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OPINION 1/01/2017 @ 5:04PM | 2,326 views

The 10 Best Classical Recordings Of 2016 (New Releases)

It's fair to say to say that such "Best-Of" lists are inherently daft if one clings too literally to the idea of "Best." Still, I have been making "Best of the Year" [lists](#) for classical music [since 2004](#), when working [at Tower Records](#) gave me a splendid oversight (occasionally insight) of the new releases and of the re-releases that hit the classical music market. Since then, I've kept tabs on the market as much as possible.

2014 Forbes list of the best [Classical Recordings](#) (Part 1) | 2014 Forbes list of the best [Classical Recordings](#) (Part 2) | 2015 Forbes list of the best [Classical Recordings](#) (Part 1) | 2015 Forbes list of the best [Classical Recordings](#) (Part 2)

[The entire list [on Amazon for CDs \(and mp3s\)](#) can be found [here](#). The complete-as-possible Spotify playlist [here](#). Links to iTunes (where available) and the high-fidelity streaming/download platform [Qobuz](#) are provided individually.]

Making these lists is a subjective affair, aided only by massive exposure and hopefully good ears and a discriminating, if personal taste. But then "10 CDs that, all caveats duly noted, I consider to have been outstanding in 2015" does not make for a sexy headline. You get the point. The built-in hyperbole of the phrase is a tool to understand what this is about, not symbolic of illusions of grandeur on part of the author. Because the market lends itself to it, I distinguish between new releases and re-releases.

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This is the Top 10 of the former, the Top 10 of the re-issues can be found here: [The 10 Best Classical Recordings Of 2016 \(Re-Releases\)](#). Let's get right to it:

10



Mieczysław Weinberg, *Idiot*, National Theater Mannheim, Thomas Sanderling et al.

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon CD: ~\\$30](#) |
[ArkivMusic: \\$40](#) | [Qobuz download: £14.40](#) |
[iTunes mp3: NA](#)

When I heard the (full-orchestra) premiere of Mieczysław Weinberg's opera *The Idiot* at the Mannheim Opera, I found it a transfixing experience, the discovery of one of the major operas of the second half of the 20th century; in short: a revelation. Even with my high expectations of Weinberg, of whose life and music I've become an aspiring champion and minor expert over the years, after first encountering him thanks to Bob Reilly's [Surprised by Beauty](#) (then still listed as "Vainberg"), this was astonishingly good—indeed great—music, well over three hours of it, and nary the temptation to nod off during any of it. Just as incredulous is the ingenious libretto, in which Alexander Medvedev (he already wrote the text for Weinberg's [Passenger](#)) miraculously managed to tame Dostoyevsky's sprawling *Idiot* and turn it into a cohesive story suited for the stage. Not the least, the entire team of the Mannheim opera sang, played, conducted, acted as if they had done nothing but live for that moment.

My detailed review can be read here: ["Mieczysław Weinberg's *Idiot* — Awe-inspiring Masterpiece Unearthed in Mannheim"](#) and I know that I hoped very much – and told anyone who wanted to hear it – that one of the subsequent performances of this production would be recorded. Fortunately someone at SWR2 was smart enough to let him or herself be convinced by someone, and in late January a recording was made which has since been published on the tiny but aspiring "Pan Classics"



label. Fortunately for everyone, most of what I found so thrilling about the earlier performance translates on that recording, too, even with a different Prince Myshkin (now Juhan Tralla, then Dmitry Golovnin). In any case, Lars Møller (Lebedev) and Ludmila Slepneva (as the ravishing and ravished Nastassya Filippovna), Steven Scheschareg (portraying an intense and dark and lustrous and animalistic Rogozhin), Elzbieta Ardam (Madame Yepanchin, whose mezzo, once warmed-up, just pours out of her, irresistibly in dark and lusty tones) were still part of this celebration of operatic discovery in January and they haven't slacked. If you think Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* is good stuff, or if you are just vaguely interested in opera of the 20th century (along the quality-lines of Britten and Janáček!) you owe it to yourself to hear this work.

