

# INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL MUSIC

By Lloyd Lim (draft no. 8 dated 12/27/18, 4 pages)

## **Introduction**

More ink has been spilled over classical music than makes sense because music is not fundamentally about words, but about sounds. Classical music can be wonderful, but one shouldn't think that everything in it is great. There is a lot of mediocre stuff in the pile; indeed, there is also some trash. I will point the reader in the direction of a few pieces that will hopefully give them an entry point into classical music. I won't try to do the whole shebang; we merely try to take a first few steps.

But before I discuss those pieces, I want to make a few general points about music.

## **Generalities**

Simplicity in form does not mean that the composer is being simple minded or that the emotional world of the piece is superficial. There can be great elegance and depth in something simple. Big things come in small packages and we shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

Music is partly about structure, partly about emotions and partly physical. Some believe that our ability to do music serves an evolutionary purpose relating to mating (think of birdsong) and social bonding (think of a ritual gathering with drums). I do not believe that emotions are conveyed from the pianist through the keys, hammers and strings of the piano and then flow out to the audience. I believe that the pianist sets forth the musical structure with some variations of touch and timing and that the audience in hearing the sound fosters what internal emotions they as individuals may be capable of based on their prior experience and mental associations. We humans always remain separate beings, despite the use of various modes of communication. The commonality of the emotions from one end of the chain to the other is not due to connectivity, but to a certain commonality of humanity and culture. And so, the musician is the "first listener," with a primary duty to the intentions of the composer that lie behind the bars and notes on the page, an intermediary for the audience.

If we take a step back further and ask ourselves what is "art," we are reminded of two definitions. Renaissance thinkers thought of art as "holding the mirror up to Nature." In other words, God is the original artist and we humans imitate His handiwork as best we can. A more modern definition came from philosopher George Santayana who said: "The effort of art is to keep what is interesting in existence, to recreate it in the eternal."

As to the question of what constitutes "greatness" in art, composer Jan Swafford (who wrote the excellent book The Vintage Guide to Classical Music) came up with a definition around the

idea of significance or relevance to people. Let me restate his idea another way. There is never total agreement between two given people on whether they like a given piece of classical music, but there is a surprising amount of agreement among a majority of people that a given piece is a very good one, such as Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* or Johann Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*. This suggests that while no two persons are the same, we all share some similarities as human beings in the context of the culture that shapes us. Note that this does not necessarily mean that all judgments about music are subjective and that cultural relativism is always valid.

Swafford makes a crucial point about art in the context of his discussion of Bela Bartok. He writes: "There is a lesson that, in one way or another, all great artists demonstrate, Bartok as well as any: to be deeply personal, deeply of a time and place—and, let's not forget, to write well—is also to be universal." (Jan Swafford, *The Vintage Guide to Classical Music*, 434).

One of the more famous quotes about music came from English poet William Congreve who wrote that "Musick has charms to soothe the savage beast." Plato stated this idea somewhat more elegantly:

"And harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of our souls, is not regarded by the intelligent votary of the Muses as given by them with a view to irrational pleasure, which is deemed to be the purpose of it in our day, but as meant to correct any discord which may have arisen in the course of the soul, and to be our ally in bringing her into harmony and agreement with herself, and rhythm too was given by them for the same reason, on account of the irregular and graceless ways which prevail among mankind generally, and to help us against them."

This ancient wisdom may seem quaint, but it isn't far wrong.

There is some mystery about how we encode meaning into music, or how it changes our sense of meaning. Clearly context matters, but also repetition with variations. I suspect that as one experiences music either by playing an instrument or listening to music, the emotions of the moment become intertwined with the music and some of that goes into memory such that when the music is heard again in the future, some of the past memory returns. Over time, this adds up to additional resonance, echoes of a time past. Now, this is pure theory on my part, but I think it is logical.

Performances differ, even when done by the same performer. That tells us something important—that music changes for you as you go through life. The reason is simple: you get out of music what you bring to it, that music is not just about technique, but about what you have inside.

