

(Editor's note: Dr. Hospers's original review contained references to specific phonograph recordings. These are no longer available (except perhaps in collectors markets that specialize in vintage vinyl recordings). Digitally remastered versions are available on audio CD and MP3 files. These essays were written by typewriter several decades ago and were originally published in Books for Libertarians (later renamed Libertarian Review in September of 1974.)

INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL MUSIC

A Guide to Recorded Classical Music in Six Parts

By John Hospers

PART I: CHAMBER MUSIC TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

I have been asked to provide a systematic series of reviews of recorded classical music, indicating which available records are of special merit. This task has rather got out of hand as one composition after another turned out to be a musical "must." Though I have tried to be as impartial as possible, my own personal preferences clearly show through, nor have I really tried to hide them. My main purpose in writing this series has been to share with you those works of music which I have found especially rewarding, having listened to recorded music every day during most of my life, and played some of it as well. In that way some of you may discover, as many of my own students have discovered, vast musical treasures providing many hours of listening enjoyment that they did not previously know existed.

It is much easier to hear musical sounds than to listen to them. Hearing, like seeing, is passive; listening, like looking, is active. To listen requires the full use of one's attentive faculties. When you listen to good music, it should not be as background to other activities: particularly when you are listening to it the first few times, it requires your full attention. "Full attention or silence" is a good rule to observe, which pays large dividends in future enjoyment.

Most people who listen to classical music at all seem to pay attention only to music written for large orchestras, as if the greater the volume of sound the better the music must be. Santayana once ironically defined music as "a drowsy reverie interrupted by nervous thrills." And the nineteenth-century Viennese music critic Edouard Hanslick said in his excellent book *The Beautiful in Music* that "most hearers are content simply to be inundated by the sheer flow of sound." In so doing, they are unlikely to pay much attention to the various elements of which the total flow is composed. And thus they miss much more than they know of the fascinating things that are constantly going on in a musical composition.

In chamber music one can't do this: here the form stands naked. That is why it is the best mode of introduction to music. The interplay of parts assigned the various instruments is immediately evident, and one soon learns, especially when the melodies being intertwined are tuneful or "catchy," to follow them as they progress and interact with each other. It is chiefly

for this reason that such great musical scholars as Sir Donald Tovey have called the string quartet the ideal musical form; not only is it the best way to get introduced to music, but (in the opinion of Tovey and many others) more great music has been written for it than for any other combination of instruments. And chamber music itself has probably produced more memorable music per hundred pieces written than the larger forms such as the concerto and the symphony.

Accordingly, we shall begin with chamber music. My first two reviews will deal with chamber music, the next two with orchestral music, and the last two with vocal and choral music. In chamber music, there is only one instrument carrying a melodic line, rather than a group of them--for example, one violin instead of an entire group of violins playing the same notes in an orchestra. To a listener accustomed to a barrage of sound, the sound of chamber music will at first strike him as rather thin; but he will very quickly get over this impression and be rewarded by the interplay of tones which stand out so clearly as a result. Chamber music is so called because it was quite literally played in a chamber--living room or drawing room--after dinner by a single instrument or a small ensemble. Bach's Brandenberg Concertos, at least as played today, do not count as chamber music because they are played by an entire orchestra. But solo compositions for piano, harpsichord, organ, violin, or any other instrument do count as chamber music; violin-and-piano sonatas and other duo combinations are also chamber music; so are trios (usually for violin, cello, and piano), string quartets (two violins, viola, cello), string quintets (the above plus an added cello), piano quartets (three strings plus piano), piano quintets (string quartet plus piano), and so on. Octets are about as large an instrumental ensemble as one gets in chamber music.

Let's begin with the string quartet. The German composer Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809) was not the founder of the string quartet, but he developed it almost single-handedly into a major musical form. Haydn wrote 82 string quartets as well as numerous trios and piano sonatas--an output of staggering quantity and inexhaustible variety which every student of music would do well to tap. A few weeks of listening would be well spent on Haydn quartets before moving on to the next step.

These quartets convey a variety of moods: sometimes pensive, sometimes playful, by turns lilting and humorous and melancholy, most often energetic and vigorous, but always tuneful, and always full of the sense of delight of the four instrumentalists playing together. There is a dazzling series of quartets which constitute Opus 20; another beautiful set in the Opus 33 series; the Opus 54 series are pure inspiration, with more of the same in Op. 64, Op. 76, and Op. 77. It's hard to know where to start with this treasure-trove of musical works. I suggest beginning with the third (slow) movement of the last one, Op. 77 No. 2. The tune is stately with a touch of melancholy. See how it is stated, then repeated, then repeated again with a difference; then note next the transition to the musical theme, how it interacts with the first, and what fascinating variations are played upon it to keep

the attention constantly alert in the midst of the returning original theme. Then do the same with the tremendous opening movement of the Op. 64 No. 5. After you have sated yourself with this movement, I suggest that you listen to the entire quartet Op. 76 No. 5; every movement has its own marvelous melodic lines, shifting, turning, returning, intertwining with others, sometimes waxing incandescent with verve and enthusiasm. Listen to it all the way through several times, until you feel like whistling some of the main tunes, and by that time I think you will be hooked on either Haydn or string quartets, or both.