#9



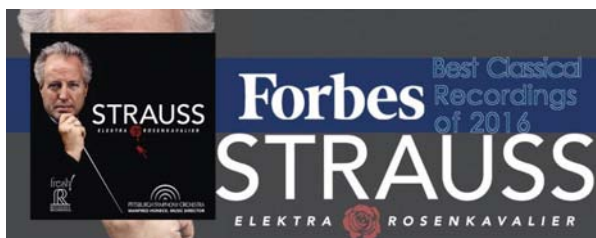
Jean Roger-Ducasse, *The Complete Piano Music*, Martin Jones (piano), Nimbus

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon CD: ~\\$25](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$30](#) | [Qobuz download: £8](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$16](#)

I remember pianist Martin Jones' recordings of the complete everything by everyone on Nimbus from my budget student days, where every penny needed to stretch and when I convinced myself that his recordings were actually really good. Debussy, Mendelssohn, Czerny, Brahms, Grainger, Szymanowski, Hoddinott, Stravinsky: if it had keys on it, Jones recorded it. Now came a box of the (complete!) piano music of Jean Roger-Ducasse (1873-1954) and I bemusedly rolled my eyes. Until, that is, I popped the first CD into the player. Goodness, this favorite pupil of Fauré's (whose Requiem he was asked to make a two-piano reduction of) and Ravel-contemporary knew how to write tenaciously charming music and Martin Jones communicates it marvelously well, with a felt touch and color-rich palette that give Roger-Ducasse the full impressionist treatment. It would be easy and convenient to liken his music to that of Debussy

and, for those who know this wonderful underrated composer, Charles Koechlin (he has his chapter in "[Surprised by Beauty](#)"), and it'd be fitting enough. But Debussy is harmonically further out there, which makes Roger-Ducasse probably more readily appreciable or easier to listen to for ears that are exploring the 20th century of classical music with a hint of trepidation. Roger-Ducasse eventually focused on teaching (he was Fauré's successor teaching composition at the Paris Conservatoire, and Paul Dukas' teaching orchestration) and neglected composing: our loss and presumably his students' gain. After 13 Nocturnes and Barcarolles each, nine Préludes and six Impromptus, several Études and other smaller pieces, piano reductions of excerpts from two of his lush ballets, the three hours of exquisite music end with Roger-Ducasse's transcription of my dearest piece of music, Bach's Passacaglia, BWV 582. Totally unnecessary sucker punch, as I was already completely swayed. Now I'll be hurrying to get my hands on more Roger-Ducasse and also blow the dust of those older Martin Jones records of mine.

#8



Richard Strauss, Elektra and Rosenkavalier Suites, Manfred Honeck, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Reference Recordings FR-722

[Amazon mp3: \\$9](#) | [Amazon CD: ~\\$18](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$20](#) | [Qobuz download: £8 – 12 \(Hi-Res\)](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$10](#)

I also remember very well when I first listened to Richard Strauss' [Elektra](#), having approached it as a naïve person might approach Strauss, with the [Four Last Songs](#), [Heldenleben](#) & [Rosenkavalier](#) in his or her mind. So I expected a lush, big overture, being eased in with some harmo – when a violin chord rips through my ears and a powerful lady screams at the top of her lungs: “Wo bleibt Elektra?” Oh, the joys of being yelled at in German! Holy Moses, was I scared and, initially, scared-off. Since then I've grown to love how it rips through music like a hungry vulture

through the corpse of a juicy, drowned infant.
But I still feel with anyone who finds Elektra
daunting stuff.

Good news: Here's your ticket to appreciation. You know those [Wagner-for-people-who-don't-like-Wagner](#) recordings and the [Ring without Words](#)? Well, this has every chance of doing the same to people who are turned off by putting on Elektra because Manfred Honeck's 'Elektra Symphonic Drama' (co-written by Manfred Honeck and Tomáš Ille) absolutely lifts the lid and shows you how much sensuous and sumptuous music there's in this opera already, which otherwise looks and sounds, on experiencing in toto or in the opera house, so very, very – indeed totally – different from Strauss' later operas. Here, Elektra seems like the natural lede for Rosenkavalier – which incidentally, and unfathomably upon first hearing – was the opera that, in 1911, immediately followed Elektra (1909) in Strauss' operatic output. Honeck is proven right by his own doing, because he had, by his account, always thought Elektra to be the most symphonic opera of Strauss: An insight gained when he was playing the work as a member of the Vienna Philharmonic under Claudio Abbado. And speaking of Rosenkavalier: Honeck and his sublimely playing Pittsburgh band add the Artur Rodzinski arrangement of the Suite from that opera to close out this disc that is a must for any Strauss-lover. Just terrific! The sound on this Reference Recordings SACD is smashingly vivid, something that is true for the whole lot of their wonderful recordings of the last few years.

