

Classical CDs Weekly: Bernstein, Donizetti, Stravinsky

A compact comic opera, revelatory performances of two ballet scores, and the most sophisticated of musicals gets the recording it deserves

by [Graham Rickson](#) | Friday, 13 June 2014

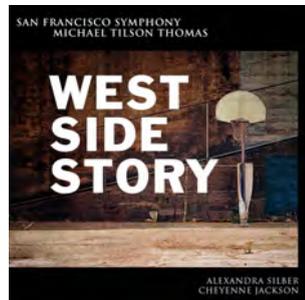
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Jessica Vosk and Alexandra Silber as West Side Story's Anita and Maria

Bernstein: West Side Story Alexandra Silber, Cheyenne Jackson, San Francisco Symphony/Michael Tilson Thomas (SFS Media)

Bernstein's West Side Story has been patchily served on disc. The original cast version has the freshest vocals but is heavily cut. The film soundtrack reordered the songs, with Sondheim's lyrics softened. Michael Tilson Thomas's new, live San Francisco version offers the best of all worlds. This two-disc set presents the show virtually complete. It's well sung and the playing is magnificent. Sid Ramin and Irv Kostal orchestrated the show from Bernstein's piano score, and this performance makes one marvel at their work – West Side Story's sound world is unique. Tilson Thomas uses the original scoring, only adding a few extra strings. This could be the best pit band in recorded history. Think of those brazen, screaming trumpets which introduce The Dance at the Gym, or the nagging ostinati which open the Act 2 ballet. There's a wonderful few minutes before the show's close, when a scratchy jukebox reprise of the Mambo segues into the Taunting Scene. America's ebullient rhythms are stamped on, defaced. And the show's disquieting, discordant final bars, cheekily lifted from Strauss's Zarathustra. This has to be Bernstein's greatest achievement – taut, witty, vibrant and emotionally affecting from start to finish.



His overblown, operatic 1985 recording on DG is a colossal misfire. Tilson Thomas states in the notes to this set that he wanted instead to use singing actors. "That's who West Side Story was written for. I wanted to take it back in that direction with artists who could sing it." He succeeds. Cheyenne Jackson

“ This could be the best pit band in recorded history ”

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direction, with artists who sounded idiomatic. He succeeds. Chryenne Jackson and Alexandra Silber succeed as Tony and Maria. Something's Coming is electrifying, and the pair's duets are convincing. Jessica Vosk's Anita is nicely characterised, sparring effectively with Juliana Hansen's Rosalia in America. A Boy Like That's verismo isn't underplayed. Julia Bullock's Somewhere is simple, pure and unaffected. The Jet Song and Officer Krupke are pin-sharp, despite the chorus of male voices sounding a tad middle-aged. A superb set – handsomely presented and very well recorded.



Donizetti; Rita (Deux Hommes et une femme) Katarina Karnéus, Barry Banks, Christopher Maltman, The Hallé/ Sir Mark Elder (Opera Rara)

Opera Rara's latest exhumation is this obscure Donizetti one-acter, the only work by this composer to have been premiered after his death. Written in the early 1840s, contractual and health issues conspired against Rita. The score was inherited by Donizetti's brothers, and after a jury had been

assembled to verify the opera's authenticity, it was produced in Paris in 1860, complete with alterations made to Gustave Vaëz's libretto. This new recording uses the original French text. Perhaps it's best not to dwell too much on the unsavoury plot, concerning two unappetising men competing to win the heart of a girl – the twist being that neither of them really wants, or deserves her. On the plus side, Donizetti's music is unfailingly charming, and it's hard to imagine the piece sounding better than it does here. Mark Elder and a slimmed-down Hallé Orchestra accompany in some style.

Katarina Karnéus's feisty Rita is beyond praise – a superb vocal actress, alert to

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arm. Don't ask why. Diction is excellent, so anyone with a decent grasp of French will be able to follow the onstage shenanigans with ease. Opera Rara's booklet is a joy to read – what a pleasure to find a CD libretto which you can read without recourse to a magnifying glass.

Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring, Petrushka Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth (Musicales Actes Sud)

François-Xavier Roth's intention here was to recreate the sounds heard at The Rite of Spring's first performance in May 1913. Stravinsky's ballet received its final revision in 1967, and Roth's research involved looking at the original manuscript, along with conductor Pierre Monteux's annotated score from the 1920s. Spotting the differences is made more complicated by the very different sounds made by a crack period-instrument orchestra. For a live performance, this is astonishingly assured playing. And there's an irresistible transparency and clarity to the textures. Brass and percussion are always audible, but never drown out everything else. The offbeat horn chords in Danse des adolescents are a poke in the ribs, not a kick in the face. The very French bassoon sound suits the score to perfection. Plucked strings near the close of the Danse Sacrale are a surprise, and the final flourish carries real weight.



Stravinsky's 1911 version of Petrushka is unfairly neglected, ignored in favour of the leaner, sharper 1947 revision. The original's warmer, less brittle colours are seductive, relating the work more strongly to the 19th century Russian tradition. Gut strings sound very different, and Jean Sugitani's brilliant piano solos are played on an appealingly mellow 1892 Pleyel instrument. None of which matter if Roth's interpretation wasn't up to snuff. It is – this is a vivid, dramatic and entertaining performance. The two central tableaux are claustrophobic, and the fourth scene's dance sequence is pure joy, making the disquieting coda more of a shock. This disc is much more than a curio for Stravinskyphiles – it's essential listening.

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