

# The memorable concerts of 2013

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*courtesy of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music*

December 25, 2013

I seem to have come to compiling my review of the year 2013 later than I did **last year**. This was not a problem of procrastination but of the fact that December turned out to be a very active month this year (like many of the other months of the year). I did not want any candidates to be neglected simply because they took place too late in the month.

For those unaccustomed to my approach to reviewing the year, I should reemphasize that I have a strong **aversion to rank-ordering**. That aversion hits a peak during the month of

December, when it seems as if everyone else feels obliged to make a “top ten” list of something or another. My own approach is to begin with the resources of my own memory while reviewing the list of all the events I covered over the course of the year. I then try to select what I feel was the most memorable experience for each of the twelve months of the year.

This method, of course, has flaws of its own, since memories of December are clearly far stronger than those of January. Nevertheless, I am always surprised that each month has at least one event that pops up as a salient memory with very little prompting. The greater problem is when more than one such event arises, thus triggering the humbling reminder from Stephen Jay Gould that all boundaries based on a calendar are artificial and may therefore sometimes be counterproductive. With that disclaimer, I now present my month-by-month review of my personal memories with hyperlinks to the articles I wrote about those events:

**January: The *Salon Series* recital given by the Cypress String Quartet at which, together**



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**with cellist Gary Hoffman, they performed Franz Schubert's D. 956 quintet in C major.** I have written often about how productive and imaginative Schubert was during **the final year of his life**. He completed D. 956 in September of 1828 and would be dead by November 19. This was his last composition of chamber music for strings, and I cannot get enough of it. The experience of listening to an intelligently expressive performance provides me with the best working definition of the Yiddish word “*kvell*,” and there was no question that this performance more than filled the bill.

**February: Scott Sandmeier's “audition” concert conducting the Conservatory Orchestra of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM).** 2012–2013 was the **season** during which SFCM had to choose a new conductor for its student orchestra. Each conductor prepared and led a program for one of the concerts in the ensemble's season. My schedule did not allow me to attend all of those concerts, but I am definitely glad I did not miss this one. Sandmeier made some ambitious choices, including Dmitri Shostakovich's Opus 54 symphony in B minor (the sixth) and Ludwig van Beethoven's Opus 58 piano concerto in G major (the fourth). The entire evening was riveting from beginning to end, and I was not surprised when it was later announced that **Sandmeier was selected as the ensemble's new Music Director.**

**March: The American Bach Soloists performance of George Frideric Handel's *Dixit Dominus*.** Handel was such a prolific composer that it is almost not surprising that new encounters with his music can turn up fresh surprises. Still, his HWV 232 setting of Psalm 110 is a doozy. Handel composed it in 1708 when he was developing his career in Rome. He had gone there to cultivate his craft in composing opera, only to discover that Pope Clement XI had put a ban on operatic performances. HWV 232 emerged as a perfect instance of Robert Kennedy's famous motto (possibly appropriated from his father), “**Don't get mad, get even.**” When I wrote about this performance, I described the music as “a vivid blood-and-guts account of unflinching Old Testament vengeance and retribution, just the sort of elements of opera that Clement must have abhorred.” The composition immediately worked its way onto my “favorite Handel” list, which is why when, **later in the year**, harmonia mundi released a recording of it, I could not wait to write about that as well.

**April: Richard Goode's *Beethoven: The Last Works* piano recital.** Beethoven's last three piano sonatas have been favorites ever since I first began to appreciate them while reading Charles Rosen's *The Classical Style*. Still, there is something almost athletic about trying to perform them all on a single program that brings an element of risk to attending such a concert.

Goode's approach did not disappoint. Indeed, he even "paced" the listener's attention by choosing to perform the last six of the Opus 119 bagatelles before proceeding to Opus 111, the last of those three sonatas. This was one of those performances in which the "logic of the text" was perfectly accounted for through the expressiveness of performance.

**May: Danny Clay's Graduate Recital at SFCM.** I realize this selection may raise some eyebrows; but I must remind the reader that the working adjective in this exercise is "memorable." Clay is one of the most imaginative young composers I have encountered, and he is utterly fearless in seeking out ideas to mine for his pieces. However, that was only part of the story for this particular concert. The event was also a gang's-all-here evening that provided the listener with exposure to performances by some of the most interesting groups to have emerged from SFCM in the recent past: **The Living Earth Show**, the **Mobius Trio**, the **Friction Quartet**, and **Nonsemble 6**. That last group, originally formed to perform Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, stole the show with "wishes, lies and dreams," a mini-opera based on text by five young students (aged eight through twelve) at the writing workshop 826 Valencia.

