

Classical countdown for '06: The year's 10 best performances  
By Jeff Rapsis for Hippo Press

I'm no Casey Kasem, but here's an opinionated round-up of the region's 10 best classical performances of 2006. It's based only on those concerts I attended and limited by my taste and judgment, or lack thereof. Happy New Year!

- No 10: Nashua Symphony and Choral Society, a semi-staged performance of "Carmina Burana" by Carl Orff, Richard A.A. Larraga conducting, Saturday, March 25. With added staging, costumes, and props, a bold effort to lend fresh interest to this warhorse. It was actually fun to watch unfold and see what would happen next. If more classical groups tried this kind of creative approach, audiences would be more willing to get into the habit. Also, the stripped-down orchestration for two pianos and four percussionists proved very effective—at full blast, the ensemble sounded a little like Danny Elfman's score for Pee-Wee's Big Adventure, and that's not a bad thing.
- No. 9: New Hampshire Philharmonic Pops Concert, Anthony Princiotti conducting, Saturday, Nov. 25. Probably the region's most satisfying holiday concert of 2005, highlighted by a movement from Mozart's oboe concerto featuring soloist Tim Gocklin, a junior at Manchester's Memorial High School and winner of the Philharmonic's annual youth concerto concert. Gocklin mastered the piece enough to have fun with it. The jaunty melodic licks came across as playful and effortless, an effect that must have taken a lot of work to achieve.
- No 8: Nashua Symphony, Royston Nash conducting, Peng Peng piano soloist, Saturday, April 22. Though just entering his teenage years, Peng Peng possesses an artistic maturity at the keyboard that rivals many adult virtuosos. In a polished performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, he created legato from the keyboard rather than by using the pedal, an approach that allowed the piano writing to come through with wonderful clarity and detail.
- No. 7: Granite State Symphony, Robert C. Babb conducting, Saturday, Oct. 7. Soloist Elliott Markow, the orchestra's concertmaster, delivered an incredible performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto that showcased the rich, expressive sound of a 300-year-old Italian violin he recently acquired. With his new/old fiddle, Markow delivered a memorable reading, one that brought the work's musicality to the forefront but didn't shortchange the passages studded with virtuoso pyrotechnics.
- No. 6: Granite State Symphony Orchestra, Robert C. Babb conducting, Saturday, March 11. Spectacular performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor with George Lopez as soloist. The musicians plumbed the depths of one of Mozart's most beguiling scores with thoroughness, grace, and a wonderful sense of proportion. At the keyboard, Lopez delivered a polished performance that was paradoxically delicate and extroverted. Grounding his playing in Mozart's classical style—no Rachmaninoff-style purple moments here—allowed the concerto to glow in its own original power.
- No. 5: Manchester Choral Society, 'Songs of Travel,' Dan Perkins, conductor, Sunday, May 21. Under Perkins, the group brought out the best of each work with an easy and chameleon-like grace, switching gears from a polished classical ensemble sound to a full-throated end-on-a-fat-chord gospel revival choir. You got the sense there was nothing that the Manchester Choral Society couldn't tackle and turn into wonderful music. If someone had given them all the Manchester phone book, they probably would have sung that, too.
- No. 4: Concord Community Music School, The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I by J.S. Bach, pianist Birgit Matzerath, Sunday, Feb. 5. It's the Boston Marathon of piano pieces. Clocking in at nearly 2½ hours, it takes stamina, endurance, and a solid sense of pacing to get through a live performance. Pianist Birgit Matzerath made it all work. Rarely playing louder than forte, Matzerath mined the score for tunes rather than flash, and more often than not found gold. Whether or not she was inspired by Super Bowl Sunday, Matzerath delivered a championship performance.

- No. 3: Manchester Community Music School, Manchester Chamber Players, pianist George Lopez, violinist Elliott Markow, violist Mimi Bravar, and cellist Larry Veale, Thursday, March 16. A run-through of the massive Piano Quartet in G minor by Brahms showed why these folks are generally recognized as among the state's finest musicians—they took a big, broad approach to the music, which is symphonic in scope and demands a lot from any musician.
- No. 2: New Hampshire Symphony Orchestra, various works, Kenneth Kiesler conducting, Friday, March 3. It's not every day you hear new classical music inspired by the likes of pop culture icons Jackie Onassis and Elvis Presley. But that's what conductor Kenneth Kiesler brought to New Hampshire this past weekend, with crackerjack performances of Jackie's Song and Dead Elvis, two works for chamber ensemble by U.S. composer Michael Daugherty. The result was some of the most exciting music to be heard in New Hampshire this season.
- No. 1: Granite State Opera, Madama Butterfly, Phil Lauriat, artistic director, Sunday, May 7. A glittering production, one that ranks among the most satisfying stagings of Butterfly I've seen anywhere and was a match for many of the recordings out there as well. Those who came for the music were richly rewarded. This sumptuously realized production, with its simple but effective staging, provided the perfect launching platform for a flat-out amazing cast of voices to take flight.