

(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). Digitally remastered versions of these performances are often available today either as downloadable MP3 files from the Internet or on audio CDs as those technologies have superseded phonograph records.)

INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL MUSIC

A Guide to Recorded Classical Music in Six Parts

By John Hospers

PART III. ORCHESTRAL MUSIC THROUGH THE 18TH CENTURY

The history of vocal music in the Western world goes back several centuries further than that of instrumental music. But if you want to know how the earliest instruments sounded, get Odyssey 32160178, with an instrumental ensemble of the instruments of the time in selections from the fourteenth century by Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377) and Francesco Landini (1325-1397), and of the 15th century by Guillaume Dufay (1400-1474). (There are some vocal numbers also.) Though the music is fairly simple and listenable, it creates for our ears mostly an impression of strangeness. Combining the 14th with the 15th century, there is a fine record (highly recommended), Turnabout 34019, with an instrumental ensemble (harps, viole, recorders, tambourine, etc.) of Renaissance instruments.

By the time we get to the 16th century, the music sounds more familiar to modern ears. Seraphim 6052 is a three-record set, "Guide to Renaissance Music" which has good instrumental and vocal selections. Philips 6500293 has French 16th-century dance music, and Philips 6500102 Italian 16th-century dance music. Nonesuch 71036 has a set of French Renaissance dances; Odyssey 32160036 contains a charming set of Renaissance dances of various nations. But the two albums of this period that I recommend most are Telefunken 9576-B, a 16th-century (and some 17th) collection of dances

of various nations, and Nonesuch 73010, "Music of Shakespeare's Time," a two-record set, which contains lots of delightful short English songs and instrumental pieces of 1550-1600.

The 17th century contains at least three musical giants: Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), Mere-Antoine Charpentier (1634-1704), both French, and the greatest of English composers,

Henry Purcell (1659,1695). Most of their music is vocal, but (unlike the earlier a cappella vocal music) is accompanied by instruments which are often as important as the voices; still, we shall consider them in Part V:- Vocal. If you want just one record of 17th-century French instrumental music, I recommend Lully's "Pieces de Symphonie"--a marvelous record, Oiseau-Lyre S0L-301. You will be delighted with the melodies and the sounds from the interesting instruments of the time. Delightful music for smaller instrumental combinations are Lully's orchestral suite, "Amadis de Gauls" (RCA VICS-1432), and his ballet music to "Xerxes" (Turnabout 34376). As for

Charpentier, the works of this enormous genius are almost all vocal, but you might listen to his "Medee" on Oiseau S-300 for an instrumental sample of his "high baroque" style. Of Henry Purcell we shall hear much more

in Parts V and VI; but for some of his purely instrumental pieces I recommend Nonesuch 71027, containing his "Gordian Knot" and "The Virtuous Wife" (featuring harpsichord and clavichord) and his Sonata in D for Trumpet and Strings; and on London 6618, his "Chaconne" and "Pavane." The purity and clarity of this music

is highly infectious, and it is very easy to get hooked on it.

The Italian composer Giovanni Gabrieli (1551-1612) wrote (among many other things) music for the dedication of St. Peter's

Cathedral in Rome, which is on Vanguard BM-8, "Processional and

Ceremonial Music," and Columbia 145-7209, "Canzoni for Brass Choirs." Though his music lacks depth, all the pomp and circumstance attaching to ceremonial occasions is there, and the trumpet fanfares are quite exhilarating. (There is a good record, DG-139431, consisting entirely of trumpet fanfares from the 16th to the 18th century.)

Also spanning the gap between the 17th and 18th centuries are the Italian Archangelo Coralli (1653-1713) and the German Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706). Corelli is best known for his "Christmas Concerto," a lovely bit of lace; and Pachelbel is best known for

his "Kanon"--the perfect relaxation music, highly romantic in mood. The two compositions are together on one record, London 6206. A pleasant suite by Pachelbel is on Nonesuch 71229; and Corelli's entire series of Concerti Grossi, of which the Christmas Concerto is one, is on a three-record Odyssey set, 32360002. If you like the Christmas Concerto, you will enjoy the rest of them, as well as the sonata for trumpet and strings on Argo ZRG-601.