#7



Robert Schumann, The Symphonies, Odense Symphony Orchestra, Simon Gaudenz (conductor), cpo SACDs

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon SACD: \\$29-31](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$35](#) | [Qobuz download: £12](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$20](#)

This was one of my [Classical CDs of the Week](#) this year and this is how the review began:

“ Until not so long ago, [Wolfgang Sawallisch's set](#) of Schumann Symphonies was the universal consensus reference recording which conveniently meant that thinking about new recordings wasn't necessary – nor renewed listening. But then came the HIPsters and forced us to re-listen and re-appreciate. And now we are pummeled with new, edgy Schumann that changes our conception of the broad, rather Gemütlich composer who was a little bit rubbish at orchestrating. (A myth not even Bernstein was able to dispel in his compelling [1950s lecture](#).) Still, any new recording of the four symphonies, unless it comes from a star-powered combo, is going to be treated with some suspicion. Simon Gaudenz and the Odense Symphony Orchestra are not “star power” and in any case, didn't their CPO label just release the complete Schumann Symphonies on SACDs a few years ago, in decent recordings with the aptly named Robert Schumann Philharmonic from Chemnitz? Well, color me skeptical. But the discs were atop the stack of new arrivals and disc one was half in the player before I even looked at the cover. Uncolor me!

It's still as damn impressive as it was then and turned out an easy inclusion in this list. Read the full review [here](#).

#6



Dieterich Buxtehude, Complete Works, Ton Koopman, Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, Challenge Classics

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon SACD: \\$380](#) | [ArkivMusic: NA](#) | [Qobuz download: NA](#) | [iTunes mp3: NA](#)

This box is a triumph of the explorer spirit and musical love over sober economic considerations: A ‘major’ record company would never, certainly not in the last few decades, have undertaken a recording of the complete (surviving) musical output of Dieterich Buxtehude 1637/39 – 1707. But Challenge Classics – nomen est omen – did; a project spearheaded by Ton Koopman who conducts all where there's conducting and plays the rest, where there are keyboard buttons to press. The works were recorded between 2005 and 2013 – not exactly secretly, but without great fanfare, at a considerable clip and without the media attention that would have been paid to,

say, the undertaking of recording all the Bach Cantatas (which of course Ton Koopman has also done). There will be a more detailed review forthcoming, but inclusion in this list for this project (even if it was technically issued a bit before 2016) is a given!

#5



Charles Ives, Orchestral Works v.2, Melbourn Symphony Orchestra, Sir Andrew Davis (conductor), Chandos SACD

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon SACD: \\$17-21](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$20](#) | Qobuz download: NA | iTunes mp3: NA

Charles Ives, pace Robert Reilly, who calls him “surely the single most overrated American composer” in [Surprised by Beauty](#) (relative to some other very unjustly ignored American composers, which I think is what he means, he’s actually got a point), is a wonderful composer who fascinates me endlessly. It took me a while, though, because he has a tendency to reveal himself [only in concert](#), but not really on CD... his music is too complex and rather dependent on sonic effects to truly spin its magic in flattened sound. (A more radical example for this is Maurizio Kagel, who is fun and interesting in concert but rarely works on CD.) If every recording sounded as great as this, though, it might have happened sooner. This, too, was a [CD of the Week: Charles Ives Down Under](#). (See also: [The Profound Existentialism of Charles Ives: Kent Nagano in Conversation](#))

#4



Franz Berwald, Édouard Du Puy, Septet, Wind Quartet, Basson Quintet, Donna Agrell (bassoon), Lorenzo Coppola (clarinet), Teunis van der Zwart (horn), Marc Destrubé, Franc Polman (violins), Yoshiko Morita (viola), Albert Brügger (cello), Robert Franenberg (double bass), Ronald Brautigam (fortepiano), BIS SACD

[Amazon mp3: \\$9](#) | [Amazon SACD: \\$14](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$23](#) | [Qobuz download: £8 \(16Bit\) -12 \(hi-res\)](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$10](#)

Oh, what wonderful music and how wonderfully performed! For the stupid title – “A Bassoon in Stockholm”, I almost didn’t pick this up, but fortunately a friend with good ears – working [in my favorite record store](#) – alerted it to me in time. It was a CD of the Week earlier this year, which is where you will find my reviewlet [sic]: [Classical CD Of The Week: Bassoon Delight From Sweden](#).