**June: The San Francisco Opera (SFO) production of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.** Jacques Offenbach's opera based on the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann has deservedly earned warhorse status in the opera repertoire. However the SFO presentation of Laurent Pelly's staging stood out above all of my past encounters with this opera. This was due, in no small part, to Pelly's decision to work with the integral edition of the score edited by Michael Kaye and Jean-Christophe, through which he could establish a much clearer (and, therefore, dramatically effective) account of the relationship between Hoffmann and the Muse figure, affording a better appreciation of how Hoffmann became the storyteller he was. Without short-changing any of the narrative substance of any of the tales, Pelly still occupied the foreground with the underlying theme of the artefactual nature of those stories.

**July: The final performance of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.** My schedule was such that I was not able to see Mark Adamo's new opera *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* until the final performance of the SFO 2012–2013 season. I had done a lot of preparation for this occasion, including attending a rehearsal to which members of the press were invited and **a close reading of the libretto** (with its 116 scholarly footnotes). Nevertheless, all that background work mattered little in the here-and-now of the actual performing situation. At the time I wrote that both the score and the production "solidly established the rightful place of opera in 21st-century culture;" and I still feel that way, however much of a beating the performing arts may be

taking in our current economic straits. This was also the one case in which I have to confess that the artificial boundaries of the calendar worked against me, because July turned out to be a very rich month of compelling performances; but Adamo's opera remained the most memorable of them.

**August: Tien Hsieh's performance of Beethoven at Noontime Concerts™.** On the basis of my April selection, readers may assume that I cannot get enough of Beethoven's Opus 111 sonata. It would be more accurate to say that I cannot get enough of imaginatively intelligent approaches to that sonata, particularly where the variations of the second movement are concerned. Hsieh's approach to those variations was as compelling as Goode's had been in April, perhaps because she introduced the sonata with shorter pieces by Franz Liszt and Frédéric Chopin. Thus, while Goode's recital presented Opus 111 as "the end of a journey," Hsieh prepared a program through which one could appreciate its reverberations into the later years of the nineteenth century.

**September: Jean-Michel Fonteneau's performance of the two cello sonatas of Johannes Brahms with pianist Jeffrey Sykes.** This SFCM **Faculty Artist Series** recital was particularly distinguished by its historically-informed approach to the music. Thanks to the Department of Music at the University of California at Berkeley, Sykes was able to perform on an 1856 instrument, made in London by the French piano company Erard. What made this in an interesting choice is that, while Brahms was a champion of Bösendorfer pianos, many elements of the Bösendorfer design could be traced back to Erard features. Thus, there is a good chance that the audience experienced the sort of piano sonorities that Brahms had in mind; and Fonteneau complemented those sonorities with his own decision to use gut strings on his instrument.

**October: The conclusion of András Schiff's *Bach Project*.** The final program of Schiff's six-concert ***Bach Project*** featured Johann Sebastian Bach's BWV 988 set of 30 ("Goldberg") variations on an aria. Schiff then chose to complement this selection with a performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's Opus 120 set of 33 variations on a waltz that had been presented to him by Anton Diabelli. The evening thus emerged as a major study in the nature of variations technique, presented in two significantly different aesthetic contexts. Furthermore, since Schiff has never been shy about lengthy undertakings, his encore was the variations movement from Beethoven's Opus 111 sonata, whose theme was marked Arietta in what may have been a nod

to Bach.

**November: Semyon Bychkov conducting Benjamin Britten’s “War Requiem.”** Yesterday, in writing on my national site about the release of a new recording of the “War Requiem” shortly before Britten’s 100th birthday, I described the piece as “**an icon of much of the twentieth century.**” I also described it as a composition whose resources were so extensive and complex that no recording would ever do it justice. The music can only really be appreciated through a good performance, and Bychkov’s command of the score during his San Francisco Symphony subscription concert performance at Davies Symphony Hall was truly excellent, not only through his attentiveness to the many details on all of those score pages but also to his physical layout of the performers to insure that those of us on audience side would fully appreciate the spatial qualities of Britten’s conception.

**December: The recreation of a Venetian Christmas Mass service presented by the San Francisco Early Music Society.** This was a stunning performance in which Warren Stewart’s Magnificat ensemble joined forces with the brass musicians of The Whole Noyse. The primary emphasis was on the rich contrapuntal composition (often in large numbers of separate parts) conceived by Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi, both of whom served at St. Mark’s Basilica in the early seventeenth century. Here, again, attention to spatial qualities was paramount, since it was only through such physical cues that such complex counterpoint could be perceived as more than a blur. Stewart thus prepared the concert with impeccable attention to not only the details in the scores but also the question of how those details would register with the attentive listener. I should also observe that, appropriately enough, the performance took place in San Francisco’s own St. Mark’s, even if that happened to be St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Still, this is a setting with impressive acoustics; and, on this particular occasion, it was the site for a “Venetian weekend,” since **the previous evening** it had hosted the Voices of Music performance of the reconstruction of a Christmas Vespers service with Psalm settings by Alessandro Grandi, who served as *vice maestro di cappella* under Monteverdi.

Reviewing this list, I realize that 2013 will be a tough act for 2014 to follow; but I have been at this job long enough by now to always be prepared for pleasant surprises!