But the best is yet to come. I haven't yet mentioned the quartets which take you to the most ecstatic heights which Haydn has provided in this medium: Op. 20 No 4 and 5; Op. 33 No 3; Op. 54 No. 1 and 2; Op. 64 No. 3 and 4; Op. 74 No. 2. Each listener will have his own favorite melodies and movements from this collection of quartet masterpieces. But I suggest that when you listen to one you do so several times before turning to another, then, if you haven't yet had your fill, turn to some of the other great ones, which you may like just as well or even better: Op. 29 No. 1; Op. 22 No. 2; Op. 50 No. 3 and 6; Op. 54 No. 3; Op. 55 No. 1 and 3; Op. 64 No. 6; Op. 71 No. 1 and 3; Op. 76 No. 3, 4, and 5. Op. 76 No. 3, the "Emperor" quartet, has the famous slow movement which later became the tune of the German national anthem. Before the Haydn Society went out of existence, most of the Haydn quartets were available individually under the Haydn Society label, usually with superb performances by the Schneider quartet. Since the Quartetto Italiano has by far the best performances available, I suggest that you get what you can of these.

Haydn also wrote some wonderfully tuneful trios (piano, violin, cello). We now turn from Haydn to Wolfgang A. Mozart (1756-1791), that tremendous musical genius who when he died at the age of 35 left us a legacy of such great chamber music, concertos, symphonies, masses, and operas that no musicologist today fails to place him among the "top five" of composers. Continuing the great tradition established by Haydn, but proceeding always further toward the romanticism that sprang into full flower in the nineteenth century, we have the six great "Haydn quartets" (dedicated to Haydn), which are probably Mozart's greatest works in this genre, particularly the No. 17 in B flat (K. 458, "The Hunt"), No. 19 (K. 465, "Dissonant"), No. 20 in D (K. 499), and No. 21 in D (K. 525). Whenever possible, get the Italiano Quartet recordings on the Philips label.

From these, I suggest going on to the two great piano quartets (piano plus three strings), the No. 1 in G minor (K. 478)—one of the most joyful pieces of music in the entire literature, and one of my two favorites among Mozart's chamber pieces—and the No. 2 in E flat (K. 493): also the lovely quintet in A for clarinet and strings (K. 581), and the K. 407 Quintet for horn and strings. Having heard these, you will now be ready for the great string quintets, K. 515 in C, K. 516 in G minor, K. 593 in D, and K. 614 in E flat. My own favorite among all of Mozart's chamber works (each person of course will have his own favorites) is the K. 516, whose two great slow movements have reduced many a

listener to tears--and even those who don't respond that overtly to music find it the epitome of quiet serenity and tender nostalgic melancholy, with a serene beauty that can carry you through many otherwise troubled hours.

Those who prefer the music of the nineteenth century, which usually carries its emotion on its sleeve instead of subtly as Mozart does, will find here as worthy a predecessor of it (with both the emotion and the subtlety) as is to be found anywhere in the nineteenth century itself.

There are also some marvelous trios, especially the E flat trio for clarinet, viola, and piano (K. 498). Mozart's compositions for solo piano are interesting technical exercises but not particularly moving, and minor Mozart in comparison with his huge array of immortal masterpieces--many more of which will be discussed in Part III: Orchestral and Part V: Vocal.

The next major figure in historical order is Beethoven; but I suggest waiting just a bit with his chamber music and turning to the next "great" of chamber music, Franz Schubert (1797-1828), because his music is so melodic and so instantly accessible even to the untrained listener. (In fact, if Mozart and Haydn don't grab you at once, you might do well to start your journey into chamber music with Schubert.) In Schubert's thirty years of life he wrote such a profusion of memorable works, mostly chamber works, that it is hard to believe that one person could have achieved so much at such a consistently high level in so short a time.

Of the many great chamber works by Schubert, I recommend beginning with the work that one of his contemporaries called "the ne plus ultra of energy and passion," the great Trio. No. 1 in B flat for piano, violin, and cello (Op. 99; D. 898). Every bit of it is eminently singable (and whistleable), and the great fun of playing (and hearing) chamber music is nowhere more evident than in this marvelous work.

Then turn to his tender and romantic string quartet No. 14 (D. 810), "Death and the Maiden." You will find the Quartet No. 13 (Op. 29, D. 804) to be equally worth listening to. Then turn to his "nobly profound" chamber work, the great string quintet in C (Op. 163; D. 956), which many consider to be the capstone of Schubert's work in this genre. Equally tuneful and much lighter intone is the famous "Trout" quintet for piano and strings (Op. 114; D. 667). There are many other excellent Schubert chamber works available, but I have mentioned only those that I consider to be the cream of the crop.

