

THE BEST OF THE YEAR

THE SETS SUPERLATIVE: Our ten favorite full-length opera recordings of the year were Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, stylishly shaped by Marcello Viotti (Dynamic); Britten's *Death in Venice*, paced masterfully by Richard Hickox (Chandos); Donizetti's brilliant one-act, *Elvida*, led by Antonello Allemandi (Opera Rara); Houston Grand Opera's world-premiere recording of Floyd's *Cold Sassy Tree*, conducted by Patrick Summers (Albany); Paul McCreesh's pellucid reading of Gluck's *Paride ed Elena* (Archiv); Jason Kao Hwang's startlingly original *The Floating Box*, its complexities untangled by conductor Juan Carlos Rivas (New World); Strauss's *Daphne*, as set blooming by Renée Fleming and Semyon Bychkov (Decca); *La Traviata* from Salzburg (DG), its starry cast commanded by Carlo Rizzi (DG); Vivaldi's *Bajazet*, brought to exhilarating life by Fabio Biondi (Virgin); and the same composer's *Orlando Furioso*, given a scorching performance by conductor Jean-Christophe Spinosi and company (Naïve).

THE DAZZLING DOZEN: Twelve outstanding recitals were Cecilia Bartoli's breathtaking *Opera Proibita* (Decca); a rich all-French program from Ian Bostridge (EMI); Johan Botha's authoritative disc of Wagner excerpts (Oehms); Christine Brewer's boldly delivered *Great Operatic Arias* (Chandos); a deeply personal *Dichterliebe*, courtesy of Christian Gerhaher (RCA); Matthias Goerne and Alfred Brendel's Olympian traversal of *Schwanengesang* and *An Die Ferne Geliebte* (Decca); exquisite *Mozart Arias* from Soile Isokoski (Ondine); the Jennifer Larmore collection *Bravura Diva* (Opera Rara); *Silent Noon*, a beauty from Bryn Terfel (Decca); Rolando Villazón's high-flying *Gounod and Massenet Arias* (Virgin); a disarming program of *American Songs* by Deborah Voigt (EMI); and Anne Sofie von Otter's elegant *Music for a While*.

NONE DARE CALL IT CROSSOVER: Renée Fleming's *Haunted Heart* included cuts by Mahler and Villa-Lobos as well as Stevie Wonder.

STAR POWER: Individual work worthy of note included knockout turns by David Daniels, Ildebrando D'Arcangelo and Vivica Genaux in *Bajazet* (Virgin); Joyce DiDonato's delicious Cenerentola (Naxos); the nuanced polish of Christine Brewer, William Burden and Susan Graham in *Vanessa* (Chandos); Philip Langridge's poignant Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (Chandos); Marie-Nicole Lemieux's blazing Orlando (Naïve); and the radiant Love Simpson of Patricia Racette in *Cold Sassy Tree* (Albany).

THERE'S A REASON HE STILL SINGS SO WELL: Plácido Domingo decided to make his long-delayed debut as Wagner's Tristan in the recording studio, rather than the opera house.

BEST OF THE PAST: Outstanding historical releases included Edita Gruberova's Salzburg recital (Orfeo); Rosanna Carteri and Cesare Valletti in *La Traviata* (Testament); Andante's double *Fidelio* package from Vienna; and a welcome French-language *Vêpres Siciliennes* (Opera Rara).

DID CECILIA BARTOLI REALIZE WHAT SHE HAD STARTED? The year's releases included at least a half-dozen complete operas by Vivaldi.

PERFECT PICTURES: Especially sharp DVDs were Alfano's *Cyrano*, starring Roberto Alagna (DG); *Les Troyens* from Paris's Châtelet; Katie Mitchell's clever film of *The Turn of the Screw* (OpusArte); Scotto and Bergonzi in a sublime 1967 *L'Elisir d'Amore* (Hardy Classic); Salzburg's staging of Henze's *L'Upupa und der Triumph der Sohnesliebe* (EuroArts); the BBC broadcast of Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* (Sony); Les Arts Florissants in *Les Indes Galantes* at Paris Opera (OpusArte); Finnish National Opera's realization of Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Rasputin* (Ondine/Koch); and Christian Chaudet's mixed-media *Rossignol* (EMI).

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