

Classical DVDs

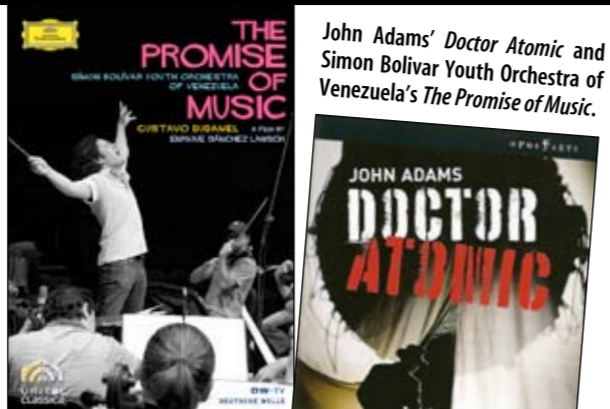
BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

There's no difficulty choosing the most memorable instrumental DVDs I reviewed in 2009. They were undoubtedly the two devoted to the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela — *The Promise of Music* (DGM 073-4427) and *Live From Salzburg* (DGM 073-4515).

The Promise of Music shows the lives of these musicians, the cream of a quarter of a million youngsters who've been taught musical instruments in Venezuela, often en masse as members of unwieldy, cacophonous orchestras. It ends with their trip to the Beethoven Festival in Bonn in 2007. Their performance there of Beethoven's Third Symphony (*Eroica*) then follows complete.

Live From Salzburg contains their concert at the famous Austrian music festival the following year. They play Beethoven's Triple Concerto, with Martha Argerich, making her first appearance there in 14 years, as one of the soloists, then the Mussorgsky/Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This proves an ideal vehicle for the orchestra, with its huge numbers and unconventional approach. As a bonus track you have their charismatic young conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, giving a talk on parts of Mahler's First Symphony, with musical illustrations from the orchestra.

I used to think *Live From Salzburg* was the more



enjoyable of the DVDs, but now I'm not so sure. You need to understand the background these players have come from to properly appreciate their extraordinary achievement.

As for opera, two 2009 issues stand out. The first is the premier DVD recording of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* (Opus Arte OA 0998), about Robert Oppenheimer and the first atomic test in the New Mexican Desert in July 1945. This represents a vindication of contemporary opera as a whole — rhythmically powerful, emotionally gripping and vividly staged. Several bonus tracks are included on this two-DVD set, including a half-hour interview with the librettist and director Peter Sellars.

The second is totally different — a traditional production of Verdi's *Falstaff* in a performance at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1992. The cast was stellar — Barbara Bonney, Marilyn Horne and Mirella Freni, with Paul Plishka in the title role. Scenery, costumes, acting, singing and orchestral accompaniment (under the peerless James Levine) combine to make this a virtually ideal *Falstaff*. This legendary performance finally made it onto DVD in July.

Of these four items, only *Dr Atomic* doesn't have Chinese subtitles.

Books

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Of the 23 books I've reviewed in 2009, two novels stand out unambiguously. The best non-fiction titles are less clear, but it's possible to make a tentative selection.

The top novel for me was Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (Vintage), and it was also the best book I read in 2009. It's a feat of synthesis and evocation, and its guiding principles are aesthetic and stylistic rather than historical or social. Nostalgia, comedy and melancholy mix, and although the ostensible subject is cricket as played in New York City, the book also encapsulates confidence tricksters, an androgynous waif, a public procession, Holland, India and the London Eye. But it's a love of New York that dominates the book, leading some critics to dub it the best thing that's happened to US fiction in a decade.

Second came Ian Buruma's *The China Lover* (Penguin, US). It follows the career, in a fictional form, of the endlessly re-inventing Yoshiro Yamaguchi (aka Otaka Yoshiko, Shirley Yamaguchi, Ri Koran and Li Xianglan), film star and receiver of Japanese cinema's first ever on-screen kiss. Using three different narrators, seasoned Japanophile Buruma depicts both the performer and the country with a perceptive affection, seeing both as capable of remarkable feats of self-renewal, and surveying half a century of Japanese cinema in the process. It's a skillful balancing act, essentially



Xianhui Yang's *Woman From Shanghai* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*.

researched history but highly competent as well. And Buruma's

knowledge of Japan is so extensive that he brings off the transformation with aplomb.

