Subject: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by elektratig on Fri, 11 Mar 2005 16:08:30 GMT
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Consistent with MB's suggestion below that we move away from the "usual suspects", I'm going to try to start posting on a regular basis about favorite musical pieces in various different genres. Rather than overwhelm people with long lists of suggestions, I will focus each post on my experience with a single album or cd and, where there are multiple performance choices (particularly with classical and opera), a particular performance. Genres will vary from medieval to classical and opera to "international" to country and "old time" to electronic. I will probably try to focus on works or genres that are, hopefully, somewhat unfamiliar to some of you (i.e., no Led Zepplin), but not so obscure as to scare everyone off. I'm going to try to encourage you to try a genre or work that you might not otherwise try.The recommended cd for today is – yikes! – opera: a two-cd set containing two operas, Cavelleria Rusticana ("Rustic Chivalry") by Pietro Mascagni and I Pagliacci ("The Clowns") by Ruggiero Leoncavallo, both featuring Luciano Pavarotti.These two operas share many similarities. Both were composed in the 1890's by Italians who were, more or less, one-hit wonders. Both are relatively short, a little over an hour each. Both inhabit a similar late-romantic musical world. Both are set in Sicilian villages and, dramatically, are considered "verismo", that is they deal with "ordinary" villagers in comparatively realistic (although highly overwrought) settings, rather than with kings and queens. Both have extremely dramatic plots focusing on love, betrayal and murder. Both take place on a single day. "Cav/Pag" quickly became linked in the repertoire and are often presented together, both live in the opera house and on cd.Although there are plenty of other ways to get your toes wet, these operas – and this version of these operas – are an excellent place to start if you have never tried opera before. I can attest to this because these discs were the first opera I purchased and seriously listened to.I purchased them quite by chance. About fifteen years ago, I was disenchanted with rock. I wandered into a music store looking for something different and somehow found myself in the opera section. I knew nothing about opera except that the only people who listened to it were old dames with blue hair, who dragged their bored husbands to performances, at which they promptly fell asleep. Nonetheless, I was desperate, so I looked more closely.Then panic set in: I was confronted by rack upon rack of unknown titles and names, and there seemed to be hundreds of versions of each work. Ashamed to expose my ignorance to the clerks, I searched with increasing desperation for something, anything familiar. And then I found it. The "big aria" in Pagliacci was one of the few I had ever heard and sort of liked, Pavarotti was a name even I recognized, and I was somehow comforted by the picture of him in clown makeup on the cover. I took it home, balanced between fear that I had wasted my money and hope that I might be on to something – and was promptly hooked. I listened to the discs obsessively for weeks, usually following the librettos found in the booklet included with the cd, finding them more and more beautiful on each hearing. At first, I enjoyed mostly the "big" arias, but over weeks and months I came to love the flow and sweep of the operas – Cavelleria Rusticana in particular, set on a single day, Easter Sunday, may lack the highlights that Pagliacci has, but it is, if anything, more consistently beautiful.I won't to try to provide a detailed musicological description, nor will I try to argue the merits of this version over others. Suffice it to say that both feature Pavarotti and his distinctive voice in their prime, and the conducting and other performances are uniformly fine. I listen to these discs all the time and continue to love them fifteen years later.In short, if you want to take a stab at an opera, you can do it in many different ways, but you can't go wrong starting with these discs.

In my case, they ultimately opened up entirely new musical worlds, stretching over hundreds of years. You can't ask for more.
Cav/Pag

Subject: Re: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by Manualblock on Fri, 11 Mar 2005 20:23:11 GMT
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Nice post Lon; remmember the movie Serpico? After watching it I thought to explore some operatic music the way he did in the movie. So I actually did listen for a time, mostly Wagner and Motzart and I kinda like it. Just lost touch but this post is a good nudge into a re-aquaintence. Thanks and keep 'em coming.