#3 Scarlatti, Sudbin



Domenico Scarlatti, 18 Keyboard Sonatas, Yevgeni Sudbin, BIS

[Amazon mp3: \\$9](#) | [Amazon SACD: \\$14-24](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$24](#) | [Qobuz download: £8-12 \(Hi-Res\)](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$10](#)

A decade after recording [Scarlatti as his debut disc for BIS](#), Yevgeni Sudbin has recorded more Scarlatti for them... finally! Added octaves and chords in these spunky-wistful sonatas suggest that he took a page out of Mikhail Pletnev’s Scarlatti-playbook ([his recording is my modern Scarlatti touchstone](#)). But the result is more finely spun; less bluntly energetic with Sudbin, perhaps a touch less visceral and that amount (and then some) more elegant. You hear voices and connections hitherto unknown; you hear some of the playfulness that makes Alexandre Tharaud’s Scarlatti so special (reviewed [here](#)); more subtle and yet more mischievous than those of Claire Hungci (a [Forbes CD of the Week](#) earlier this year). The sonatas under Sudbin’s finger glow from the inside, they glitter and glare and are gay or explode or prod stubborn little fingers at the listener. They are a minor miracle and the most enjoyable, marvelous Scarlatti record to have appeared in many years. Can you tell I’m in love?

#2



Franz Schubert, "Schubertiade" Various Works, Jos van Immerseel (piano/director), various interpreters, Alpha 216

[Amazon mp3: \\$37](#) | [Amazon CD: \\$26](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$35](#) | [Qobuz download: £16-24 \(Hi-Res\)](#) | [iTunes mp3: NA](#)

If one-word reviews weren't frowned upon by the inclined reader, I'd leave it simply at: "Delightful!" But then again it's not difficult to inflate the word-count a bit on behalf of this 4-CD release on Alpha, titled simply "Schubertiade". The popular on-line encyclopedia defines Schubertiade as "an event held to celebrate the music of Franz Schubert." Simple – and that's exactly what Jos van Immerseel and his coterie of musical friends and partners do: Four hour-long concerts of Schubert's music where every musician takes his or her turn.

Each evening has one or two larger work(s) surrounded by apropos Schubertiana: The Trout Quintet (disc 1), the Divertissement à la Hongroise for piano four hands (disc 2), F minor Fantasy for four hands and the G minor Violin Sonata (disc 3), and the Arpeggione and the four-hand Allegro (Lebensstürme) (disc 4). It all ends, how fittingly, with "An die Musik". In doing so, these evenings catch the slightly random spirit of what a Schubertiade might be like, the familiar rubbing shoulders with the completely unknown, delivered not in absolute perfection but with absolute infectiousness! There's not a dull minute; the switching from chamber music to piano duo to song to (male) vocal quartet (!) is delightful, because it's both natural and very much not done anymore, in the strictly regimented, often sadly boring, nothing-daring monoculture of classical recitals. I'd lament how much I should have liked to be present at these four concerts, but then playing these discs really comes very close to it.

The lovely sound of the various period instruments is well caught and will further delight anyone not averse to natural horns ("Nachtgesang im Walde" D.913) or an 18th century clarinet (Der Hirt auf dem Felsen, D.965)

or the various fortepianos used. The four-hand keyboard works of Schubert (not just in my estimation some of the best works Schubert wrote; the three ‘big ones’ are all included here) are given particularly fine renditions; perhaps in part a consequence of those pieces actually being played with two bums on one piano bench and twenty fingers sharing one keyboard, rather than cheating by using two pianos instead. The soloists and singers include the likes of Midori Seiler (violin), Thomas Bauer (baritone), and Marianne Beate Kielland (mezzo). I love everything about it. Or, as I said: Delightful!