Political books about Asia made a strong showing. Mike Chinoy's *Meltdown* (St Martin's Press) is an account of relations between the US and North Korea, something Chinoy witnessed in person as a Korean-speaker and longtime correspondent in the region. It's heavily critical of the handling of the situation by former US president George W. Bush's administration, but also contains a large amount of information on North Korea over the last 20 years, together with many insights backed up by an in-depth understanding.

Lastly, Xianhui Yang's (楊顯惠) *Woman From Shanghai* (上海女人—中國勞改場倖存者的故事) (Pantheon) is a heart-wrenching but highly readable account of one of China's re-education camps for "Rightists" during the late 1950s. Told through the mouths of former inmates lucky enough to have survived (most didn't), it's shaped as 13 short stories, each as vivid as it is horrific. It's the debut in English of revelations that first rocked China several years ago.

CDs

BY DAVID CHEN, IAN BARTHOLOMEW
AND ANDREW C.C. HUANG
STAFF REPORTERS AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Pop idol "reality" shows have proven to be the new launching ground for Taiwan's rising Mando-pop stars, several of whom are included in the *Taipei Times*' list of best CDs of 2009. On the indie and folk music front, Aboriginal and post-rock sounds represent some of the best releases of the year.

But one steady figure in mainstream Taiwanese music made the final cut. Pop A-mei's (張惠妹) latest album, *A-mit* (阿密特, also the name of her onstage alter-ego), into the CD player and the first thing that greets you is a barrage of Metallica-like wall of drums and guitars. A-mei is rocking out big time, and while *Open the Door, See the Mountain* (開門見山) is not completely convincing as a heavy metal outcry that romance is dead and you should take what you can get, it has the virtue of novelty for Taiwan's first lady of song.

Fortunately, although A-mei is no Chrissie Hynde or Debbie Harry, she has the performing chops to carry off these forays into angst and cynicism in *Black Eats Black* (黑吃黑) and *Animal Sentimentality After Falling In Love* (相愛後動物感傷), even if the bad girl persona is as much of a pose as the ridiculous images of her in a black sequined cat suit that adorn the liner notes. The album is particularly noted for the heavy rock Taiwanese anthem *Come if You Dare?* (好膽你就來), which is good fun, even if owing a huge debt to Wu Bai (伍佰).

Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩) was one of the boldest and most creative of the alumni from the third season of CTV's *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) pop music talent show. The release of her debut album suggests that she might be around for some time. Her song *I Ride a White Horse* (身騎白馬), which combines teen pop and *gezai* opera (歌仔戲), has already proved a huge hit securing massive airtime, and has the distinction of achieving a smooth musical and lyrical integration between two very different forms, a feat that has confounded many more experienced artists.

The chorus of *I Ride a White Horse*, sung in Taiwanese, references not just a classical heritage, but also, whether intentionally or not, its glitzy, kitschy manifestation of televised golden light puppets. It is romantic, heroic, just a tad tongue-in-cheek, and totally self-assured.

At just 24, Hsu has emerged as a talented musician in the Mando-pop mainstream, and one who is no stranger to the commercial possibilities of a catchy tune. The final track on the album *My Door's Not Locked* (沒鎖門) was commissioned for the 10th anniversary of the MSN chat service, and for all its marketing functionality, is a remarkably appealing bit of bubblegum pop, down to MSN sound effects and online slang. Hsu is definitely someone to watch.

Jam Hsiao's (蕭敬騰) new album *LOVE Moments*



A-mei (張惠妹)

A-mit (阿密特)

Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩, aka Lala)

Lala's First Original Songs (首張創作專輯)

Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰)

LOVE Moments (愛的時刻自選輯)

Nanwan Sisters (南王姐妹花)

Nanwan Sisters, Honey Voices

(南王姐妹花 中古美少女篇)

(愛的時刻自選輯) is a cover album which consists exclusively of ballads originally made famous by female singers. Hsiao, also an alumnus of *One Million Star*, makes each track his own with his idiosyncratic phrasing and slightly off-key notes at the end of each sentence.

