

# Brief look back at tops in arts

I'm doing all I can do to avoid Top 10 best and worst lists of everything. I hope there are legions of you also bored by these endless look-backs by who knows who? They're everywhere in our media at year's end. Enough already.

So this year I'm boiling it down to, forgive me, a Top One, locally and regionally.

As I mentioned in this space last week, the Solano County arts event of the year was Dec. 17, when international opera star Hope Briggs returned to Fairfield for a evening of arias, Christmas music and carols. A flaw or two on German pronunciation, but otherwise the South San Francisco-based soprano proved all over again why she was the undeniable star of the 1998 North Bay Opera staging of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" (her professional debut) but also the star of San Francisco Opera's 2004 production of Busoni's "Doktor Faustus." Reaching well beyond the arched rafters inside the Community Methodist Church, her "Doretta's Song" rivaled versions by Fleming and Te Kanawa for their power, balance and sensitivity.

Regionally, the musical event of the year was the Oct. 4 visit Cecilia Bartoli made to the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts at the University of California, Davis. Singing selections from her new CD, "Opera Proibita" (Forbidden Opera), the Italian opera superstar used every inch of her mezzo-soprano range to inject drama and life in little-known 17th- and 18th-century baroque Italian repertoire — a narrow band of the operatic canon, certainly, but no one does it better.

In the visual arts, it would be hard to surpass the religious icons of Theresa Hartman for beauty and artistic skill. Done in the old-timey medium of egg



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tempera, they are on view, as part of "The Spiritual & The Sublime" exhibit, through Saturday at the Vacaville Art League & Gallery, 718 E. Monte Vista Ave. Her art goes to the heart of the exhibit's theme and, curiously, touches the past and the future at the same time.

The best regional art exhibit of the year is a building, the new De Young museum, rebuilt and re-opened last fall in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. The story's on the inside, in the well-thought-out design of the many galleries by architects Herzog and de Meuron. As for the museum's exterior shape and its copper sheath, well, one wag called it a rusty Mississippi barge.

On local stages, the Solano College Theatre version of Disney's "Beauty and The Beast" last fall gets a thumbs up primarily because it was a big-budget affair (\$70,000, I was told by college officials) and it featured a young, talented cast. Baritone Joshua Hollister, who portrayed the egomaniacal Gaston, definitely impressed and should be auditioning for Broadway shows. He's ready.

In our region, the best theater production was the Sacramento Music Circus staging of "Crazy For You," featuring a nimble-footed cast of dancers whose voices also made the Gershwin score

jump, swing and pop with energy.

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Some of the worst music of the year was Navajo flute music played while I was in telephone hold (hell) mode last summer, trying to make reservations for a room at Zion, Bryce and Grand Canyon national parks. There was no avoiding it, I suppose, if I wanted a room, which I did. The parks were their usual stupendous, natural selves, whether I thought so or not. Zion's red rock formations soared, the "hoodoo" columns of Bryce, sentinels to the forces of erosion, fascinated with their reddish-gold beauty and the Grand's sheer size made it, well, grand. However, the South Rim, where I visited and stayed, was overcrowded and a little smoggy. My eyes burned a couple of times from exhaust from cars, buses and trains. From time to time, the question is asked, "Are we loving our national parks to death?" The answer, in the case of the Grand Canyon, is yes.

Some of the best music of this past year — or any year — can be heard during The Bracebridge Dinner, an evening of Elizabethan-era pageantry and silly skits, at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. On Monday, the December season's last of eight dinners was a revel of singing and acting by talented performers, some of whom are San Francisco Opera chorus members.

For more information about the dinner (2006 dinner tickets go on sale in February) go online to [www.yosemitepark.com](http://www.yosemitepark.com).

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