



# 'Don't talk to me, talk to Spock'

Director J.J. Abrams and his collaborators have taken on the daunting task of resurrecting the once glorious 'Star Trek' franchise from recent television and box office failures

BY DAVE ITZKOFF  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LOS ANGELES

Engage J.J. Abrams in conversation for even a few minutes and he will gladly confess the role that *Star Trek* played in his cultural coming of age. "I was not a fan," he said recently.

Though Abrams would eventually become a creator of the television shows *Lost*, *Alias* and *Fringe* — series that owe their existence to boyhoods fueled by syndicated television and second-run movies — when he grew up in the 1970s and 1980s he had no interest in the hoary voyages of the *Starship Enterprise* and its crew.

Not that Abrams, now 42, had anything against science fiction; he just preferred *The Twilight Zone* and its supernatural morality plays. Whereas *Star Trek* seemed closed off to newcomers — "It always presumed you cared about this group of characters," he said — *The Twilight Zone* was inviting, offering a self-contained origin story in each episode.

This would not be an especially remarkable revelation except that Abrams happens to be the director of *Star Trek*,

the coming feature film (opening on Friday) that is Paramount's US\$150 million attempt to rejuvenate the decades-old space adventure franchise, the first movie to provide an official origin story for Kirk, Spock and the *Enterprise* team.

Abrams' admission, made offhandedly in the lunchtime company of his *Star Trek* collaborators, didn't raise a single eyebrow around the table. From Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman (who created *Fringe* with Abrams and wrote the *Transformers* films) to Damon Lindelof (a creator and producer of *Lost* and Bryan Burk (Abrams' producing partner), they've all heard his pronouncements on *Trek* before.

But the remark is emblematic of why this particular team, comprising broad sci-fi fans and a couple of *Trek* aficionados, has been handed control of a fantasy franchise that is one of the most recognizable in entertainment yet was in serious disrepair, a victim of diminished expectations and waning enthusiasm.

Abrams and his partners are guys with

mainstream pop-culture aspirations; their forte is taking on genres with finite but dedicated fan bases — science fiction, fantasy and horror — and making them accessible to wider audiences. And what they had in mind for their *Star Trek* movie is a film that is consistent with 43 years of series history but not beholden to it.

Despite their collective reverence for *Star Trek* — and *Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones*, and *X-Men*, and other cultural artifacts of their awkward adolescence — none of them are total *Trek* completists (not even Orci, who once owned a telephone shaped like the *Enterprise*). They say that makes them the ideal candidates to upgrade Gene Roddenberry's creation for 21st-century audiences.

"There's just too much stuff out there to be loyal to everything," Lindelof said. "Someone will find 50 ways to tell us we're idiots, and it wouldn't be *Trek* if they didn't." At the same time they appreciate the perils of chiseling away at a cultural touchstone whose influence has remained

enormous even as its reputation has varied wildly over the years.

If *Star Trek* fails, Kurtzman said, "it'll be the biggest personal failure we've ever had, because we will have actually violated something that means a lot to us."

Their *Trek* movie puts them simultaneously on a new trajectory and right in the heart of the series' mythology. It tells the story of a reckless 23rd-century youth named James T. Kirk (played by Chris Pine) who enrolls in the Starfleet Academy, driven in part by the death of his father, a starship officer who sacrificed his life for his crew. He is drawn into a band of talented cadets, clashing with the half-Earthling, half-alien Spock (Zachary Quinto of the television series *Heroes*).

For the *Trek* faithful there are plenty of nods to past television episodes and movies, familiar catchphrases and Kirk's notorious solution to a supposedly unwinnable mission simulation. But there is also a conscious effort to inscribe this *Trek* in the storytelling traditions

polarized by Joseph Campbell, in which heroes must suffer loss and abandonment before they rise to the occasion.

The filmmakers admit that this is a deliberate homage to their favorite films, like *Superman*, *Star Wars* and *The Godfather Part II*: epic movies that, by the way, did pretty well at the box office.

Perhaps more audaciously, this *Star Trek* also has a time-travel story line that essentially gives those on its creative team license to amend internal *Trek* history as they need to, and they aren't timid about exercising it. (For example the villains of the movie are Romulans, even though the *Enterprise's* first encounter with this alien race occurs in a well-known original *Trek* episode.)

Though their revisions may be contentious, the filmmakers said they were necessary; the *Star Trek* empire entrusted to them has been in dire straits.

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From left: Anton Yelchin as Chekov, Chris Pine as James T. Kirk, Simon Pegg as Scotty, Karl Urban as McCoy, John Cho as Sulu and Zoe Saldana as Uhura in a scene from *Star Trek*.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## [ CLASSICAL CD REVIEWS ]

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Fashions influence classical music as they do other kinds, and over the last year the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela has been a name on many enthusiasts' lips. It's the product of a program to educate young people, often from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, in classical music performance. A quarter of a million Venezuelan children have benefited from the scheme, known locally as the *sistema*, and this astonishing orchestra is one result.