Tackling A-mei's (張惠妹) *Remember* (記得), Hsiao turns a heart-wrenching mourner into an empowering anthem with soaring vocals. He turns *Full Bloom to Decadence* (開到荼蘼), a quirky rock ballad by the equally quirky diva Faye Wong (王菲), into a jazz-infused reflection on the whimsical nature of love. Few cover albums are as delicious as this one.

To little surprise, the Nanwan Sisters (南王姐妹花) won the Best Aboriginal Album Award at this year's Golden Melody Awards for their debut *Nanwan Sisters, Honey Voices* (南王姐妹花 中古美少女篇). But this trio of singers from Taichung also earned well-deserved recognition in the more general category of Best Singing Group, which more often goes to mainstream Mando-pop acts.

The album title indeed says it all. Together, Samingad (李論芹, not to be confused with 紀曉君), Lavaus (陳惠琴) and I-hua (徐美花) make harmonies that are sweet and sublime, and each singer also proves to be skillful on her own. Award-winning producer and musician Pau-dull (陳建年) shaped this collection of gentle, traditional Puyuma songs, drawing from a variety of contemporary Western folk and New Age sounds to provide the backdrop for the Sisters. Yet the music comes across as unique and timeless.

Several releases that caught the attention of folk and world music fans included Lin Sheng-xiang's (林生祥) *Growing Up Wild* (野生), which centered on stories of women in contemporary Taiwanese farming communities, and A Moving Sound's *Starshine*, the latest from this pan-Asian/worldbeat group, which features the alluring voice of Mia Hsieh (謝韻雅).

Indie rock in Taiwan only gets better. This year saw some polished releases from fledgling bands like Orangegrass (橙草) and The White Eyes (白目樂團), while veterans of the scene 1976 and Tizzy Bac came out with their most mature work to date. But one album that we keep revisiting is Hsi Pan Jie's (錫盤街) *Needing Dimensions*.

Masterminded by Huang Wan-ting (黃婉婷) of the beloved and now-defunct girl punk group Ladybug, this release nicely balances punk-inspired noise with compositional flair. The title track follows a common post-rock structure — build the song into a tower of distortion — but the band manages a captivating melodic theme beneath the tune's ear-piercing veneer and Huang's guitar work is inspired. *195* displays the band's speed and agility, while the exuberant *New Magicians* shows that post-rock, or whatever one might call this instrumental music, can have soul and personality.

Shi-Yang Culture Restaurant

(食養山房)

Address: 7, Ln 350, Xiwan Rd Sec 3, Sijih City, Taipei County (台北縣汐止市汐萬路三段350巷7號)

Telephone: (02) 2646-2266

Open: Tuesdays to Sundays noon to 3pm and 6pm to 9pm

Average Meal: NT\$1,100 per person

Details: Reservations recommended two weeks in advance on weekdays and six weeks for weekends; credit cards accepted

On the Net: www.shi-yang.com

A Zen-inspired decor and slow food approach to cuisine makes Shi-Yang Culture Restaurant (食養山房) the perfect place for burnt-out city dwellers. Diners don't even have to bother deciding what to eat, as the prix-fixe menu (NT\$1,100 per person) is simply based on whatever fresh and local ingredients are available.

Shi-Yang's 10-course meal, a healthy interpretation of the traditional Taiwanese banquet, emphasizes seafood and fresh vegetables. The *Taipei Times* also found other delightful surprises, from the homemade peanut tofu and a savory mochi (麻糬) filled with mullet roe to the home-brewed rose and pineapple vinegars served between courses to cleanse the palette.

Presentation is as important as the food itself at Shi-Yang, where many dishes are decorated with fresh flowers and leafy sprigs from the restaurant's garden. The meal culminates in a fragrant chicken soup, which the waiter brings to the table with a lotus flower on top. The petals open up before diners' eyes and practically melt into the soup.

Shi-Yang has just moved to a new mountainside property in Sijih City after 10 years in Yangmingshan, but is as busy as ever. Reservations on weekends need to be made at least six weeks in advance.

