

THE LOWDOWN ON ARTS DOWNLOADING

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"Thrifty" and "easy" are not usually how the performing arts are described. But thanks to the wonders of modern technology, world-class ballet can be downloaded from iTunes for just \$14.99. And with the proliferation of HD broadcasts, the latest European operas are showing up at your local movie theater—for about \$25.

Downloading and HD broadcasting are so common now that arts content is mounting fast. As a result, Culture City's latest quest for new arts experiences turned into a double feature: two performances, two different formats, zero hassle.

The easiest part of the equation was the download. In late December, two dance titles distributed by TenduTV, an arts content provider, hit the iTunes platform. The two titles are not "Swan Lake" and "Giselle," as might be expected. They are "Entity" by Wayne McGregor's Random Dance and the Dutch National Ballet's "Hans Van Manen Festival."

Hans Van who? Yes, exactly.

"He's a legend, and he's just underexposed in the U.S.," said the founder and general manager of TenduTV, Marc Kirschner. "We're trying to give the audience more exposure to more choreographers."

Mr. Van Manen is a neo-classical ballet choreographer who has worked closely with the Dutch National Ballet and the Nederlands Dans Theater. In the U.S., his work is in the repertory of companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, but I must admit that I hadn't seen it.

The festival video, however, served as a crash course in this choreographer. The four dances on the video show crisp yet fluid and smooth movement, often with hints of modern dance. Men are more than accessories in his ballets; they've got real presence.

And because the performances are by companies that don't tour the states frequently, it was a chance to see unfamiliar dancers. If you've never seen the ballet dancer Lucia Lacarra, this video is worth the \$3.99 rental just to watch her in "Five Tangos," a ballet set to tango music by Astor Piazzolla.

The ability of video to capture new or surprising aspects of dance is what motivates Mr. Kirschner, who hopes to bring 12 to 15 ballets to iTunes this year. "You see the nuance. You see that extra inch or two of movement that puts your jaw on the floor," he said.

The other half of my digital exploration also had my jaw on the floor. La Scala's new production of the traditional double bill "Cav" and "Pag"—Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" and Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci"—was presented at BIG Cinemas Manhattan Theater on East 59th Street, near Second Avenue. I saw it there, and it was also shown at Symphony Space on the Upper West Side.

Although opera companies, especially the Metropolitan Opera, embraced HD years ago, I hadn't been to movie-theater broadcast for the simple reason that there is so much live theater, dance and music to see. And since I hadn't seen this famous double bill, the La Scala production seemed a good place to start.

I was wrong. It wasn't just good—it was magnificent.

Director Mario Martone made the setting of "Pag"—which came first in this production—all trash and vaudeville in modern dress. Tenor Jose Cura was devastating as Canio, the jilted lover-clown. "Cav" was brutal, tribal and stark. Religion and honor matter; scenery, not so much.

The exceptional camera work made for thoroughly gripping cinema. Also, the production is designed so that some action takes place in the first few rows of the audience; you can see the audience members and their reactions. But best of all was watching conductor Daniel Harding's dramatic facial expressions and movement.

The broadcast was part of the Opera In Cinema series presented by the distribution company Emerging Pictures, which also beams out the Ballet in Cinema series. Still to come at BIG Cinemas: the Paris Opera Ballet's "Caligula" on Feb. 8 and La Scala's "The Magic Flute" on March 24. Though emergingpictures.com has information, the far easier path is to go to the venue websites: bigcinemas.com and symphonyspace.com. (And on the home front: The Met's HD broadcast of the John Adams opera "Nixon in China" will be shown at multiple screens on Feb. 12.)

I can't say that watching in person and in HD are equal pleasures. They are entirely different, but they both fuel the opera addiction: After seeing the HD version of Mr. Martone's "Cav and Pag," I want to fly to Milan and see it live.

On a related subject: Sotheby's is hosting a panel discussion Monday night on the impact of technology on visual art. Panelists for "Art in the Digital Age" will be: Thomas Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; software tycoon Peter Norton; and Google's VP for global media and platforms, Henrique de Castro.

Amy Todd Middleton, Sotheby's marketing director, said the panel is part of the auction house's search for what's next at the crossroads of art buying and digital media. "Our clients are exceptionally global and mobile. They have to make very quick decisions. They need to have information available," she said.

If there is overlap with the stage arts, it may be in the research that precedes the purchase—of tickets or sculpture. "They are doing a lot of homework online," said Ms. Middleton of auction clients.

The event is private, but limited seating may be available by calling Sotheby's at 212-606-7375.

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