

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2016

The Memorable Concerts of 2016

The year has not yet concluded, but both print and online journalism outlets are already getting flooded with end-of-the-year best-of articles. Personally, I side with John Oliver's opinion that the only way to greet the conclusion of this year will be with the phrase "Good riddance!" Furthermore, those who used to follow my writing on Examiner.com know that I have a long-standing aversion to "top ten" lists.

Instead, I prefer to reflect on what has embedded itself in memory. As a result my own list continues to be a month-by-month account of which concert was most memorable (to me, if to no-one else) for each of the twelve months. In the past I would annotate that list with hyperlinks to my accounts of these events; but, because AXS cut off access to all of my past writing for Examiner.com, I can only provide those hyperlinks for July and the following months.

By way of context, I have to say that, while the "real world" of John Oliver seemed to be a matter of tuning into the news every night for reports of "fresh disasters" (as a *Beyond the Fringe* routine put it), this was actually a very good year where the performance of music was concerned, at least here in San Francisco. As a result, just about every month involved making hard choices, just because there were so many good memories. However, now that the list has been compiled, I find I can look back on it with satisfaction. Those who do not agree with my preferences are invited to share the strongest of their own memories!



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STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

Still trying to "liberate the mind from fear, superstition and pettiness."

January: Torben Ulrich's visit to *Meridian Music: Composers*

in Performance. This event was memorable for the rather unconventional reason that, over eleven months later, I am still not quite sure what to make of it. Listening to Ulrich ramble on about what the noun “meridian” meant to him before he finally got around to making music with violinists Adria Otte and Gabby Fluke-Mogul, cellists Teresa Wong and Doug Carroll, and Bryan Day with his table of invented instruments, I was reminded of the gentle tone of another “unclassifiable” composer, John Cage. Cage may have been more interested in systematic foundations that Ulrich was, but neither was afraid to wander at a significant distance from anything resembling a beaten path. Ulrich's own performance with these five musicians involved recalling phrases from that rambling introduction with occasional percussion punctuations. That evening was a trip that I suspect I shall not soon forget.

February: The Del Sol String Quartet plays Ben Johnston's

tenth string quartet. Those who compose with microtones do so for a variety of reasons. Many wish to incorporate pitches from the overtones of the natural harmonic series. Johnston, on the other hand, wanted to chuck the chromatic scale entirely and work *only* with natural overtones. This poses some rather serious challenges to any composer who wishes to account for *listening* to his/her music, rather than just *making* a score to be performed. Johnston rose to those challenges in many inventive ways, some of which involved reflecting on traditional techniques while others were strikingly original. Before playing his tenth quartet at the Center for New Music, Del Sol provided an extended verbal introduction, which was highly informative because it avoided taking any glib shortcuts. It would be fair to say that, once they concluded that introduction, everyone in the audience was stoked for the prospect of listening to the music itself; and, with that kind of a context, it is no surprise that the performance is still memorable.

March: San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (SFCMP) percussionists play Gérard Grisey's “Le Noir de l'Étoile.” This piece lasted about an hour, taking up all but about ten minutes of the

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BLOG ARCHIVE

▼ 2016 (421)

▼ December (58)

Michael Tilson Thomas will
Begin the New Year with...

Memorable Recordings in 2016

The 2016–2017 SFP Jazz Series
will Continue Next M...

The Memorable Concerts of
2016

SFCMP will Bring “Large-Scale”
Chamber Programming...

Constant Lambert the Ballet
Composer

New Esterházy Quartet will
Present their Ninth Pro...

The San Francisco Girls Chorus
Brings the Highland...

Brilliant Classics Releases the
Last Two Published...

The Bleeding Edge: 12/19/2016

Kate Stenberg and Lisa Moore
Bring Music of Time a...

The Company Sviatoslav Richter
Keeps for Chamber M...

The Sunset Music | Arts 2017
Chamber/Ensemble Seri...

Voices of Music Begins 2016–
2017 Season with a Hol...

Starscape program that SFCMP prepared to conclude their 2015–16 season. The title translates as “the black of the star;” and, while it was not performed in darkness, it was music in which spatial orientation mattered just as much as the rhythms performed by the six percussionists (William Winant, Loren Mach, Haruka Fujii, Nick Woodbury, Sean Dowgray, and Megan Shieh), who were the only performers. The six of them described an ellipse that surrounded the seated audience. It did not take long to figure out that *looking* to see the source of a particular sound was far less important than letting the ears identify its spatial location. If one did not waste time on looking, the ears would be able to identify how different motifs were migrating from one source to another, almost in the same way that a thematic motif may migrate from one contrapuntal voice to another.

