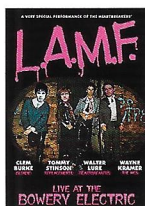


are exquisite, the harmony velvet-like and the high notes on target. Annalisa Stroppa is only slightly less effective as Henrietta, and though the supporting cast does not match the principals' level of excellence, none really disappoint. The chorus and orchestra perform splendidly for conductor Evelino Pidò, who supports the soloists with finesse. The only drawbacks are staging by Emilio Sagi that fails to overcome the opera's innately static character, and a set by Daniel Bianco that is elegant but relies too heavily on white chairs being moved across the sandy stage and a constellation of chandeliers that rise and fall to little purpose. The costumes offer little excitement, being basic black except for Elvira's white gown and Henrietta's royal robes. But with Bellini the quality of the singing is what matters above all, and in that regard this performance excels. Presented in DTS 5.1 and LPCM stereo on DVD, and DTS-HD 5.1 and PCM stereo on Blu-ray, this is highly recommended. (F. Swietek)

L.A.M.F.: Live at the Bowery Electric ★★1/2

(2017) 47 min. DVD: \$19.95.
Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

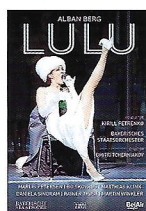
In 1977, the proto-punk rock band Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers recorded their one and only studio album, *L.A.M.F.* (common gang graffiti at the time, standing for "Like a Mother Fucker"). Although derided for its poor sound mix, *L.A.M.F.* nevertheless gained cultural cache among music fans, all the more so after the death of Thunders and the departures of the original band members. *L.A.M.F.: Live at the Bowery Electric* is a 40th anniversary 2016 live concert performed by a kind of punk supergroup acting as a glorified cover ensemble. Organized by Heartbreakers guitarist Walter Lure—the only remaining musician from the historic first lineup—the legendary players in the tribute group here include drummer Clem Burke from Blondie; singer-bassist Tommy Stinson from the Replacements; and—most impressively—Wayne Kramer from the deeply political (and loud) 1960s-'70s punk pioneers the MC5. Playing on a small stage in what looks like a cramped New York club full of enthusiastic audience members, the graying band delivers serviceable renditions of the 12 roaring, if murky, tracks on *L.A.M.F.* Guest artists including Jesse Malin (D Generation), Cheetah Chrome (Dead Boys), and Liza Colby (Liza Colby Sound) also appear on several songs. But while everyone clearly seems to be having a good time, the largely colorless music feels more like a reference point for the real thing than the real thing itself. Extras include band interviews. Presented in Dolby Digital stereo, this is a strong optional purchase. (T. Keogh)



Lulu ★★1/2

(2015) 182 min. DVD: \$24.99,
Blu-ray: \$29.99. Bel Air
Classiques (dist. by Naxos of
America).

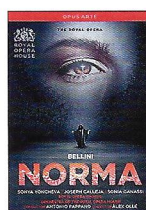
Alban Berg's 1937 final opera—about a voluptuous woman who destroys one man after another before falling into prostitution and being killed by Jack the Ripper—is no longer regarded as the fearsome pinnacle of the avant-garde that it once was. Especially after the unfinished third act was orchestrated by Friedrich Cerha, *Lulu* has become a repertory staple, although many listeners still find its musical idiom—based largely on 12-tone serial style—to be challenging. One of the great strengths of this 2015 production from Munich's Bayerische Staatsoper is the conducting of Kirill Petrenko, who mines the vein of lush late romanticism in the score alongside its modernist spikiness. The vocalism is also remarkable, with Marlis Petersen easily sailing through the stratospheric demands of her part, and the supporting cast—including Bo Skovhus, who plays both her longtime lover/final victim Schön and Jack the Ripper—nearly as fine. Dmitri Tcherniakov's staging is at times controversial—he omits the silent film that traditionally accompanies Lulu's escape from prison, for instance—but his decision to employ a plexiglass maze as the single set turns out to be a stroke of genius, visually conveying the relationships among the characters (and their mirror-like reflections). Joining other superb renditions of Berg's masterpiece—from Covent Garden (VL-11/10), Salzburg (VL-5/12), and Glyndebourne (VL-1/14)—this is presented in Dolby Digital 5.1 and PCM stereo on DVD, and DTS-HD 5.1 and PCM stereo on Blu-ray. Highly recommended. (F. Swietek)



Norma ★★1/2

(2016) 154 min. In Italian w/
English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99,
Blu-ray: \$39.99. Opus Arte
(dist. by Naxos of America).

Bellini's 1831 opera—in which the titular Druid high priestess becomes enraged when Pollione, her secret Roman lover, grows enamored of her younger colleague Adalgisa, leading Norma to incite rebellion against the occupiers and even threaten their two children—has been transplanted to many different times and locales. But director Alex Ollé's concept for this 2016 production from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, must be considered bizarre by any standard. In what appears to be a contemporary setting, the Druids have become some sort of arch-conservative Catholic sect in which Norma (Sonya Yoncheva) presides over rituals against a wall covered in a baroque sea of crucifixes—which is only



the most intrusive of the visual distractions in Alfons Flores's sets and Lluc Castells's costumes. *Norma* also features allusions to a fascistic military, the KKK, inquisitorial torture devices, and even *Watership Down*. Who exactly Pollione (Joseph Calleja), dressed in a simple business suit, represents in this weird context is unclear. The vocalism—by Yoncheva, Calleja, and Sonia Ganassi as Adalgisa—is strong, but it is often undercut by strange staging choices: Norma's famous aria *Casta diva*, a prayer to the moon goddess, is sung while a huge censer, spewing smoke, swings from the ceiling like a gigantic pendulum, and even the nobility of her death is crudely compromised. The fine work by the company chorus and orchestra under music director Antonio Pappano adds to the musical virtues of this production, but the visual oddities in Ollé's staging make this an also-ran among currently available offerings, including the 2015 production from Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu starring Sondra Radvanovsky, (VL-3/17). Presented in DTS 5.1 (DTS-HD 5.1 on the Blu-ray release) and LPCM stereo, extras include a brief introduction, a behind-the-scenes featurette, and a cast gallery. A strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

Nutcracker: The Motion Picture ★★1/2

(1986) 86 min. DVD: \$14.95,
Blu-ray: \$29.95. Olive Films
(avail. from most distributors).

Carroll Ballard's 1986 filmization of Tchaikovsky's popular Christmas-themed ballet preserves a production by Kent Stowell for the Pacific Northwest Ballet that is notable for its lovely and imaginative sets and costumes designed by Maurice Sendak. The score is also nicely played by the London Symphony under Charles Mackerras, although the stereo sound is frankly mediocre. Patricia Barker as grown-up Clara and Wade Walthall as her Nutcracker Prince, along with the company, appear to be fine dancers—at least what one can see of them: one of the major flaws here is that Ballard indulges in lots of editing and close-ups, so that the entirety of the dancers' motions is often obscured, with images frequently cut off at the waist (the battle of the Nutcracker against the Mouse King is particularly cluttered). Another curiosity is a prologue in which the elder Clara looks back wistfully on her experience, especially her relationship with Drosselmeier (Hugh Binyon), whose near obsession with young Clara (Vanessa Sharp) has a slightly creepy undertone. Despite its failings, this rethinking of *The Nutcracker* has a distinctively dreamlike quality, and the final act—with its succession of short solos and ensembles, as well as a *pas de deux*—is less subject to over-editing than the earlier segments. While there are many fine straightforward stage productions of this beloved ballet on DVD and Blu-ray, this will

