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Top 10 classical performances in South Florida

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PHOTO



New World Symphony
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(Photo by Chris Lee)



Charles Dutoit
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Pianist Steven Osborne
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In 2005, the New World Symphony led the local league once again with its consistently first-class music-making and enterprising programming; Seraphic Fire was a close second. The most encouraging development was the resurgence of our two opera companies. Florida Grand Opera bounced back from the doldrums of recent seasons with three excellent productions in 2005, and Palm Beach Opera's new artistic director, Bruno Aprea, began his tenure with a colorful and worthy *Aida*.

1. Michael Tilson Thomas and the New World Symphony in Beethoven's Eroica Symphony.

The New World Symphony's season-opening gala usually serves up populist showpieces rather than serious cornerstone repertory. In October, however, Michael Tilson Thomas elected to kick off the season with Beethoven's mighty Symphony No. 3. The conductor's renewed study of the *Eroica* made for an uncommonly fresh, vital and beautifully played performance. The jarring idiosyncrasies registered as if the intervening two centuries disappeared, and all of Beethoven's fire, nobility, humor, tragedy and defiance came across with blazing force and natural eloquence.

2. Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Charles Dutoit.

That the Pittsburgh Symphony is one of the nation's finest has long been widely known. Still one was unprepared for the musical tempest whipped up by conductor Charles Dutoit and the Pittsburgh players at the March concert presented by the Concert Association of Florida. The tonal luster, characterful solos and seamlessly blended ensemble in music of Brahms and Prokofiev were astonishing, with the charismatic Dutoit's dynamic direction drawing playing of sleek refinement and combustible power.

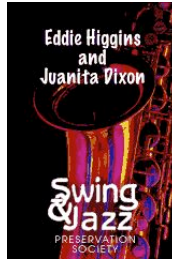
3. Steven Osborne at the Miami International Piano Festival.

With a canceled flight and string of travel mishaps, Steven Osborne arrived in South Florida mere hours before his March recital at the Broward Center. That didn't stop the Scottish pianist from delivering one of the most spellbinding concerts of the year. Osborne's Brahms and Liszt blended burnished nostalgia with amazing bravura. The iridescent colors and staggering technique Osborne brought to *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jesus* richly conveyed Messiaen's ecstatic visionary music.

4. Seraphic Fire in Shawn Crouch's The Road From Hiroshima.

In this May world premiere, Patrick Dupré Quigley showed that his choir is not only one of the finest music ensembles in South Florida, but also one of the most adventurous. Commissioned to mark the 60th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Shawn Crouch's *The Road From Hiroshima* for choir and chamber orchestra has its debts to Penderecki, Britten and Stravinsky. Yet the 29-year-old composer's requiem also shows an individual voice and is a searing, imaginatively crafted and deeply moving work. It's also enormously difficult, yet Quigley and his singers launched Crouch's memorial with laudable tonal polish, full-blooded fervor and corporate commitment.

5. Emerson String Quartet.



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At their first South Florida appearance in six years in January, the Emerson String Quartet once again showed why after nearly three decades they remain the most celebrated and exciting American chamber ensemble. The musicians tackled two epic quartets by Beethoven and Schubert in symbiotic accord, with unforced eloquence and violent intensity.

6. Violinist James Ehnes.

In a recital on a stormy June night at Coral Gables Congregational Church, the Canadian fiddler displayed the flexibility, turn-on-a-dime technique and musical integrity that have made him one of the finest violinists currently before the public. With first-rate support by pianist Eduard Laurel, Ehnes served up music of Schumann, Grieg, Dvorak and Kreisler with aristocratic finesse and faultless technical command.

7. Florida Grand Opera: Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor.

The Miami company's casting in recent seasons has been more baffling than downtown zoning in Fort Lauderdale. Yet in 2005, Florida Grand managed to field a superb group of singers for a darkly atmospheric production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Company favorite Leah Partridge was well suited to the doomed Lucia, and the soprano's sensitive performance culminated in a magnificent Mad Scene. From top to bottom, the cast sang gloriously and was dramatically effective, putting across the bel canto beauty and Gothic drama of Donizetti's opera.

8. New World Symphony Concerto Competition winners.

The stellar musicianship of the New World musicians is no secret, but it was boldly manifest in March with two remarkable solo outings by a pair of young Concerto Competition winners. Dwight Parry's graceful elegance and quicksilver vivacity brought out the Mozartean grace and autumnal glow of Richard Strauss' Oboe Concerto. And Daniel Carlson proved fully in sync with Bartok's Violin Concerto No. 2, his commanding reading bristling with edgy virtuosity and pungent Hungarian folk influences.

9. Sarasota Opera: Delibes' Lakmé.

French opera has given Sarasota Opera some of its most memorable productions, and so it proved again with this year's revival of Leo Delibes' *Lakmé*. The exotic, once-popular opera is bursting with beautiful melody, and Sarasota's evocative production was sparked by a star turn by Eglise Gutierrez. The petite Cuban soprano nearly stopped the show with her stunning rendition of the *Bell Song*, and Gutierrez's sensitive vocalism and quiet dignity culminated in a heart-breaking, beautifully sung final scene.

10. Alasdair Neale and New World Symphony in Adams' Harmonielehre.

Since his appointment four years ago, the New World Symphony's principal guest conductor has gained in artistic maturity and grown into a very impressive musician. The Scottish maestro had no finer night than last May with the closing weekend of the 2004-2005 season. In addition to collaborating in a stellar Beethoven *Emperor* Concerto with soloist Jonathan Biss, and presenting the local premiere of Kevin Puts' Symphony No. 3, Neale and the musicians tore the roof off with a thrilling, seismic performance of John Adams' rocking *Harmonielehre*.

HONORABLE MENTIONS: Seraphic Fire's radiant Monteverdi *Vespers*; and Palm Beach Opera's handsomely mounted *Aida*; the Pacifica Quartet's silken virtuosity in Mendelssohn and Hindemith; Florida Grand Opera's delightful *Magic Flute* and *Fanciulla del West*; pianist Stephen Hough's limpid poetry and digital fire; violinist Joshua Bell at the Kravis Center; the Jerusalem Quartet's Smetana; pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet with Kurt Masur and the French National Orchestra; keyboard prodigy Kit Armstrong's recital; and, with the New World Symphony, Paavo Järvi's Nielsen, Alasdair Neale's Elgar, and, not least, the three bracing, thought-provoking "Sounds of the Times" concerts led by HK Gruber, Oliver Knussen and, jointly, Michael Tilson Thomas and Vladimir Feltsman.