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Some Flavorful Picks from 2015's Classical Bumper Crop (Part 1: Non-Iowa)

By [BARNEY SHERMAN \(/PEOPLE/BARNEY-SHERMAN\)](#) • 13 HOURS AGO

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Phil Maass, IPR's sound engineer extraordinaire, solves knotty problems every day. So it's not surprising that when I was trying to whittle down my list of classical releases for Charity Nebbe's year-end show, it was Phil who came up with the fix. Why, he asked, does it need to be the Top 10? Why not 15 or 17 or whatever number it comes out to?

Phil and I had been talking about how the classical music world seems to be popping in 2015 in a way we didn't sense 20 years ago. We weren't alone: back in 1995, someone wrote a book called *Who Killed Classical Music?*, which saw the classical recording industry imploding. What's happened instead is more or less the opposite. There's an explosion of new releases, year after year. In addition to three new cycles of Beethoven piano sonatas annually (there were only three total when I was born), we keep getting first recordings of rediscovered masterpieces, and above all, a renaissance of riveting new music. You couldn't possibly hear all the worthy contenders, and the more you try, the harder it gets to narrow it down to ten.



Once Phil liberated me from that number, the exercise became fun. Of course, my list is provisional - below it you'll find my "wish list" of albums I've not managed to get my hands on, and there are others I should add - and I plan to do an entire post and radio series of **Iowa-based classical albums, because it was a great year** here. Moreover, this is meant to list "albums that would make great holiday gifts" more than to rank "the best of 2015" (how would I know?), as you'll see from at least one choice. Also, next year I'll put together another "mega-meta list (<http://iowapublicradio.org/post/so-what-were-best-classical-albums-2014-worldwide-meta-list-tries-answer>)" tallying critics' choices from around the world, since that process is more likely to catch truly outstanding releases. But with those caveats, here goes, in no particular order. [PS: Charity asked me about the CD vs download question - I'll get into that in my next post too, but let's get on with the list...]

Bach: Suites for solo cello - David Watkin, cello (Resonus 10147)

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1691280).

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1691280) In the decade when I was a kid, a total of three recordings of the Bach Cello Suites came out (not that I was paying attention);

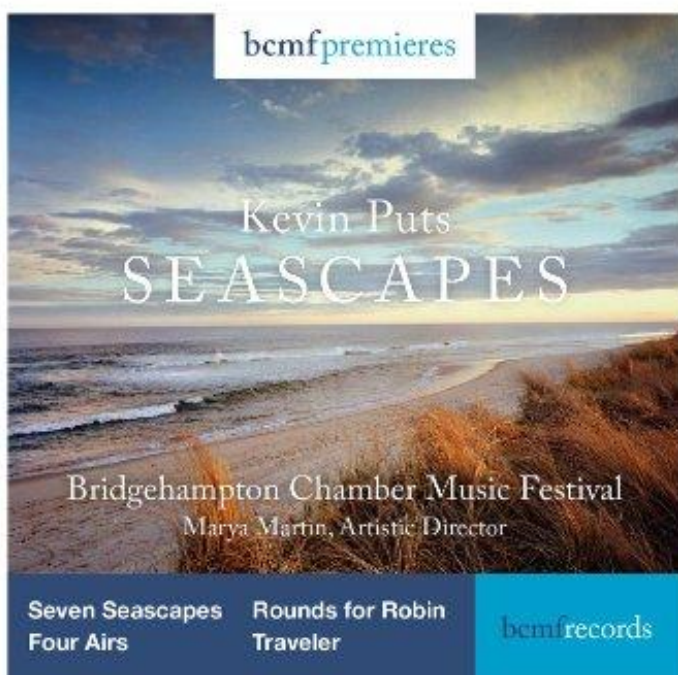


(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Bestof2015Bach.jpg)

but halfway through the 2010s there have already been 47 new recordings - about **eight new recordings per year**. (And that's just on the cello; there were also recordings on guitar, marimba, and, notably, lute (http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=CD-16305)). The glut is easy to explain: this music is at the core of every cellist's imagination, there are way more cellists than there used to be (world population has more than doubled, middle-class membership, by standard measures, quintupled); and meanwhile, barriers to entry have collapsed, since to record these suites now all you need is a pair of microphones and a laptop. I'm not complaining.

