

DAVID PATRICK
STEARNS



CLASSICAL MUSIC

MEDITERRANEAN HOLIDAY

If your glorious sounds of Christmas have never included bagpipes, try something different this week as Piffaro the Renaissance Band harks back to the 16th-century Kingdom of Naples with a swirl of Italian and Spanish music. Details at www.piffaro.org

Milestones from 2014

Remember the era, way back in the 20th century, when the classical-music world seemed to proceed with majestic sameness? When Eugene Ormandy and the Fabulous Philadelphians seemed to go on forever, one *Scheherazade* at a time? Such stability and artistic centralization are certainly long gone. But in their place? Much fascinating new music — in odd and interesting places.

Best? Worst? All one can really discuss are milestones. And here are some from 2014:

Concertos that change your life. Stephen Paulus organ concertos don't come along very often, but the Kimmel Center hosted two this year. First was Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's January performance of *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Percussion*. In November came the Philadelphia Orchestra's performance of his *Grand Concerto for Organ and Orchestra*. Both are pieces that transform the idea of the organ concerto into something distinctly unsecular, American, intellectually stimulating but immediately moving. Between the two performances, Paulus died Oct. 19 from the effects of a stroke he suffered in 2013. His reputation could easily rest on these two works. But much more of his fine music is waiting to be heard.

Just in case you forgot what a true diva is. Susan Graham sang a high-glam recital for the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society in April after repeated cancellations (they do that), which only stoked anticipation. She looked amazing, sang with a depth of tone unique to her, and left you vehemently defending all aspects of her performance. Because divas can do no wrong (until, of course, they do).



After a performance in Changsha, China, of Tan Dun's "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women," Yannick Nézet Séguin and harpist Elizabeth Hainen were joined onstage by speakers of the secret language that inspired the piece. JAN REGAN

Music from the coal mines. While great new stuff is premiered here frequently, witnessing creative breakthroughs is rare. But with *Anthracite Fields*, Julia Wolfe, the cutting-edge minimalist, entered a new maximal emotional world in her hour-long work about Pennsylvania coal-mining culture that begins with a litany of names of injured or killed miners. Premiered April 26 at the Episcopal Cathedral by the Mendelssohn Club, it went on to acclaim at the inaugural New York Philharmonic Biennial.

Philadelphia had its own unofficial biennial. In a town sometimes accused of championing composers from far away at the expense of locals, the Crossing choir's June/July Month of Moderns Festival featured new works by both Robert Maggio (*The Women Where We Are Living*) and James Primosch (*Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus*) at peak inspira-

tion. In October, Kile Smith delivered *The Consolation of Apollo*, an ingenious melding of the writings of sixth-century Boethius and the musings of the Apollo 8 astronauts in 1968. Would these works have been written were there not a choir like this to sing them?

Most trying Philadelphia Orchestra concert. The great idea of touring Tan Dun's *Nu Shu: The Secret Language of Women* in China turned out to be an exercise in musical survival in the composer's hometown of Changsha. The acoustics were bad. The hall didn't smell so good. The audience seemed too busy talking and taking photos to absorb the music. One wonderful thing, however: The women who speak the secret language were there. Upon meeting them, one realized they're a Masonic-like club of admirable souls.

Most daring presentation of classical music. 14 *Sequenzas* presented Lu-

ciano Berio's bizarrely virtuosic "Sequenzas" for solo instruments as a quirky series of installation environments as part of September's Fringe Festival. Masterminded by harpist Elizabeth Morgan-Ellis and coproduced by Bowerbird, the event allowed you to migrate from one piece to another, from a room full of TV monitors to a dark closet where you saw nothing and heard everything. Weeks later, Arcade Fire's Richard Reed Perry arrived with music he wrote to be performed by musicians wearing stethoscopes so they could play in rhythm to their breathing. The comparison made him seem sadly

inconsequential.

Most tragic passing. Pianist Christopher Falzone, a Curtis Institute graduate and Philadelphian for several years, apparently jumped to his death in Switzerland on Oct. 21 at age 29 after years of mental illness. Details are murky and just too sad to probe, but contemporaries from Yuja Wang to Roberto Diaz remember him as a buoyant personality. One need only hear Enescu's *Piano Sonata No. 3* (his only published recording, made in 2011) to know that Falzone had staggering technique and blinding vision.

Who is Dan Visconti,

and what kind of Andy Warhol opera is he writing? Opera Philadelphia put the Bearded Ladies cabaret group to work on something called *ANDY: A Popera* for months before adding little-known composer Dan Visconti. Clues are elusive on his recent Bridge-label disc *Lonesome Roads*, which veers among many styles and ethnicities — though in the 2012 title piece one finally hears the clarity and layers of thought he'll need to encompass the puzzling world of Warhol.

Best emerging American orchestra: The Seattle Symphony Orchestra launched a series of self-produced recordings under its new music director, Ludovic Morlot, that were immediately the talk of the industry. The latest is a wild, 12-section piano concerto by Alexander Raskatov titled *Night Butterflies* and a *Rite of Spring* that roars with the best.

Pianist of the year. Ingrid Fliter is no newcomer, especially since she landed the 2006 Gilmore Artist Award. But with her new Linn label recording of the Chopin *Preludes Op. 28*, the Argentine seems to be at a new level of depth and individuality. The fingers are as dazzling as ever, but are put in the service of Chopin's A-to-Z inner landscape of the preludes. Fliter is hardly less introspective in a series of Chopin's mazurkas that find her going to the soul of the dance with particularly luminous tone.

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The Philadelphia Orchestra

Yannick Nézet-Séguin Music Director

Music to brighten your season!