

SUGGESTED LISTENING AND READING

Five Recommended Recordings

Schoenberg and Webern, *Pieces for Orchestra*, Berg, *Lulu Suite*;
Arleen Auger, Simon Rattle conducting the City of Birmingham
Symphony (EMI)

Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, Bartók, *The Miraculous Mandarin*;
Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic (DG)

Britten, *Peter Grimes*; Jon Vickers, Heather Harper, Colin Davis
conducting the orchestra and chorus of the Royal Opera House
(Philips)

Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time*; Tashi (RCA)

Reich, *Music for 18 Musicians*; Steve Reich and Musicians (ECM)

Chapter 1: The Golden Age

Richard Strauss's *Salome*, with which *The Rest Is Noise* begins, is a many-sided creation that foreshadows various destinies for twentieth-century music: modernist dissonance, Romantic nostalgia, ironic detachment. Herbert von Karajan, in his 1977 recording of the

opera (EMI), revels in the ambiguities, drawing out sounds both sumptuous and grisly. Hildegard Behrens rages beautifully as the Princess; Karl-Walter Böhm finds dark comedy in her stepfather Herod.

Among hundreds of recordings of the symphonies of Gustav Mahler, Leonard Bernstein's second complete cycle, for DG, stands out for its ever-cresting passion, its urge to "embrace everything," in Mahler's words. Among several forceful accounts of the "satanic" Sixth, Claudio Abbado's 2004 live performance with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG) has the advantage of appearing on a single CD. For many, the supreme Mahler work is the autumnal song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*; Otto Klemperer's recording with Christa Ludwig and Fritz Wunderlich (EMI) is the one I return to most often.

Bryan Gilliam's *The Life of Richard Strauss* is a deft but scholarly short biography. Michael Kennedy's *Richard Strauss: Man, Music, Enigma* tells the story at greater length, with authority and affection. True Mahler fanatics must grapple with Henry-Louis de La Grange's nearly five-thousand-page biography, whose fourth and final volume, *A New Life Cut Short*, has now appeared.

Chapter 2: Doctor Faust

Schoenberg and Stravinsky may have caused the scandals, but Claude Debussy was the first composer to dissolve harmony as we knew it. Pierre Boulez's recordings of *Images* and *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* with the Cleveland Orchestra (DG) track Debussy's revolution in crystalline focus. A low-priced Simon Rattle disc with the City of Birmingham Symphony (EMI) maps out the fully atonal, continuously seething landscape of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. On the Philips label the pianist Mitsuko Uchida has a superb recording of Berg's Sonata, Webern's Variations, and Schoenberg's Three Pieces for Piano, Six Little Pieces, and Piano Concerto (the last with the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez). There's an absorbing DVD of a Berlin State Opera production of Berg's awesome and

fearful *Wozzeck*, with Patrice Chéreau directing and Barenboim conducting (Warner Classics). Claudio Abbado's formidable live recording of the opera is now part of *The Alban Berg Collection* (DG).

The best Schoenberg book is Joseph Auner's *A Schoenberg Reader*; the composer's intellect, wit, and passion shine on every page.

Chapter 3: Dance of the Earth

As of this writing, the Sony label is offering a phenomenal bargain: more or less the complete works of Stravinsky, on twenty-two CDs, for £18.00. The composer was a captivating if not always technically flawless conductor of his own music, and his renditions of *The Rite of Spring*, *Petrushka*, *Symphony of Psalms*, and the *Symphony in Three Movements* in this historic series have never really been bettered. Esa-Pekka Salonen's recording of the *Rite* with the LA Philharmonic (DG), made at Disney Hall in Los Angeles, may be the benchmark version of the new century. The operas of Janáček must be seen live to deliver their full impact, although Charles Mackerras's survey on the Decca label lacks nothing in authenticity and intensity. Among recordings of Béla Bartók, Fritz Reiner's RCA Living Stereo disc of the *Concerto for Orchestra* and the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* with the Chicago Symphony has matchlessly vital playing and vivid sound. A disc by Martha Argerich and the Berlin Philharmonic under Claudio Abbado (DG) includes a lustrous account of Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*. Leonard Bernstein infectiously recorded Darius Milhaud's jazz-laced masterpiece *Création du monde* with the *Orchestre National de France* (EMI).

Stephen Walsh's two-volume biography of Stravinsky is meticulously researched and elegantly written. Richard Taruskin's 1700-page *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions* is a monumental feat of musicology that has permanently altered perceptions of the composer, demonstrating just how deep his Russian roots went.

