

A Listening Guide for The Indispensable Composers by Anthony Tommasini

“Exuberant . . . he writes with the music under his fingers.”
—ALEX ROSS, author of *The Rest Is Noise*



INDISPENSABLE COMPOSERS



A PERSONAL GUIDE

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A listening guide

INTRODUCTION: *The Greatness Complex*

Bach, Mass in B Minor
I: Kyrie

I begin the book with my recollection of being about thirteen and putting on a recording of Bach's Mass in B Minor for the first time. I remember being immediately struck by the austere intensity of the opening choral singing of the word "Kyrie." But I also remember feeling surprised by a melodic/harmonic shift in the opening moments that didn't do what I thought it would. I guess I was already a musician wanting to know more, to know why the music was the way it was.

Here's the grave, stirring performance of the Kyrie from the 1952 recording I listened to, with Herbert von Karajan conducting the Vienna Philharmonic. Though, as I grew to realize, it's a very old-school approach to Bach.

[Herbert von Karajan, conductor; Vienna Philharmonic \(12:17\)](#)

Today I much prefer more vibrant and transparent accounts, like this great performance from Philippe Herreweghe's 1996 recording with the chorus and orchestra of the Collegium Vocale, which is almost three minutes shorter.

[Philippe Herreweghe, conductor; Collegium Vocale Gent \(9:29\)](#)

Grieg, "Shepherd Boy"
Arthur Rubinstein, piano
Album: "Rubinstein Plays Grieg" (3:26)

As a child I loved "[Rubinstein Plays Grieg,](#)" an album featuring the great pianist Arthur Rubinstein playing piano works by Grieg, including several selections from the composer's volumes of short, imaginative "Lyrical Pieces." My favorite was "The Shepherd Boy," a wistful piece with an intense middle section. "Why was this Norwegian shepherd boy so sad?" I wondered at the time.

Adams, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*

Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano (Mary Magdalene); Tamara Mumford, mezzo-soprano (Martha); Russell Thomas, tenor (Lazarus); Gustavo Dudamel, conductor; Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Master Chorale

[Scene 1, Part 1 \(4:09\)](#)

[Scene I, Part 2 \(2:44\)](#)

John Adams's 2012 oratorio *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* focuses on the final weeks of the life of Jesus from the perspective of the "other" Mary, Mary Magdalene, as well as her sister, Martha, and her brother, Lazarus, though these three biblical figures are also shown as modern-day characters. The sisters run a shelter for homeless and unemployed women. The setting and the premise are powerfully and immediately conveyed in Scene 1.

ONE: *Creator of Modern Music*: Claudio Monteverdi

Monteverdi, *Orfeo*

Anthony Rolfe Johnson, tenor (Orfeo); John Eliot Gardiner, conductor;
Monteverdi Choir, English Baroque Soloists

Claudio Monteverdi was not among the group of composers, poets, and singers in Florence who, starting around 1600, essentially invented the genre that came to be known as opera. But he knew what they were up to. In 1607 he wrote *Orfeo*, an opera that built on what his predecessors had done and pointed the way to the future, the first operatic masterpiece. He instinctively understood that an opera could not simply be a musicalized drama; it also needed to come across as a coherent, structured composition. Here are the first scenes of *Orfeo* from John Eliot Gardiner's superb 1985 recording.

[Prologue: Toccata \(1:38\)](#)

[Prologue: "Dal mio Permesso" \(La Musica\) \(5:44\)](#)

[Act I: "Vieni, Imeneo" \(Chorus of nymphs and shepherds\) \(3:28\)](#)

[Act I: Balletto, "Lasciate I monti" \(Chorus of nymphs and shepherds\) \(2:34\)](#)

TWO: *Music for Use, Devotion and Personal Profit*: Johann Sebastian Bach

Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*

John Eliot Gardiner, conductor; Monteverdi Choir, London Oratory Junior Choir, English Baroque Soloists

When you hear how Bach creates visceral drama in the *St. Matthew Passion*—with contingents of choristers taking many roles, including the crowd witnessing the persecution of Jesus, high priests, disciples, Jews, and more, a baritone portraying the disconsolate yet purposeful Jesus, a tenor Evangelist narrating the world's most often-told story—you realize why he was never enticed to write an opera. What could be more dramatic than this wrenching, profound oratorio? Here is the opening chorus from Gardiner's landmark 1988 recording.