Another aspect of Schubert's genius in chamber music is evident in his numerous piano sonatas. Of these, the very greatest in my opinion are the three posthumously published ones (Op. Posth.): the C minor, the A major, and the B flat major. To say that these are deeply moving is to understate the fact. If you have to pick only one of these, listen to the monumental B flat major sonata (D. 960). For such music one must find a pianist who

not only can play to perfection but is on the same wavelength with the spiritual qualities Schubert expresses in this work; and the one who does this best was Artur Schnabel.

There is, of course, a tremendous quantity of chamber music (though not string quartet) written prior to Haydn, but most of it is played today for small orchestra (chamber orchestra) and I shall discuss it in Part III: Orchestral. Moreover, the greater part of this early music is for the human voice (either a cappella or with instrumental accompaniment), and this will be discussed in Part V: Song and Opera and Part VI Choral Music.

However, to select just a few of the highlights of chamber music prior to Haydn, I would suggest the following as very rewarding listening:

1. Hear the simple but moving melodies of early composers in the album "Instrumental Music of the Year 1600 of France, England, Italy, and Germany" or any of a number of similar collections on records put out by Bach Guild, Turnabout, and Nonesuch records. At once you will be in a different world, both in musical idiom and in instrumentation (marvelous instruments like the lute, virginals, viola da gamba, bass viola da gamba, discant viola da gamba, etc.). But it is a very listenable world; these albums contain much of the popular music of the day, and it is so delightful to hear that when you compare it with most of the popular music of today you can only think, "How the mighty have fallen!" Once you unlock the doors of this early music, you will find it just as rewarding as any of the later (18th century and after) music. Much more will be said about this in later parts of this series.

2. Then listen to the superb chamber works of the great English composer Henry Purcell (1659-1695)--the Sonata for Trumpet and Strings, the Chacony in G minor, and the trio sonatas. More fine chamber works by Purcell are listed in Schwann.

3. Much of the solo harpsichord music of this period is exquisite. Many listeners soon come to prefer the harpsichord to its successor, the piano. For samplers, try some of the collections of early harpsichord solo music. As to harpsichord records by individual composers, especially fine are the harpsichord compositions of Francois Couperin (1668-1733) "Pieces de Clavecin"--and of Jean Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) under the same title. Then, turning to the eighteenth century, listen to the intoxicatingly delightful harpsichord sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757).

4. Then listen to some chamber music by two or more instruments including harpsichord. A marvelous gem by the totally neglected Spanish composer Antonio Soler (1729-1783) may still be found, some compositions for two harpsichords, some for harpsichord and organ. You will also enjoy Rameau's trios for flute, cello, and harpsichord, and his "Pieces de Clavecin en Concert" on Nonesuch 71063 and Telefunken 5-9578, as well as Couperin's "La Parnassus", and violin and continuo sonatas by Archangelo Corelli (1653-1713). The world of these works is of such

consummate purity and clarity that you may come to prefer it to anything else.

5. Bach's work is, by the almost universal acclaim of musicians, the greatest of all in almost every musical form he attempted. Johan Sebastian Bach (1684-1750) wrote extensively for solo harpsichord: e.g. The Well-Tempered Clavier (S. 846-93), the English Suites for harpsichord (S. 806-11) the Fantasias for harpsichord, and the six French suites for harpsichord (S. 812-17), the Italian concerto, and the Goldberg Variations (S. 988).

All of these are technically masterpieces, but not all of them are equally rich in emotionality. Be sure in every case that you get a harpsichord performance, not a piano transcription. Plenty of both are available in the Schwann catalog. Try also his sonatas for unaccompanied violin and his suites for unaccompanied cello.

6. And then there are thousands of fine compositions for solo organ--virtually a lost art since the eighteenth century. Since an organ composition can sound like a symphony orchestra, it seems a bit absurd to classify this as chamber music, though technically (being a solo instrument) it is. I suggest beginning with some organ works by Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707). Then turn to the undisputed master of organ composition, Bach. Any of the famous ones will do: the tremendous Passacaglia and Fugue for Organ (S. 582); the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (S. 565); the Choral Preludes for organ, the Fantasia and Fugue for organ (S. 542), and the Toccatas and Fugues in D minor and F major. This doesn't even begin to exhaust Bach's tremendous output of organ compositions.

Remember, in approaching these compositions and listening to them, that great as they are, the very greatest of Bach's compositions, and certainly those with the most overwhelming emotional impact, are yet to come. We shall discuss them in Part III: Orchestral, and Part VI: Choral. But, by listening to these smaller-scale compositions now, you will be building a solid base for the proper appreciation of his larger masterworks.

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