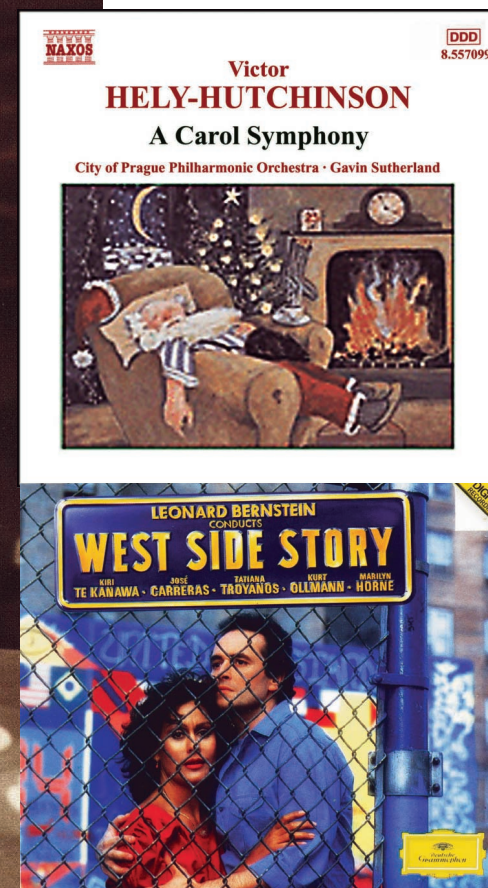
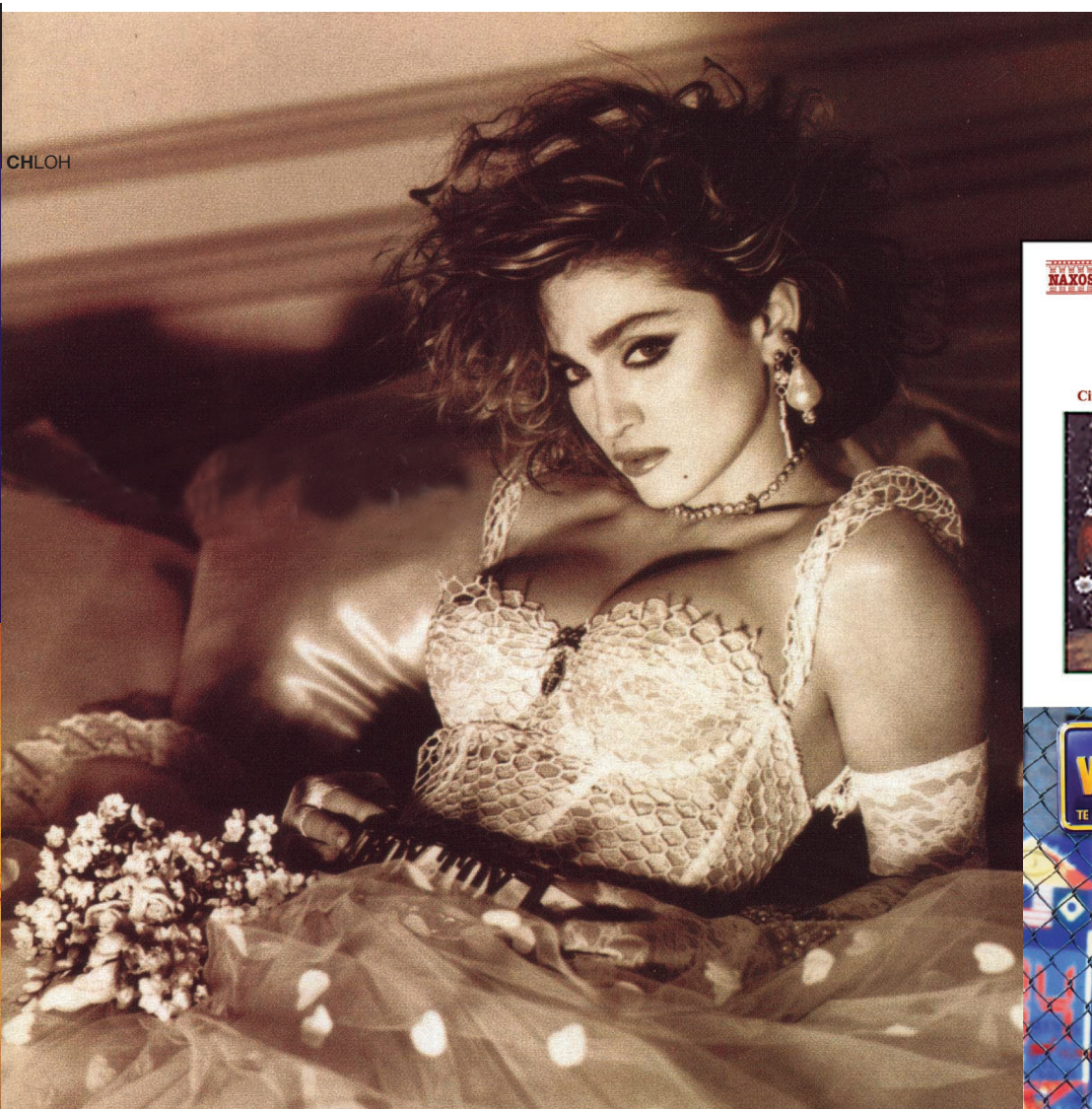




CHLOH



Three men and a BABY

John Adams conceives, Peter Sellars and Kent Nagano deliver. It's Christmas with 'Minimal' fuss!