Before we get fully into the 18th century, I want to recommend two 17th (and very early 18th) century albums above all others: (1) Nonesuch 73014, a three-record set (on a cut-price label), "Music at the Courts of Italy, Sweden, and France," an

array of instrumental music of the period whose quality will surprise even those who are familiar with this period (including some by the choral composer par excellence, Palestrina); and

(2) Turnabout 34232, "Musiques Royales a Notre Dame," instrumental works for wind ensemble and organ by three French masters, Lalande (1657-1726), Mouret (1682-1738), and Lully. This record, on a cut-price label, is worth many times what it costs. It's ceremonial music, not profound but stately and stirring, and the combination of instruments with the powerful pipe-organ represents as well as any other music the flowering of the baroque style. This record is a "must".

And now we come to the greatest age of music, the first half of the 18th century. The number of first-rate works, both instrumental and vocal, is simply staggering. Couperin was born

in 1668; Vivaldi in 1678; Rameau and Frescobaldi in 1683; the twin giants

of them all, Bach and Handel, in 1685; and thrown in for good measure, Telemann in 1681 and Scarlatti in 1685. One scarcely

knows where to begin. (I spend at least half my listening time with music of this period--the choral even more than the instrumental-- and if you extend it a bit to include Purcell and Charpentier on

one side and Haydn and Mozart on the other, it would be about 75%.)

The two giants of French music in the 18th century were Rameau (1683-1764) and Couperin (1668-1733), as Lully and Charpentier were in the 17th. They were among the first major figures to write more

secular than religious music, and more instrumental than vocal. The best single record for introducing yourself to their music is a marvelous album, Turnabout 34101 (which I recommend just about as highly as I did the Lalande-Lully record, Turnabout 34232), entitled "Music at Versailles at the Time of Louis XIV." It contains selections from Couperin's "La Sultane", dances from Charpentier's "Medee," and the dances from "Acanate" by Rameau. With this as appetizer I recommend continuing with Couperin's "Aptheose de Wily," another lovely work, on Oiseau 5-300, and then, if you like this (as you will), his "Concerts Royaux" on Vanguard C-10029. This work is also a part of a worthwhile three-record set, Nonesuch 73014. As for Rameau's instrumental music, get his ballet music from "La Temple de la Claire" on Oiseau S-302 and S-297, and the suite from the opera "Dardanus" on Victor VICS-1333. You will find this French baroque music so delightful that you won't want to leave it.

Turning from France to Italy, you might try the fine instrumental set, Nonesuch 73008, "Baroque masters of Venice, Naples, and Tuscany," for a variety of baroque composers of this period. Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643) wrote, in addition to much worthy keyboard music, some ceremonial music as stirring as Gabrieli's: hear the "Toccatà Canzoni" (Decca 79425) and the fine collection of his instrumental work on Everest 3173.

But the greatest of the Italians, approaching the level of Bach himself, was Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). His instrumental music--which constitutes the bulk of his compositions--consists mostly of concertos, which possess an unquenchable verve and vivacity, and whose predominant mood is an intoxicated delight. A dozen years ago most of his works were unrecorded; today there is such a great profusion of his works available that there are more pages in the Schwann catalog devoted to Vivaldi than to Verdi or Wagner. I suggest beginning with his "Concerto for Diverse Instruments"--you will

swear that the opening movement is the happiest and jolliest music you have ever heard--as recorded by Bernstein on Columbia MS-6131. Then get his equally delightful lute and mandolin concerti on Turnabout 34153-S. The third of the triumvirate of "musts" for Vivaldi's instrumental music is his best-known work (actually a series of violin concertos), "The Four Seasons," of which there are more than twenty recordings

in the Schwann catalog. (The one to get is Philips 6500017.) His twelve Concerti Grossi (Op.3), "L'Estro Armonico," which are a worthy successor to Corell's Concerti Grossi and precursor of Handel's, are well played on Argo ERG 733/4.

And from there on only the size of your pocketbook and your desire for some of the most vivacious music in the world is the limit: there are concertos for piccolo, for recorder, for horns,

for oboe, for clarinet, for violin, for guitar, for flute, for flute and violins, for 4 violins, for 2 oboes and clarinets, for flute, oboe and bassoon--and so on, and so on, in an endless cascade of delight from the pen of this composer. Much of it is well done on inexpensive labels such as Nonesuch, Turnabout, Seraphim, and Odyssey. Apparently Vivaldi's job, as priest in charge of a Catholic girls' school agreed with him.