— DAVID CHEN



Osmanthus Farm (桂花農園)

Address: 4 Singsikeng, Longsheng Village, Shihding Township, Taipei County (台北縣石碇鄉隆盛村新興坑4號)

Telephone: (02) 2663-4011

Open: 11am to 9pm

Average meal: NT\$400

Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted

On the Net: www.osmanthus.biz

Osmanthus Farm is located in one of the many nooks in the hills around Taipei that with a bend in the road seem to take you deep into the countryside. It is a scenic restaurant where visitors can sit on verandas and enjoy the view and the breeze, but it has the distinction of actually being an osmanthus farm, with food that draws heavily on its own produce.

The farm serves up a menu of more than 20 dishes and 12 types of blended tea featuring osmanthus. Considerable ingenuity is exercised, creating a wide range of very different tasting dishes. Some of these are twists on conventional



Taiwanese cuisine, while others are inspired flights of fancy.

The main dining area is rather dingy, in the manner of many mountain chicken establishments (土雞城), but there are terraced verandas out back that overlook the hills of Shihding (石碇) and Shenkeng (深坑). This area, though simply furnished, is extremely pleasant. Service was fast and unfussy, and presentation was invariably elegant, though the use of disposable paper rice bowls somewhat spoiled the effect.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Diary

Address: 53 Dongfeng St, Taipei City (台北市東豐街53號)

Telephone: (02) 2706-3553

Open: 3:30pm to 1am

Average meal: NT\$1,000

Details: Chinese and English menu; credit cards accepted

Taipei's bistro and tapas-style dining dernier cri reaches a new apogee in the form of Diary, a stylish bar-cum-restaurant whose fusion menu focuses on bold combinations and striking presentation.

One good example is the chicken meat balls (炸雞肉球, NT\$180) served disguised as a plate of Ferrero Rocher chocolates. The fried rocks (炸岩石, NT\$300) are wow-inducing chunks of seafood coated in a batter colored by cuttlefish ink and deep-fried to look like small stones.

Populated by tattooed young wait staff, including experienced trendsetters from popular nightspots Mono Mono and Binchotan (備長炭), Diary offers a drink list that's as exciting as its food menu. Apart from reasonably priced white wine from Italy, France and Chile, the bar serves a nectarous selection of cocktails priced between NT\$200 and NT\$300.

Diary's menu changes with the seasons and according to the creations of guest chefs.

— HO YI



Just In Bistro & Wine Bar

Address: 33, Ln 181, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路四段181巷33號)

Telephone: (02) 8771-9297

Open: Noon to midnight; opens at 5:30pm on Mondays

Average meal: NT\$900

Details: Chinese and English menu; credit cards accepted

Opened last April in the East District (東區), Just In Bistro & Wine Bar is the new project of chef Justin Quek (郭文秀), who runs French restaurants in Shanghai, Taipei and his native Singapore. Just In offers French comfort food with a few upscale twists. It serves bistro basics like steak — from premium Wagyu beef — and pommes frites. A comprehensive wine list, posh but intimate setting, late opening hours and a menu with a range of price points add to the bistro's versatility as a gathering place for different occasions.

Just In's take on two French bistro classics, pan-roasted duck confit and sauteed mushrooms and grilled wagyu rump steak with French fries, are especially good. Meat from Wagyu cattle, originally bred in Japan, is known for its extensive marbling and superlative texture and flavor, all of which were evident. The steak, cooked medium rare, cut like butter. The waitstaff can also offer suggestions on wine, and the manager is a sommelier.

— CATHERINE SHU

BEST OF 2009 Restaurants

Hui Guan (回館)

Address: 15, Ln 265, Xinyi Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市信義路四段265巷15號)

Telephone: (02) 2754-9924

Open: Mondays to Fridays 5:30pm to 11pm, Saturdays and Sundays 11:30am to 2pm and 5:30pm to 11pm; closed on the first and third Sunday of every month

Average meal: NT\$400

Details: Chinese menu; credit cards not accepted

Close to the Tonghua Street (通化街) night market, Hui Guan (回館) occupies a rare niche in the city's dietary landscape by serving cuisine from Ningxia, a Hui autonomous region in China. Li Hai-jung (李海蓉), a Muslim, opened the restaurant a few years ago primarily to observe her religion's dietary code and satisfy her craving for a taste of home.

From a menu featuring a selection of meals that spare no part of the sheep, the cumin-flavored mutton with bread (孜然羊羔烙餅, NT\$280), a street food in Ningxia, is a good choice for first timers. Stir-fried with cumin, celery, onion and other vegetables, the mutton cubes are paired with slightly salted breads — a recipe from Li's mother.