Subject: Re: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by lon on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 05:23:38 GMT
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T'weren't me, but a good post and start of a thread nonetheless. Previously I made some remarks about good taste. I hope no one thought I was talking about anyone _here_, but rather what passesfor middle brow culture-- like broadway musicals with classicalpretentions. Similarly, I came to a bit of opera by not having any othercommercial-free radio on Sat. afternoon but the local Public.Saturday Afternoons at the Met (brought to you by Texaco) hasbeen a long-standing habit now. So imagine my chagrin at actaully _seeing_ (and hearing) a fewlocally. Not the same. In the Theater of the Mind that is radio,I could imagine those big New York Lincoln Center Sets: the legacy of Gordon Craig in which well-heeled New Yorkers couldindulge. Local road companies are pretty pale by comparison--pale and aften barely competent it seems. All this is by way of saying I've seen and heard a bit of opera. After seasons of Afternoon At The Met, for style, tempi andgeneral lack of hysterical sopranos (small 's') I've found that"Nabuco" is my favorite to both listen to and imagine in setting. But with that said, when they play "I Barbieri de Sevilla"I still think of Bugs Bunny.

Subject: Re: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by BillEpstein on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 08:59:15 GMT
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I've been an on-again, off-again opera lover since dad shlepped us to the Met to hear Moffo, Tucker and Merrill sing La Traviata when I was 7. The Met came to Cleveland every Summer and I also heard Tosca with Callas and Bergonzi and La Boheme and of, course, Cav/Pag. Always a

family affair. Besides listening I also played in Summer Theatre pit orchestras for more performances of Gilbert & Sullivan than I care to remember.Then came the Beatles! But somehow I also acquired my own copy of Turandot and Rigoletto after I happened to hear Joan Sutherland sing to my kids while watching Sesame Street! Her voice blew me away, even on the little 8" Fisher speakers I had at the time.Present day; I find that Horns and Opera were made for each other. Nowhere else does the range of dynamics come in to play with such high contrast. A great Soprano, and to a lesser extent, a Tenor can "load" whatever hall they're in, no matter the size, so as to actually cause the hall to "clip"! That's thrilling and needs to be reproduced as faithfully as the whispers of a dying Liu for us to really appeciate the music.A really great feature of re-acquiring Vinyl at thrift stores and record shows is that I come across Opera's I wouldn't have tried. And they're really cheap 'cause hardly anyone wants them. I recently bought Bellini's Norma with Sutherland for just a few dollars in really clean condition. So now I'm listening to something I had always heard about but never understood: Bel Canto Singing. With Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne both "beautiful singing", Norma is a great find.

Subject: Re:I forgot to thank Elektratig.....
Posted by BillEpstein on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 09:29:02 GMT
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....for bringing Opera into the Forum. And if it weren't 5:30 in the A.M., I'd fire up some Bel Canto right now.

Subject: Too early for that!
Posted by Wayne Parham on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 09:47:49 GMT
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Maybe the Marriage of Figaro instead.

Subject: Re: It's 4 A.M in Tulsa, when do you sleep?
Posted by BillEpstein on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 09:58:03 GMT
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Subject: Re: It's 4 A.M in Tulsa, when do you sleep?

Posted by Wayne Parham on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 11:27:10 GMT
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Sleep? What's that?

Subject: Re: Today's Recommendation: Opera
Posted by Manualblock on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 13:07:23 GMT
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Sorry Electratig; Got the wrong guy; too many hours at the CRT; start seeing double. Thanks for that great post and keep 'em coming.

Subject: Opera Performances
Posted by elektratig on Sun, 13 Mar 2005 18:41:18 GMT
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You don't have to go the Met to see a great opera performance. I had a subscription at the Met for a number of years, say eight performances per year. Of the eight, maybe one or two were really good or great; one or two were poor; and the remainder were OK. Plus, I seemed to have the subscription that included a performance of La Boheme every year. I like Boheme, but sheesh.Seriously, the two best operas I've ever seen -- as total productions -- were NOT at the Met. One was at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the other at the New York City Opera.On the other hand, the worst opera moment I ever experienced was at the City Opera. If you know Turandot, the Ice Princess weighed about 350 and had a face like the mother in Throw Momma From the Train. She made Birgit Nilsson look like a sex goddess. Our hero was about 5'2", 130. He made Woody Allen look like Arnold Schwartzenegger. He couldn't get near enough to her to put his arms around her. When it came to the Big Moment -- "Vincero, Vincero, VINCERO" -- on the last "VINCERO" our hero produced . . . a strangled squeak. It was the only time I heard an entire audience audibly gasp in unison.