Chapter 4: Invisible Men

No single recording can sum up the teeming world of Charles Ives, America's pioneering modernist, but Michael Tilson Thomas comes close with the disc *Charles Ives: An American Journey*. *Three Places in New England* and *The Unanswered Question* anchor the program, which features the San Francisco Symphony and the baritone Thomas Hampson (RCA). The jaggedly dissonant works of Edgard Varèse, Parisian mystic turned New York revolutionary, are richly and fiercely rendered by Riccardo Chailly, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the ASKO Ensemble (Decca). Gershwin's grand jazz opera *Porgy and Bess* received deluxe treatment in a 1986 Glyndebourne Opera production under the direction of Simon Rattle; EMI later released an excellent DVD. Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige* is available both in an archival recording of the 1943 Carnegie Hall premiere (Naxos) and in an abridged Columbia Records version, with Mahalia Jackson singing "Come Sunday."

Gayle Sherwood Magee's *Charles Ives Reconsidered*, Malcolm MacDonald's *Varèse: Astronomer in Sound*, and Carol Oja's *Making Music Modern* are all significant studies of American music in the early twentieth century. Paul Allen Anderson's *Deep River* explores conflicted attitudes toward classical music among African-Americans.

Chapter 5: Apparition from the Woods

If the symphony threatened to become a Romantic relic after Mahler's death, Sibelius proved how much life remained in the form. I first fell in love with Sibelius's mysterious later symphonies (Nos. 4–7) through Herbert von Karajan's recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG). They remain a good bargain on two CDs, although two recent surveys by Finnish conductors outclass Karajan's in grittiness and expressive force: namely, Osmo Vänskä's cycle with the Lahti Symphony (BIS) and Leif Segerstam's with

the Helsinki Philharmonic (Ondine). The catalogue teems with strong recordings of twentieth-century symphonies; I recommend, for a start, Carl Nielsen's Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies, with Herbert Blomstedt conducting the San Francisco Symphony (Decca); and Vaughan Williams's nine symphonies, with Adrian Boult conducting the New Philharmonia in a low-priced EMI set.

James Hepokoski's short book *Sibelius: Symphony No. 5* peels away the layers of one of the composer's best-loved works.

Chapter 6: City of Nets

In the fractured musical world of Germany in the 1920s, rival styles of composition outnumbered warring parties in the Reichstag. Paul Hindemith, who moved to Berlin in the second half of the decade, helped set the tone with the mechanized bustle of his *Kammermusik* pieces; there's an incisive recording by Chailly's Concertgebouw on Decca. Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* is best experienced in grittily authentic discs from the late twenties and early thirties, although the 1954 recording of Marc Blitzstein's English translation, with Lotte Lenya as Jenny, retains much of the original Brechtian bite (CBS Masterworks). Pierre Boulez's pioneering account of the three-act version of *Lulu* (available in DG's *Berg Collection* and also by special order from ArkivMusic.com) captures the terrible beauty of Berg's all-devouring twelve-tone score.

Weill has inspired dozens of books in English, German, and other languages. Jürgen Schebera's *Kurt Weill: An Illustrated Life* succeeds in tying together the composer's seemingly disparate personas; Kim Kowalke's essay collection *A New Orpheus* anatomizes each phase of Weill's career.

Chapter 7: The Art of Fear

The fifteen symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich, the enigmatic icon of Soviet music, have proved nearly as popular on recording as those of Mahler. A solid budget-priced introduction comes in

the form of Leonard Bernstein's rugged 1959 disc of Symphonies Nos. 5 and 9, with the New York Philharmonic (Sony). Among several impressive complete cycles, Bernard Haitink's rests on the sturdiest musical foundation; Decca has issued it as a trim box set. Shostakovich's fifteen quartets, which explore a wider range of styles and delve into ever grimmer emotional regions, can be had in a modestly priced box set from Melodiya, with the Borodin Quartet demonstrating their intimate knowledge of the composer and his world. There are countless fine recordings of Sergei Prokofiev's tensely lyrical Soviet-era music, but two stand out: Lorin Maazel's gleaming rendition of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* with the Cleveland Orchestra (Decca) and Herbert von Karajan's ironclad version of the Fifth Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG).

Shostakovich's ambiguous relationship with Soviet officialdom has led to heated skirmishes among biographers and scholars, but in recent years a clearer picture has emerged. Laurel Fay's biography, *Shostakovich: A Life*, attends fastidiously to the facts; Elizabeth Wilson's oral biography, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, is rich in anecdote. The so-called memoirs of Shostakovich, *Testimony*, have been discredited. Utterly authentic are the diaries of Prokofiev, two volumes of which have now been published in English translation; the composer writes about his violent times with a keen eye for detail, considerable literary flair, and somewhat eerie emotional detachment.

