

Classical DVDs

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The best classical DVDs dating from this year to come my way were Kenneth Branagh's World War I version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (Lien Yin), Massenet's opera *Manon* with Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazon, with Daniel Barenboim conducting (Deutsche Grammophon), Karajan's versions of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* dating from 1968 and 1970 (also Deutsche Grammophon), and a privately-issued recording of Bach's B Minor Mass from Taipei.

Branagh's *Magic Flute* film combines high-spirited elation with serious thoughts, exactly as Mozart's original opera does. It succeeds against all the odds, using mostly young singers and combining them with spectacular visual effects. Branagh says on a bonus track that he hopes what he's created will make people feel that love is still possible, and it certainly does that, setting sex against war — the adoration of bodies and the people who inhabit them against mankind's worst habit, tearing them ritually apart.

Manon isn't many people's favorite opera, but why it was once so popular is revealed in Vincent Paterson's exciting and colorful staging. Everything is unpredictable — Paterson a director from Hollywood, Barenboim a conductor who'd



Left: Massenet's *Manon*.
Below: Kenneth Branagh's version of *The Magic Flute*.



probably never been near Massenet before, and two charismatic and alluring singers as the doomed lovers. This product is full of brio, glamour and zest. Karajan's *Cav* and *Pag* are classic renditions that it's wonderful to have at last on DVD. The first starring Fiorenza Cossotto, the second Jon Vickers, they're characterized by their lucidity and inner strength. The images are intensely clear and memorable, and the music — well, this is Karajan, even if the scores are remote from his usual areas of expertise. Taiwan's Evergreen Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonic Chorus gave what was claimed to be the first ever Taiwanese performance of Bach's *B Minor Mass* on March 29 this year — astonishing, if true, as this is one of the summits of world music. It was a stupendous event, and was recorded by the Philharmonic technicians. It's never been released, but a privately-made DVD is in circulation in Taipei, and if you can find one there could be no legal restriction on making a copy. Orchestra and chorus members are both probably worth a try, or even the Philharmonic administration. Believe me, it's worth the effort.

Books

The year of Theroux

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The four best books published in 2008 that I've come across are Nam Le's *The Boat* (Knopf), Paul Theroux's *The Elephanta Suite* and *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* (all three Houghton Mifflin).

The Boat hasn't done badly for praise — it's been raved about by just about everyone who's read it. Consisting of seven short stories ranging from the autobiographical to the intensely imagined, the book's overwhelming quality is strength. This is tough, intense, highly-wrought writing without a shadow of whimsicality. Nam Le was born in Vietnam but brought up in Australia, studied in the US and has just accepted a creative-writing professorship in the UK. What makes the book so remarkable is its combination of high literary aspiration with an intensity that just about everyone will respond to.

Paul Theroux bounced back in 2008 with a set of three novellas and yet another travel book. *The Elephanta Suite* just happened to take its title from the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai which was to be the focus of the terrorist attack later in the year. None



Left: Nam Le's *The Boat*.
Below: Paul Theroux's *The Elephanta Suite*.

of the stories actually takes place there except fleetingly, however. Instead, they're three hilarious and frightening gettings his own back on a place he doesn't like. But as fiction they're exceptionally compelling, brilliantly crafted and written in fire. *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* saw Theroux revisiting many of the locations he first described in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. He once again travels mostly by rail, lambasting and receiving homage as he goes. He likes Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Thailand best, and savages Singapore, along with Turkmenistan and Myanmar (or at least the governments of all three places). He soaks in a hot spring on the northern tip of Hokkaido and visits a former Gulag prison in Russia. You almost feel there's no point in taking any more trips yourself — Theroux has done them all for you, and had more interesting thoughts en route than you'll ever manage. *Evening is the Whole Day* is a fine debut novel by a young Malaysian. I may have been excessively enthusiastic in comparing her book in my original review with *Middlemarch*, but the point is that it has the same kind of qualities. Whole swathes of history are subsumed in the life of a single family.

