

# REVIEWS

## PMM's reviewers look back at the past season

### Orchestral highlights — and some lowlights — of Verizon's 2008-2009 season

The Philadelphia Orchestra season started impressively with the mercurial Martha Argerich and chief conductor Charles Dutoit collaborating in a concert that showcased their strengths. Argerich demonstrated that her nimble fingerwork remains unrivalled in the First Piano Concertos of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, and Dutoit concluded with a finely nuanced performance of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Ravel's orchestration, of course). The potential high points of the season were three major choral-orchestral masterpieces by Berlioz. I say potential because things don't always go as well as anticipated. Dutoit failed to hold the oddly structured *Romeo and Juliet* together in a performance that managed to make Berlioz sound boring! Fortunately, Simon Rattle conducted the even longer and more-difficult-to-manage *The Damnation of Faust*. Rattle's credentials as an interpreter of French music in general and Berlioz in particular are certainly open to question based on previous recordings, but his overall command of large-scale pieces contributed to an incendiary performance that revealed every aspect of Berlioz's remarkable orchestration as he led his vast performing forces to the abyss. The monumental Berlioz *Requiem* will be the presumed climax of the season, much as Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand" was last year.

Once again, Vladimir Jurowski programmed a rarely heard and difficult to conduct major work (Mahler's *Das Klagende Lied*), and dazzled the audience with his technical virtuosity and ability to transmit his interpretive vision to the orchestra. We still have to wait until next year to hear Jurowski address the standard repertoire when he plays Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony

The indispensable visiting orchestras were a mixed bag this year. It was good to hear the New York Philharmonic conducted by Lorin Maazel perform Tchaikovsky's rarely heard Suite No. 3. It is full of typical Tchaikovsky melodies and is almost symphonic in scope. However, we did not need to hear Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony again, no matter how well it was played (and Maazel has made it one of his specialties). Franz Welser-Möst led the Cleveland Orchestra in a sterile performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony with a finale that was so fast and rigid that it almost seemed superfluous. You have to wonder why Welser-Möst bothers to play music like this. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra's peerless reputation insures that any visit will be a major event, but they hardly distinguished themselves at Verizon Hall this year. The Vienna Philharmonic is better known for its darkly burnished sound than its cutting precision. They actually sounded scrappy and Zubin Mehta's sluggish tempos didn't help. Then there is the question why any orchestra would schedule Chopin's Second Piano Concerto on tour. No matter what you think of Lang Lang's onstage mannerisms, the spotlight was on him, and this was just about the worst possible piece to showcase the orchestra's prowess.

All of which brings us to Gustavo Dudamel and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Amidst much anticipation, they provided the unequivocal highlight of the visiting orchestras season. It is customary for stuffy critics to grouse over young media sensations like Dudamel. And yes, Dudamel does not have an answer for the final movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony yet, but since so many other highly regarded conductors have had similar problems with

# REVIEWS

this music you can make the case that he is in very good company, and part of the problem may be Brahms. The minor pieces of Leonard Bernstein represented adventurous programming and Dudamel and his orchestra generated plenty of excitement. The Israel Philharmonic is clearly not in the class of

the Vienna Philharmonic, but they sounded better under Dudamel. The bottom line is that Dudamel is a charismatic and gifted conductor who created an electric atmosphere in Verizon Hall, and the importance of that for the world of classical music should not be underestimated.

*Arthur Lintgen*

## Best of the '08-'09 season

This season reflected the effects of a woeful economy on the world of the arts and non-profits generally, and yet there was plenty of inventive programming, greeted by enthusiastic audiences. It was especially gratifying, for example, to hear of standing-room-only crowds in March for the world premiere of Andrea Clearfield's Tibetan-inspired *Lung Ta*, a mixed media work performed by Network For New Music and Group Motion Dance. A month later, Chamber Music Now! gave us four new works (composers Maneval, Brodhead, Laganella, and Belcastro) for chamber ensemble and voice, inspired by and performed at Eastern State Penitentiary, with nary an empty seat. In both cases, the music was engaging, very well performed, and connected solidly to audiences clearly hungry for something new. More of this, please!