Most professional musician's, critics, and musicologists agree that the greatest composer of them all is Bach. The majority of his

compositions are vocal, but he has left an enormous legacy of chamber music and orchestral music as well: the total of his extant work

(much of it has been lost) amounts to 47 large volumes. His music is not always in as happy a mood as Vivaldi's, but it is in the Brandenburg concertos, with which I suggest you begin. All six of them, with the exception of the relatively uninspired No. 6, are immortal masterpieces, which one wants to hear again and again no matter how often he has heard them before--I must have heard them each at least five thousand times, yet it is always a delight to hear them again. With more than twenty entries in the Schwann catalog, there is lots of choice, but in my opinion the very best one is conducted by the English composer Benjamin Britten on two London records 2225.

Then turn to his four great "Suites for Orchestra" (S 1066-9), which some prefer even to the Brandenburg Concertos. There are

several excellent recorded performances, but for the money you can't beat the one on the cut-price Seraphim label, Seraphim S-6985, conducted by the violinist Yehudi Menuhin. And from then on, again, the sky is the limit: the suite for flute and strings; concertos for flute, violin, and harpsichord; concerto for two violins, and

so on, depending on your instrumental preferences.

You might also be interested., in the record "Switched-on Bach," Columbia MS-7194, an "electronic-music" version of some of Bach's works done on the Moog Synthesizer. It contains among other things the Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, and you'll find it interesting to listen to the concerto in its original form first and then the electronic version. In most cases I don't approve of transcriptions--for example, transcriptions of Bach's organ works for orchestra, because the "silken strings" effect is entirely unsuited to this music and a great many of the archaic details are lost. But in

the case of the "Switched-on Bach" only the medium is different,

but every note of the original is preserved, and stands out distinctly in the recording. Bach would have approved, or

at least found interesting, the electronic transcription, but I daresay he would

have been utterly repelled by the orchestral transcriptions of his organ works.

But among this enormous musical output, both tuneful and profound, I want to call attention to one especially noteworthy series of works: his harpsichord concertos--concertos for one harpsichord, for two, for three, and for four. We have discussed harpsichord music before, but never did a harpsichord sound better than when set off against an orchestra, especially in playing the music of Bach. I will say without the slightest hesitation that Bach's harpsichord concertos are the greatest music ever written for the harpsichord--if you get nothing else for harpsichord, get this.

It is well performed on a five-record cut-price set, Nonesuch HE-73001. But the most brilliant in performance and perfect in sound is the five-record set on Telefunken SCA-25, which is well worth the difference in price. Once you acquire this set, you will want to hear at least one of these concertos practically every day from then on.

Still in the baroque style, but in the Italian tradition of Vivaldi rather than the German tradition of Bach, is Georg Frederic Handel (1685-1759). The greater part of his music consists of oratorios; but the quantity and quality of his output of instrumental music is also tremendous. Best known of his orchestral works is the "Water Music," usually in the form of a selection from it by Sir Hamilton Harty called the "Water Music Suite." There are about a dozen recordings of the complete work, of which I recommend most the one conducted by Menuhin on Angel S-36173. As for the suite, it is excellently done by Szell (with Handel's "Royal Fireworks Music" on the other side of the record) on London 6236, and by Ormandy (with the "Fireworks" plus a Corelli suite on the other side) on Columbia MS-6095.

In my opinion some of Handel's very finest instrumental music is in the Concerto Grossi Op. 6--not to be confused with the other series of Handel Concerti Grossi, Op. 3, which is technically just as proficient but much less moving as music. In interpreting this fine music for orchestra (often featuring the harpsichord), I believe there is no better recording than the old one conducted by Scherchen on (mono) Westminster WAL-403--the restrained but intense enthusiasm of the No. 5 and the slow lingering sadness of the slow movement of the No. 6 (reminiscent of the Mozart Quintet K. 516) is nowhere better conveyed. Since this has long been a discontinued item, I suggest as the best a currently available recording (and a very good one at that), the one conducted by Menuhin on a four-record set, Angel 5-3647.

Handel also wrote concertos for harp, for oboe, for trumpet, for oboes and strings, for two wind choirs and strings--not all profound, but every one a delight to the ear. Only Bach and Vivaldi are rivals to Handel in the quality and quantity of orchestral concertos. Each listener will have his own favorite instruments

and his favorite concertos for each instrument. I shall only call special attention to his sixteen concertos for organ and orchestra, which are impressive works indeed; the entire

sixteen is available and well conducted by Boult on a six-record set, Columbia D3S-777/8. If six records is a bit much, try the marvelously played selections by De Klerk and Van der Horst on Telefunken S-9437 and S-9441.