No grand hallelujahs, exotic costumes, sheep disguises nor straw-lined manger required. A bare stage, a chair, come-as-you-are rehearsal dress, and a superb cast back-dropped by the gritty urban filmwork of director Peter Sellars is all that is needed to bring the message of the Messiah home with revelatory power. Move aside, Handel. John Adams is here.

His latest opera *El Niño* is not a commentary on meteorological havoc — it's the OTHER *El Niño*, the one born on Christmas day. Feeling a little sheepish, aren't we?

Adams is perhaps the leading figure in American music today, no longer the Philip Glass wannabe after having gotten minimalism quite wrong, and thank goodness for that! Adams explains: "I felt early on that Minimalism had its inherent limitations... I knew even from the start that I had to break through this style." And break through he did, creating his own vibrant language out of a synthesis of minimalist techniques and his own pop sensibilities. His unique voice is clear in *El Niño*, the opera that Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* wasn't, and it's a work that will endure as one of our century's classics.

It's not just a modern take on the age-old story of Christ's birth, but a complex, thought-provoking commentary seen from a woman's point of view. Hence this Christmas oratorio centres on Mary rather than Jesus, and has not one, but multiple facets of the Holy Mother, portrayed simultaneously on stage. This is achieved through a combination of vocal narrative and aria, dance and movement, backdropped by Sellar's film projected on a huge screen above the bare stage, with its stark imagery, ballet sequences and a parallel tale of Hispanic characters living in the desert fringes of LA.

Accompanying this carefully controlled kaleidoscope is a remarkable score, brimming with passion and power, sensuality and reverence, distilled clarity and surging complexity, over which mellifluous vocals soar like angels. The texts, a combination of English, Latin and Spanish, draw from a variety of sources, from Latin American female poets to various scriptures.

The opera first appeared in a studio recording issued by Nonesuch, but *El Niño*'s world premiere held in Paris has now been released on Arthaus DVD — the cornerstone of Naxos' DVD venture — and it's a visual experience like no other. Refreshing, intriguing, deeply moving, it's the way for DVD opera to go. Appropriately, *El Niño* leads Naxos' awards-quest at the 2003 Cannes Music Festival. Check out Naxos' latest DVD releases at www.naxos.com

John Adams, *El Niño* (Complete Opera, DVD)

Kent Nagano, Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin, London Voices, Maitrise de Paris Children's Choir and so on

Dawn Upshaw, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Willard White Naxos/Arthaus DVD 100 220

This Arthaus DVD is a real treat, both musically and visually. The performance is first-class, with the impish Upshaw as the main Mary, the imposing White as Joseph, and Lieberson as narrator and sometime-Mary. The trio are supported by a caste of dancer-Marys, three countertenors who double as the Wise Men, and chorus. The device of the opera is highly metaphoric: dance, body movements and the film commentary piece together the narrative of the Nativity, resulting in a tale beautifully told, contemporary without being arty-farty.

On the DVD, the stage action is spliced with cuts from the gritty film to produce a multilevel exploration of the texts. The recorded sound from this live performance is well balanced and full of detail. Throw in the visual impact and this version is second to none — just sample the climax of Part 1 (the birth of Christ), where the marriage of sound, movement and imagery makes a moving experience.

The music is fresh as it is exciting, embracing as diverse a range of influences as Old English sonnet to blues. There are many high points, from the jubilant opening chorus, to the countertenors' three-part singing in "The babe leaped in her womb", to Upshaw's exquisite *Magnificat*, all through to the quietly affirmative conclusion *A Palm Tree* with the children's chorus.

It's a must see for the holiday season, one that promises fresh insights with each viewing. Put it on your Christmas wish list!

Victor Hely-Hutchinson, A Carol Symphony

(includes Peter Warlock, *Bethlehem Down*, Patric Standford, *A Christmas Carol Symphony* and so on)

Gavin Sutherland, City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra Naxos 8.557099

After *El Niño*, Christmas offerings will never be the same again. This disc, however, is special for nostalgic reasons — I have not encountered Hely Hutchinson's *A Carol Symphony* since FM Radio aired it in the late 1970s. Hutchinson and the band of British bards on this disc offer a spread of orchestral carolling that comes with great taste, and if not all are timeless then Hutchinson's certainly is enduring.

It's a most delightful symphonic treatment of popular carols like *Come All Ye Faithful* and *In This Town of Bethlehem*, each forming a movement within the traditional plan. Elsewhere there are a variety of styles, from the medleys of Standford to the chestnut-roasting warmth of Warlock's hymn. There's plenty for everyone in this timeless seasonal offering. Now, where's my figgy pudding? **E**

C H Loh is a populist who listens to Madonna in his spare time

CH's half dozen: There's something about Mary

CH Loh hunts down the many incarnations of Mary in the world of music.

The Choral Mary: Szymanowski's Stabat Mater & Litany to the Virgin Mary (EMI 55121)

There is no better tribute to the Holy Mother.

The Divine Mary: Maria Callas, La Divina 1-3 (EMI 54702/55016/55216)

She is, after all, a Goddess of the operatic diva.

The Mary of the High Cs: Maria Caniglia in Aida (Naxos 8.110156)

Italian high drama — this Mary ruled La Scala.

The Downtrodden Mary: Marie, from Wozzeck (Naxos 8.660076)

The spirit was not willing but the flesh was weak.

The 'Say it loud and there's music playing' Mary: Maria, from West Side Story (DG 415 253)

Broadway had a touch of class for the briefest moment.

The 'Wash your mouth with soap' Mary: Miss Ciccone aka 'Madonna', now 'With Child'

Poster girl for single mother hood, only not immaculately conceived.