Piano solos are a standard of any season, and there were a number of highlights. Mitsuko Uchida is one of our great ones, and her spring recital at Perelman, in music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann, gave us much to chew on and dream about. One cannot agree with every interpretive choice (her playing of the mighty Schumann *Fantasy* possessed vehemence that verged on banginess), but unquestionably, this is a uniquely eloquent voice. In her spirit of thoughtful and engaged playing is the young Jonathan Biss, who presented penetrating Mozart, elegant Schubert, brilliant Chopin, and a few whimsies by Hungarian composer Kurtág in April.

The brilliant pianist Krystian Zimerman had to cancel his spring recital at Kimmel, but he was here in the fall for a shimmering reading of the astonishing

Piano Concerto of Lutoslawski. Other highlights of the Philadelphia Orchestra season included a gorgeous rendering of Mahler's *Wayfarer Songs*, from Philly's own Eric Owens, and enticing visits from potential music directors, including Denève, Jurowski, and Robertson. And kudos for Charles Dutoit, who, despite some misgivings and surprisingly clumsy early outings, is now leading the band with authority and skill in a difficult period.

Our skimpy opera scene always manages a number of strong shows, which speaks to the potential for a more robust schedule. I agree with colleague Quint about the delightful *Italian Girl from Algiers*, by OCP, but (the editor gets the last word!) for me the standout singer was the young American tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who, as Lindoro, displayed a voice as rich and sweet as a late summer peach. The OCP/Curtis joint production of Berg's *Wozzeck* presented the masterpiece not so



*Lawrence Brownlee*

much as a daunting work of dissonance, but rather as a riveting and powerful theater piece. And AVA closed their season with *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in a production packed with prodigious singing, at a level of excellence that is taken for granted by AVA devotees, and ignored by all others to their considerable detriment.

*Peter Burwasser*

# REVIEWS

## Best Concerts of 2008-2009

The Opera Company of Philadelphia is always at its best with comedies, preferably in Italian. Last November's season opener, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, crackled with good humor. With OCP favorite Ruxandra Donose as Isabella — in previous seasons, she was a wonderful Rosina, Dorabella, and Cinderella — and the dependably hilarious Kevin Glavin handling the buffo bass role of Mustafa, the production couldn't miss on either dramatic or musical grounds.

The Israel Philharmonic, in town last fall under Gustavo Dudamel, gave us a Brahms' Fourth Symphony of remarkably cogency, clarity, and power. The young Venezuelan is an exuberant yet self-effacing presence on the podium, and he had the Israeli ensemble sounding like the Vienna Phil.

From the local band, we heard many superb concerts, including one led by Vladimir Jurowski, the glamorous international star we pine for as the Philadelphia's next music director — and one from good old dependable Charles Dutoit, who actually has the job, at least for now. In March, Jurowski led a perfect performance of a less-than-perfect piece, Gustav Mahler's early cantata *Das klagende Lied*,

which received its first-ever Philadelphia hearing. A couple of weeks later, Dutoit was in Verizon conducting three 20th-century staples, Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, the Prokofiev Violin Concerto No.2 (Lisa Batiashvili was the very capable soloist) and the complete *Firebird* ballet. In the Stravinsky, there were lengthy stretches of orchestral playing that brought to mind the luminous transparency of Riccardo Muti's best Beethoven and Scriabin performances.

The Philadelphia Chamber Music Society remains the best musical value around, world-class artists for about \$20 a show. On Halloween, András Schiff presented an evening of Beethoven piano sonatas, readings that were carefully modulated and structured, yet emotionally potent. At the beginning of April, the Paris-based Ysaÿe Quartet programmed three works, each composed toward the end of their creator's life — Fauré's Quartet in E minor, Op.121, Bartók's Quartet No. 6, and Cesar Franck's only string quartet of 1889. All these compositions are characterized by considerable complexity and density, and the French musicians played them with an exceptional sense of organic coherence.

*Andrew Quint*

## Plethora of season highlights

The past musical season was so full of "bests," a complete list would fill tomes. I will therefore list them with minimal comments.

**Orchestras.** James Conlon led a riveting program with the Philadelphians of Schreker, Beethoven (the Seventh) and scenes from Zemlinsky's *The Dwarf* with soprano Mary Dunleavy and tenor Rodrick Dixon, and Christoph Eschenbach presented a "repeat highlight" with violinists Salerno-Sonnenberg and Kavakos, and Schubert's Great C Major Symphony. Solzhenitsyn conducted the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra with the right size, skills, and sound, in a young-Mozart program with violinist Korbinian Altenberger. Also memorable was the group's ideal mix of Handel, Bach, and Telemann, led by conductor-violinist Scott Yoo.

