

**RICHARD A.A. LARRAGA**  
**Reviews**



**Hippo Press / December 27, 2006**

Classical countdown for '06  
The year's 10 best performances  
By Jeff Rapsis jrapsis@hippopress.com

I'm no Casey Kasem, but here's an opinionated round-up of the region's 10 best classical performances of 2006. It's based only on those concerts I attended and limited by my taste and judgment, or lack thereof. Happy New Year!

- No 10: Nashua Symphony and Choral Society, a semi-staged performance of "Carmina Burana" by Carl Orff, Richard A.A. Larraga conducting, Saturday, March 25. With added staging, costumes, and props, a bold effort to lend fresh interest to this warhorse. It was actually fun to watch unfold and see what would happen next. If more classical groups tried this kind of creative approach, audiences would be more willing to get into the habit. Also, the stripped-down orchestration for two pianos and four percussionists proved very effective—at full blast, the ensemble sounded a little like Danny Elfman's score for Pee-Wee's Big Adventure, and that's not a bad thing.

**For a performance of Handel's Acis and Galatea:**

"The playing and singing, under the direction of Richard A. A. Larraga, was trim and stylish....The chorus of nine offered disciplined ensemble work, excellent intonation, and attractive tone -- qualities shared with the early-instrument orchestra of 10 under the alert, responsive, and lively direction of Larraga."

Richard Dyer  
The Boston Globe | November 23, 2004

"The chamber orchestra, conducted by Richard A. A. Larrage (sic), made a crisp, sprightly sound that never called direct attention to its musicians, only inches away from the singers."

Carl Rossi  
The Theater Mirror| November 23, 2004

### **For a performance of Haydn's Mass in Time of War:**

"The best moments were the busy passages where everything is going at once; Larraga kept it all in balance and the clarity of texture did ample justice to Haydn's contrapuntal mastery."

Jeff Rapsis  
Hippo Press | November 16, 2004



### **For a performance of Mendelssohn's Elijah:**

There are some big moments in Elijah, and these were not missed. One highlight was the conclusion of the raucous "Hear and Answer" chorus, with its sudden silences in the coda. On Saturday night, these came across as electrifying."

Jeff Rapsis  
Hippo Press | March 24, 2005

## General Comments:

"A talented and serious musician with considerable ability as a communicator who has much to offer as a conductor of vocal and instrumental ensembles."



Thomas Somerville  
Oregon Bach Festival Master Class director and associate teacher  
Professor of Music Emeritus, Occidental College  
Director of Music at the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles and  
Artistic Director, Los Angeles Bach Festival

"An excellent musician who enjoys a wide range of training experiences in all disciplines of the choral and instrumental art."

Simon Carrington  
Professor of Choral Conducting  
Conductor of the Yale Schola Cantorum  
School of Music and Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University

## The Vox Consort is reviewed in The Boston Globe

### MUSIC REVIEW

Vox Consort delights with stylish 'Galatea'

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | November 23, 2004

The Vox Consort, a newish early-music ensemble, offered a delightful performance of Handel's little opera "Acis and Galatea" on Sunday afternoon.

The group arrived on the scene highly recommended by its mentor, Simon Carrington, a founding member of the King's Singers and later director of choral activities at New England Conservatory (and now at Yale), and Carrington wasn't wrong. The playing and singing, under the direction of Richard A. A. Larraga, was trim and stylish, and the semistaging by Stephen Marc Beaudoin was simple and effective.

Handel's black-comedy pastoral on a text by poet John Gay was even more popular than "Messiah" in the composer's lifetime. The first part is a rural idyll depicting the romance of Acis and Galatea. The second part pulls the rug out from under them. The giant Polyphemus arrives on the scene, falls in love with Galatea, and, in a moment of fury, kills Acis with a boulder. Galatea's lament is so poignant that a goddess helps her turn Acis into a fountain; in this production the chorus wrapped him in watery blue silk.

The Vox Consort played the piece on a bare platform and in modern dress; the setting, the program leaflet told us, was "a tony party for the reunion of young hipsters," although in context, the cast looked more like a well-dressed Sunday-school class. The exception was Polyphemus, dressed as a burned-out vet with a backpack full of drugs; he hurled the backpack at Acis to knock him down, finishing the job with a few brutal jabs with a box-cutter.



