

By Paul Horsley

Ten Years, Ten Cheers: Best Moments of the Decade for Kansas City Music and Dance



Urban Bush Women

It was a rough decade for America, as the geopolitical fallout from 9/11 was followed by a frightening economic downturn. All this had a momentous impact on philanthropic giving, and the arts suffered consequently. Yet local arts groups managed to steer a reasonable course, scoring remarkable moments despite conservative trends. I arrived in Kansas City in February 2000 and have seen it all (well, almost). Here is my list of Top Ten Music and Dance Moments of the "Aughts." I've tried to represent the major performing arts groups and presenters, but I've also included some "runners-up." Let me know if I've left out *your* favorite moment.

10. Sometimes a single piece on a program stands out, even when you can't remember anything else about the concert. One of the most bracing performances of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* I've ever heard was at a Kansas City Chamber Orchestra concert in September 2002. Conductor **Bruce Sorrell** led an ensemble of 35 or so local musicians in a fresh rendering that was light on its feet in the best "authentic" tradition but imbued with warmth and flexibility.

9. A brilliant smaller dance company here is **Störling Enna**, which caught my attention with *The Prodigal Daughter* in 2000 and astonished me again in 2006 with *Underground*. This full-length piece about the historical activities of the Underground Railroad, choreographed by **Mona and Tobin James**, was "one of the most vivid, heartfelt, and theatrically astute pieces of dance theater ever to grace a Kansas City stage," as I wrote. (Runner-up, among smaller dance groups: **Mary Pat Henry's Trains**, created for her **Williams/Henry Contemporary Dance Company**.)

8. The Kansas City Chorale has scored numerous home runs over the years, but the one I remember with most clarity was the April 2005 concert at the just-restored Visitation Church, where **Charles Bruffy** and his Grammy-winning Chorale were joined by British-based **Harry Christophers** and *The Sixteen*. Their rendering of Scottish composer **James MacMillan's** dazzling *O Bone Jesu*, "had a mind-blowing clarity," as I wrote, "that confirmed my belief that this work is a modern masterpiece." (Runner-up: Octarium's October 2008 concert.)

7. Dance companies rarely collaborate, but the teaming-up of **Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's Urban Bush Women** and Senegalese choreographer **Germaine Acogny's Compagnie Jant-Bi** in spring of 2008 produced pure gold. Their *The Scales of Memory* was a powerful, vivid piece exploring gender, history and commonalities between Africans and African Americans; the dance was delightful and infectious dance, part African dance, part American contemporary.

6. The Harriman-Jewell Series has been responsible for many of the memorable moments of the decade, but if I had to choose one it would be tenor **Ben Heppner's** solo recital at the Folly Theater in November 2005. The greatest living heldentenor, singing at his prime. If **Luciano Pavarotti** was sunshine and **Plácido Domingo** is burnished wood, then Heppner is "like a full-bodied Cabernet," I wrote at the time. (Runner ups: **Stefan Jackiw** performing the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto in November 2006; tenor **Juan Diego Flórez's** appearances on the Harriman series, most recently in spring 2008; **Yuri Termirkanov** conducting the St. Petersburg Philharmonic in November 2004).

5. The Kansas City Symphony under **Michael Stern** has grown steadily, but even before he arrived, then-assistant conductor **Timothy Hankewich** led one of the finest performances of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* I've heard. The soprano in this November 2002 concert was the incomparable **Christine Brewer** — a perfect case of rapport between singer, conductor and orchestra. (Runner-up: mezzo-soprano **Marietta Simpson** with the Symphony in Verdi's *Requiem* in May 2001.)

4. The Kansas City Ballet scored a number of hits this decade, and it has emerged as one of the great American ballets under **William Whitener** artistic direction. It was William's full-length *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that first dazzled me with the company's capabilities when I saw it in 2002. It featured two dozen top young

dancers, including an indelible **Christopher Barksdale** at Symphony and Kansas City Chorale performing Mendelssohn **Robert Olson's** baton, and dazzling sets and costumes. (Ru *Nine Sinatra Songs*; **Yuri Possokov's Firebird.)**

3. Likewise the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has scored **Holmquist's** direction. From a theatrical standpoint, I **Strassberger's** production Thomas' *Hamlet* (November operatic moment of the decade. But from a musical standpoint, **Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream** was the most satisfying **Mechem's John Brown**; **Joyce DiDonato** in Rossini's *La* season's *Tosca* with **Greer Grimsley**.)

2. Certain musical or dramatic moments will, I'm certain, I can still remember, the *exact sensation* of listening to perform Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in 2005 for **Cyndt Chamber Music** series. Here was one of the great Bach performing one of the most complex, sublime works of *We* breath for its entire hour-long duration. (Runners-up on **Sie String Quartet's Art of Fugue** project; pianist **Ivan Mora Orion String Quartet's Beethoven** cycle.)

1. **Merce Cunningham**, who died in July, might be described as visionaries of American culture, and his visits to the **I Johnson County Community College** were mind-bending. February 2003 of *Interscape* was one of the most moving had. It's hard to describe the sensation of three dancers to the stage, to the music of **John Cage** and *décor* a **Rauschenberg**, but it amounted to a perfect amalgam of somehow just made sense. It's as memory as anything I've ever experienced. **JCC: Paul Taylor's Promethean** performed by the Paul Taylor Dance



Merce Cunningham

Merce Cunningham
Interscape



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Season's Greetings—The Harriman-Jewell Series' 45th on February 13, with violinist **Rachel Lee** in a free Dis "Print tickets at home" at hjseries.org or call 816-415-50