April: San Francisco Performances (SFP) hosts an “Assad family” concert. Brazilian-born brothers Sérgio and Odair Assad have performed frequently as a duo for SFP. This was their seventh appearance in that capacity; but this time they were joined by Sérgio’s daughter Clarice, who contributed as vocalist, pianist, and composer. The result was a broader scope of repertoire than had been encountered in the past. This was not just a matter of adding a few of Clarice’s works to the repertoire. She also took a solo set at the piano, in which her scat singing was punctuated with “body music” percussion. In contrast to the Grisey performance, this was a case in which looking definitely enhanced listening, sometimes in some rather surprising ways.

May: Mason Bates’ “Mass Transmission” gets a second performance. Experience has taught me that the power of a new composition is not established on the basis of listening to it for the first time. Rather, the question is whether any organization will choose to perform it a *second* time; and, if you are lucky enough to be there, that “second impression” often bears more weight than the first, since memory alters the “playing field” on which perception takes place. “Mass Transmission” was one of the works commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony (SFS) for the season-long celebration of its

Naxos’ Second Project to Record the Keyboard Sonat...
 Two Fascinating Series will Begin on the Same Day ...
 Musica Pacifica will Begin the New Year in Noe Val...
 Handel Suffers the Slings and Arrows of Outrageous...
 Trinity Alps Chamber Musicians will Return to San ...
 Fred Frith Goes Back to Jazz Improvisation (in his...
 Sarah Cahill Concludes SFP’s Fall Salons with More...
 Starkland Releases Premiere Recordings from the Ar...
 Dates Announced for San Francisco Tape Music Festi...
 Gerhaher Brings an Intimate Approach to Mahler for...
 Farallon Quintet will Return to Old First Concerts...
 Paul Hersh Brings an Expressive and Cerebral All-B...
 San Francisco Symphony Takes a Stand on Discrimina...
 Sviatoslav Richter the Concerto Pianist on Warner ...
 San Francisco Chamber Orchestra’s Annual Holiday C...
 Archetti Brings a Program of Christmas-Appropriate...

centennial; and it was given its debut as part of the *American Mavericks* portion of that season. Curiously enough, SFS was not involved in the performance, because Bates had scored it for full chorus, pipe organ, and electronica. Thus, while the piece has not been included on any subsequent subscription concert, it *was* the high point of a program given by the SFS Chorus, led by Director Ragnar Bohlin, on their own. The major work on that program was Gabriel Fauré's Opus 48 setting of the Requiem text with instrumental accompaniment provided only by organ (played by Jonathan Dimmock); but the Bates "revival" was the "distinguishing feature." I was delighted at how many of my memories were reinforced by this occasion and can only hope that this piece will benefit from further attention on a broader scale.

June: A "dynamic duo" of San Francisco Opera (SFO) productions. This was the one of two "double headers" of the year, since it involved two separate SFO productions; but they were so different that it would be unfair (not to mention ridiculous) to make a case that one was better than the other. One might argue in favor of Oliver Tambosi's staging of Leoš Janáček's three-act opera *Jenůfa*, because this was a new production, while Emilio Sagi's staging of Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo* was a revival of a production first seen in 1998. However, both of these operas were produced for maximum visceral impact on the audience, not only by virtue of the well-informed efforts of the stage directors but also due to the optimally-charged conducting by Jiří Bělohlávek (Janáček) and SFO Music Director Nicola Luisotti (Verdi).

July: Pamela Z celebrates her 60th birthday with a concert. I tend to be skeptical about "anniversary" events. There is too much of a risk that the whole affair will get bogged down in sentimental reflections on the past to the detriment of the immediacy of performing in the present. Pamela Z could not have come up with a better counterexample. Entitled *Z Program 60*, the work she composed for the evening was a 60-minute collage consisting of 60 movements, each exactly one minute in duration. Furthermore, the image of a ticking clock was projected on a screen, always displaying the number of the