For one thing, no single recording can do justice to this music, so there's always room for more;

further, with this many entrants, some are going to be special. I can't claim to know what the best set of 2015 was, but I can say that every now and then I hear one that especially moves me - and this year, that was, above all, David Watkin's. In a golden age of Bach playing and scholarship, he's taken it all in, let his insight mature and grow over decades, and recorded them just before giving up the cello due to a muscle disease (he's taken up conducting instead). Not a moment too soon: Watkin has found his way to the deeply humane core of these works; he sounds both natural and profound. Even if you've heard many recordings, I recommend adding this to your shortlist.



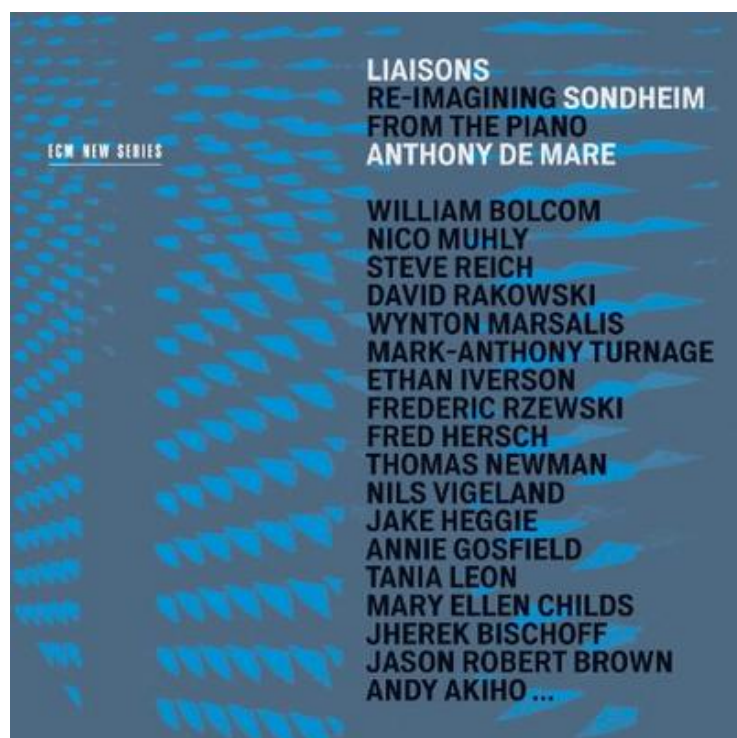
Kevin Puts: *Seascapes*

(<http://naxosdirect.com/items/kevin-puts-seascapes-313743>)(Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival, through Naxos) - Missouri-born Kevin Puts won a Pulitzer in 2012 for his opera *Silent Night* and has released some great choral and orchestral recordings, but *Seascapes* is the first album devoted entirely to his instrumental chamber music. Puts has said that his main musical concern is communicating with listeners, and in this he embodies a trend: major composers are rejecting the avant-garde philosophy expressed in the 1958 phrase, "Who cares if you listen?" Puts cares - and I couldn't stop listening. The title work of the new album is

a richly imagined response to descriptions of the sea by writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf and

Douglas Adams; the four "Airs" let the instruments sing; but for Charity I chose his *Rounds for Robin*

(<https://youtu.be/fHMyCDr4Pds>). I was afraid that this memorial to Robin Williams might feel overdone or maudlin, but it's neither. Instead of a lament, it seeks to embody something of Robin Williams' "spirit and humor" as well as a hint of his darker undertone - and captures it perfectly. And *Rounds for Robin* represents another salutary trend. The classical world used to pit itself in opposition to popular culture, against which it claimed timeless superiority, but in 2015 composers want to be a part of the creative currents of our time (as, say, Haydn was in his day). I didn't realize until just before Charity's show that the first three notes of *Rounds for Robin* come from the Mork and Mindy theme song, and it's just as well - I can say that it is musically completely convincing even if you don't know. And it demonstrates how engaging with popular culture can enrich classical music, at least when the engagement comes from the heart.