**Chamber music.** Standouts were the array of performances by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, including Schubert's two piano trios performed by So-ovin Kim, violin, Sophie Shao, cello, and Solzhenitsyn, piano; the indomitable Menahem Pressler with the Muir Quartet; and at least five others, including two with the consummate clarinetist Ricardo Morales.

Other chamber music "bests" included Smetana's *From My Life*, performed first by members of the Lenape Chamber Ensemble in Doylestown and the next evening by four extraordinary young women at the Curtis Institute. Also the Wister Quartet's performances of Italian Baroque gems at Beth Zion-Beth Israel on the Lenape series, at the German Society in their 1807 and Friends guise, and as the core of the

# REVIEWS

Amerita Chamber Players (with Davyd Booth trading his violin for a harpsichord).

**Early music.** The small medieval ensemble Quiditas, a Kile Smith family affair, at the German Society was both masterful and charming, while Piffaro, the Renaissance Band's "Harmony of the Spheres" made esoteric notions accessible through expressive and entertaining performances and brief narrations. Piffaro's illustrated program books are masterpieces, and their "Christmas in Renaissance France" should be an annual event.

**Choral music.** Matthew Glandorf and the Choral Arts Society presented a first-class Bach Mass in B minor in collaboration with the Bach Festival of Philadelphia. Accompanied by the excellent Bach Festival Orchestra, the chorus sound was rich and transparent, with precise agility in the rapid passages. Among the soloists were local Baroque divas Julianne Baird and Laura Heimes, and countertenor Ian Howell, who was simply phenomenal.

**Student performances.** Three of the best choral performances were not by professionals: Joseph P. Fitzmartin's Keystone State Boychoir, Temple University's Concert Choir, and their combined choirs, led by Alan Harler. The Concert Choir's "Music from a French Cathedral" included the Fauré *Requiem* and shorter works by Poulenc, Duruflé, and Lili Boulanger. A month later the Temple combined choirs and the university symphony orchestra gave a strong, nuanced rendition of Poulenc's *Gloria*, in which soprano Angela Devine, a college senior, far surpassed some professionals who have graced our stages. A major contribution was the orchestra which shone in the Poulenc and Berlioz' *Roman Carnival Overture* under the baton of guest Charles Dutoit (recipient of the Boyer College Tribute Award), and in Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony under their music director Luis Biava.

Speaking of student orchestras, the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, whether in the pit for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Berg's *Wozzeck*, or Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*, or onstage for Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, was as amazing as ever.

**Opera.** Curtis singers also served the music brilliantly in a double bill (with piano) of *Impressions of Pelléas* (Peter Brook's adaptation of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*) and Menotti's *The Medium*. In these performances, an even higher number of singers than usual exhibited enormous vocal and dramatic skills, beautiful voices, and that quality of "presence" that cannot be taught. Among the exceptional talent were graduates Shuler Hensley as *Wozzeck*, Israeli mezzo Rinat Shaham, Israeli soprano Rinnat Moriah, and Philadelphian Eric Owens (also Temple alumnus).

Shaham showed her mastery of art song as well as opera in her Curtis recital, and Owens (Curtis Opera and Temple alumnus, and Astral Artist), best known for his operatic roles, also revealed his gifts as a song interpreter in his recitals for PCMS, at Settlement Music School (his other alma mater), and in the Mahler *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* with Dutoit and the Orchestra.

PCMS' outstanding vocal recitals this season included (along with Owens) those by the young American bass-baritone Morris Robinson, English baritone Christopher Maltman, and German tenor Christoph Pregardien.

Tempesta di Mare's season-ending concert of Handel's early opera/cantata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* also excelled. The drama and humor came across vocally, textually, and expressively in the persons of super-agile soprano Clara Rottsolk as *Aci*, rich-voiced mezzo Lorie Gratis as *Galatea*, and baritone (with tenor and bass ranges!) David Newman as *Polifemo*, and the instrumental ensemble was superb.

Also, there was Lyric Fest, with its always fascinating union of literature and music, in "Mahler Resurrected" and "Music at the White House."

But the absolute highlight of the season was the benefit concert by and for the Chamber Orchestra, with Plácido Domingo singing in Philadelphia for the first time in 25 years. Sounding decades younger than 67, he made each aria and song a vignette of an entire personage, exuding warmth, charm, and humanity. Tops.