[Opening chorus, "Kommt, ihr Töchter" \(7:00\)](#)

THREE: "*Vast Effects with Simple Means*": George Frideric Handel

Handel: *Orlando*

Bejun Mehta, countertenor (Orlando); René Jacobs, conductor; B'Rock Orchestra

For about 25 years Handel seized on the London public's fascination with Italian opera. Transcending the stilted conventions of the *opera seria* style, he wrote a series of dramatically penetrating and musically remarkable works that brought him enormous popularity, along with the headaches of being an impresario. Then the fad petered out, and Handel's operas slipped into near obscurity for 150 years. Today, they rightly claim the stages of international houses large and small. One of the greatest is *Orlando*, written in 1733, the tale of a heroic knight in Charlemagne's army who falls for a pagan princess. That she loves another man drives Orlando to delusional, raving madness, though he recovers his reason by the end. Here is Orlando's tour de force "mad scene," performed rivetingly by the countertenor Bejun Mehta.

[Final recitative and scene of Act II: "Ah, Stigie larve!" \(Ah, Stygian monsters\) \(9:35\)](#)

FIVE: "*I Had to Be Original*": Franz Joseph Haydn

Haydn, *The Creation*

Leonard Bernstein; New York Philharmonic, Westminster Choir

Haydn was in his mid-sixties and considered himself semiretired when he was enticed into a project that resulted in a magnificent oratorio, *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*). It tells of and celebrates, no less, the creation of the world according to Genesis. In the astonishing Introduction, the slow, shifting, harmonically murky orchestra suggests "The Representation of Chaos." After a mysterious passage, the chorus, in hushed tones, sings that the Lord said "Let there be light." At that moment, on the word *Licht* (light), the chorus and orchestra break into a radiant, shimmering, glorious C major chord. My favorite recording remains the first one I owned, a 1966 account with Leonard Bernstein, who simply "got" Haydn, leading the New York Philharmonic.

[Introduction, "Die Vorstellen des Chaos" \(The Representation of Chaos\) \(9:15\)](#)

SIX: *"Right Here in My Noodle"*: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart, Piano Concerto no. 9 in E-flat, K. 271
David Greilsammer, pianist and conductor; Geneva Chamber Orchestra

When it comes to Mozart, I was tempted, for a select playlist, to go with excerpts from an opera. But I'm choosing the Piano Concerto no. 9 in E-flat, written when Mozart was twenty-one and brimming with confidence and daring. The pianist and scholar Charles Rosen called it perhaps "the first great masterpiece" of "the Classical style." And the superb pianist and Mozart champion David Greilsammer, in a 2011 recording with the Geneva Chamber Orchestra, may be my current favorite. While also conducting, he boldly interpolates some improvised embellishments and passages into the piano part, much as Mozart would have done in the moment. The performance of the playful, whirlwind rondo finale, which is interrupted in the middle with a stately minuet, is especially exhilarating.

[First movement: Allegro \(10:22\)](#)

[Second movement: Andantino \(10:19\)](#)

[Third movement: Rondo \(10:30\)](#)

SEVEN: *The Gift of Inevitability*: Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 4 in G Major, Op. 58
Rudolf Serkin, piano; Eugene Ormandy, conductor; Philadelphia Orchestra

In many ways, Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, completed in 1806, is a stirring and virtuosic work, a stylistic cousin to the Fifth Concerto, the aptly nicknamed *Emperor*. Yet from the unconventional (for its day) opening moment, when the solo piano plays the first pensive phrase of the first movement's main theme, as if posing a question to the orchestra, the Fourth Concerto has searching and mystical strands that set it apart from any concerto written during the Classical period. Both the brilliant and the cosmic qualities of the music come through in the 1955 recording featuring the pianist Rudolf Serkin (a pianist-hero to me when I was a child) and the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Ormandy.

