



2009: Ten Exceptional Recordings

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Opera fans are a contentious lot, furiously sparring over the relative worth of leading singers, but a rare consensus has emerged around Joyce DiDonato, the down-to-earth mezzo with the gleaming voice and [charming blog](#). She has the technique, the passion, the musical intelligence, and the instinct for the next right move. On her new collection of Rossini arias, inspired by the early nineteenth-century diva Isabella Colbran, DiDonato proceeds effortlessly from the prayerful lyricism of “[Giusto ciel, in tal periglio](#)” to the gleeful coloratura of “Bel raggio lusinghier” and on to the demonic rage of the “Armida” finale (audio above; crank it up). This finely dazzling disc is my pick for the best CD of 2009.

The test of a great recording is whether you find yourself temporarily unable to live without it. For certain overlapping periods this year, I couldn’t stop listening to the Ebène Quartet’s hyper-lyrical renditions of Debussy, Ravel, and Fauré; to Mark Padmore’s psychologically raw “[Winterreise](#)”; and to Ann Southam’s immense, mysterious piano piece “Simple Lines of Enquiry.” Stile Antico’s radiant singing of the Clemens non Papa motet “[Ego flos campi](#)” heightened an idyllic late-summer run through the Sunken Forest on Fire Island; the Jack Quartet’s beautifully harsh Xenakis roared from my rented-car stereo during a drive into Death Valley. Lately, I’ve fallen under the autumnal spell of “Notturmo,” a song cycle for baritone and string quartet by the twentieth-century Swiss composer Othmar Schoeck. On an immaculate ECM production, Christian Gerhaher sings with hushed intensity, and the infinitely gentle C-major chaconne that enters at the end is like a secret gift to the patient listener.

“[Colbran, the Muse](#)”: Rossini Arias; Joyce DiDonato, Edoardo Müller conducting the Orchestra and Chorus of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome (Virgin Classics)

“[Song of Songs](#)”: Works by Palestrina, Gombert, Lassus, Victoria, Clemens, Guerrero, Lhéritier, Ceballos, Vivanco; Stile Antico (Harmonia Mundi)

Ravel, Debussy, Fauré, [String Quartets](#); Ebène Quartet (Virgin Classics) [released in 2008, belatedly discovered in 2009]

Schubert, “[Winterreise](#)”; Mark Padmore, Paul Lewis (Harmonia Mundi)

Ann Southam, “[Simple Lines of Enquiry](#)”; Eve Egoyan (Centrediscs)

David Lang, "The Little Match Girl Passion"; Paul Hillier, Theatre of Voices and Ars Nova Copenhagen (Harmonia Mundi)

Xenakis, String Quartets; Jack Quartet (Mode)

Othmar Schoeck, "Notturmo"; Christian Gerhaher, Rosamunde Quartet (ECM)

Mozart, Piano Concertos Nos. 23 and 24; Mitsuko Uchida, Cleveland Orchestra (Decca)

Messiaen, "St. Francis of Assisi"; Rod Gilfry, Hubert Delamboye, Henk Neven, Camilla Tilling, and Tom Randle, with Ingo Metzmacher conducting the Netherlands Opera Chorus and Hague Philharmonic (Opus Arte DVD)