

THREE THAT MADE AN IMPRESSION



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If anyone thought classical music and opera lived in an ivory tower, devoid of the concerns of the world below, 2009 landed with

a shock. The failing economy forced the San Diego Opera to reduce its season from five to four productions, and the San Diego Symphony, like other classical music organizations, feverishly worked to broaden its base amid diminishing corporate and donor support.

Still, classical music continues to thrive in San Diego, and even expand, as new, innovative ensembles, like Art of Elan, are finding an audience and established organizations, like La Jolla Music Society, are finding ways to keep old formats fresh and vital.

The *Union-Tribune's* classical music coverage comes from a patchwork of sources, and given the fact that none of us has seen enough performances over the course of the year to comfortably put together a Top 10 list, I'm going to turn to another time-honored formula: the good, the bad and the ugly.

The good:

Bernstein's "Mass," Dec. 4-6, The La Jolla Symphony & Chorus at UCSD — Under Steve Schick's leadership, and with the help of a number of his students and faculty colleagues, his volunteer forces re-energized a too-rarely performed contemporary masterwork. The performance evoked a quality too rare in classical music programs: a sense of occasion and a shared experience that had everyone buzzing as they left the hall.

The bad:

Puccini's "Tosca," Jan. 24, San Diego Opera at the Civic Theatre — It's probably too harsh to call the opera's season-opening production bad. But when you make the claim of being among America's Top 10 opera companies, demand top ticket prices and assemble an international cast, it's important to deliver. From the pit to the direction to the cast, one of Puccini's most dynamic works was strangely flat.

The ugly:

Stewart Copeland commission. Aug. 22, La Jolla Music Society SummerFest at Sherwood Auditorium — In an otherwise remarkable SummerFest, ugly is the only way to describe rocker Stewart Copeland's appearance. You could say it was admirable that the Music Society turned to the Police drummer for a contemporary piece. He claims to be a serious film composer. But he took the Music Society's money and ran. His contribution was a watered-down fusion jazz rip-off performed at ear-shattering volume. But most startlingly, his appearance didn't even sell out the roughly 500-seat hall. Apparently, when the Police sell out arenas, the people must be coming to see Sting.

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