***Liaisons: Re-Imagining Sondheim* - Anthony de Mare, piano, playing 36 composers (ECM 2470-72 (<http://www.liaisonsproject.com/>))** Stephen Sondheim turned 85 this year, had a Hollywood hit with *Into the Woods*, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, let slip that he's working on a new musical - and inspired a notable three-disc instrumental set. Actually, he inspired it ten years ago, when he was a kid of 75: it was then that pianist Anthony de Mare began commissioning new pieces that re-envision Sondheim songs. The project ended up with 36 composers from many genres (classical, jazz, Broadway and indie rock) ranging in age from their 30s to their 70s, with such participants as Wynton Marsalis and Steve Reich. If you love Sondheim, don't miss it: the re-imaginings reveal

both musical possibilities and emotional possibilities.

Rachmaninoff, *Variations* and Trifonov, *Rachmaniana* - Daniil Trifonov, piano; Philadelphia Orchestra/ Yannick Nezet-Sequin (Deutsche Grammophon 479 4970) (http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1866711). I love Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, but with hundreds of recordings out I tend to ignore new ones. I'm glad I didn't in this case: this 24-year-old Russian artist creates magical sounds at the keyboard, but at the same time, conveys what's at play in this irresistible piece - and I'm using "play" in the fullest sense. He really communicates, both with us and with the Philadelphia Orchestra and its gifted Canadian music director Yannick Nezet-Sequin (age 40). Trifonov adds some solo Rachmaninoff and - here's the kicker - his own composition, *Rachmaniana*, inspired by his love of the composer. It represents another trend: the breakdown of the strict division of labor between people who write music and people who play it (a division which barely existed in the 18th century and still was permeable in Rachmaninoff's day).



Clockworking - Nordic Affect (Sono Luminus 70001

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Bestof2015Rachmani



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/BEST2015Clockwork

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1955772))- I mentioned the division of labor in classical music, whereby some people wrote the notes while others just played them. Let me add that the ones who composed were mainly people with Y chromosomes. This album was one of a number this year to show that imbalance being redressed. All five of its composers come from Iceland, a country of 300,000, which has been called the “per-capita capital of the world” - and perhaps that includes female composers per capita? That split I mentioned above with popular culture appears never to have had much strength in Iceland - one of these composers, María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir, is known mainly for her indie band *anima*, and two others worked with Bjork and Sigur Ros. Another split in the classical world is between period instruments and modern ones,

but this group is playing new music on baroque instruments. A final boundary-breaker is that this is a group project. Since Beethoven, classical music has focused on the individual "genius," but this disc gives you a sense of a scene, a group of artists. As it happens, one of the five earned renown on her own this year, Anna Thorvaldsdottir: she was named the New York Philharmonic's Kravis Emerging Composer - she's the second person ever chosen - and released two acclaimed albums of her compositions (*In the Light of Air*, (<http://www.annathorvalds.com/in-the-light-of-air/>) on Sono Luminus, and *Aerial* (<http://www.annathorvalds.com/aerial/>), on Deutsche Grammophon). But you can sample one of the compositions from the latter album on *Clockworking*, as well as spellbinding works by the other composers.



Heinrich Biber: *Baroque Splendor* (Alia Vox AVSA9912

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Best2015Savall.jpg)

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=2109222): 2015 was a year of hits for a certain Justin, but in the classical world, we got the Fever for an earlier Biber, the Czech-born composer Heinrich Biber. The leading musician in Salzburg a century before Mozart, he inspired several great albums this year. For me, the standout was a new recording centered on his 1682 Salzburg Mass, which has places of its own in the record books. It has 54 separate parts for voices and instruments, and while I know of an earlier piece with 60, that is just one movement - so Biber's full Mass probably has more notes than any work before it. The manuscript is huge; it was re-discovered in 1870 by a grocer who, legend has it, was just about to wrap vegetables in it when he noticed the notes. There were a lot of notes to notice.

All those notes create a musical challenge: the piece can sometimes sound, to quote Matthew Westphal, "tedious and overblown." That's not even slightly the case in this new recording. The Catalan master Jordi Savall has conducted the works several time since 1999, and says that on listening carefully "we discover a very subtle structure and some surprising harmonic shifts as well as a rich abundance of motifs... We are enthralled by the breathtaking emotion and guileless beauty." I certainly was. The recorded sound is also extraordinary - the 54 musicians were spread out in different parts of a cathedral and you can actually hear it on even two channels. No audiophile should miss it, or the other marvelous pieces on the album. And, yes, I recommend

getting the CD for the beautiful booklet and amazing sound quality.



