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Reviews

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18th Annual RECORDS TO DIE FOR

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he value of music as a commodity, and as one of mankind's wonders, has never been in such flux. Retail record shops are dying, the former major labels are focused on making records for kids (the same kids they're suing), and the business overall remains wedded to an incredibly short view (get a hit or get out), but the music itself continues to trickle through to those who want it—and, yes, on some level would die without it.

If change exhilarates rather than terrifies you, the collapse of the traditional music-business model has made for a very exciting time. Like wine grapes made tenacious by rocky soil, adversity has added new fuel to musical fires. Musicians, liberated from the clutches of record labels, are intoxicated by new freedoms. Fewer rules and fewer expenses mean that imaginations have the freedom to experiment and hopefully grow a career. When artists work for themselves instead of companies that also make perfume, electronics, or whiskey, they're a tad more motivated to embrace possibility. Independent labels, seeing the weakness of the old major-label goliaths, have leapt into the breach, and many of them are now healthier than ever. Consumers who are willing to surf the Web, keep their ears open, and type their credit-card numbers into online stores, can now obtain more music than they can probably ever listen to. And if you're a music collector, this is a golden age: many musicians have begun to build their audiences by releasing limited-edition EPs, live sets, and website-only recordings—in other words, things the major labels should have been doing for decades.

Just a few years ago, the changes that are now occurring would have been dismissed as pure fantasy. The Eagles selling a new two-disc set exclusively at Wal-Mart, in ecologically sound packaging, for $11.99? A portable digital device as the way people store and consume music? It's a new world, and where it will all lead no one knows—yet. But fear not: though the ways we receive, amass, and listen to music will never be the same, the music itself shows no signs of going away.

Against this very molten backdrop, we present our annual compilation of essential listening experiences, guilty pleasures, and really scary (or hilarious) glimpses into what makes Stereophile's writing crew tick. Enjoy, keep the faith, and by all means listen.

Robert Baird

Note: If a recording listed here has previously been reviewed in Stereophile, whether in "Record Reviews" or in past editions of "Records To Die For," the volume and number of the pertinent issue appear in parentheses at the end of the review. For example, a listing of "(XXX-9)" means that a review of the recording appeared in Vol.30 No.9 (September 2007).
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ANAT COHEN: Poetica
Anat Cohen, clarinet; Jason Lindner, piano; Ormer Avital, bass; Daniel Freedman, drums, percussion; Gilad, percussion. With: Antoine Silvermann, Belinda Whitney, violin; David Greenswell, viola; Danny Miller, cello.

This recording is jazz saxophonist Anat Cohen's first outing on her original instrument, the clarinet. And, oh, what an original voice that is! I have never heard a clarinetist whose articulation, phrasing, and use of dynamics and portamento more closely resemble those of the human voice. Cohen's sense of melodic shaping flows like a narrative, hence the album's title. Her chamber ensemble, augmented by a string quartet, covers a wide range of Cohen originals, Brazilian and Israeli folk songs, and even a Coltrane tune.

KALMAN RUBINSON
GOLIJOV: Oceana,1 Tenebrae,2 Three Songs1
Dawn Upshaw, soprano; Luciana Souza,1 vocals; Soloists,1 Gwynneth Young Singers,2 Kronos Quartet & guests,2 Robert Spano,1 3 Atlanta Symphony,1 2 & Chorus,3 Deutsche Grammophon B00090969-02 (CD). 2007. McLaughlan,1 3 Judith Sherman,2 prod.; Stephen Flack,1 3 Judith Sherman,2 prod.; Stephen Flack, eng. DDD. TT: 60:42

GOLIJOV: Ainadamar
Dawn Upshaw, soprano; Kelley O’Connor, mezzo-soprano; Jessica Rivera, soprano; Robert Spano, Atlanta Symphony; Women of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus.

The music of Osvaldo Golijov is a great discovery for me. The recent origins of these works, all but one composed in the last decade, should not be off-putting—Golijov is a thoroughly romantic and mostly tonal composer. His tremendous lyrical talent is clearly voiced in his works for the female voice, and expressed in styles ranging from theango to the Yellowd lament (Three Song). Add to that his talent at integrating emotionally communicative sound effects into the music, as most strikingly demonstrated by the use of a rifle barrage as rhythmic underpinning for the execution scene in Ainadamar. Even in his strictly instrumental music, such as the Tenebrae for strings, Golijov's melodies have a vocal quality. Beyond all such analysis, Golijov tells stories with a wide array of voices and instruments, and with the syncopation of the tango and the Spanish flavor of the guitar, whether explicit or implied. This is marvelous stuff.

The sound is good but not outstanding—not in the class of what Telarc gets from the Atlanta Symphony on their SACDs. Nonetheless, the all-important voices are beautifully rendered, and there's sufficient impact from the varied percussion instruments to support the drama.

MOZART: Symphonies 19, 20, 21, 26
Adam Fischer, Danish Radio Sinfonietta

MOZART: Violin Concertos 3, 4, 5
Marianne Thorsen, violin; Owland Grims, Trondheim Soliste

In these phenomenally lovely and original performances of some of Mozart's middle-period symphonies and violin concertos, conductor Adam Fischer and the Danish Radio Sinfonietta emphasize the works' classical structures, while

Oyvind Grimse and the Trondheim Soliste play with remarkable flexibility. Each reveals a truly Mozartean flare; playing them back to back, one feels that their individual personalities serve the music with fidelity. Fischer gives each symphony its due without, like Harton's more generic presentations, overdrumming them. Violinist Marianne Thorsen, going up against Julia Fischer's ongoing Pentatone series of the Mozart concertos (and directly in No.5), finds many subtle and delightful ways to make these familiar works voyages of discovery.

The sound is excellent in both sets, but subtly different. The symphonies sound as if recorded in a small concert hall with a warm but open acoustic, which allows the balance of the strings and brass to be simultaneously contrasted and consistent. Indeed, despite the small forces and classical scoring, the perceived dynamic range is great. The concertos, on the other hand, were recorded in a small church with a more close-up sound; the venue provides its warmth more in the ambience than in the direct instrumental sound. I'm addicted to both sets.

LELAND RUCKER
DAN ZANES: Cool Down Time

Zanes headed the nervous, shaky Del Fuegos back in the days before alternative was a marketing term, but you'd never know it from this disarmingly low-key affair, which loosely documents his alcoholic crash landing, recovery, transition back to the real world, and, finally, a second career as a children's entertainer. The sound of this stripped-down trio of Zanes, Mitchell Froom, and Jerry Marotta evokes glimmers of everyone from Booker T and the MG's to the Durl. The soulful, bluesy grooves are solid, and Zanes handles admittedly difficult subject matter with humor ("Tested," "Rough Spot") and poignancy ("If You Live," "No Sky," "Carefully").

THE ROLLING STONES:
Out of Our Heads

It is the thing of magic to hear the moment when five individual musicians become a band: when the spark ignites, when the whip comes down. That's how Out of Our Heads feels. Not to say that the Rolling Stones hadn't shown plenty of promise on earlier singles and albums, but then they were mostly mimicking their heroes, for whom they were, out of their heads. But something happens here: It's the moment of inspiration, the point at which they take control of any song they cover, and at which Mick Jagger and Keith Richards' songwriting begins to come together. Richards said recently that the Stones didn't really nail "Satisfaction," that it took Otis Redding to finally get it right. I guess I can forgive them for the clumsiness of the hit single that changed their careers.