German lied and American song.

Chicago Q Ensemble’s January concert at Constellation offered a rare chance to dive into the sound world of a single contemporary composer—Caroline Shaw, winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for music. The four string players brought passion and insight to her faintly astringent, but fundamentally lyrical works. (Wynne Delacoma)

Bruce Tammen led the Chicago Chorale in a sublime performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in March, at Rockefeller Chapel, eliciting exquisite singing from his vocal ensemble, unforgettable arias from guest soloists, and burnished playing from a period-instrument ensemble. Nikolai Lugansky's Ravinia program of Schubert, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky displayed the pianist's musical acumen, flawless technique, and Old World virtuosity. (Tim Sawyier)

Anonymous 4 delivered the goods in a December program at Rockefeller Chapel that featured holiday-themed English language works from the 13th century forward. But it was a bittersweet event for a large audience of their devoted fans, since the concert was the final touring event in a storied 29-year career. (Michael Cameron)

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A disappointing CSO anniversary

Riccardo Muti elected to mark the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's 125th anniversary season by highlighting works of which the orchestra gave the world or U.S. premiere. Good idea except that in nearly every case, the chosen music consisted of familiar works the CSO performs regularly anyway, some as recently as last season.

Conspicuously absent from this seasonal retrospective are 20th-century music and the hundreds of American composers whose works were premiered by the CSO over the past century and a quarter. Especially grievous was overlooking John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1, the most celebrated CSO commission of the past 50 years. And, to no one's surprise, this year's significant birthday anniversaries of Carl Nielsen, David Diamond and Vincent Persichetti went completely ignored by an orchestra whose artistic leadership seems increasingly detached from the rest of the music world.

Finally, the CSO is marking its 125th anniversary season with just two premieres, and not a single commission by a major composer. Depressing.

Worst opera production

Lyric Opera opened its season in September with a new production of *Le nozze di Figaro* that delivered arguably the lamest Mozart show in the company's 60-year history. As misdirected by Barbara Gaines into a crass, sophomoric sitcom with garishly ugly costumes and constant sexual shtick, this crude and charmless show wasted a mostly solid cast in an embarrassing production complete with low-brow colloquial supertitles ("scumbag," etc.) that had little connection to Lorenzo da Ponte's witty libretto.

Never was one more grateful for Act IV cuts. Gott in Himmel.

Second worst opera production

Lyric nearly undermined a terrific cast in its February production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* with a post-apocalyptic lunar-surface unit set that had zero to do with the composer's detailed libretto. Director Tim Albery managed to recycle every hoary, postmodern revisionist staging cliché of the past three decades, as if they were newly discovered. Maybe to him but not to anyone else.

Le Roi n'a pas de vêtements

Pierre Boulez has always been extolled by his acolytes as writing works of such rarefied genius that only a few lesser mortals can divine their brilliance. To this skeptic, hearing the interminable *Derive 2* at the CSO's MusicNOW concert in March felt like a 50-minute water-boarding session, revealing the French composer's algorithmic music as cold, empty and a tortuous listen.

Lyric Opera rising

Despite some jarring production lapses in 2015, under Anthony Freud the Lyric Opera finally began to emerge from an artistic complacency characterized by unevenly cast productions of standard repertory. This year Lyric brought to Chicago audiences the local premiere of Mieczyslaw Weinberg's *The Passenger* in February and the world premiere of Jimmy Lopez's *Bel Canto* in December, the latter Lyric's first commission in over a decade.

Neither work is a masterpiece but both showed a welcome return to more ambitious and adventurous repertory presented in terrific productions with impeccable casts.

The company should continue the momentum with at least one 20th- or 21st-century work each season. A good place to start would be with revivals of the operas it premiered in the 1990s, especially William Bolcom's *McTeague* and *A View from the Bridge* and Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Who needs artistic leadership? You do.

Speaking in July about the impending exit of music director James Conlon after 11 seasons, Ravinia CEO Welz Kauffman suggested that the festival didn't really need a music director or regular classical leadership at the helm, and that he was doing just fine, thank you, overseeing the programming himself.

It is an undeniable achievement of some sort to make the Chicago Symphony Orchestra artistically irrelevant every summer. The Highland Park festival manages to hang on to some credibility as a classical destination for its worthy lineup of chamber music and recitals. But using the CSO for pops events and *Lord of the Rings* film screenings continues to appall observers and musicians alike. It's past time for Ravinia to start treating the CSO musicians with some of the respect it shows for aging divas and not like an uppity garage band rented for the night.

Good opera intentions

Despite wildly uneven choices in repertoire and direction, Chicago Opera Theater continues to carry the torch for American opera. COT's strong and impassioned performance of Tobias Picker's *Therese Raquin* in February marked one of the highlights of the Andreas Mitisek era.

Likewise, following up on its terrific production of Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium* in 2014, Third Eye Theater Ensemble presented a storefront production of Mohammed Fairouz's timely *Sumeida's Song* this fall, marking the promising young ensemble as a company to watch on the local scene.

Best premiere

Joshua Roman giving the world premiere of his cello concerto, *Awakening*, with David Danzmayr and the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra in October.

Farewells

Alan Heatherington and wife Gayle decided to draw the curtain on the Ars Viva orchestra after 20 seasons of artistic excellence in May.

Requiescat in Pace: Paul Freeman, John Vorrasi, Andrew Patner and [Marvin David Levy](#).

As always, a big thank you to our many advertisers whose loyal support allows us to continue to cover the busy and fascinating Chicago music scene—even when we really tick them off.

Personal thanks to Caitlin McKechny, the pride of Lake Bluff, for helping out on the ticket table at last month's successful [American Music Project](#) concert in New York with the JACK Quartet and Anthony McGill. (The program will be repeated March 6, 2016 at Ganz Hall in Chicago.)

Finally, a huge debt of gratitude to my CCR colleagues: Wynne Delacoma, Michael Cameron, John Y. Lawrence, Tim Sawyer, Gerald Fisher and Hannah Edgar for their superb and insightful writing, enthusiasm and good humor.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and best to all for a healthy and prosperous 2016.

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