This Month's Third Sunday Concert will Offer a Uni...
 Areon Flutes Make their Recording Debut on the Inn...
 A Dispassionate Program about Passion from IOCSF
 Meta4 Continues (concludes?) its Saariaho Recordin...
 Voices of Music will Bring its Holiday Concert to ...
 The SFCM Opera and Musical Theatre Program Present...
 Celebrate End-of-Term at SFCM with Paul Hersh Play...
 Vladimir Feltsman's Schubert Project Advances to i...
 Bold Modernism Distinguishes the San Francisco Ope...
 San Francisco Renaissance Voices will Give its Ann...
 Francesco D'Orazio Plays Solo Violin Music from th...
 Colin Andrews Plays the Complete Organ Works of Ol...
 Ian Scarfe Announces his Next House Concert for To...
 Jeffrey Chin Returns to the Cadillac Hotel to Give...
 The GRAMMY Nominations Deliver my Annual Reality C...

current movement, running from “0” to “59.” Within that context, nothing ever felt as if it was going on for too long; and there was a delightful breadth of diversity across the full scope of those 60 movements.

August: Lamplighters transplants Gilbert and Sullivan in Renaissance Milan. There is a fair amount of history of efforts to “transplant” or “reconceive” the better known operettas of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. This year Lamplighters Music Theatre decided to transform *The Mikado; or the Town of Titipu* into *The New Mikado: Una Commedia Musicale!* This was an exercise in “transplanting,” repotting the flower of the narrative into the soil of Renaissance Milan, so to speak. Surprisingly few modifications to both the script and the lyrics were required. The music, on the other hand, did not need to be modified at all. Even when he was trying to evoke Oriental sonorities, Sullivan’s score came out sounding even more Italianate than Giacomo Puccini’s *Turandot*. On the other hand the few instances of Japanese text managed quite well when transformed into Latin. The bottom line is that Lamplighters figured out how to be both successfully outrageous and true to G&S roots at the same time.

September: Paul Dresher revives *Schick Machine*. *Schick Machine* is the product of a grand design fortunate enough not to get bogged down in the complexity of either its creation or its production. Both monodrama and recital, it was created for percussion virtuoso Steven Schick under commission from Stanford Lively Arts and Meyer Sound Labs; and it was first performed in Dinkelspiel Auditorium on the Stanford University campus on March 7, 2009. The creative team involved Schick collaborating with composer and artistic director Paul Dresher, writer and stage director Rinde Eckert, instrument inventor Daniel Schmidt, mechanical sound artist Matt Heckert, and lighting and visual designer Tom Ontiveros. This year’s revival took place at Z Space, which allowed for a much more creative use of space than was afforded by Dinkelspiel. In addition, because much of the instrumentation involved modified or invented percussion, members of the audience could descend from the bleacher seating for a “guided

Nikki Einfeld and Loren Mach
Give their Debut Perf...

The Bleeding Edge: 12/5/2016

The China Philharmonic
Orchestra Fares Best with C...

San Francisco Conservatory of
Music: January, 2017...

Another Way for the Rich to
Make Life Worse for th...

Veretski Pass Offers up the
Jewish Side of the Hol...

San Francisco Girls Chorus
Takes its Davies Visit ...

Lawrence Ferrara Returns to
Old First for his Annu...

The Neighborhood Performance
Project will Present ...

Philharmonia Baroque Presents
Splendid Music for a...

Warner’s Reissue of Sviatoslav
Richter: Solo and D...

The 2016–17 Concert Season for
San Francisco Chora...

The Village Road Trio Brings
Genuine Salon Nostalg...

- ▶ November (71)
- ▶ October (81)
- ▶ September (75)
- ▶ August (74)
- ▶ July (48)
- ▶ May (1)
- ▶ April (3)

tour” of the instruments following the performance. The narrative itself involves getting inside the head of a character whose own sense of identity is highly tenuous but who can “find himself” through playing the many instruments at his disposal. This was rich in imaginative conceptions that were never burdened down by pretense; and the result was a one-hour performance that was thoroughly engaging from beginning to end.

October: Philharmonia Baroque begins season with Beethoven. For as long as I can remember, Waverley Fund Music Director Nicholas McGegan has always devoted one concert of the Philharmonia Baroque season to music of the nineteenth century. For the 2016–17 season, that happened to be the very first concert, whose title was *All Beethoven*. Robert Levin was the guest soloist playing the Opus 37 (third) piano concerto in C minor on a fortepiano made by G. Hendrich Guggenberger dating from around 1820, and McGegan led the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in a performance of the Opus 68 (“Pastoral”) symphony in F major. Levin spontaneously improvised the cadenzas in his concerto performance; and, while those familiar with his recording with John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestra Révolutionnaire et Romantique probably recognized some of Levin’s tropes, one could still definitely revel in the immediacy of the situation. In the symphony, on the other hand, many of the “special effects” (such as the thunderstorm) had far greater impact than one tends to encounter in the more uniformly polished “contemporary” performances. This was an opportunity to appreciate just how good Beethoven looked in a light more conducive to his own historical period.

