

Breathtaking performances among Top 10 concerts

By Steve Siegel and Philip A. Metzger, Special to The Morning Call

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1. "Carmen": The MET Live in HD (Jan. 16, Allentown Symphony Hall)

A Lehigh Valley opera lovers' dream came true when Allentown Symphony Hall began screening videocasts of Metropolitan Opera performances in high definition. In January, the opera was Bizet's "Carmen," perhaps the most popular opera of all time, with young Latvian mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca in the title role. Roll-over-and drop-dead gorgeous, with a steely yet subtle voice and powerful acting ability, she made a conquest of many more than just the hapless Don Jose.

2. Monocacy Chamber Orchestra (April 18, Cathedral Church of the Nativity)

Donald Spieth, conductor of the late Lehigh Valley Chamber Orchestra, had a chance to exercise his baton with a small ensemble called the Monocacy Chamber Orchestra, in a Sunday afternoon concert at the Cathedral Church of the Nativity. Two young musicians — violinist Domenic Salerni and violist Ayane Kozasa — gave a sumptuous performance of Mozart's Duo Concertante, and the orchestra supported them beautifully. It was paired with Poulenc's Organ Concerto featuring Russell Jackson, a contrast at once startling and rewarding.

3. Orpheus Chamber Orchestra with Ryo Goto (May 3, Williams Center)

Twenty-one year-old violinist Ryo Goto's performance of the Bruch violin concerto with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at the Williams Center at Lafayette College was ample evidence why he's considered a superstar in his native Japan. Goto played with a silken tone, velvety-smooth attacks, and underscored passion, appearing as calm and detached between musical phrases as if he were waiting for a bus. His encore, Variations on Paganini's Caprice No. 24, was as breathtaking as the Bruch, with lighting-fast arpeggios, rapid string crossings, and left-hand pizzicatos all taken in cool stride.

4. Valley Vivaldi (June 27, Octave Hall, Allen Organ)

The 25th consecutive season of the Valley Vivaldi summer chamber music series, presented by the Pennsylvania Sinfonia Orchestra, began at a new venue with one of the best performances in this concert series. Oboist Nobuo Kitagawa's performance of Bach's Concerto in A for Oboe d'Amore was the gem of the program, which took place at Octave Hall at the Allen Organ Company headquarters in Macungie. Kitagawa's sweet, velvety sound simply melted into every corner of the hall, with wonderfully shaped notes the consistency of rich cream, and an allegro filled with intricate, carefully executed trills.

5. Andre Watts with Allentown Symphony Orchestra (Oct. 6, Symphony Hall)

It was big, brash, sometimes even overbearing and every note was superb. Pianist Andre Watts' performance of the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra in its 60th anniversary season opener at Symphony Hall displayed big sound, big technique and natural musicality. The orchestra deftly followed Watts' lead as a perfect sparring partner, whether he was pouncing like a tiger or purring like a kitten. Shostakovich's brassy and joyous "Festive Overture" got the whole program off to a grand, celebratory start, and conductor Dianne Wittry conjured up the images in Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" with imagination and drama.

6. Peabody Trio (Oct. 17, Chamber Music Society of Bethlehem at Foy Hall)

Ghosts and drama filled the Peabody Trio's delightful program at Moravian College's Foy Hall, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Bethlehem. The ghosts issued from the eerie "Soliloquy" by the Israeli-American composer Shulamit Ran, with haunting piano runs, shrill cries from the violin, and soulful modal cello melodies. Happier spirits characterized a charming performance of Mendelssohn's D Minor Trio, and raw passion abounded in the musical battle lines that fill Schubert's E flat Piano Trio. Schubert's stunning swells of contrasting moods were presented in vivid contrast to the emotional stability of the Mendelssohn trio.

7. Yo-Yo Ma with Kathryn Stott (Oct. 23, Zoellner Arts Center gala)

Superstar cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pianist Kathryn Stott demonstrated pure musical telepathy in their sold-out gala concert at the Zoellner Arts Center. Ma's very first notes of Schubert's "Arpeggione" Sonata seemed to come out of thin air, their silken tone perfectly matched by Stott's softly stroked keys. His supremely sensuous phrasing and intense lyricism, with Stott answering each gentle pizzicato with equally gentle caresses of her own, was remarkable — all with no eye contact. Their impassioned performance of the Frank A Major Sonata highlighted the musicians' easy rapport, with piano and cello following each other in a sensuous canon before concluding with energetic elegance, leaving a big, wide smile on Ma's happy face.

8. Lehigh University Philharmonic (Nov. 5 and 6, Zoellner Arts Center)

Mahler's seminal Symphony No. 1 is not the kind of work that an orchestra made up mostly of college students from a variety of disciplines, plus a few community members and a sprinkling of professionals, normally tackles. Its musical and technical demands are considerable. Nonetheless, conductor Eugene Albuлесcu pulled up the Lehigh University Philharmonic's socks, and the result was a performance that both startled and impressed its hearers. The writer of this item (Metzger) was a humble member of the percussion section of the Philharmonic (although the percussion parts in this work are hardly humble) and heard compliments from knowledgeable listeners that went much beyond mere politeness.

9. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (Nov. 10, Williams Center)

In the 20th century, percussion instruments came into their own, no longer having to limit themselves to roles as handmaidens of winds and strings. The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center brought two of the century's most important works for percussion to the Williams Center at Lafayette College. The first was Bartok's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937) and the second George Crumb's Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III, 1974).

10. Orpheus Chamber Orchestra with Kate Royal (Dec. 3, Williams Center)

Young British soprano Kate Royal's name was unknown to most of the listeners at the Lafayette College's Williams Center. She had accompanied the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra to Easton to preview a program that was to be repeated the next night at Carnegie Hall in New York. With a beautiful sinewy and rich soprano, together with an intense stage presence, she made a perfect pairing with the Orpheus in an early song cycle by Benjamin Britten, "Les Illuminations." Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and Samuel Barber's Capricorn Concerto more than rounded out the program.



Pianist Kathryn Stott and cellist Yo-Yo Ma showed pure musical telepathy at the Zoellner Arts Center gala Oct. 23. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO / December 30, 2010)

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