[First movement: Allegro moderato \(17:39\)](#)

[Second movement: Andante con moto \(5:07\)](#)

[Third movement: Rondo: Vivace \(9:10\)](#)

EIGHT: "When I Wished to Sing of Love It Turned to Sorrow": Franz Schubert

In the fall of 1814 the seventeen-year-old Schubert was living at home, teaching truculent students in his father's school, and feeling miserable. His career in music was stymied, he thought. As if to prove to himself—to the world, even—what he was capable of, on a single day he composed the song "Gretchen am Spinnrade," his first setting of a poem by Goethe. The song is a first-person monologue by the tragic heroine of *Faust, Part One*, a young woman who has been courted by Faust, transformed into a dashing youth. As she sits at her spinning wheel, she wonders about the feelings of desire and arousal that have been stirred up within her. The song last less than four minutes but covers the same emotional and psychological terrain as Wagner's four-hour *Tristan und Isolde*.

[Schubert, "Gretchen am Spinnrade"](#)
[German lieder; text by Goethe](#)
[Renée Fleming, soprano; Christoph Eschenbach, piano \(3:23\)](#)

NINE: *An Unforgettable Day in 1836*: Fryderyk Chopin and Robert Schumann

Chopin may have been evoking the heritage of minstrel songs and narrative poems by choosing the word "ballade" to title four of his greatest and most demanding piano pieces. From the first time I played Rubinstein's 1959 recording of the Chopin ballades, I was hooked, especially by First Ballade in G Minor. The piece might seem episodic, as it shifts from passages of wistful lyricism to dreamy musings to utter turbulence, ending with a hell-bent final burst. Yet the subtle structural design of the piece makes the music seem inevitable. I longed to perform it as a young piano student, but I didn't really do so until a recital during my senior year at Yale, still inspired by Rubinstein's recording.

[Chopin, Ballade in G Minor for piano, Op. 23](#)
[Arthur Rubinstein, piano \(9:17\)](#)

Schumann, who was both awed and intimidated by the challenge of Beethoven, wrote his share of ambitious symphonies and sonatas. But he was most in his element when composing fantastical suites for the piano, giving vent to his fervid imagination and mercurial bent. Of those works, *Kreisleriana* may be his finest achievement. In the first movement alone, lasting just two and a half minutes, the music shifts from restless, ominous tangles of swirling runs to a middle episode of deceptive delicacy, then snaps back relentlessly to the turbulent opening. The dark side wins. For now. There are seven movements to go. These qualities are vividly captured in Murray Perahia's recording of the opening movement.

A great example of Schumann striving for Beethovenian sweep while remaining an impetuous romantic is the Piano Concerto. Here's a favorite recording of the first movement, featuring the superb pianist Leif Ove Andsnes.

Schumann, *Kreisleriana*

I: ["Äusserst bewegt" \(2:23\)](#)

Schumann: Piano Concerto

Leif Ove Andsnes, pianist; Mariss Jansons, conductor; Berlin Philharmonic

[First movement: Allegro affettuoso \(14:37\)](#)

TEN: *The Italian Reformer and the German Futurist*: Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner

Verdi, *Otello*

Mario del Monaco, tenor (Otello); Renata Tebaldi, soprano (Desdemona)

Herbert van Karajan, conductor; Vienna Philharmonic

I was already a Verdi lover when a week before I turned sixteen I heard a performance of *Otello* at the Metropolitan Opera starring Renata Tebaldi as Desdemona. This was my first real exposure to the opera, which thrilled me, though it would take many years before I understood how ingenious Verdi's adaptation of Shakespeare's play really was. But I had never heard, and maybe never have since, such sumptuously beautiful singing as Tebaldi's performance of Desdemona's final scene, when she sings the forlorn "Willow Song," then the "Ave Maria" prayer, and takes to her bed, though her sleep is soon interrupted by her avenging husband. Here are excerpts from the classic 1961 recording of *Otello*, conducted by Herbert van Karajan, with Tebaldi as Desdemona and Mario del Monaco as Otello, first the Act I love duet, then the achingly sad "Willow Song" and the wistful "Ave Maria."

