

New operas, Bernstein, and squid brains

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

With the Philadelphia Orchestra and Opera Philadelphia going full throttle, the region's year in classical music was bound to be excellent. And it was, with particularly distinguished activity in the outlying areas involving specialists in music both ancient and modern from Chestnut Hill to Princeton. That doesn't mean everything worked out. But while lapses and misfires aren't as satisfying as successes, they can be just as interesting. Pope Francis' visit, for example ...

Most distracted concert. Though Saturday showed Philadelphia at its best — Center City closed to cars and everybody in a mellow mood — during the Festival of Families concert on the Parkway, soprano prodigy Jackie Evancho sang to an audience that was looking in the opposite direction because the pope was thought to be arriving. And hours later, when the pontiff left, most of the crowd followed, so the Philadelphia Orchestra closed the concert with fire and fireworks that were mostly enjoyed by the cleanup crew.

The best and worst of John Eliot Gardiner. The venerable British conductor arrived at Princeton's Richardson Auditorium in April with a rare performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. The 1607 opera reached across the centuries in ways that don't often happen.

But, as though to remind us that artistic brilliance can be fleeting, Gardiner's new record-

ing of Bach's *Mass in B minor* is puzzling, full of strangely splintered and oddly unmusical phrasing. This, from the author of the excellent book *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*? In the world of musical instincts, left-brain knowledge can be overrated.

The opera everybody wanted to love but did not. After a mixed reception earlier in Santa Fe, N.M., the local debut February of Theodore Morrison's *Oscar* (about the demise of Oscar Wilde) was supposedly revised for an Opera Philadelphia incarnation — but not enough. Even with charismatic countertenor David Daniels, Wilde has never seemed so uninteresting.

Most successful musical fusion. Estonian composer Tuivo Tulev took on the *echt*-American verse of Walt Whitman in *A child said who is the grass* at the Crossing choir's Month of Moderns Festival in June.

Most American composers respectfully set Whitman with an ear to support and showcase the words; Tulev brought all kinds of symbolism to the music, suggesting the underlying life force and how the dead can rise again through the grass that grows over them.

Most unlikely musical fusion. Music doesn't get brainier than Bhub Rainey's electronic piece *Axon Ladder* at Vox Populi in February — a work based on mathematical formulas abstracted from the brain activity of squids.

To judge from the piece, squids have busy inner lives — much like Rainey, one of the more fascinating composers in



Far out: "Andy: A Popera" presented by Opera Philadelphia with the cabaret group the Bearded Ladies and composer Dan Visconti, left behind suitably woozy, dreamy, Warholian memories.

the area. Though I certainly liked the piece, the downloaded version left my cat utterly mesmerized, repeatedly. Even Mahler doesn't do that.

The seemingly unlovable but most unforgettable opera. *Glory Denied*, an uncompromising piece by Tom Cipullo about Col. Jim Thompson, a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1964 to 1973, made a lasting impression, most powerfully depicting the Green Beret's rocky readjustment to a disintegrated marriage.

Elsewhere in its four-opera August season, Vulcan Lyric (formerly Center City Opera) was in way over its head.

The opera that was widely

loved but so hard to remember. What was in the punch being passed around at the beginning of *Andy: A Popera*? I didn't touch the stuff.

Still, this new piece, presented by Opera Philadelphia with the cabaret group the Bearded Ladies and composer Dan Visconti, so convincingly recreated the woozy, dreamy atmosphere of Andy Warhol's world that, perhaps like those who did drink the punch, I have only vague but pleasant memories of the piece. Better than unpleasant.

Best vocal performance. American tenor Nicholas Phan has built a career around English repertoire that isn't known to export well, though his November performance of Vaugh-

an Williams' "On Wenlock Edge" was emotionally devastating — mainly thanks to his musical meticulousness that revealed details others missed. Equal credit goes to his collaborators, the Concordia Chamber Players of Bucks County.

Radical Bernstein. Leonard Bernstein's 1971 *Mass* returned, with Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra in a cast-of-hundreds performance in May that the conductor said was one of the peaks of his year.

Yet all that can be said for certain about the piece is that it retains the power to polarize, often along generational lines.

Those of us who lived through the 1960s and '70s find it still has moments of first-class Bernstein but more moments that amount to an inauthentic, hastily composed shotgun wedding of pop and classical. Younger listeners think it's a polystylistic wonder. Take your pick.

Most explosive discovery. The ever forward-looking ensemble Bowerbird turned its focus in October to the late Julius Eastman (1940-90), the troubled, hugely talented African American composer whose works have been largely lost (the few that survive have unprintable titles).

However, the jackhammer force behind his minimalist-based pieces suggests he was decades ahead of his time.

Watch for *Gay Guerrilla*, coming next month from the University of Rochester Press, in which several of Eastman's contemporaries attempt to piece together the puzzle.