CDs

Bucking the trend

BY DAVID CHEN AND IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTERS

Panai (巴奈) *A Piece of Blue* (那片藍)

Crowd Lu (盧廣仲) *100 Ways of Life* (100種生活)

88 Balaz (八十八顆芭樂籽) *The 44 Stone Lions* (肆十肆隻石獅子)

Wu Bai (伍佰) *Spacebomb* 太空彈

TC Yang (楊祖瑋) *A Voice*

That Could Not Be Silenced: The TC Yang Collection 1977-2003 (關不住的歌聲——楊祖瑋錄音選輯1977-2003)

While politicians bicker endlessly and people eye the economy nervously, Taiwan's music scene seems like the only thing that's moving along these days. To be sure, the Mando-pop industry keeps churning out new stars and regurgitating the old ones, but the gems lie in a new generation of independent-minded musicians with a polish and sheen of their own. If you buy only one CD by a Taiwanese artist this year, make it Panai's (巴奈) *A Piece of Blue* (那片藍), a dreamy and sublime collection of acoustic songs spiced with jazz, Brazilian folk and reggae rhythms. This long-awaited second album — inspired by a group of artists in Taitung County's (台東縣) Dulan Village (都蘭) — shows the 37-year-old singer-songwriter at her best. She naturally draws from her Amis and Puyuma roots, but doesn't let traditional music dominate her original songs, mostly penned in Mandarin. The various island music grooves sprinkled throughout the album bring a lighter shade to Panai's melancholy-tinted voice, which sounds both detached and intimate. The result is a beautiful balance: soulful, poetic reflection at a drifting, beachside pace.

There's a near-magical energy to 23-year-old Crowd Lu (盧廣仲), whose guitar-fueled, sunshine pop is winning the hearts of college kids in the Chinese-speaking world. His full-length debut, *100 Ways of Life* (100種生活), sounds as inspired as his



Top: Panai's *A Piece of Blue*.
Above: Wu Bai's *Spacebomb*.

personal story; he was in a serious car accident, and while recovering in the hospital he resolved to learn to play guitar. The instrument turned out to be a good match for his agile and highly capable voice; his geek-chic charm and earnest songwriting glued the rest together. Lu's tunes are about exams, making breakfast and toy robots, which haven't sounded like so much fun in a long time. Special mention goes to **88 Balaz** (八十八顆芭樂籽), whose solid debut album, *The 44 Stone Lions* (肆十肆隻石獅子), is full of punk verve and rock 'n' roll heat, but best of all captures the zany spirit of Taiwanese rock. On the other side of the *taike* (台客) spectrum is the venerable **Wu Bai** (伍佰), who has gone into outer space with his latest, *Spacebomb* (太空彈), a sci-fi concept album that stuffs light social satire into a rock party. In light of this fall's Wild Strawberry student protests, TC Yang's (楊祖瑋) retrospective album of folk and protest songs is timely. *A Voice That Could Not Be Silenced: The TC Yang Collection 1977-2003* (關不住的歌聲——楊祖瑋錄音選輯1977-2003) is a collection of the folk singer-turned-college professor's recorded output, which includes her renowned version of *Formosa* (美麗島), a tune that rang throughout various protests by the Dangwai (outside the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party, KMT) movement of the late 1970s and 1980s. Another of this year's best albums was *Gaga*, the first full-length release by 54-year-old Atayal (泰雅) singer Inka Mbing (雲力思), which includes traditional Aboriginal songs as well as original works. The album has an intensity of deeply felt experience, and can be seen and enjoyed as a musical portrait of a people, one that takes in the children's playground as much as the vast prospects of the mountains which many Atayal call home.

Sodagreen's third album, *Incomparable Beauty* (無與倫比的美麗), continues the band's transition from indie to the pop mainstream without totally selling out its roots. Lead singer Wu Qing-feng's (吳青峰) voice continues to define the band's sound, but the album has tight arrangements and good lyrics as well. Sodagreen likes to show its sentimental side, yet never forgoes charm, and often flirts with cute, but is thoughtful enough to avoid insulting the listener's intelligence.

Restaurants

Best of 2008

James Kitchen (大隱酒食)

Address: 65 Yongkang St, Taipei City (台北市永康街65號)
Telephone: (02) 2343-2275
Open: Daily from evening until around midnight
Average meal: NT\$600
Details: Menu in Chinese, credit cards not accepted

People don't come to James Kitchen (大隱酒食) merely for its fine Taiwanese cuisine. They come to have a good time with old friends or new companions they meet at the restaurant adorned with a soothingly nostalgic feel — regulars sit on wooden stools, relishing comfort food while listening to old Japanese and Taiwanese ballads.



The menu offers Taiwanese and Hakka classics such as rice with lard (蔥香豬油飯, NT\$20), bamboo shoot with pig intestines (鮮筍燒大腸, NT\$220) and pork with kumquat sauce (結醬白切肉, NT\$175). The kitchen also specializes in fresh fish with strange names, and what's in stock each day is written on a blackboard.

