



The Top 10 Performances of 2011

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By Lawrence A. Johnson



Photo: David Cortes

10. Fulcrum Point: **Speaking in Tongues**

Just by definition new-music concerts are often mixed, uneven affairs but in this March program Fulcrum Point managed to deliver one of the finest contemporary programs of recent seasons with three world premieres. Most notable were Vivian Fung's engaging Yunan Folk Songs and Geoffrey Gordon's unapologetically 12-tone Tiger Psalms, the latter given a sterling performance by Julia Bentley. With artful, non-distracting projections, all the varied works received tight, full-metal performances under Stephen Burns' focused direction.

9. John Nelson and Soli Deo Gloria: **Bach's St. Matthew Passion**

Yes, the acoustic was over-resonant, restroom facilities inadequate and parking horrific. It didn't matter, for conductor John Nelson and Soli Deo Gloria inaugurated a new Holy Week tradition in Chicago with a gleaming, deeply spiritual and wholly idiomatic performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion at St. Vincent de Paul Parish.

8. Carlos Kalmar and the Grant Park Orchestra in **Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde.**

The good thing about Lollapalooza chasing the Grant Park Orchestra underground to the Harris Theater is that it allows an opportunity, sans amplification and al fresco noises, to really appreciate what a terrific orchestra Kalmar has built. With two superb soloists (Alexandra Petersamer and Christian Elsner) Kalmar led a concentrated, beautifully detailed July performance with glorious playing by the Grant Park musicians.

7. Lyric Opera of Chicago: **Wagner's Lohengrin**

In the Lyric Opera's first Lohengrin in thirty years, the company scored its greatest success of 2011 in February with Wagner's epic tale. The first-class cast was led by Johan Botha who sang magnificently with strength and tenderness in the role of the melancholy title knight.



The Top 10 Performances of 2011 (continued)

6. Esa-Pekka Salonen and violinist Leila Josefowicz with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Esa-Pekka Salonen was at his finest with the CSO in a February program that featured him in dual roles as composer and conductor. Soloist Leila Josefowicz delivered a blistering Chicago premiere of Salonen's rock-edged Violin Concerto and the Finnish conductor and CSO followed that with a richly elemental account of Sibelius's Symphony No. 2.

5. Chicago Opera Theater: Tod Machover's Death and the Powers

Equal parts opera, theatrical event and electronic art installation, Tod Machover's envelope-pushing *Death and the Powers* was the undisputed opera highlight of the year in Chicago. The strange futuristic tale, Machover's engaging electronic score, and the audacious multimedia staging proved consistently compelling and a highlight of Brian Dickie's tenure as general director.

4. Bernard Haitink and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Mahler's Symphony No. 9

Bernard Haitink's majestic June performance of Mahler's final completed symphony was a testament to the strength of the partnership of the CSO and its former principal conductor in this repertoire. The eloquent, beautifully played Ninth resonated long after the hushed final bars had faded away.

3. The Pacifica Quartet in Shostakovich's Quartets Nos. 7 and 10-12.

The Pacifica Quartet's remarkable survey of Dimitri Shostakovich's complete string quartets began last October and ended in February of this year. The cycle reached its peak with the penultimate program in mid-February with these young musicians delivering shattering, knife-edged performances that laid bare all the desolation and painful nerve-endings of these works.

2. Susanna Mälkki and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Ives, Musgrave and Strauss

So, we know there is no such thing as a bad Finnish conductor. But even by the high standards of that musically gifted nation, Susanna Mälkki's sensational October debut with the CSO was a triumph. Her demanding program included the U.S. premiere of Thea Musgrave's *Autumn Sonata* (J. Lawrie Bloom, the superb bass clarinet soloist) and Mälkki brought bracing clarity to Charles Ives' densest contrapuntal thicket and delivered an *Also Sprach Zarathustra* of extraordinary sweep and Straussian brilliance. Can you spell principal guest conductor?

1. Riccardo Muti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Verdi's Otello

With Riccardo Muti's inaugural season as Chicago Symphony Orchestra music director thrown into chaos and uncertainty by the conductor's two medical emergencies and extended absence, much was riding on these April concert performances of Verdi's late operatic masterpiece. In his first CSO concert in seven months, Muti answered any skeptics with his dynamic conducting and a full-throttle performance that brought out the seismic dramatic punch and poetic delicacy of Verdi's score. Backed by an inspired group of singers and brilliant playing and ensemble support from the CSO and CSO Chorus, this memorable *Otello* was Chicago's top musical event of 2011.