Its conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, now 28, became its music director at the age of 17, and was subsequently appointed, not without controversy, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic as its director from 2009. And Deutsche Grammophon (DGM) has issued, among other items, highly praised recordings of Beethoven's 5th and 7th Symphonies, and of Mahler's 5th Symphony, with the Venezuelan under-25-year-olds under Dudamel's baton.

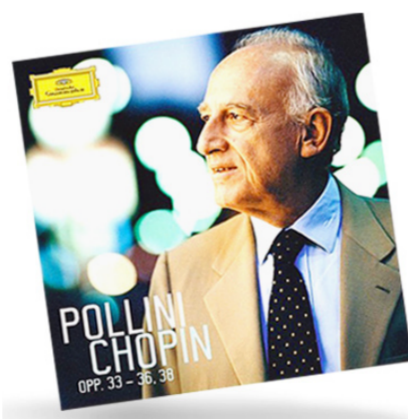
I found their Mahler 5th riveting. They have the characteristic virtues of youth — enthusiasm, lack of embarrassment at delivering passionate and overtly "beautiful" renderings, but also a commitment in doing something — recording for an international label — for the first time. These qualities stand against the suave assurance and "professionalism" of the great established orchestras (the Vienna Philharmonic, for example, is said to be made up largely of professors of music).



**SIMON BOLIVAR YOUTH ORCHESTRA OF VENEZUELA**  
Mahler 5th Symphony  
Gustavo Dudamel, conductor  
DGM 477 6545

If I preferred the Venezuelan Mahler to most existing versions, it's partly because I'm not a natural Mahler-lover. I tend to prefer the confident mastery of Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, Bellini or Verdi to the contortions of early 20th century anguish. But in a sense these young Venezuelans converted me, and I have listened to this remarkable CD over and over again.

Some critics have questioned the acoustic quality of this recording, made in the Great Hall of the City University of Caracas. But I found it especially fine. There's a very distinct rendering of instrumental tone (presumably the result of placing microphones close to the



**MAURIZIO POLLINI**  
Chopin  
Opus 33-36, 38  
DGM 477 7626

main instrumental groupings), and this combines with the dedicated abandon of the playing itself to marvelous effect. And the German names of the recording engineers show that DGM sent its own specialists to South America rather than relying on local technical talent.

The celebrated Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini paid the young Venezuelans the tribute of recording Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* with them on his three-disc CD set of all Beethoven's piano concertos (DGM 477 7244, released July 2008). DGM has made this artist central to its current catalog, and his new CD of Chopin is masterly indeed.



**EVERGREEN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, TAIWAN**  
Autumn in Prague, Dvorak  
Solo Violin: Siqing Lu  
ESO CD-061019

It contains the four mazurkas of Opus 33, the three waltzes of Opus 34, the ballade No. 2, the impromptu No. 2, and the famously problematic second sonata. Pollini has observed that Chopin was a composer who only wrote masterpieces, and who never wrote anything for purely lyrical effect. And the intellectual quality of his playing, not to mention the choice of items, is a major characteristic. Pollini is ascetic and muscular, and for many listeners this will bring out an unsuspected side of the great Polish composer.

There seems no end to the pleasure delivered by Taiwan's Evergreen Symphony Orchestra. Though they have



**GURRELIEDER**  
Schoenberg  
Wiener Philharmoniker  
DGM 439 944-2

issued many DVDs of their concerts, there are also some CDs, and one I've listened to recently is of a concert devoted to Dvorak given in Taipei on Oct. 19, 2006.

It contains the work with which Dvorak made his breakthrough into recognition, his *Serenade for Wind and Strings* of 1878, plus his *Violin Concerto* and 8th Symphony. The violin soloist is China's Siqing Lu (吕思清), who engenders such extrovert enthusiasm from audiences whenever he performs in Taiwan. It's notable that the same freshness that marks the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra also characterizes these mostly very young

Taiwanese musicians.

Lastly another pair of CDs that have astonished me this month — Arnold Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*, recorded by Abbado and the Vienna Philharmonic, and released by DGM in 1995. If you associate Schoenberg only with the often dissonant and abrasive 12-tone system he took to in his later years, listen to this, a massive piece of late Romanticism that took audiences by storm in the Vienna of 1913.

It's essentially an oratorio telling the legendary story of the love of King Waldemar IV of Denmark for the young girl Tovelille ("little dove") who he visits secretly in her castle at Gurre (hence the title "Songs of Gurre"). Tove is killed by Waldemar's jealous wife, and after his own death Waldemar hunts the landscape with his followers in search of her wandering ghost.

Siegfried Jerusalem sings Waldemar, Sharon Sweet is Tove, and Marjana Lipovsek is the Wood Dove, whose lament for the death of Waldemar ends the first CD. The spoken narrative against an orchestral background, originally intended for a man but here finely delivered by a woman, is by Barbara Sukowa.

Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* had an enormous effect when first unveiled. Audiences cried and ovations seemed unending. With its extensive nature-mysticism and lament for a fallible humanity, it was as if listeners had a premonition of the First World War that was soon to come, and to devastate all their lives.