

scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge has maintained its place in the repertory for more than a century. Less likely to stand the test of time is the new English-language production *Faustus, The Last Night* by Pascal Dusapin, presented here in its 2006 premiere at the Opéra de Lyon. The libretto, written by composer Dusapin, focuses on the final hours before Faustus is to be dragged off to hell, during which he and Mephistopheles pass the time by verbally jousting over questions related to reality and existence. The pair are periodically joined by others—an angel, the character of Sly from Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, and a figure named Togod, whose name not only references the deity but is an anagram of Beckett's *Godot* (and so points to the theme of stasis and endless waiting). Staged on a gigantic slanted clock face that the singers must scamper across (often clinging to the moving hands), the production is admittedly visually striking, and the performances by the five-member cast and the orchestra are committed, but the music itself is hardly melodic—rumbling and shrieking with dissonance and percussive force—and the text is delivered in *Sprechstimme* style (i.e., the vocals spoken rather than sung). Presented with a Dolby Digital soundtrack, DVD extras include a bonus behind-the-scenes featurette with remarks by the composer, conductor, and singers. Optional. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

Hänsel und Gretel

★★★

(2006) 108 min. In German w/ English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99 (booklet included). EuroArts (dist. by Naxos of America).



Although musically rich, Engelbert Humperdinck's 1893 opera *Hänsel und Gretel*, which premiered in Weimar Germany under the baton of none other than Richard Strauss, has traditionally been considered Christmas kiddie fare. This 2006 production, directed by Katharina Thalbach at the Dresden's Sächsischen Staatsoper, successfully brings a more mature sensibility to the work

Staatskapelle Dresden orchestra under the baton of Michael Hofstetter gives a rich and satisfying performance. Presented in DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1, and PCM stereo, this is recommended. Aud: C, P. (J. Reed)

Harlem Roots: The Big Bands, Volume 1 ★★★

(2004) 57 min. DVD: \$15.98. Storyville Films (dist. by Naxos of America).



Churned out by the hundreds over a seven-year stretch during the 1940s, "soundies" were the precursor to MTV videos: brief lip-synced performances by popular acts of the day—most of them straightforward (although some featured sets, dancing, costumes, and/or a hint of a storyline)—shown on a video jukebox called the Panoram. This opening volume of Storyville's *Harlem Roots* series is a pretty hip compilation, featuring bandleaders Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Count Basie, and Lucky Millinder, not to mention sidemen and singers such as Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, Ray Nance (all with Ellington), Jimmy Rushing, Freddie Green (both in the Basie band), and the wonderful Sister Rosetta Tharpe (featured on two of Millinder's four tunes). Most of these clips have been available in various formats for years, and—from a strictly musical standpoint—are something less than a cavalcade of classics; for every bona fide standard (Ellington's "I Got it Bad and That Ain't Good" and "Cottontail," Calloway's "Blues in the Night" and "Minnie the Moocher," Basie's "Air Mail Special"), there are two or three silly throwaways like Cab's "The Skunk Song" and Millinder's "I Want a Big Fat Mama," and the frequent minstrel-like mugging may prove discomfiting to some viewers. Still, there's enough great dancing (the Lindy Hoppers accompanying "Cottontail" are simply amazing), cool swing era clothes, and just plain flashy showmanship (especially by Calloway) to sustain interest in these 20 black-and-white clips served up in less than an hour in Dolby Digital 5.1 and mono sound. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (S. Graham)

cert footage to be had. Born Chester Arthur Burnett (named after the 21st U.S. president) in Mississippi, the man who became known as Howlin' Wolf (not to mention "the Taildragger," "300 Pounds of Heavenly Joy," and other colorful monikers) was 60 when he appeared here at the Washington, D.C. Blues Festival in November 1970. Following a brief montage of "man on the street" interviews in which young African-Americans are asked if they know who the musician is (most don't), Wolf makes a dramatic first appearance, literally crawling onstage on his hands and knees while his band (including longtime guitarist Hubert Sumlin, drummer S.P. Leary, and pianist Sunnyland Slim) gets into the groove behind him. Thereafter, Wolf performs a few of his better known tunes ("Killing Floor," "Back Door Man," "How Many More Years"), blows some harp, and generally struts, prowls, and mugs shamelessly (if it's possible for a man his size to play the impish coquette—Wolf was at least 6' 3", and reportedly had size 16 feet—he indeed pulls it off) through a thoroughly entertaining gig. Unfortunately, producer-director Topper Carew's black & white film is hampered by dreadful sound and appalling camerawork (the other musicians are seen only rarely, while Wolf himself is often half out of the frame). Still, for larger music history collections, not to mention Wolf fans, this should be considered a strong optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (S. Graham)

Inga Rumpf & Friends

★★1/2

(2007) 120 min. DVD: \$19.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).



Veteran singer Inga Rumpf describes this concert as "a musical journey through German rock," which may sound about as appealing as, say, "a culinary tour through English stew"—let's face it, once you get past Kraftwerk and, er, David Hasselhoff, the Teutonic pickings are pretty slim. But Rumpf is good. Sixty years old at the time of this 2007 gig for the German *Rockpalast* music TV series (and celebrating her 40th year as a performer, including stints with the New

City Preachers, Frumpy, Atlantis, and other bands you've never heard of), Rumpf was once called "Germany's only world-class rock and soul singer," and she's certainly the most authentic-sounding European soul artist (not including Great Britain) I've heard. Rumpf's gospel, blues, and R&B influences are evident from the get-go, while her strong and soulful (if slightly ragged) voice brings to mind any number of singers, from Tina Turner and Ann Peebles to Bonnie Bramlett and Julie Driscoll (the jazzy "Indian Rope Man," a minor hit for Driscoll and organist Brian Auger 40 years ago, is one of several covers included in this 14-song set), and she plays some impressive bottleneck guitar, as well. Still, there's a certain *je ne sais quoi* missing here: Rumpf and her band are more than imitators—emulators, perhaps—but I'd still rather listen to Etta James. DVD extras include a backstage interview with Rumpf and bonus concert footage from Hamburg. A strong optional purchase. Aud: P. (S. Graham)