Friendliness and a homely feel are this establishment's greatest qualities. Once diners become acquainted with the chefs and the owner, chances are they will never leave the restaurant sober again.

— HO YI

to 12:30am (cafe/tapas bar)
Details: English menu; credit cards accepted; free WiFi

Nonzero is as much about lifestyle as it is about food. This is evident the moment you walk into the spacious restaurant with its chunky wooden communal tables and mismatched antique furnishings. The shelves glitter with bottles of artisan oils, balsamic vinegar, vegetable pastes and spices, while a Parma ham sits stage center on a special stand waiting to be sliced. Nonzero is owned by Chu Ping (朱平), who also runs the Aveda cosmetics franchise in Taiwan. It embraces many similar ideas, focusing on high-quality natural ingredients, bold combinations and striking presentation. Nonzero's tapas menu ranges from the simplicity of bread with roasted tomato (NT\$120) to more unusual but equally simple dishes such as blanched market-fresh squid (NT\$350). There is also a truly exciting assortment of salads, including a grilled seasonal warm vegetable salad (NT\$450), and an elaborate rack of lamb carpaccio with tomato and arugula (NT\$1,000). A glass of quality house wine is NT\$250.



— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Mushroom Park (伯菇園)

Address: 17, Ln 71, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段71巷17號); 60, Mingsheng E Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市民生東路五段60號)
Telephone: Renai Rd: (02) 8773-3160; Mingsheng E Rd: (02) 2753-0625
Open: From 11:30am to 2:30pm and 5:30pm to 10:30pm
Average meal: NT\$400 to NT\$710
Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted

On the Net: www.baigu.com.tw

Mushroom Park (伯菇園) is a stand out among Taipei's ubiquitous hotpot restaurants, with dozens of mushroom varieties available for diners to toss into a boiling pot of fragrant broth. All items on Mushroom Park's menu are made without artificial ingredients or preservatives. The VIP set (VIP套餐, NT\$710/NT\$630) includes the restaurant's addictive ice-chilled mushroom "sashimi" appetizer, which is made from the thick, tender stems of king oyster mushrooms (杏鮑菇) and four or five different types of mushrooms (along with beef or chicken) for the hot pot. Your server will introduce each mushroom's unique flavor and health properties one-by-one — some can help your blood circulation, while others will supposedly clear your skin or slim you down. Flavorful fat, and served on a bed of stewed peanuts, which soak up the juices well.

— CATHERINE HSU

Witch Cloud (巫雲)

Address: 7, Alley 9, Ln 244, Roosevelt Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路三段244巷9弄7號)
Telephone: (02) 2369-3906
Open: Daily from noon till late
Average meal: NT\$300, including drinks
Details: Chinese menu; credit cards not accepted

After my very first visit, Witch Cloud (巫雲) immediately became one of my favorite dining spots, with its home-cooked Yunnan fare, extensive collection of vinyl records and a unique ambience that makes this intimate establishment a popular haunt among musicians and artists.

Regulars usually let the chef to decide what goes on the table. From tea salad (涼拌苦茶) and Yunnan papaya chicken (雲南木瓜雞) to pickles fried with pork (醃菜炒肉) and Yunnan pigskin salad (雲南大薄片), the Chinese Province's strong flavors never fail to delight my taste buds.

Everything is soothingly casual at Witch Cloud, which remains open as long as its long-haired artist owner and his friends decide to hang out. Late diners are welcomed even well after midnight.

— HO YI

Toasteria

Address: 2, Ln 248, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路四段248巷2號)
Telephone: (02) 2731-8004
Open: 11am to 11pm Monday through Thursday; 11am to 2am Friday and Saturday; 11am to 9pm on Sunday
Average meal: NT\$140 to NT\$250
Details: Chinese and English menus; credit cards not accepted
On the Net: www.toasteria.com.tw

Toasteria takes the humble grilled cheese sandwich and gives it a new spark. The menu's 20 sandwiches — made fresh on a panini-style grill — are imaginative, well-conceived and melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

You can't go wrong with any of the choices, which range from the CLT (cheddar cheese, lettuce and tomato, NT\$75) and shitake mushroom (NT\$85) to the wasabi (mozzarella, smoked salmon, lettuce, tomato and wasabi, NT\$105). On the more exotic side, the grapa (NT\$95), made with red wine onion jam, gouda cheese, roasted garlic and fresh basil, is a refreshing choice in warmer weather.

Prices are reasonable enough to leave spending room for Toasteria's classic French fries (NT\$40) and excellent salads (NT\$110 to NT\$130), which use properly chopped greens and homemade vinaigrette.