Chapter 8: Music for All

During the New Deal era of the thirties and forties, Aaron Copland stepped forward as the musical embodiment of America's populist, leftist spirit. Michael Tilson Thomas, the irrepressible evangelist for American music, conducts the San Francisco Symphony in a strikingly fine collection titled *Copland the Populist* (RCA), which includes the original version of *Appalachian Spring*. Ruth Crawford Seeger, a bravura modernist who later concentrated her energies on folk-song collecting, is harder to track down on

recording than she should be; a DG “Portrait” disc directed by Oliver Knussen, including her masterly *String Quartet 1931*, can be ordered through ArkivMusic.com. The film scores of Bernard Herrmann, by contrast, have thrived on CD; *Vertigo*, undoubtedly the most remarkable of them, is played in lavish style by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra on Varese Sarabande.

Howard Pollack’s biography *Aaron Copland* is a painstaking portrait of a complex, mutable man. Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*, a study of leftist art in the thirties, has absorbing sections on the strengths and perils of political music.

Chapter 9: Death Fugue

Conspicuously little music of enduring value emerged from Nazi Germany. Most of it came from the pen of Richard Strauss, who, after being ejected from the Nazi cultural machinery in 1935, somehow regained his creative powers. His opera *Daphne*, a flight from history into mythology, is best heard in a shimmering live performance under the direction of Karl Böhm (DG). In *Metamorphosen* and the *Four Last Songs*, Strauss moved through morbid melancholy to a final serenity; the two works are paired on a CD with Herbert von Karajan, Gundula Janowitz, and the Berlin Philharmonic (DG). Ervín Schulhoff, one of several gifted Jewish composers who perished in the Holocaust, left behind many striking pieces in between-the-wars styles; perhaps his strongest creation is the Sextet, which the Raphael Ensemble plays glowingly on a Helios disc.

The historian Michael Kater is the leading authority on the dismal story of classical music in Hitler’s Germany. His book *The Twisted Muse* mercilessly exposes the compromises and Faustian bargains that led great artists into the darkness.

Chapter 10: Zero Hour

My sketch of musical activity in Germany during the Allied occupation from 1945 to 1949 is based mainly on research

conducted at the National Archives in Washington, DC. David Monod's book *Settling Scores: German Music, Denazification, and the Americans, 1945–1953* sheds more light on America's influential if short-lived intervention in German music history. The chapter sets the stage for the era of the international avant-garde, which produced an impossibly varied tumult of styles and sounds. Anyone looking for a sophisticated analytic study of the period can consult Paul Griffiths's *Modern Music and After*. Arnold Whittall's *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* also provides wise guidance through the labyrinth of avant-garde technique.

Chapter 11: Brave New World

Olivier Messiaen's mercurial, ethereal *Quartet for the End of Time*, first performed at a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1941, heralded the rise of the postwar avant-garde, not least because Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Iannis Xenakis all received guidance from Messiaen in Paris. The classic recording of the *Quartet* is by the group Tashi (RCA). Boulez waxed violent in his early works, then cultivated an almost Debussyish refinement in his vocal and instrumental cycle *Le Marteau sans maître*, finished in 1955. Needless to say, Boulez himself produced the definitive account (DG). Most of Stockhausen's vast output has been recorded, but, at this writing, the discs are obtainable principally through the composer's website, stockhausen.org, where prices run high. There is an imperfect rendition of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* by the Berlin Philharmonic under Claudio Abbado (DG); it is paired with György Kurtág's profoundly haunting *Stele*. Xenakis's viscerally complex creations are also well documented; a col legno disc of orchestral and chamber works, including *Metastasis*, is a good point of departure. An ECM titled *The Seasons* follows John Cage as he voyages from the Satie-like simplicity of his prepared-piano pieces to landscapes of chance, noise, and silence. For the Naxos label the Pacifica Quartet made a bracing disc of the First and Fifth String Quartets of Elliott Carter, an American modernist of more traditional cast.

Cage's *Silence* is one of the most remarkable books ever written by a composer—a compendium of radical ideas that is also a literary tour-de-force. *The Boulez–Cage Correspondence* traces the evolution and disintegration of the friendship between two leading postwar composers. *Stockhausen on Music* gathers some of the most cogent utterances of a composer who occasionally flirted with absurdity.

Chapter 12: “Grimes! Grimes!”

Benjamin Britten, like Sibelius earlier in the century, was an ostensible conservative who extracted residual musical and psychological potency from seemingly worn-out forms. The Suffolk psychodrama *Peter Grimes* stands at the center of Britten's output, and the composer's own recorded version, set down in 1958 with Peter Pears in the title role (Decca), likewise dominates the Britten catalogue. Yet, when the tenor Jon Vickers recorded *Grimes* in 1978 with Colin Davis conducting (Philips), he came close to overshadowing the original *Grimes*; from the moment of his first entrance, chanting “I swear by almighty God,” Vickers gives one of the most enthralling opera performances on disc. Very different in atmosphere is Britten's brilliant, buoyant Shakespeare opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the composer's account, also for Decca, is unrivaled. Another precious document from Britten's lifetime is Mstislav Rostropovich's disc of the First and Second Cello Suites, which were written for the cellist and inspired by his massively sonorous playing.