[Act I, Love Duet \(10:49\)](#)

[Act IV, "The Willow Song" \("Salce, Salce"\) \(7:13\)](#)

["Ave Maria" \(5:00\)](#)

Wagner, *Die Walküre*

John Tomlinson, bass (Wotan); Daniel Barenboim, 1991 Bayreuth Festival, Bayreuth Festival Orchestra

Wagner was a deeply flawed man. Though he could be generous and charming, he was petty, arrogant, and anti-Semitic. Yet the final scene of *Die Walküre*—when the god Wotan, who has made a hash of his life and violated the covenants he had sworn to uphold, places his beloved daughter Brünnhilde, the feisty Valkyrie warrior, under a sleeping spell as punishment for disobeying him—has some of the most beautiful and profound music ever written. It's evidence that artists can sometimes transcend their character in their work. You can't tell me that the person who wrote this music did not understand compassion, longing, parental love, and the timeless cycles of life by which sins of one generation are bequeathed to the next. Here's this final scene, in an inspired live performance from the Bayreuth Festival in 1991.

[Act III, final scene: "Die Augen leuchtendes Paar" \(track 52\) \(7:15\)](#)

["Loge, hör!" \(track 53\) \(4:57\)](#)

ELEVEN: *The Synthesizer*: Johannes Brahms

Brahms, Piano Concerto no. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83
Sviatoslav Richter, piano; Erich Leinsdorf, conductor; Chicago Symphony Orchestra

I: Allegro non troppo (16:45)

<https://open.spotify.com/track/71qp2vFfgz1Pn45qLWbFGR?si=0QPono8cQQG57uFQ6iXCw>

Brahms, born in 1833, six years after Beethoven's death, grew up feeling compelled as a German composer to carry on the Beethoven legacy and continue the symphonic imperative. Yet he also was a young man of his time, full of Romantic imagination and fascinated by musical innovations of the period, especially in the realm of harmony. In no piece did he reconcile his devotion to Classical symphonic structures with impassioned Romantic fervor better than in the colossal Piano Concerto no. 2 in B-flat Major. In 1960, the Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter made a suitably colossal recording of the concerto, with Erich Leinsdorf and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The cultural authorities in the Soviet Union had finally allowed Richter, already a legend by reputation, to tour America. He played the Brahms with the Chicago Symphony for his American debut and then recorded it. His playing uncannily combines scintillating pianism, rhapsodic daring, and demonic intensity.

TWELVE: *The Refined Radical*: Claude Debussy

Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) Leonard Bernstein, conductor; New York Philharmonic (10:30)
<https://open.spotify.com/track/1YnlbI1myaMKE5G0SzGBNX?si=VETj5wobQKWbhW36dE8qHA>

Inspired by Mallarmé's symbolist poem about a sensual faun who, awakening from a nap, starts playing his pipes in the woods and becomes aroused when alluring nymphs and naiads pass by, Debussy wrote an orchestra work that he somewhat elusively called a prelude. Lasting just over ten minutes, the piece is not a prelude to anything. Rather it's a haunting, erotic, playful, sumptuous, and at times menacing depiction of faun's afternoon revelry. The score is also a pioneering composition on its own terms. The composer Pierre Boulez once said that "modern music was awakened" with the 1894 premiere of Debussy's *Faune*. Bernstein demonstrates why in his plush and gripping and 1960 recording with the New York Philharmonic.