November: Simon Rattle visits Davies Symphony Hall. This was the other “double header” of the year, since it would be unfair to rank-order the two concerts given by the Berlin Philharmonic led by Artistic Director Simon Rattle. The first used Pierre Boulez’ relatively brief “Éclat” to serve as an “overture” for Gustav Mahler’s 1905 seventh symphony in E minor. (The program was performed without an intermission.) This was followed by a program of music “on either side

- ▶ March (2)
- ▶ February (2)
- ▶ January (6)

- ▶ 2015 (135)
- ▶ 2014 (200)
- ▶ 2013 (247)
- ▶ 2012 (266)
- ▶ 2011 (312)
- ▶ 2010 (426)
- ▶ 2009 (505)
- ▶ 2008 (652)
- ▶ 2007 (661)

LABELS

- 9/11 (42)
- action (191)
- addiction (87)
- Adès (3)
- Ahmad Jamal (2)
- AIPAC (32)
- Alan Louis Smith (1)
- Alban Berg (24)
- Albert Ayler (3)
- alienation (79)
- Aminikia (1)
- Amy Beach (8)
- analysis (152)
- Andrew Imbrie (3)
- Andriasov (1)
- Andriessen (2)

of Mahler.” The first half presented compositions called only “pieces” by their respective composers. Arnold Schoenberg’s Opus 16 set of five orchestral pieces was followed by Anton Webern’s Opus 6 set of six orchestral pieces, with Alban Berg’s Opus 6 set of three orchestral pieces wrapping up the sequence. Before beginning their performance, Rattle requested that the audience refrain from applauding until all fourteen pieces had been presented. Given the dates, this was a bit of an artificial sequencing; but the impact was remarkably intense. The second half then turned back the clock to Johannes Brahms’ Opus 73 (second) symphony in D major. Thus, over the course of two concerts Rattle unfolded a repertoire that fit comfortably into a 100-year span, albeit one that crossed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century; and it would be unfair to treat that conjunction of the programs as anything other than an integrated “package.”

December: Sarah Cahill plays Danny Clay. This recital, which concluded the 2016 Fall Salons series presented by SFP at the Hotel Rex, also concluded a story that began at the beginning of this year. Cahill had prepared a program of chaconnes from both the Baroque period and the twentieth century for a Noe Valley Chamber Music recital she gave in January. She then performed about half of that program in May for a Salon at the Rex. Her December program for the Rex was entitled *Chaconnes, Revisited*, which involved accounting for other pieces she had played in January. Among them was a commissioned work by Danny Clay entitled “Still Cycles,” which was inspired by a chaconne in G major by George Frideric Handel. This month Cahill played the Handel and the Clay back-to-back, allowing Handel to provide just the right context for listening to a highly original modernist undertaking involving approaches to repetition that distinguished the work from any of its so-called “minimalist” predecessors. This ingenious synthesis of retrospection and prospectation emerged as the perfect antidote for setting aside all those absurdities that made the “practical side” of this year so unpleasant.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 2:31 PM 

LABELS: CHAMBER MUSIC, MUSIC, OPERA

Antes (1)
 Antheil (1)
 Anthony Braxton (1)
 Anton Rubinstein (1)
 Antonio Soler (2)
 anxiety (6)
 Arcangelo Corelli (3)
 Art Tatum (6)
 Arthur Sullivan (1)
 arts (4)
 Arvo Pärt (9)
 Aubrey de Grey (1)
 authenticity (28)
 authority (360)
 Balanchine (5)
 Balfe (1)
 ballet (48)
 Banchieri (1)
 Bartók (27)
 Basie (2)
 Bazzini (1)
 Beethoven (184)
 being (10)
 Bellini (3)
 Benjamin Britten (36)
 Berlioz (9)
 Birtwistle (2)
 Bismarck (3)
 Bloch (3)
 blogs (96)
 Bolcom (1)
 boredom (2)
 Borodin (1)