Humphrey Carpenter's *Benjamin Britten* is the most comprehensive of several biographies, although it sometimes places too much stress on the composer's generally harmless attachments to boys and young men; John Bridcut's book *Britten's Children* serves as a valuable corrective. In all, the most balanced study is David Matthews's brief but perceptive book *Britten*. Donald Mitchell's multi-volume edition of Britten's letters and diaries is a biographical monument that matches La Grange's Mahler.

Chapter 13: Zion Park

If *Quartet for the End of Time* has whetted your appetite for Messiaen, invest in a six-disc, budget-priced set on the Naïve label. Reinbert de Leeuw's account of *From the Canyons to the Stars*, Messiaen's tribute to the canyons and birds of Utah, is among the most sensually overwhelming recordings I know. The advanced Messiaeniste will want to own *Saint Francis of Assisi*, the composer's sublimely overlong religious opera, which Kent Nagano recorded splendidly for DG. György Ligeti's avant-garde masterworks *Atmosphères* and *Lontano*, as played by the Berlin Philharmonic under Jonathan Nott (Teldec), disclose a mysterious lyricism; Ligeti's apocalyptic Requiem is well served on another disc in Teldec's Ligeti edition.

Christopher Dingle's *The Life of Messiaen* is the best short treatment of the composer; Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone's *Messiaen* is the definitive long-form biography. Richard Steinitz's *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* offers an exceptionally revealing blend of biography and close analysis.

Chapter 14: Beethoven Was Wrong

The penultimate chapter of *The Rest Is Noise* goes back to the beginning and looks at the century from an alternative perspective—that of composers living on the American West Coast. An aesthetic of earthy, blissed-out lyricism distinguishes the work of the Californian master Lou Harrison; see a New World disc titled *Chamber and Gamelan Works*. Morton Feldman, a voluble New Yorker whose near-silent music gives off a slight West Coast vibe, produced some of the century's most arcanelly lovely sounds in *Rothko Chapel*; there are CDs on New Albion and col legno. Terry Riley's *In C* exuberantly inaugurated minimalism in 1964; the best performance is the one that your local new-music ensemble will give sooner or later. Steve Reich, the most rigorous of minimalists, has earned two box sets on Nonesuch; ECM's 1978

recording of *Music for 18 Musicians* is a standout single disc. Philip Glass fans may recommend Nonesuch's recordings of *Music in Twelve Parts* and *Einstein on the Beach*, but, for me, the most convincing document of Glass's art of repetition is his score for the film *Koyaanisqatsi*, a disturbing portrayal of humanity as an insectoid species.

Keith Potter's *Four Musical Minimalists* is the authoritative scholarly treatment. Reich eloquently discusses his own work in *Writings on Music*. Feldman, like his longtime comrade Cage, had an extraordinary flair for language, and the books *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* and *Morton Feldman Says*—collections of his essays, lectures, interviews, aphorisms, and jokes—make for compulsive reading.

Chapter 15: Sunken Cathedrals

When people ask me what contemporary music they need to hear, I sometimes ask in return, "What kind of music do you want?" A bewildering multiplicity of styles reigns in the current moment—as it did throughout the century past. With some hesitation, I have picked out ten recordings from the post-1980 era; curiosity-seekers can listen first to excerpts at www.therestisnoise.com/audio. Nonesuch and DG, among other labels, also offer higher-quality audio downloads for sale on their websites.

- John Adams, *Harmonielehre*; Edo de Waart conducting the San Francisco Symphony (Nonesuch)
- Georg Friedrich Haas, *in vain*; Sylvain Cambreling conducting the Klangforum Wien (Kairos)
- Osvaldo Golijov, *Ayre*, and Luciano Berio, *Folk Songs*; Dawn Upshaw and The Andalucian Dogs (DG)
- Witold Lutosławski, Symphony No. 3 and other works (*The Essential Lutosławski*); Lutosławski conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, etc. (Philips)
- Tōru Takemitsu, *Chamber Works*; Toronto New Music Ensemble (Naxos)

- Sofia Gubaidulina, *Offertorium*; Gidon Kremer, Charles Dutoit conducting the Boston Symphony (DG)
- Arvo Pärt, *Tabula Rasa*; Gidon Kremer, Alfred Schnittke, and others (ECM)
- Thomas Adès, *Asyla*; Simon Rattle conducting the City of Birmingham Symphony (EMI)
- Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*; Dawn Upshaw, Gerald Finley, Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Finnish National Opera (DG DVD)
- Peter Lieberson, *Neruda Songs*; Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, James Levine conducting the Boston Symphony (Nonesuch)