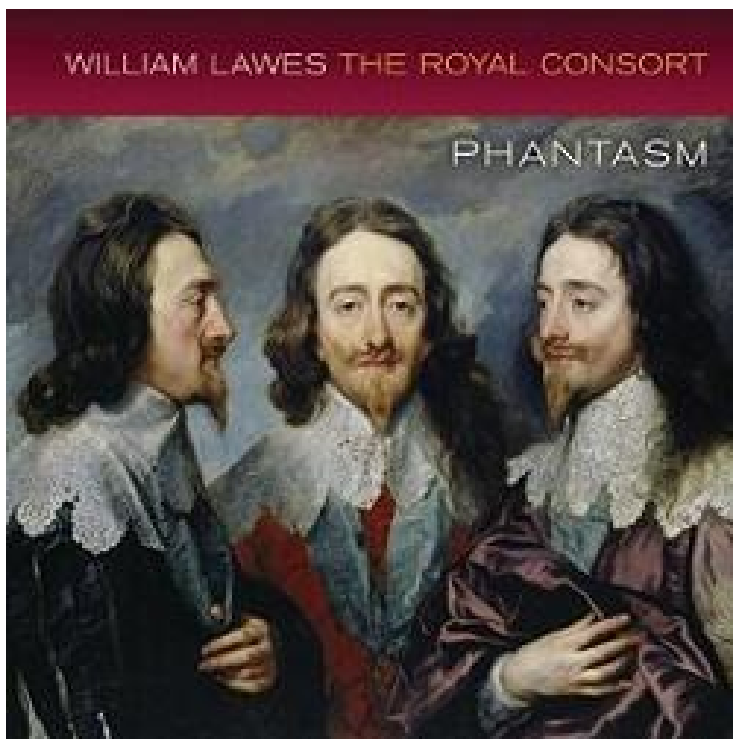
**Beethoven: Symphonies nos. 5 and 7 -
Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/ Manfred
Honeck (Reference 718**

http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/best2015Beethoven.j

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=2146347)) - In 1993, the great Latvian conductor Mariss Jansons said, "You ask yourself, 'why produce a new Beethoven symphony cycle? The market is full.'" But market demand ain't everything. Since 1993, we've had about two new Beethoven symphony cycles per year (including a notable one from Jansons). Some were revisionist, with light textures, small ensembles, period instrument, limited vibrato, quick tempos, and literal rhythms, while others were more traditional. But in the last decade I've sometimes sensed a sort of "consensus" interpretation developing, that at a certain point can seem predictable; you forgot why these works once seemed to matter so much. Not with these live recordings of Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. These artists take nothing for granted, bring everything they have to grappling not only with why these particular notes are there but, more than that, with what they mean. The orchestra is big - not the now-common chamber group - and you feel the weight that's sometimes been missing in recent recordings, but without any loss of energy and propulsion. Above all, from the first note you feel that the performers are telling a powerful story, building and resolving a gripping human drama that engages with the big questions (as well as the details - you'll hear awesome things you never knew were there). And there's also demonstration-quality recorded sound.