#1



F.Schubert, R. Schumann, J. Brahms, R. Wagner, "Rheinmädchen", Pygmalion (vocal ensemble), Raphaël Pichon (director), Harmonia Mundi

[Amazon mp3: \\$10](#) | [Amazon CD: \\$14](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$19](#) | [Qobuz download: £9-13 \(Hi-Res\)](#) | [iTunes mp3: \\$11](#)

Transcriptions and original compositions for female chorus and a section of historical French horns are poured into an evocative, eclectic narrative of six chapters about “Rhinemaidens” on this release. Where there are girls and horns (no wabbits), Wagner can’t be far behind and so a version of Wagner’s Rheingold overture for 24 female voices, harp, horn-quartet, and bass opens proceedings. We meander through the heartland of German romantic music — Schumann, Brahms, Schubert — sometimes a capella, sometimes via horn quartet, or solo. There’s a delicious cameo by Bernarda Fink in Schubert’s Ständchen (his version for mezzo, female chorus and harp). It’s altogether sunny and transfixing and novel and really everything a CD recital should be.

Extra #11



Walter Braunfels, Symphonic Variations, Sinfonia Brevis, Glass Mountain Suite, Johannes Wildner, BBC Concert Orchestra, Dutton CDLX 7316

[Amazon mp3: NA](#) | [Amazon CD: \\$16](#) | [ArkivMusic: \\$19](#) | [Qobuz download: £8](#) | [iTunes mp3: NA](#)

OK, usually I cheat the restriction of ten releases by adding an “Almost List” of best recordings (as in [2008](#), [2009](#), [2010](#), [2011](#)). I might do the same again, this year, because there are still other recordings much deserving a nod. But I’ll cheat outright here, adding an 11th choice to my Top 10, with Dutton’s release of Walter Braunfels’ Symphonic Variations and his Glass Mountain Suite.

Walter Braunfels (1882–1954), son of a granddaughter of composer Louis Spohr, went from being one of the most performed composers between the wars to the domain of musicologist specialists after he was sidelined (if not outright killed) for excessive Jewishness during the Nazis’ rule of Germany and then sidelined for excessive tonality in post-war Germany, where atonality ruled classical music. He is due a rediscovery much like [Mieczysław Weinberg](#) has experienced, and for that matter his music is a good deal more easily digestible, too, being closer to soft Richard Strauss rather than sardonic Dmitri Shostakovich. He’s got a chapter in “[Surprised by Beauty](#)” for a reason.

One of the recording companies that has taken to making Braunfels something of a priority is, perhaps surprisingly and most laudably, the English label Dutton Epoch. On their second volume in an ongoing series, they turn to the Symphonic Variations on a French Children’s Song, the Sinfonia Brevis op.69, and the Suite from The Glass Mountain op.39b. This is symphonic Braunfels at his finest; the 1948 Sinfonia Brevis (one of his last works, written shortly after the entrancing opera “The Annunciation” – see [Classical CD Of The Week: Revelation Of A Mystery Play](#)) being a particularly entrancing work of romantic modernism from the middle of post-War

Germany with all the bitterness and angular shapes that might be expected, and yet solidly cast in the language from which a Richard Strauss, his erstwhile competitor and colleague, hailed. The Adagio is intense and searing and fierce; the sugar-content is near zero, but the lyricism remains. You can downright taste the tannins in this music, to liken the music to a taut, big-bodied red wine. The Scherzo, as it would, eases up a little, but the Finale – brings it back to that unique mix between severity and tonality that Braunfels could employ and that might have shown the way to a popularish contemporary classical music, if – especially in those years – the hard core avant-garde hadn't dominated and divorced classical and popular music so severely. Like drinking a wine who bites back and offers vast complexity without just rolling over by way of pleasantry, I love and absolutely adore this work and I feel indebted to Johannes Wildner and the BBC Concert Orchestra for their committed and resolutely, tightly excellent performance.

The Glass Mountain Suite is an excellent bonus; an orchestral synthesis of a much lighter work of “warm-hearted lyricism” (as per the premiere's review quoted in the excellent liner notes by Jürgen Schaarwächter) along the lines of Hans Pfitzner's delightful [Christelflein](#). Four years after the Glass Mountain's premiere Braunfels was dismissed from all his posts and pushed into internal exile. (Not bad, under the circumstances, but still tragic.) The recording decidedly makes the listener curious about the whole Christmas play upon which it is based.¶

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