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- [brain \(8\)](#)
- [brain damage \(5\)](#)
- [Branca \(2\)](#)
- [Bruch \(6\)](#)
- [Bruckner \(8\)](#)
- [bubble \(10\)](#)
- [Bud Powell \(8\)](#)
- [Burke \(30\)](#)
- [business \(519\)](#)
- [Busoni \(11\)](#)
- [Buxtehude \(2\)](#)
- [Cardew \(1\)](#)
- [Carissimi \(1\)](#)
- [Carl Loewe \(2\)](#)
- [Carl Maria von Weber \(2\)](#)
- [Carl Nielsen \(2\)](#)
- [Carlos Chávez \(2\)](#)
- [Cassadó \(2\)](#)
- [Castello \(1\)](#)
- [Catholicism \(2\)](#)
- [Cavalli \(5\)](#)
- [Cecil Taylor \(9\)](#)
- [chamber music \(318\)](#)
- [Charles Villiers Stanford \(3\)](#)
- [Charlie Parker \(9\)](#)
- [Chatman \(2\)](#)
- [Chopin \(35\)](#)
- [chutzpah \(308\)](#)
- [Cluetrain \(8\)](#)
- [Cole Porter \(1\)](#)

collectivism (2)
Coltrane (35)
communication (271)
complex (88)
consciousness (147)
consequences (571)
Constant Lambert (1)
consumer (193)
control (52)
conversation (68)
Copland (15)
corruption (3)
Craigslis (2)
CRM (20)
culture (290)
Cziffra (1)
Dan Visconti (1)
David Conte (5)
David Garner (2)
Debussy (27)
decision (95)
deliberation (105)
democracy (155)
description (54)
design (5)
Diabelli (2)
Dick Connette (1)
digital (11)
disaster (33)
discourse (8)
discrimination (239)
Dizzy Gillespie (8)
Dockstader (1)

Dolphy (2)
Domenico Scarlatti (12)
Don Cherry (1)
Donizetti (16)
dramatism (70)
Dušek (1)
Dutilleux (2)
Dvořák (24)
economy (673)
Edelman (23)
editing (63)
education (154)
effective (46)
efficient (42)
Eisler (1)
Elgar (23)
Ellen Goodman (1)
Elliott Carter (14)
engagement (23)
Eno (7)
environment (92)
Ernő von Dohnányi (5)
Esa-Pekka Salonen (2)
evolution (5)
experience (9)
Ezra Sims (1)
faith (221)
Falla (3)
Fauré (8)
fear (110)
Feinberg (1)
Felix Mendelssohn (20)
fiction (107)

Finzi (3)
flamenco (1)
Franck (3)
François Couperin (1)
Frank Zappa (11)
Fred Frith (1)
freedom (12)
Fučík (1)
Gavin Bryars (6)
George Benjamin (3)
George Russell (3)
Gerry Mulligan (2)
Gershwin (17)
Gesualdo (4)
Giddens (20)
Gil Evans (2)
Ginastera (2)
Giovanni Gabrieli (2)
Giuliani (10)
Glazunov (1)
globalization (131)
Gluck (5)
Google (174)
Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel (1)
government (832)
Grieg (8)
Grofé (1)
Gubaidulina (8)
Hába (1)
Habermas (52)
Handel (33)
Harbison (1)
Harry Partch (2)

Hasidic New Wave (3)
Haydn (65)
hazard (28)
health care (187)
Henry Cowell (2)
Henze (2)
Herbert Howells (1)
Herbie Hancock (2)
Hindemith (8)
history (402)
Hollywood (7)
Holst (4)
Horace Silver (1)
Horowitz (1)
Hubert Parry (1)
Hugo Distler (1)
Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1)
Hugo Wolf (3)
Hummel (1)
Humperdinck (4)
ideas (21)
identity (59)
ideology (244)
impeachment (4)
injury (24)
intelligence (29)
Internet (349)
interpretation (47)
intolerance (37)
investment (24)
Iraq (96)
irony (62)
irrationality (6)

Isaiah Berlin (51)
Israel (87)
Ives (29)
Jake Heggie (2)
Janáček (11)
Jay Lyon (1)
jazz (167)
Jean-Marie Leclair (1)
Jerome Kern (1)
Joaquín Rodrigo (5)
Johann Sebastian Bach (130)
Johann Strauss (6)
John Adams (22)
John Cage (52)
John Lewis (1)
Josef Strauss (1)
Kalevi Aho (3)
Kancheli (1)
Katrina (28)
Keith Jarrett (1)
keyboard music (56)
Khachaturian (1)
Kleist (5)
Klucevsek (1)
knowledge (298)
Knussen (1)
Kodály (9)
Korngold (4)
Kosugi (1)
Kucinich (29)
Kurt Weill (3)
Kurtág (10)
La Monte Young (3)

