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Best of 2015: Trojan War masterpiece, Gustavo Dudamel, top classical year



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In a year marked by chaos and fear, the Bay Area's classical music organizations remained a constant source of comfort and joy for local audiences. A Top 10 list scarcely covers the variety, excellence and inspiration in this year's performances, but it serves to remind us of the riches Bay Area music lovers enjoy from season to season. Here are the highlights.

1"The Trojans": San Francisco Opera hit the pinnacle of musical, artistic and vocal artistry in June with Berlioz's five-hour operatic masterpiece. Donald Runnicles conducted the

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orchestra in a masterful performance featuring a cast for the ages led by mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, tenor Bryan Hymel and soprano Anna Caterina Antonacci.

2Dudamel at the Greek: Cal Performances launched its fall season in September with a residency by conductor Gustavo Dudamel, who brought the Símon Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela to the Greek Theatre for a performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, "Choral." Joined by the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Pacific Boychoir, and Chamber Chorus of the University of California and Alumni, it was a glorious night of music under the stars.

3Christian Tetzlaff-San Francisco Symphony: There was chemistry to spare in October at Davies Symphony Hall, when German violinist Christian Tetzlaff, Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki and the musicians of the San Francisco Symphony teamed up for an electrifying performance of Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1.

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4Terry Riley Birthday Bash: Terry Riley turned 80 in June, and the inimitable Kronos Quartet hosted a top-notch roster of musical guests to celebrate the great minimalist composer's life and works. In a three-day festival at SFJazz Center, audiences heard Riley revivals and premieres, short pieces and the epic "Salome Dances for Peace."

5"Lulu": Kicking off its summer season at Oakland's abandoned 16th Street train station, West Edge Opera presented a gripping production of Alban Berg's dark expressionist masterpiece, featuring skilled music direction by Jonathan Khuner and a sensational performance by soprano Emma McNairy in the title role.

6"Jupiter" at Midsummer Mozart: No one conducted Mozart's music with the affection and deep understanding of George Cleve. The founder and music director of the Midsummer Mozart Festival led an unforgettable performance of the composer's "Jupiter" Symphony at Stanford's Bing Hall in July. Sadly, Cleve passed away soon after -- a major loss in Bay Area music.

7Schubert at Music@Menlo: Led by husband-and-wife team David Finckel and Wu Han, the annual chamber music festival turned its gaze to Schubert this year; as always with this summer event, the results were sublime. With string quartets, piano works and a generous

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helping of Schubert lieder in the lineup, audiences enjoyed a full immersion in the composer's enduring genius.

8"Where Angels Fear to Tread": Opera San Jose scored a hit with the world premiere of Mark Lanz Weiser's well-crafted adaptation of E.M. Forster's first novel. The February production at the California Theatre boasted a shapely orchestral performance conducted by Joseph Marcheso and beautiful singing by a strong ensemble cast.

9Baroque treasures at American Bach and Philharmonia Baroque: It's hard to believe, but the Baroque era continues to yield new musical treasures. This year brought two revelations. In August, the American Bach Soloists unveiled a dazzling concert performance of "Sémélé" -- not Handel's opera but an earlier version of the same mythological tale by French composer Marin Marais. In October, the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra treated Bay Area audiences to "La gloria di primavera" (The Glory of Spring), a gorgeous evening-length work by Scarlatti making its long overdue U.S. premiere.

10"Klinghoffer" choruses, Berkeley Symphony: Under Joana Carneiro, the Berkeley Symphony scores frequent successes with the pairing of old and new works. In April, Carneiro led Mozart's "Requiem" alongside a set of choruses from John Adams' opera, "The Death of Klinghoffer." It was a moving program, one that left many of us hoping that "Klinghoffer" will receive a complete performance in the Bay Area soon.

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