The cast was excellent. Soprano Brenna J. Wells (Galatea) looks and sounds so much like Emma Kirkby in her youth that it was interesting to read that she has in fact been studying with the beloved British early-music diva. Wells sang neatly and affectingly, but needs to beware of blasting her top tones into shrillness. Tenor Jason McStoots sang sweetly and insinuatingly as the confidant shepherd Damon, dressed as a flower child. The direction increased his role in the plot: Damon was pining in vain for Acis himself, and he turned him over to Polyphemus when it became clear that there was no place for him in the happy picture. Baritone Brian Church does not boast the ripely rolling tones traditionally associated with Polyphemus's hit song, "O ruddier than the cherry," but he invests himself in his singing and acting. Best of all was Lawrence Jones, a new tenor from California now enrolled at Boston University, who sang as Acis. The direction presented him as a kind of nervous Nellie, unable to decide which shirt to wear to impress Galatea (Damon had to help), but his singing had all the elegance and ardor you could want.

The chorus of nine offered disciplined ensemble work, excellent intonation, and attractive tone -- qualities shared with the early-instrument orchestra of 10 under the alert, responsive, and lively direction of Larraga. The group's performances of Bach's "St. John" Passion March 18 and 20 with McStoots as the Evangelist and choreography by Lorraine Chapman promise much.

The Vox Consort  
Richard A. A. Larraga, music director  
At: St. Paul's Church, Sunday

## The Vox Consort is reviewed in the Theater Mirror

The CABARET Website / [www.theatermirror.com](http://www.theatermirror.com)



The Vox Consort, now in its second season, recently performed Handel's charming Baroque opera ACIS AND GALATEA for two performances in two different churches. Those who attended were treated to two hours of lovely period singing by Boston-based artists who are often passed over by other companies; established singers being steadily cast in their places --- to remedy this, the Consort prefers to use local talent, especially those with diverse backgrounds, for its ensembles. One might assume that Handel's pastoral love triangle between a shepherd, a nymph and a Cyclops would make for a traditional, stately evening but in a recent interview director Stephen Marc Beaudoin stated, "We're not interested in that whole 'formal concert setting' routine. The last thing Boston needs is another tux-and-black-dress ensemble. [w]e're never going to be that", and he semi-staged ACIS AND GALATEA at a posh party set in contemporary times with the singers in casual dress (far too casual, actually; the performance resembled a rehearsal); thus, Galatea became a trembling socialite and Acis a swinger in a leather jacket, both, conventional enough; fellow shepherd Damon, advising Acis to use caution in love, was recast as his fussy valet; Polyphemus the Cyclops sported an eye patch and stomped about with a backpack full of drugs. Rather than Polyphemus discovering the lovers in embrace and killing Acis in a fit of rage, as written, Damon, now equally jealous of Galatea, led in the Cyclops and pointed out the lovers to him. Ah, well: like youth, a director must (and will) have his fling; my main concern, however, is that Mr. Beaudoin's current ensemble is pedestrian in movement (after all, Baroque singers must be seen as well as heard) and their numerous bits of business cluttered up the sweep and majesty of Handel's music; the soloists were often left stranded with plenty of "down" time and forced to repeatedly smooth down their hair, brush off a shirt cuff, etc. (in character) while awaiting their cues. For me, the most effective moments came whenever the ensemble simply stood still and sang in true Baroque fashion, allowing the drama in the music to take precedence over physical action.

And my ear was constantly beguiled: Brenna J. Wells, a delicate blonde sparrow, and Lawrence Jones, a willowy tenor, became flowing silver (she) and gold (he), separately and together. Their physical slightness is deceiving: Ms. Wells performed her trills with unforced ease and demonstrated a few high notes in Dolby-like volume, and Mr. Jones was transformed into a ringing trumpet for the celebrated "Love sounds th' alarm"; it is to their credit that they sounded as fresh at the end of the evening as they did at the beginning. Jason McStoots must have been a honeycomb in a past life for his voice is sweetness personified and 'tis a pity that his Damon had to turn villainous for he's an adorable performer; Mr. McStoots' first aria lay too low for him, making him sound fuzzy and breathless; his two other moments displayed him at his best. Brian Church, for all his glowering, turned in a gentlemanly-sounding Polyphemus, sung in smooth, warm tones. Despite a few annoying moments --- e.g. yelling "WHOO!" when Acis and Galetea finally kissed --- the Chorus provided a superb frame for Mr. Beaudoin's quartet, especially in their perfectly hushed "Ah, the gentle Acis is no more!" --- nine voices becoming one. The

chamber orchestra, conducted by Richard A. A. Larraga, made a crisp, sprightly sound that never called direct attention to its musicians, only inches away from the singers.