William Lawes: The Royal Consort - Phantasm (Linn 479

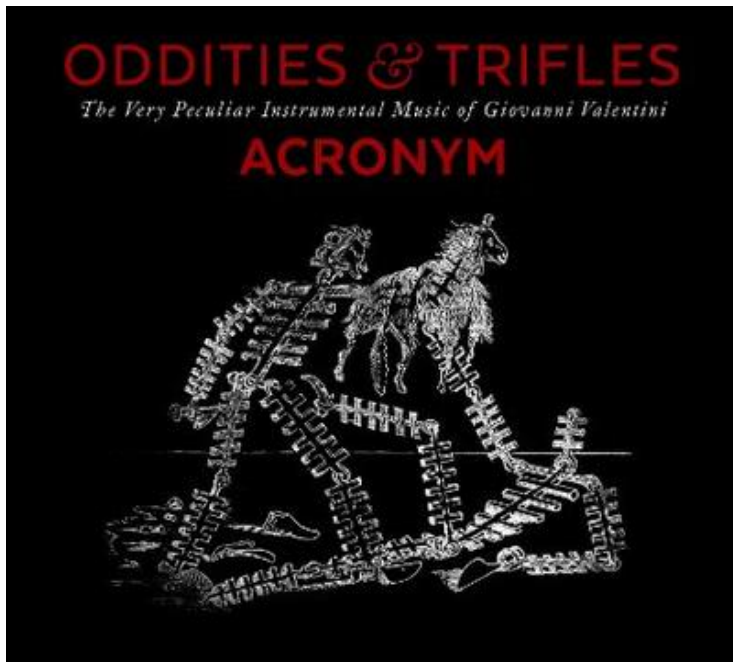
(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1803645)) I didn't used to be obsessed with instrumental music from the early modern era (roughly the 16th century on), but this is where my "newly rediscovered masterpieces" listening tends to come from. Lawes wrote these pieces circa 1630, and while they've been recorded before with a thicker scoring, this new release reveals their vibrant individuality and dancing energy with gloriously characterful playing, captured in exceptionally rich recorded sound. And thanks to Phil, I didn't feel that I needed to choose between



this and the Valentini that comes next....

Giovanni Valentini: *Oddities & Trifles: the Very Peculiar Instrumental Music of Giovanni Valentini* -ACRONYM Ensemble (Olde Focus 904

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Lawes_consort_CKD4



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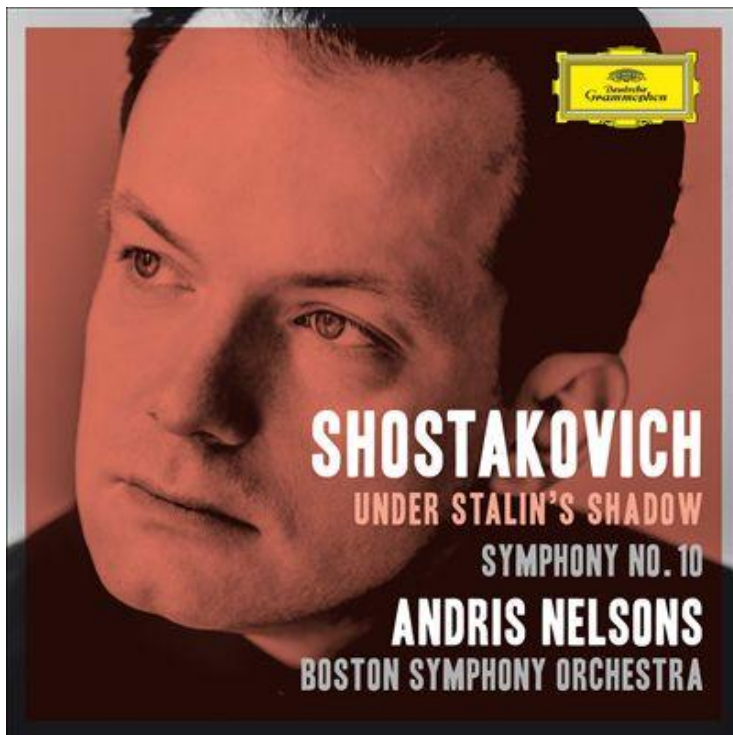
(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1694349))- Born in Venice circa 1582, Valentini became the leading musician in Vienna in the early 1600s. The music on this disc is wildly inventive - not at all what you expect - but little of it has been recorded before. I find it hard to imagine better playing than is offered by this 12-member band, some of whom have performed in IPR's studio in Cedar Falls.

Shostakovich: Symphony no. 10 and Passacaglia from *Lady Macbeth of Minsk* - Boston Symphony Orchestra/ Andris Nelsons (Deutsche Grammophon 479 5059

(<http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/Drilldown?>

[name_id1=11167&name_role1=1&comp_id=6999&bcorder=15&name_id=61895&name_role=4](http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/Drilldown?name_id1=11167&name_role1=1&comp_id=6999&bcorder=15&name_id=61895&name_role=4)))

- Does Shostakovich's Tenth actually depict Stalin, as a possibly forged interview with the composer



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Shostakovich10.jpg)



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/vivaldi_cover.jpg)

asserts? Whatever it's dealing with is - if partly political - weighty and deeply personal. In any case, this live concert performance sheds new light on this dark masterpiece - I've never heard it played better - and precedes it with a segment from the opera that in fact got Shostakovich in trouble with Stalin. Nelsons is the 37-year-old Latvian music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and their work for him here shows them in their full (and characteristic) glory.

