

Classical music: The year's best discs

By **Kyle MacMillan**
Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

The one constant in the topsy-turvy world of classical-music recordings is a dependable wealth of high-quality performances by up-and-comers and established stars alike.

This year was no exception. Indeed, it is virtually impossible, given the strong field of candidates and the many surprisingly varied sub-categories within classical designation, to compose a conclusive top 10 list.

Instead, here, in no particular order, is a look at 10 of the most satisfying releases of the year, any of which might be just the thing for the classical fan on your holiday shopping list:

"Bernstein Mass," Baltimore Symphony, Marin Alsop, conductor, Jubilant Sykes, baritone (*Naxos*). This massive 1971 work, a somehow cohesive conglomeration of musical styles ranging from blues to Broadway to brash atonality, manages to both speak of its time and transcend it.

Also, former music director of the Colorado Symphony, has long championed this work, which is gaining increasing respect. The Bernstein protégée and musical

polyglot puts that experience to good use, comfortably navigating the work's ever-changing idioms and infusing it with dynamism.

"Verismo," Renée Fleming, soprano, Chorus and Symphony Orchestra of Milan, Marco Armiliato, conductor (*Decca*). While her easy charm and down-to-earth elegance have obviously helped, it is Fleming's superlative vocal and acting skills that have made her one of the leading operatic stars of our time.

In this group of arias by Puccini and other Italian composers from the turn of the last century, she goes beyond merely beautiful singing to convey, even in these short excerpts, a deeply felt sense of the characters.

"Beethoven Late Quartets, Vol. 1," Cypress String Quartet (*Cypress String Quartet*). One of the joys of today's chamber-music scene is the regular emergence of exciting young string quartets, such as this fine San Francisco-based ensemble formed in 1996.

It has daringly ventured into some of the most challenging quartet repertoire with this self-produced effort, offering direct, incisive interpretations of these two culminating masterpieces by the essential composer in this form.

"Sonatas & Etudes," Yuja Wang, piano (*Deutsche Grammophon*). The 22-year-old pianist, who appeared last summer at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival with the Philadelphia Or-

chestra, has already generated considerable buzz in the keyboard world, and it's easy to understand why.

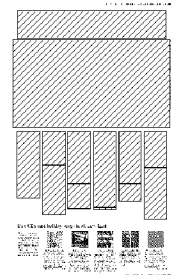
Eschewing the easy road for her debut release, she tackles five technically daunting works by composers ranging from Liszt to Ligeti, performing with virtuosic panache and an artful maturity usually expected of a more seasoned soloist.

"Beethoven: The Symphonies," Minnesota Orchestra, Osmo Vänskä, conductor (*Bis*). These five recordings have been released individually during the past four years, but, just in time for the holidays, the label has wisely boxed them together.

Whether the world needs another set of these much-recorded works is a valid question. But Vänskä pushes this traditionally second-tier American orchestra to new heights, creating smart, zesty versions of these works that might not be definitive but still have plenty to offer.

"Die Schöpfung (The Creation)," Freiburger Barockorchester, RIAS Kammerchor, René Jacobs, conductor (*Harmonia Mundi*). Haydn's 1798 oratorio, inspired in part by Handel's celebrated works in the form, is apparently very much in vogue, considering another recording of it made last year's top 10.

This German-language version, led by one of the world's most celebrated early-instrument conductors, more than holds it own, satisfying with rich, uncompro-



missing performances across the board.

“Bartók Concertos,” London Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic, Pierre Boulez, conductor (*Deutsche Grammophon*). No living conductor is more at home in 20th-century repertoire than Boulez, who is himself a noted composer with deep roots in that era.

These intense, authoritative recordings, featuring four top-level soloists, capture the still-startling, avant-garde modernity of these under-appreciated masterpieces.

“Mahler Symphony No. 8,” San Francisco Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor (*SF Media*). Mahler’s sweeping series of symphonies, with their extraordinary shifts in emotions, have lured many great

conductors wishing to put their imprint on these pieces.

Among the most recent to take up the challenge is Tilson Thomas, who leads a bold, expansive version of the “Symphony of a Thousand” that bores unreservedly into the heart of the massive work.

“Beethoven: The Complete Piano Concertos,” Richard Goode, piano, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Iván Fischer (*Nonesuch*). In 1993, the release of Goode’s complete set of Beethoven sonatas created something of a sensation, almost immediately establishing itself as a must-have version of the bedrock works.

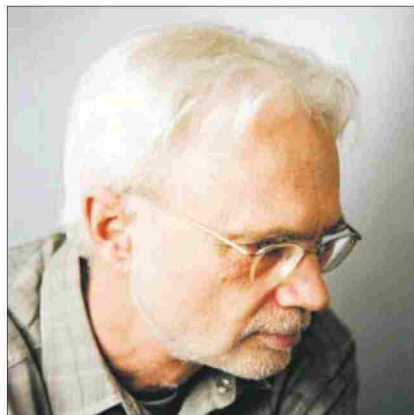
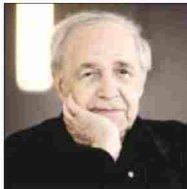
Teaming with this fine Hungarian orchestra, Goode clearly hopes to do the same thing with the piano concertos, and he certainly comes

close, displaying the intelligence, insight and profound expressiveness for which he is well known.

“John Adams: Doctor Atomic Symphony,” St. Louis Symphony, David Robertson, conductor (*Nonesuch*). Adams is arguably the most influential operatic composer of the last quarter century, and one of his biggest successes in the form so far has been his 2005 anti-homage to J. Robert Oppenheimer, “Doctor Atomic.”

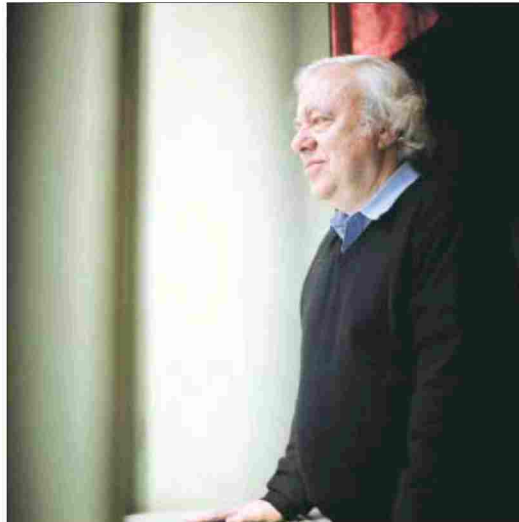
Adams later transformed the opera’s principal themes into a symphony that is dedicated to Robertson, who led the world premiere in 2008. The conductor’s commitment to this work is obvious in this bold, focused performance.

No conductor is more at home in avant-garde 20th-century repertoire than Pierre Boulez.
Harald Hoffmann



American composer John Adams transformed his 2005 opera, “Doctor Atomic,” into a symphony. *Margaretta Mitchell*

Conductor René Jacobs, a revered figure in the period-instrument scene, takes on Haydn’s oratorio, “The Creation.” *Harmonia Mundi*



With a new set of concerto recordings, ever-reliable pianist Richard Goode returns to Beethoven, the composer with whom he is most identified. *Michael Wilson*



In her latest release, star soprano Renée Fleming spotlights Italian arias from the turn of the last century. *Universal Music Classical*