The food owes much to the passion of owner and chef Tomer Feldman, who created the menus at the Sababa chain and Citizen Kain. But Toasteria is his first love, and it's apparent in the design of this 4-ping (13m²) storefront space. Not one centimeter of the shop is wasted, and each piece of furniture — from the coppertop bar and vintage-looking wallpaper to the wooden stools — was meticulously chosen. The space ultimately does what the food does: make you feel comfortable and right at home.

— DAVID CHEN

Nonzero

Address: 5, Alley 4, Ln 27, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段27巷4弄5號)
Telephone: (02) 2772-1630
Open: 11:30am to 2pm (lunch); 6:30pm to 9:30pm (dinner); 2pm

Tanhou (海島食堂)

Address: 30 Beiping E Rd, Taipei City (台北市北平東路30號)
Telephone: (02) 2351-6268 X201
Open: 11:30am to 2:30pm; 6pm to 9:30pm
Average Meal: NT\$600
Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted
On the Net: www.thofood.com

Tanhou is much more than a restaurant. It is a must-visit location for anyone interested in "natural" and organic foods. The restaurant, which had its soft opening two weeks ago, offers set menus (NT\$480 to NT\$880) that currently favor very simple preparations. A salad of nuts and raw vegetables with an almost invisible vinaigrette impressed with the sweetness of the individual elements. The fish for the sashimi comes from the Tanhou's own fishery in Penghu, and all the meat and vegetables are exclusively from Tanhou's agricultural operation and affiliated farms. The same goes for the offerings at the operation's shabu shabu and juice/snack counters, and the takeout lunch boxes that sell for as little as NT\$80. The bakery upstairs should be checked out by anyone interested in good bread, as it offers some of the best white bread in the city, as well as excellent brioches, baguettes and a selection of fancy breads. Tanhou's fish, pork and chicken are all available in frozen form, and there is a reasonable selection of organic vegetables and fruit. The dry goods area features both local and imported organic goods, ranging from fruit preserves, condiments and rice to environmentally friendly household cleaning products.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Like Lotus Vegetarian Restaurant

(荷苜蔬食時尚餐廳)
Address: 58, Ln 160, Dunhua S Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市敦化南路一段160巷58號)
Telephone: (02) 2752-0838
Open: 11am to 2:30pm and 5:30pm to 10pm on weekdays; 11am to 10pm on weekends and holidays
Average meal: NT\$400
Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted; reservations recommended

Hot pot restaurants are a kind of shrine to gluttony. Unlike their shabu shabu cousins, the majority are all-you-can eat meat, seafood and vegetables. Like Lotus follows this tradition but substitutes tofu imitations for the meat, with selections such as fake crab, cuttlefish, fish balls, duck blood and faux chicken leg. Aside from the chicken and crab, however, these tofu imitations are largely free of taste, but that's fine because the soups are what people are lining up for. The South Asian-style hot pot (南洋風味) is alone worth the visit. Stems of fresh lemon grass swim in a fiery red bowl of red chili and basil that, though spicy, doesn't overwhelm the palette. Like Lotus also provides a variety of vegetarian dumplings, fresh fruit and ice cream, which are part of the price of admission. Daily tea specials are on offer, the restaurant claims, to aid digestion.

— NOAH BUCHAN

Hutong No. 2 Yakiniku Dining Bar

(古月同燒肉夜食)
Address: 139, Civil Blvd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市市民大道四段139號)
Telephone: (02) 2570-0373
Open: Daily from 6pm to 2am
Average meal: NT\$1,100
Details: Chinese and English menu; credit cards accepted
On the Net: www.hutong.com.tw

Hutong is a yakiniku (grilled meat) restaurant that caters to the hip young crowd that hangs out in eastern Taipei. A bar seating a dozen people runs down the length of the restaurant, in front of which is the kitchen. Diners order dishes individually, which arrive raw and are cooked either by patrons or wait staff. All the meat and vegetables were tried at Hutong were of high quality and are cooked so as to bring out the natural succulent juices. The screens used for grilling are changed frequently because "it is healthier and doesn't allow the ingredients' individual flavors to interact," our server told us. Although the bill was pretty steep, the quality of the food and service at Hutong make it well worth a visit. Be sure to avoid the two stools closest to the restaurant's entrance because they are located near the dishwashers, which when opened emit a detergent mist that can mingle unpleasantly with the great barbeque smell.



— NOAH BUCHAN