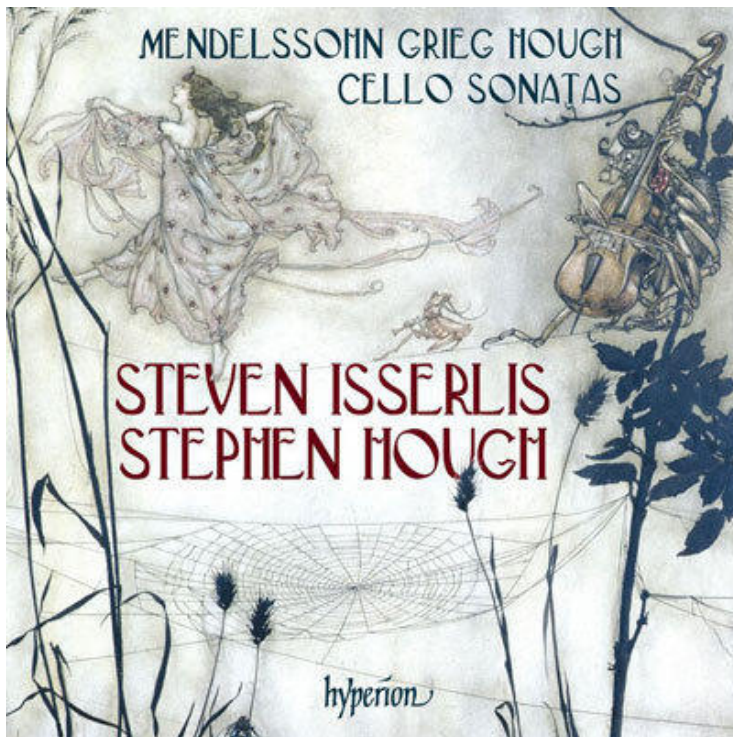
Vivaldi - The Complete Concertos for Viola d'Amore - Rachel Barton Pine (Cedille) -

Chicago-based violinist Rachel Barton Pine had three major 2105 releases demonstrating a range of skills (though not her full range; she's also in a heavy metal band). She played Mozart's concertos for violin on her modernized Guarneri with a major orchestra and conductor Neville Marriner - and, unlike most violinists, she composed her own cadenzas. It's sensational. She recorded the complete sonatas of Francesco Maria Veracini, memorably. But for a stocking stuffer try a disc with all of Vivaldi's concertos for the viola d'amore ("viola of love"), a long-forgotten instrument with extra "sympathetic" strings that just vibrate. Vivaldi's ear for color is on display not only in the solo instrument but the accompaniment, which in one case is a wind band, and in another pairs the instrument with a lute, which is played here by the great Hopkinson Smith.

Mendelssohn, Grieg, and Hough: Cello Sonatas

- **Steven Isserlis and Stephen Hough (Hyperion 68079**

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1812674)) - This disc stands in for a remarkable set of accomplishments. In 2015, Stephen Hough shone both as a pianist (in a recording of selected *Lyric Pieces* by Edvard Grieg (http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_CDA68070)) and as a composer (in his *Missa Mirabilis* (http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W17119_68096), which didn't reach Iowa but which I've heard parts of - it's great). Meanwhile, cellist Steven Isserlis released an outstanding disc of sonatas by Bach, Handel and Scarlatti. What made their collaboration on this album a favorite of mine is that it includes a piece I love irrationally, the Cello Sonata no. 2 of Mendelssohn, in my new favorite recording.



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/best2015Isserlis.jpg)

There's also a piece I hadn't quite understood before, Grieg's Cello Sonata - and this performance got me, finally - and a sonata by Hough himself for cello and piano played with the left hand alone. Chamber-music lovers, don't miss it!

