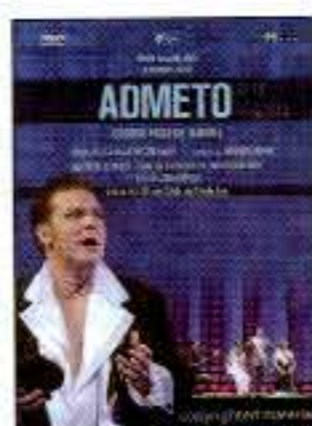


Admeto ★★1/2

(2006) 2 discs. 196 min. In Italian w/English subtitles. DVD: \$39.99 (booklet included). Arthaus Musik (dist. by Naxos of America).



Great music and fine singing can't overcome horrible staging in this production of *Admeto*, one of the magnificent but largely forgotten operas that George Frideric Handel composed for the Royal Academy of Music in the 1720s. Like Gluck's *Alceste* (see below), *Admeto* is also based on Euripides' tragedy *Alcestis*—the story of a queen who agrees to die in place of her husband, though Hercules rescues them both from the underworld—but Handel's libretto adds ungainly romantic subplots. Still, the composer's contribution easily transcends the lumpish narrative, and in musical terms this 2006 mounting from the Halle Handel Festival is fetching: the small but skillful original-instrument orchestra gives a light, ebullient reading of the score under the fluent direction of Howard Arman, while the vocals are strong and flexible across the board. Unfortunately, the physical production is Eurotrash at its worst, sporting hideous modernistic sets and costumes in the first two acts and a fountain that turns on and off at center stage without explanation (things improve during the third act with a sleekly simple setting and more elegant garb, but the damage is already beyond repair). Perhaps to make up for the assault on the eyes, this release includes two audio CDs containing highlights from the work, although anyone desiring a purely aural experience would be better served by Alan Curtis' complete 1977 recording on the Virgin label. *Admeto* is admittedly a rarity (no DVD alternative exists), but even so this is at best an optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

Alceste ★★1/2

(2006) 165 min. In French w/English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99 (booklet included). Arthaus Musik (dist. by Naxos of America).

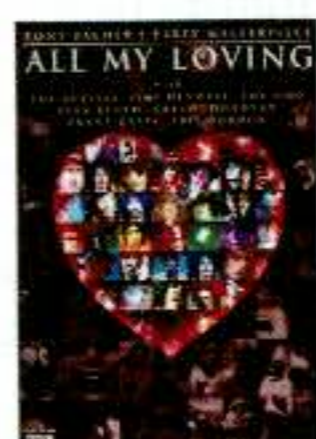


The second of Christoph Willibald Gluck's great "reform" operas—moving the form away from a singers' showcase towards a tighter fusion of music, dance, and drama—was prefaced with a manifesto in which the composer defined his aim as "a beautiful simplicity," a quality that *Alceste* certainly boasts. The story—derived from Euripides's tragedy *Alcestis*, the tale of a wife who sacrifices herself to save her husband from death, only to have Hercules intervene to rescue them both from the underworld—was first produced with an Italian text in 1767, and is here presented by the Stuttgart Staatsoper in the more popular French revision of 1776. Musically, the performance is quite good, with elegant orchestral playing and generally

fine singing, but the staging is problematic. The spare set is defensible—the production is largely static, with mostly slow, minimalist action, which is inherent to the piece—but the modern costumes are distracting (as are the orange wigs atop some characters), and the director's decision to fill the stage with plastic chairs that are constantly being shuffled about is mystifying (as is having the chorus sometimes sing with score in hand). Worst of all, while the ballet music is included here, there are no dancers, so we only see singers milling about or listening pensively. Presented in PCM stereo, this version is not without its virtues, but it cannot be preferred to the Image Entertainment release of *Alceste* conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, either musically or visually. Optional. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