If the Consort's future productions continue to be sung as impressively as this ACIS AND GALATEA, it would be a shame to continue larding them with gimmickry just to make Handel and others more accessible for today's audiences --- beautiful singing of beautiful music need never grow tiresome in itself.

"Acis and Galatea" (19-21 November)

THE VOX CONSORT

Holy Trinity United Methodist Church, DANVERS, MA (19 November)

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, BROOKLINE, MA (21 November)

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## The Vox Consort is featured in The Boston Globe

After 40 years, Fleisher makes a welcome return to recording

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | August 27, 2004



One of the highlights of the last concert season was the return of pianist Leon Fleisher to Jordan Hall, where he played a mixed program of music for the left hand and music for two hands, including Schubert's final sonata.

Now he has made his first solo recording in 40 years, "Two Hands" (Artemis Records), and it is worthy to stand with the legendary recordings of his youth, some of which never left the catalog.

Four decades ago, when he was in his mid-30s and widely regarded as the most musicianly American pianist of his generation, Fleisher was struck with focal dystonia; involuntary curling of fingers of his right hand made it useless at the piano. Courageously, he developed new careers in teaching, in conducting, and in the repertoire for left hand alone.

Years of investigating every medical and alternative therapy led to a partial recovery of his hand; most recently, Botox injections have proved helpful. A few seasons ago, Fleisher began performing concertos by Mozart and Brahms again; he made a Lieder recording featuring soprano Phyllis Bryn-Julson and baritone John Shirley-Quirk, both fellow faculty members from the Peabody Conservatory of Music, where Fleisher teaches, and where he has nurtured several generations of important pianists.

Only last summer did Fleisher's artistic conscience permit him to record two-handed solo music again. In addition to the Schubert sonata, he offers a selection of popular shorter pieces, many of which he says he learned as a teenage student of Artur Schnabel.

Some of them were on the Jordan Hall program. There's a pair of Bach transcriptions ("Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," in the Myra Hess version, and "Sheep May Safely Graze," in Egon Petri's version), a Scarlatti sonata, a mazurka and nocturne by Chopin, and Debussy's "Clair de lune."

The performances are remarkable for beauty of tone, richness and variety of texture, firmness and flexibility of rhythm, and depth of feeling over a wide range of emotions. There are probably technical feats that Fleisher cannot achieve anymore, but he doesn't play pieces that would expose them, and in controlled studio conditions he can achieve a level of consistency that can elude him in live performance.

What is more important is that Fleisher has even more to say about music today than he did during his foreshortened prime. During the time the direct road to music through his instrument was closed, Fleisher approached music through many other directions; he has

now seen, studied, heard, and performed it from all sides. His extensive work with the left hand has enriched his knowledge of harmonic movement and improved his ability to keep several strands of melody and harmony independent in color and shape while intertwining them.



Forty years of living with a disability have also brought him an emotional intensity and clarity that feed into the music, which he always invests with something personal while realizing every aspect of the composer's notated intentions. Fleisher's serene playing of "Sheep May Safely Graze," his complex realization of Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat (Op. 27, No. 3), and the profound simplicity of the Schubert sonata (complete with first-movement exposition repeat) rank among Fleisher's finest recorded achievements, which can stand alongside anybody's.

New voices: Boston has a new musical organization: Vox Consort, which performed Bach's B-Minor Mass last season with one voice on a part. Some of Vox Consort's personnel were at the New England Conservatory during the brief period that Simon Carrington was director of choral activities. Now at Yale University, Carrington recently wrote to voice support for Vox Consort, which he describes as "really most impressive." The music director is Richard A. A. Larraga, and the singers include some of the new generation of New England professionals.

Vox Consort plans a five-program season. The three largest programs are played twice, first in St. Mary of the Annunciation Church in Danvers, with repeats in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brookline or the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Boston. They include cantatas by Bach, Scarlatti, and Caldara and Baroque concertos by Telemann and Vivaldi; a semi-staging of Handel's "Acis and Galatea"; and a staged performance of Bach's "St. John" Passion, with the Lorraine Chapman Dance Company.

Two chamber programs in the Loring-Greenough House in Jamaica Plain are called "Vox Outside the Box." One of them features old music accompanied by contemporary instruments; the other features old instruments playing new music.

For further information write to Vox Consort, 765 Tremont St., No. 1, Boston MA 02118.