## Starter Recommendations

Antonio Vivaldi: Gloria (Marriner, Preston)

George Frederic Handel: Royal Fireworks Music (Pinnock)

Johann Sebastian Bach: Three Part Invention (Sinfonia) in G minor, no. 11 (Schiff)

Franz Joseph Haydn: Symphony no. 88 (Jochum)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Third movement from Piano Concerto no. 22 (Perahia)

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony no. 6 "Pastoral" (Boult, Jochum, Bohm)

Gioacchino Rossini: Overture to The Thieving Magpie (Karajan, Guilini)

Franz Schubert: Impromptus in G flat (no. 3, D 899) and A flat (no. 2, D 935) (Zimmerman, Curzon (A flat), Brendel, Lupu)

Hector Berlioz: Symphony Fantastique (Beecham, Muti, Gergiev)

Felix Mendelssohn: A Midsummer's Night Dream (Ozawa, Kubelik, Klemperer)

Robert Schumann: Traumeri, from Kinderszenen (Argerich)

Frederic Chopin: Prelude no. 1 in C from the Preludes (Pollini, Argerich, Kocsis)

Franz Liszt: Liebestraum no. 3 (Ugorski, Lang Lang)

Giuseppe Verdi: Overture to The Force of Destiny (Sinopoli, Muti, Karajan)

Johannes Brahms: Waltz in A flat (Katchen, Lympany)

Richard Wagner: Prelude to Lohengrin (Kempe, Karajan, Boult)

Antonin Dvorak: Symphony no. 9, From the New World (Dohnanyi, Karajan, Solti)

Tchaikovsky: Overture from Romeo and Juliet (Boult, Masur, Guilini)

Richard Strauss: Don Juan (Kempe, Bohm, Jansons, Karajan-Vienna Philharmonic)

Gustav Mahler: Symphony no. 4 (Karajan, Tennstedt, Haitink-Concertgebouw with Christine Shafer, Szell)

Anton Bruckner: Symphony no. 9 (Guilini, Barenboim, Klemperer)

Edvard Grieg: Piano concerto in A (Andsnes, Zimmerman, Bishop-Kovacevich)

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade (Karajan, Ozawa)

Alexander Borodin: Polovtsian Dances (Karajan, Gergiev)

Claude Debussy: La Mer (Karajan-Berlin 1965, Solti, Dutoit)  
Jean Sibelius: Symphony no. 2 (Davis-London Symphony Orchestra)  
Maurice Ravel: Daphnis & Chloe, suite no. 2 (Bernstein-NY Philharmonic, Dutoit)  
Igor Stravinsky: The Firebird-complete ballet (Davis, Dohnanyi)  
Arnold Schoenberg: Transfigured Night (Karajan, Levine)  
Bela Bartok: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta (Karajan, Dohnanyi)  
Sergei Prokofiev: Suites from Romeo and Juliet (Muti)  
Dimitri Shostakovich: Symphony no. 5 (Bychov, Haitink)  
Aaron Copland: Appalachian Spring (Bernstein-Los Angeles Philharmonic)  
George Gershwin: An American in Paris (Ozawa, Previn)  
Samuel Barber: Adagio for Strings (Bernstein-Los Angeles Philharmonic, Marriner, Stokowski)

### **About the Author**

Lloyd Lim has worked in government and business as a manager and a lawyer. For over a decade, he oversaw a small family business founded by his parents. He also has extensive experience in business law and has helped to implement various government interventions in the market. He has a BA in English literature from Columbia University, a JD from UCLA, a MBA from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and holds the CPCU designation. He has published numerous short essays and five nonfiction books: *Reinventing Government: A Practitioner's Guide* (2010), *Basic Stuff That Everyone Should Know* (2012), *Beyond Obamacare: Solving the Healthcare Cost Problem* (2014), *No More Stupidity: Insights for the Modern World* (2016) and *Business Tools, Not Platitudes--including staff training modules* (2017). He enjoys playing the piano, having studied at Columbia University, The Masaki School of Music and The Manoa School of Music and the Arts.