Reynaldo Hahn: *Le Bal de Beatrice d'Este*, *Concerto Provençal*, *Serenade*, and *Divertissement pour une fête de nuit* - Ensemble Initium, Orchestre des Pays de Savoie (Timpani 1231) - Hahn, the last of 12 children born in Caracas to a Jewish-German father and Venezuelan mother, moved with them to Paris at age 3, and grew up to be the most French of musicians. He was a lifelong friend of Marcel



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Hahn.jpg)

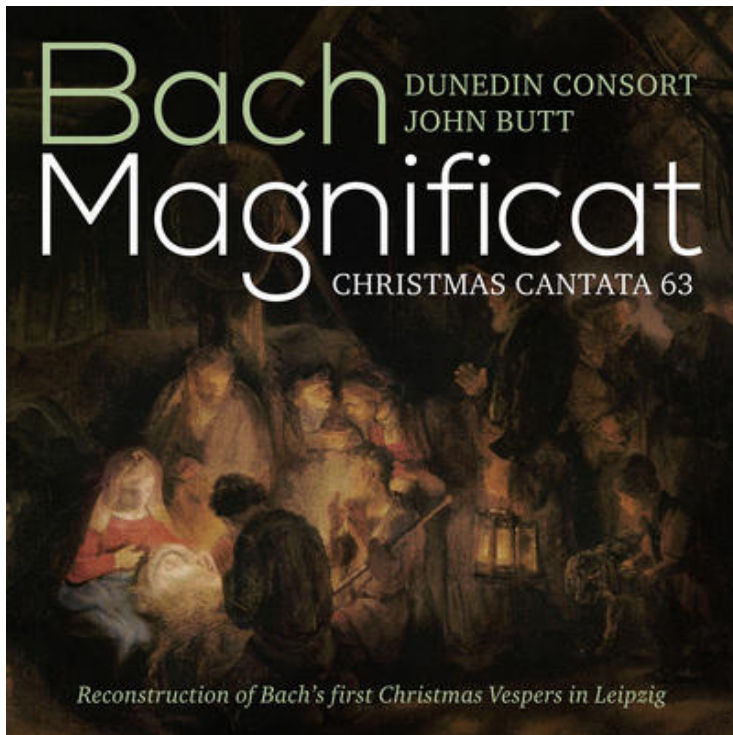
Proust (who said, "Everything I have ever done has been thanks to Reynaldo") and an ally of Sarah Bernhardt, Emile Zola, and Proust in defending Alfred Dreyfus from the anti-Semitic smear campaign that tore France apart. In World War I, Hahn volunteered for the French army even though he was above the maximum enlistment age, and rose in the ranks from private to corporal. During World War II, the Vichy regime banned his music because of his Jewish ancestry and he fled to Monte Carlo; he returned after the liberation to Paris, where he died in 1947. His songs have long been considered a pinnacle of French art music, but his instrumental works were out of step with midcentury fashions, and thus have been

rediscovered only in recent decades. This new album features four neoclassical charmers. The 1905 ballet *Le Bal de Beatrice d'Este*, evoking 13th-century Ferrara, has been recorded several times before, but this new performance makes the most appealing case for it yet. But what makes this album exceptionally beguiling are the other three works: a 1931 Divertimento that evokes Vienna, an unpublished Serenade written during his Monte Carlo exile, and a concerto that evokes Provence and was premiered in Paris in 1945.

Verdi: *Aida* - Jonas Kaufmann, Anja Harteros, et al. / Saint Cecilia Academy Rome/ Antonio Pappano (Warner 552766 (http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=2147464))
Major labels like Warner long ago stopped recording blockbuster operas with star-studded casts in



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/Aida.jpg)



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/best2015dunedin.jpg)

the studio, right? Except this year they did - the first studio *Aida* of the 21st century, and it's all that you might hope for. Except that it might make you hope they do some more Verdi operas next.

Bach: Cantata no. 63, *Magnificat* [E-flat version with Christmas interpolations], selected organ works and chorals; also Giovanni Gabrieli, *Hodie Christus Natus Est* - Dunedin Consort/ John Butt, conductor and organ soloist (Linn 469) - I feel guilty about including two Bach releases on my list, but as I was saying, it's a golden age for Bach playing, and - here I seek your indulgence - he happens to be my top personal musical obsession. (I'm planning to do a Bach round-up post one of these days, in fact - I could easily include many more on the current one, such as Andreas Staier's Harpsichord Concertos on Harmonia mundi, my new favorite of them on that instrument, the Goldberg Variations from pianists Alexandre Tharaud and Lori Sims, Masaaki Suzuki in a set of organ works on BIS, and - held over from late last year - Jonathan Cohen's Mass in B Minor, a shortlist recording of that favorite.) But given the holiday-gift focus of this list, I'll go with the most Christmasy Bach release of the year - for if you need some holiday joyfulness, you might find it delivered by this reconstruction of Bach's first Christmas service in Leipzig. I give my usual disclaimer about not having heard every acclaimed recording of the main works (e.g. those of the Ricercar Consort), but I doubt they

