



FRONT/ROW
DALLAS ARTS FROM THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE

December 24, 2014

Classical Music in Dallas: 2014's Most Memorable Moments

POSTED IN [CLASSICAL MUSIC](#). DEC 24, 2014 AT 6:00 AM BY [CATHERINE WOMACK](#)

<http://frontrow.dmagazine.com/2014/12/classical-music-in-dallas-2014s-most-memorable-moments/>



Tis the season to make lists. Or, at least, to look back on what we experienced, heard, saw, and ate over the last 12 months and make note of what stands out as memorable. In no particular order, here are some of the classical performances and stories that made big impressions on me during a fantastic, busy year of concert-going in Dallas.

The High Note: 2014's Most Memorable Vocal Performance

It's a tie. In a year packed with operatic performances (both staged and unstaged), two women stand out in my mind as exceptional performer/vocalists.

Let's start on the opera stage: Last spring, [Isabel Leonard](#) starred as Rosina in [The Dallas Opera's delightfully whimsical production of Rossini's The Barber of Seville](#). As an actor and on-stage presence, Leonard is charming, captivating and utterly irresistible, but it is the clarity and beauty of her voice that

makes her a real star. At any speed and every height, Leonard's crystal-clear soprano was pitch-perfect and dazzling. If you see her name on a bill, buy a ticket. No matter what else happens on stage, you'll be completely charmed by her mesmerizing sound.

Just last month, the [Dallas Symphony Orchestra presented a concert version of Bartók's bizarrely dark opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*](#). Singing the role of Judith, mezzo-soprano [Michelle DeYoung](#) was a powerhouse. Her rich, strong voice easily soared over the orchestral accompaniment. During one of the most dramatic moments – the opening of the 5th door in Bluebeard's creepy castle of secrets – DeYoung opened up her voice, her emotions, and her arms to the hall, belting out a huge, glorious sound. The entire concert was fantastic, but she brought the whole thing home with the strength and beauty of her voice in that one, emotionally charged moment.

Dramarama: 2014's Best Opera

The highlight of this year's Fort Worth Opera Festival was their [production of Kevin Puts' Pulitzer Prize winning 2011 opera, *Silent Night*](#). Sung in multiple languages, this moving World War II story was beautifully produced thanks to a consistently strong ensemble cast, an elaborate and aesthetically appealing set, and modern, accessible music. Kudos to the FWO for pulling off an incredibly tricky, multi-faceted production with a lot of cohesion and musical integrity. This complex and emotionally satiating contemporary opera felt fresh, but it also had the strangely familiar qualities of an instant classic.

Fresh Face: 2014's Pinch-Hitter of the Year

Karina Canellakis, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's new Assistant Conductor, made an [unexpected subscription concert debut](#) early this fall when Jaap van Zweden had to step down due to pain from a shoulder injury. Her performance at the podium was confident and studious. I was particularly impressed with the musicality of the phrasing she drew from the orchestra in Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 14*, but she also guided the DSO through a thrilling performance of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. Perhaps more importantly, she brought to our attention the fact that the DSO has more than one great conductor on its payroll.

Scandal: 2014's Classical Story of the Year

Just a few weeks ago, the *Dallas Morning News* aired quite a bit of the Dallas Symphony's dirty laundry in [a story by staff writer Michael Granberry](#). The piece outlined what many who work closely with the orchestra have heard off the record: that the relationship between Music Director Jaap van Zweden and the DSO musicians has, at times over the last year, been incredibly rocky. While the orchestra would certainly have preferred for personnel drama to be kept out of the public eye, here's hoping that shining a light on these tensions will help to bring about positive changes in the organization.

All By Myself: 2014's Most Memorable Solo Performance

In a smallish hall in the basement of the Nasher Sculpture Center, cellist Alisa Weilerstein gave an incredibly captivating performance this November as part of the museum's series *Soundings: New Music at the Nasher*. Performing unaccompanied, she played music by Bach, Britten, Kodály, and Golijov, all with unwavering intensity of focus and great depth of emotion. Her technique is impressive, but it is her daring musicality and bold sound that made this performance so captivating.

Better Together: 2014's Most Memorable Chamber Performance

Last spring, the DSO augmented its Beethoven Festival with a fantastic series of five chamber concerts, all presented at Dallas City Performance Hall. Over the course of the concerts, violinists Alexander Kerr (DSO Concertmaster), Nathan Olson (DSO Co-Concertmaster), and Chee-Yun Kim (SMU Artist-in-Residence) performed the complete Beethoven violin sonatas as well as *The Archduke Trio*. (They were joined by pianists Alessio Bax and Martin Helmchen and cellists Christopher Adkins (DSO Principal Cello), Jolyon Pegis, and Alisa Weilerstein.) Several of the concerts also highlighted Beethoven's musical connections to his contemporaries, including works by Haydn and Schubert. As a whole, the series was a lovely overview of some of Beethoven's most intimate compositions as well as an incredible display of virtuosity and musicality, especially on the part of Kerr and Olson, the DSO's consistently impressive concertmasters.

Bandwagon: 2014's Trend of the Year

[Simulcasting](#). [Everyone's doing it](#).

New School: 2014's Most Memorable Contemporary Music Performance

Once again, it's a tie: this time between an incredibly ambitious, high-tech opera production and a small but intellectually and musically stimulating chamber concert.

The Dallas Opera explored the world of science fiction last February with its [production of Tod Machover's 2010 opera, *Death and the Powers*](#). It took me more than one listen to fall for this opera, which incorporates live, electronically-generated sounds and on-stage robots, but once I got to know it, I was hooked. The sounds were new, the story fascinating, and the performances incredibly well-executed. I loved that TDO took a risk in bringing something so different to the stage, and that they introduced us to the work of such an [innovative contemporary composer](#).

Over at SMU, the Meadows school's new-music ensemble, SYZGY, presented [one of the most intriguing concerts of new music](#) I've heard in Dallas in some time. Led by Artist-in-Residence, Director of Chamber Music, and new-music aficionado Matt Albert, the concert featured students and guest artists performing a stimulating mash-up of twentieth and twenty-first century music. This was my first time to attend one of their concerts. I won't miss another.