For those with little tolerance for spicy food, inform the chef beforehand as he doesn't skimp on the red chili oil or peppercorn (花椒). The sour and spicy lentil noodles (酸辣扁豆粉, NT\$120), for example, is a deceptively mild looking plate of cold noodles — you'll be grateful to the owner for serving ice-cold Taiwan beer in tin mugs.

— HO YI

topped with tomato, mozzarella, mushroom, ham, artichoke, salami, anchovy and olives.

Boschiavo's fresh-made pastas include fettuccine, tortelloni and gnocchi (NT\$280 to NT\$400).

— DAVID CHEN

Red Monster (紅魔王麻辣香鍋)

Address: 117 Yanji St, Taipei City (台北市延吉街117號)

Telephone: (02) 2775-2597

Open: Tuesdays to Sundays 11:30am to 9:30pm

Average meal: NT\$220

Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted

Red Monster (紅魔王麻辣香鍋) offers a unique slant to "hot pot" dining by serving its spicy Sichuan concoctions "dry" in large stainless steel bowls. Patrons first choose their spice level on a scale of one to eight — from "not spicy at all" (一點都不辣), to "psycho spicy" (變態辣).

Unlike the typical blood-red broth, the ingredients of which begin to taste the same after five minutes of boiling, dry hot pot retains the individual flavors of the meat and vegetables, which are briefly fried and come to the table steaming hot. The delicate hints of ginger and cardamom that were discernible through the spicy sauce were a delicious accompaniment to the contents of the bowl. Vegetarian hot pots are also available.

— NOAH BUCHAN



PaPa Gio' (喬爸爸義大利美食餐)

Address: 22, Alley 6, Lane 170, Zhongxiao E Rd, Taipei (北市忠孝東路四段170巷6弄22號)

Telephone: (02) 2711-8720

Open: 11:30am to 2pm and 6pm to 10pm

Average Meal: NT\$400 to NT\$600 per person

Details: Credit cards accepted

On the Net: www.papagio.com.tw

Papa Giovanni, a family-style Italian restaurant on Zhongxiao East Road (忠孝東路), was reborn earlier this year as PaPa Gio', and for the better. New owners Giorgio Trevisan and Matteo Boschiavo revamped the menu to showcase their specialties, thin-crust pizzas and homemade pastas.

Trevisan and Boschiavo have been in Taiwan since 1999, and previously ran the kitchens at Osteria Rialto and Capone's. They say PaPa Gio' gives them the freedom to have a more traditional trattoria-style menu and atmosphere.

The pizzas are among the best in town. If there's fresh arugula on hand, Trevisan will recommend the fresca (NT\$450), which is topped with mozzarella and ricotta cheeses and cherry tomatoes. Those who like everything on their pie will want to try the pizza della casa PaPa Gio' (NT\$450), a house specialty



Rainbow Roll (紅彩壽司)

Address: Sogo Tianmu, 8F, 77, Zhongxiao N Rd Sec 6, Taipei City (台北市中山北路六段77號8樓)

Telephone: (02) 2833-2555

Open: 11am to 9:30pm

Average meal: Most rolls range from NT\$180 to NT\$280

Details: Chinese, English and Japanese menu; credit cards accepted

The inspiration behind Rainbow Roll (紅彩壽司) follows a boomerang trajectory. The chain was founded eight years ago in Tokyo, but its menu features "American-style" sushi-like avocado- and crab meat-stuffed California rolls and, of course, rainbow rolls (made with a colorful assortment of vegetables). Taipei's branch is a sleek and elegantly decorated space in the recently opened Sogo Tianmu's eighth-floor food court.

Diners who were first introduced to American-style sushi in the US might find Rainbow Roll's versions surprisingly light (and perhaps a bit bland). The spicy tuna filling in some rolls doesn't sear the nostrils and the California roll is crafted with only a smidgen of mayonnaise. But even though Rainbow Roll's American-style sushi isn't particularly American, the carefully balanced ingredients in each meticulously crafted roll are as pleasing enough to the palette as they are to the eye.

— CATHERINE SHU