would reduce my pleasure in performances that are so apposite, human, and spirited. Besides, you also get first-rate organ solo playing from director John Butt. Also, as a "liturgical reconstruction," the set reminds us that the music was originally "functional" rather than concert-centered (though the reminder is, thankfully, not too insistent, and the result is trimmed to fit a single CD. Some extras and the 44-page booklet are, by the way, free online (<http://www.linnrecords.com/recording-magnificat.aspx>)). As usual, Linn's recorded sound is rich, glowing, natural, and clear.



Arcangelo Corelli: La Follia and sonatas -
Michala Petri, recorder, and Mahan Esfahani,
harpsichord (OUR 220610)

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ipr/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/EsfhaniCorelli.jpg)

(http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=1616349) - Another choice that stands in for many accomplishments. Danish recorder master Petri released three remarkable discs this year, including a remake of one of the signature concertos written for her, *Moonchild's Dream* (http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=6.220609). Iranian-American harpsichordist Esfahani released an extraordinary solo disc with no less major a label than Deutsche Grammophon, *Time Present and Time Past* (<http://www.deutsche Grammophon.com/us/cat/4794481>); its mix of Bach, Scarlatti, Gorecki, and Steve Reich and its enthralling playing was so compelling that Robert Siegel covered it on *All Things Considered* (<http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2015/06/12/413693373/how-to-annoy-your-dad-play-the-harpsichord>). Again, I'll solve the problem by picking one of the albums the two released together. Sorry to return to the Baroque, but this inspired partnership knows exactly how to make the music of Corelli vivid without sounding mannered in the process. I could just as easily have chosen their recording of British and Danish rarities by the like of Benjamin Britten - on a disc called UK/DK (<http://www.amazon.com/UK-DK-Michala-Petri/dp/B00RDKD8JK>). I may change the one on this list, but basically I recommend both!

TO BE CONTINUED/ REVISED AS TIME/ INTEREST DICTATES... AND IOWA'S BATCH IS UP NEXT IN PART 2!

WANT LIST (Record companies, artists, and agents: please feel free to send me these!)

John Luther Adams: *The Wind in High Places* - Jack Quartet (Cold Blue Music) (Adam's Pulitzer-winning "Become Ocean" headed last year's list, so...)

Peter Garland: *After the Wars* - Sarah Cahill, piano (Cold Blue Music
(<http://www.amazon.com/After-Wars-Sarah-Cahill/dp/B011K9WTJY>) - and having loved Sarah's 2014 release, *Patterns of Plants*, I'm eager to hear this one)

Paul Hindemith (libretto by Thornton Wilder): *The Long Christmas Dinner* (Bridge 9449
(<http://bridgerecords.com/products/9449>)) - said by some to be THE opera recording of the year. Eager to hear this too, obviously.

Stephen Hough: *Missa Mirabilis* (http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W17119_68096)-
Colorado Symphony Chorus and Orchestra/ Andrew Litton (Hyperion 68096)

Brahms: Piano Trios - Tetzlaff, Tetlaff, and Vogt (Ondine)

Igor Levit, piano - Beethoven: Diabelli Variations; Bach: Goldberg Variations: Frederick Rzewski:
***The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (Sony (<http://www.amazon.com/Bach-Beethoven-Rzewski-Igor-Levit/dp/B0128ZEVDG>))**

Escher Quartet - Mendelssohn String Quartets (BIS 1960
(http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=BIS-1960))

Orli Shaham, piano - "Brahms Inspired" (Canary Classics
(<http://www.canaryclassics.com/recordings/brahms-inspired>))

Solitudes - Baltic chamber music (Delphian (<http://www.mcfalls.co.uk/Reviews/Solitudes-CD>))

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