THIRTEEN: "*The Public Will Judge*": Giacomo Puccini

Puccini, *La Bohème*

Mirella Freni, soprano (Mimi); Luciano Pavarotti, tenor (Rodolfo); Rolando Panerai, baritone (Marcello); Elizabeth Harwood, soprano (Musetta); Herbert von Karajan, conductor; Berlin Philharmonic

The first opera I attended, when I was thirteen, was Puccini's *Tosca*. I hardly knew what was going on. No matter, the evening immediately made me an opera fan and Puccini lover. Over the next few years I heard Renata Tebaldi as Mimi in *La Bohème*, Birgit Nilsson in the title role of *Turandot*, and more. Puccini's popularity should not be held against him. He was a master composer and matchless musical dramatist, as this excerpt, the final quartet from Act III of *Bohème*, makes clear. Here you have two young couples, one of them making up in melting phrases, the other one breaking up in a feisty quarrel—at the same time. But which of the many fine recordings to choose? I'm going with the 1972 version with Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic and a ideal cast, headed by Mirella Freni as Mimi and Luciano Pavarotti, at his best, as Rodolfo.

[Act III, final quartet \(6:08\)](#)

FOURTEEN: *New Languages for a New Century*

I. Arnold Schoenberg

Schoenberg, *Pierrot lunaire* for singer/speaker and ensemble
Christine Schäfer, vocalist; Pierre Boulez, conductor; Ensemble
InterContemporain

Schoenberg is often, and unfairly, perceived as a radical composer/theorist who pronounced the death of major-minor tonality and invented the technique of twelve-tone music to replace it. But he also revered the heritage of classical music and had a vivid theatrical streak, as in his viscerally dramatic song cycle *Pierrot lunaire*. The vocal part is meant to be performed in a style blending song and speech called *Sprechstimme*. Schoenberg wrote the work for an actress who gave the premiere costumed like a clown, with the instrumentalists playing behind a scrim. The musical language, however pathbreaking, is hauntingly dramatic and sensual.

["Mondestrunken" \(1:39\)](#)

["Colombine" \(1:38\)](#)

["Der Dandy" \(1:12\)](#)

II. Igor Stravinsky

Stravinsky, *Symphony of Psalms*

Stravinsky, conductor; CBC Symphony Orchestra, Festival Singers of Toronto

Stravinsky's early international reputation was defined by the three ballet scores he composed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company in Paris, especially that 1913 shocker *The Rite of Spring*. In the 1920s, he shifted into a long period of writing essentially Neoclassical works. One of the greatest is his compact, austere, and extraordinary *Symphony of Psalms*. I will never forget hearing Stravinsky conduct the New York Philharmonic and a chorus in a performance of this work at Lincoln Center in 1966. I already owned, and loved, this 1963 recording.

[First movement \(3:22\)](#)

III. Béla Bartók

Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra

Fritz Reiner, Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Bartók combined his penchant for modernist musical explorations with the discoveries he made as an early ethnomusicologist who traveled rural regions of eastern European countries writing down and recording the earthy and unusual songs and dances he heard. His Concerto for Orchestra, written for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and first performed in 1944, the year before he died, may be Bartók's most popular piece. In this score he demonstrates that a composer can connect with audiences while also being rigorously inventive. The first movement is a journey unto itself.

[I: Introduction: Andante non troppo, Allegro vivace \(10:02\)](#)

Epilogue

Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*

Daniel Belcher, baritone (Jaufré); Kent Nagano, conductor; Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Rundfunkchor Berlin

The master composers of classical music history, as that term implies, were mostly male and very white. Increasingly during the twentieth century, especially during late decades, and now more than ever, the field opened its doors to a wide diversity of creative artists. There is still much work to do in fostering the voices of those who historically were left out. The lag was all too apparent in 2016 when the Metropolitan Opera presented the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's mystical, haunting opera *L'Amour de Loin* (written in 2000), the tale of an idealized love from afar between a medieval French troubadour and a princess in Tripoli. Incredibly, this was the first opera by a woman composer presented at the Met in a nearly a century. And the conductor, Susanna Mälkki, making her Met debut, became only the fourth woman to lead an opera in the company's history. Here is a splendid recording of the opening scene, in which the troubadour, Jaufré, tells his companions of his restlessness.

[Premiere tableau; Jaufré and his companions \(6:49\)](#)