learning (50)
Leon Kirchner (1)
Leonard Bernstein (9)
Lera Auerbach (5)
Leroy Anderson (4)
Leyetchkiss (2)
Libby Larsen (1)
libertarian (2)
Lieberman (1)
Ligeti (18)
Liszt (36)
literature (230)
Lorca (1)
Lori Anderson (1)
Lou Harrison (6)
Lou Reed (1)
Louis Armstrong (5)
Lucier (2)
Lutosławski (4)
Magnus Lindberg (4)
Mahler (85)
marketing (152)
Martinů (3)
Marx (66)
Mason Bates (2)
Max Roach (3)
Max Weber (57)
meaning (105)
Mechem (2)
media (521)
medicine (7)
Medtner (1)
memory (51)

Menotti (1)
Meredith Wilson (1)
Messiaen (28)
Michael Jarrell (2)
Miles Davis (20)
Milton Babbitt (2)
Mingus (1)
Mompou (3)
Monteverdi (2)
Moondog (1)
Morton Feldman (9)
Mose Allison (1)
movies (83)
Mozart (143)
Mozkowski (2)
multimedia (6)
Mumma (4)
music (1286)
Mussorgsky (9)
narratology (189)
Neil Postman (2)
network (8)
neurotransmitter (1)
news (569)
Nin (1)
Nina Simone (2)
object (67)
Offenbach (2)
opera (250)
organization (4)
Orlando di Lasso (2)
Ornette Coleman (13)
Oscar Peterson (2)

Pachelbel (1)
Paganini (3)
Pamela Z (1)
Pat Metheny (2)
Paul Bowles (1)
Paul Cummins (1)
Penderecki (1)
pentad (18)
perception (46)
performance (203)
Peter Grunberg (5)
Philip Glass (35)
philosophy (319)
Piazzolla (8)
Pierre de la Rue (1)
planning (7)
politics (718)
postmodern (19)
Poulenc (13)
poverty (214)
Prokofiev (33)
propaganda (113)
psychology (13)
Puccini (28)
race (31)
Rachel Portman (1)
Rachmaninoff (35)
Randall Thompson (1)
Ravel (34)
reading (153)
reality (442)
reckless mind (16)
Reger (1)

Reynaldo Hahn (2)
rhetoric (230)
Richard Rodgers (5)
Richard Strauss (38)
Rimsky-Korsakov (3)
Robert Johnson (1)
Robert Mann (14)
Robert Schumann (53)
Robin Holloway (1)
Rochberg (1)
Roger Nixon (1)
Ron Carter (1)
Rossini (12)
Rostropovich (2)
Rott (1)
Ruehr (1)
Rzewski (3)
Saariaho (7)
Saint-Georges (1)
Saint-Saëns (8)
Sallinen (2)
Samuel Barber (12)
Samuel Carl Adams (1)
Sarasate (2)
Satie (8)
satire (65)
Scelsi (1)
Schaeffer (2)
Schnittke (3)
Schoenberg (66)
Schubert (65)
Schulhoff (1)
science (135)

Scott Ritter (2)
Scriabin (7)
search (27)
Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev (1)
service (90)
sfcmbloggernight (1)
sfsymphonybloggers07 (6)
Sgambati (1)
Shostakovich (35)
Sibelius (16)
Smetana (3)
social software (98)
social theory (521)
Sondheim (1)
Sonny Rollins (2)
Sorabji (1)
sports (1)
stability (1)
statistics (5)
Stephen Foster (1)
Steve Reich (12)
Steven Gerber (2)
Steven Stucky (1)
Stewart Wallace (5)
Stockhausen (17)
strategy (11)
Stravinsky (79)
stress (4)
subject (43)
Sun Ra (1)
Susa (6)
sweatshop (2)
symbolism (17)

Szymanowski (2)
Takemitsu (4)
Tallis (1)
Tan Dun (3)
Tancredi (1)
Tchaikovsky (30)
technology (654)
Telemann (7)
terrorism (163)
Thelonious Monk (37)
time (64)
Tomás Luis de Victoria (2)
Tony Williams (5)
Tristano (12)
truth (169)
Turnage (8)
Umberto Giordano (2)
Uri Caine (1)
utopia (28)
value (129)
Varèse (11)
Vaughan Williams (3)
verb (45)
Verdi (35)
Victor Herbert (1)
Villa-Lobos (3)
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virtual (15)
visualization (3)
Vivaldi (18)
Wagner (87)
Walter Piston (1)
war (219)

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[Web \(95\)](#)

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