All My Loving ★★★

(1968) 52 min. DVD: \$19.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

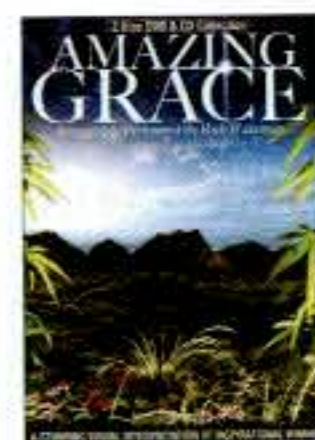


British filmmaker Tony Palmer's 1968 BBC-aired documentary *All My Loving* is an engaging, disturbing, occasionally cryptic look at the brave new world of pop music, made with the door-opening help of John Lennon and featuring a who's who (including the Who) of '60s musical giants: the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Pink Floyd, Frank Zappa, Donovan, and Eric Burdon, as well as a handful of social observers, such as novelist Anthony Burgess ("youth is not wise"). Interwoven throughout are horrific images from the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, and life under totalitarian rule, and while one supposes that these shocking scenes are meant to serve as counterpoint to the peace and brotherly love (and sex and mind-expanding drugs) at the heart of the counterculture movement (with music being one of its most visible signs), *All My Loving* never quite makes clear what relationship, if any, exists between Hendrix setting his guitar on fire and a man setting himself on fire. Still, the program, presented in Dolby Digital stereo, serves up some mighty fine music clips of Hendrix (inserting a playful "Strangers in the Night" interlude into the middle of "Wild Thing"), Cream (anchored by the relentless, marathon-drumming skills of Ginger Baker), and the Who smashing their way through "My Generation" in, of all places, Peoria, IL (in the opera house, no less!). Also worth noting: the DVD includes a fine pair of extras—one is an informative and entertaining 40-minute interview with Palmer, who reflects on the BBC (the film was originally aired after the network's official sign-off at night), the extraordinary musicianship of the rock pioneers profiled in the film, and the experience of filming Cream's farewell concert at London's Royal Albert Hall; the other is a gallery of Ralph

Steadman's portraits of rock musicians. Recommended. Aud: C, P. (R. Pitman)

Amazing Grace ★★★

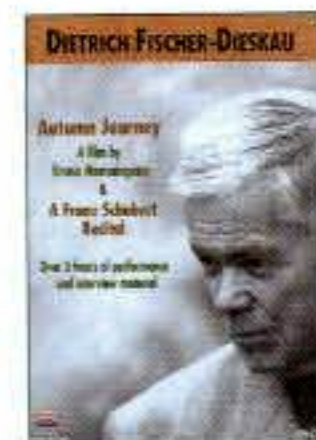
(2007) 66 min. DVD: \$19.95 (audio CD included). Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).



Rick Wakeman—intermittent keyboardist for prog-rock group Yes over the past 35 years, as well as solo recording artist of classic '70s albums such as *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*—performs 15 classic hymns in *Amazing Grace* (bundled with a bonus CD that features four extra tracks), which combines nature music videos with studio and live performances (including a rendition of the title track with his daughter Jemma and the English Chamber Choir). Presented in DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1 and stereo, each of the pieces presented here open with a brief introduction by Wakeman regarding what's known of the hymn's origin and the music that accompanies it (the classic hymn "Nearer My God to Thee," for instance, has been put to many tunes; here, Wakeman employs the well-known "Liverpool"). While the nature and location footage (sweeping meadows, majestic waterfalls, time-lapse blooming flowers, etc.) is fairly routine eye candy, and the shots of Wakeman seated at the piano are hardly visually exciting, what makes *Amazing Grace* a joy is the trademarked multi-layered sound that Wakeman brings to the arrangements of hymns such as "Glad That I Live Am I," "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," "All Things Bright and Beautiful," "Jerusalem" (also once performed by Wakeman's prog-rock competitors Emerson, Lake & Palmer), "All People That Dwell on Earth," "I Vow to Thee My Country" (with music from the Jupiter suite of Holst's "The Planets"), as well as "Ode to Joy" (from Beethoven's 9th) and "Morning Has Broken" (popularized by Cat Stevens). Recommended. Aud: P. (R. Pitman)

Autumn Journey

★★★1/2
(1995) 188 min. DVD: \$19.99. Kultur International Films. ISBN: 0-7697-8510-7.



German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's career spanned nearly half a century (1948-1992) and encompassed opera, lieder, and oratorios, as well as compositions ranging from the baroque to the contemporary (featured on numerous recordings). Bruno Monsiegeon's *Autumn Journey* (1995), filmed shortly after the singer announced his retirement, is a biographical appreciation, primarily consisting of Fischer-Dieskau's recollections about his life and career, as well as observations on the profession (with English voiceover translation), amply illustrated with excerpts from televised performances, films,