

Best 10 concert of 2011

Ensembles paired the unconventional with traditional fare

The classical music scene is an especially rich and deep one in the Capital Region. With more than 10 venues that offer everything from solo performers, choruses and chamber ensembles to opera and orchestras on almost any day of the week, attendance remained stable in 2011, and in some cases attracted near-capacity houses.

This past season offered some tantalizing alternatives to the regular fare. The Philadelphia Orchestra at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center added two pop concerts and two nights with the circus as well as the debuts of four conductors. There's no word yet on whether that means there will be more Cole Porter and less Beethoven on future programs.

Two new opera/arts organizations, Hubbard Hall Opera Theatre and Mosaic-Arts, continued to show their flair and imaginative way with a dollar to create sensational productions.

New directors made the scene at the Luzerne Chamber Music Festival (violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn); the Saratoga Chamber Music Festival (pianist Andre-Michel Schub); the Octavo Singers (Curtis Funk) and the Mendelssohn Club (Jeffrey Vrendenburg).

The Albany Symphony Orchestra made its long-anticipated Carnegie Hall debut in May to much acclaim, reprising its luminous April "Spiritual Project" concert that starred riveting baritone Nathan De'shon Myers.

Two other organizations are in transition. The Festival of Baroque Music gave its final concert after a run of 52 years, now that founder Robert Conant has retired. And despite a successful spring concert, the Saratoga Springs Youth Orchestra couldn't attract enough players to have a fall season.

Herewith, the top 10 concerts of the year, arranged by date:

Percussions de Strasbourg/Gerard Grisey at EMPAC (Feb. 27). An otherworldly and electrifying experience with percussion instruments matching the actual rhythms of the stars in a new kind of composition called spectral music.

Violinist Ray Chen at Union College's Memorial Chapel (April 28). Chen is only 22 but already a top prize winner. There are not enough superlatives to describe his playing. His charming onstage demeanor was equally engaging.

Albany Pro Musica at Cathedral of Immaculate Conception

(May 10). The floors vibrated and the voices and orchestra thundered in Berlioz's Requiem to make for a viscerally felt drama.

Boston Early Music's "Niobe, Queen of Thebes" at Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center (June 26). Like watching a great master's oil painting come to life with opulent costumes, clever sets, superb singing, and formidable baroque orchestra.

Opera Saratoga's "Cosi fan tutte" at Spa Little Theatre (July 1). A marvelous updating whose vitality and mirth spilled over the footlights.

Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood (July 22). All-Baroque concert with Pablo Heras-Casado. A favorite conductor in a concert that was a winner. (Chosen by Gazette music writer Leslie Kandell)

Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood (Aug. 26). Lightly staged version of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." A departure from custom with a savvy Bramwell Tovey, who also played honky-tonk piano. (Kandell's choice)

Harmonious Blacksmith at Kiggins Hall, Emma Willard (Oct. 10). The group's brilliant and natural grasp of the periods' styles made it seem like they were court musicians of some 16th century prince who had dropped in for a visit.

Pianist **Yuja Wang** at Massry Center for the Arts (Oct. 17). A grand display of virtuosic prowess from an artist that continues to grow, amaze and touch.

Interpreti Veneziani at Troy Savings Bank Music Hall (Nov. 7). Baroque playing of such exuberance and brilliance that the music seemed as fresh as if it had just been composed.

— Gazette classical music writer Geraldine Freedman