We now leave the baroque period and turn to the latter half of the 18th century--the classical tradition of Haydn and Mozart. To get a sample of it, music which is polyphonic but much less ornate than that of the baroque period of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, try an excellent record, "Music in London 1670- 1770", London STS-15013, which features a symphony by the early English symphonist William Boyce, as well as fine instrumental works by Purcell, Matthew Lock, and Johan Christian Bach (several of Bach's sons were composers). If you like Boyce, you will find

more of his symphonies beautifully done by Menuhin on Angel S-36951. Equally delightful is Nonesuch 71123 - Court and Chamber Music of the 18th Century."

Haydn (1732-1809) wrote 104 symphonies. Although this enormous output doesn't in my opinion equal in quality his 82 quartets, you will find at least the last one-third of them highly enjoyable. Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven are all known to the public largely for their symphonies--which is a pity, not because the symphonies aren't excellent, but because much of their other work is equally or more so. If you haven't heard any Haydn symphonies, try the last one (No. 104: "London"). Toscanini was the conductor who above all could do miracles with Haydn; his

rhythmic verve and bounding energy was transformed by Toscanini into a dizzying incandescence. But all of Toscanini's Haydn recordings

(Presumably because they were on mono) have been removed by Victor from the catalog. In lieu of these, I suggest Karajan on No. 104, with Mozart's Symphony No. 40 on the other side (London STS-15106);

No. 93 and 94 ("Surprise") as done by Szell on Columbia MS-7006, and Karajan on No. 101 ("Clock") and No. 83, on Angel S-36868.

Enormous fun to listen to and enjoyable to anyone who enjoyed the Vivaldi concertos, are the Haydn concertos; concertos for horn, for harpsichord, for flute, for cello, for liras, for oboe, for organ, for trumpet, for Violin, and so on. Haydn--like Vivaldi, Bach, and Handel before him--wrote huge quantities of delightful music, and it's hard to choose for someone else. I particularly like his concertos for trumpet and for horn, which are

together on one cut-price record, Turnabout 34031; and his concertos for harpsichord, which are all together on another cut-price disc, Seraphim S-60132. I prefer these two discs to any of the symphonies. The two fine cello concertos are together on Telefunken S-43092, his lira concertos on Nonesuch 71067 and Turnabout 34055, and his organ concertos on two Philips records, 6700052.

After Haydn, Mozart (1756-1791). Mozart wrote 41 symphonies, of which the last three are the most famous, and constantly performed.

For the lyrical No. 39 (K. 543), get Colin Davis' excellent performance on Philips 6500559, where it is coupled with the No. 40 (K. 550).

For the No. 41 (K. 551, "Jupiter"), get the Casale performance on Columbia MS-7066, both because it conveys so well the stately grandeur of this symphony, and because the other side of the record has his marvelous performance of the No. 35 (K. 385, "Haffner"), which if

not the most profound is (I think) his most joyous symphony. Among the best of Mozart's earlier symphonies is the No. 29 (K. 201), done by Davis on Philips 835262 (coupled with the Nos. 25 and 32).

To my mind, however, Mozart's greatest orchestral delights are to be found in other genres: the Sinfonia Concertantes, especially the highly romantic one in E flat (Menuhin on Angel S-36190); the Divertimentos, especially the Nos. 10 (K. 247) and 11 (K. 251), best done for chamber orchestra on RCA It/CS-1335 and for larger

orchestra on Oseau 60029; the four rollicking concertos for horn, and only to a slightly lesser extent the concertos for oboe, for flute, for flute and harp, and for bassoon. You get the whole bunch of these delightful items all together---the four horn concertos, clarinet concerto, two flute bassoon concertos, and an early Sinfonia Concertante--on a four-record cut-price set, Turnabout 34188/91, which I strongly recommend.

Also worthy of mention is the Mozart adagio and rondo for glass harmonica (K. 617). This charming instrument, once popular and now entirely neglected, is combined with an equally charming Mozartean musical score on Turnabout 34452, which also contains works by other composers for the glass harmonica.

There are five violin concertos, all early works, fine works but minor Mozart, though you might enjoy Nos. 4 and 5 (Turnabout 34186). The really tremendous orchestral works by Mozart are the concertos for piano. I suggest that you first listen to the dizzily happy concerto for two pianos and orchestra (K. 365) on Nonesuch 71028, with the somewhat less noteworthy concerto for three pianos and orchestra (K. 242) on the other side. Now turn to the concertos for solo piano and orchestra; there are 27 of them, Mozart's single greatest achievement except for his operas. Where shall we begin? The slow movement of one of the greatest ones, No. 21 (K. 467), has become famous through the film, "Elmira Madigan", and the entire concerto is a marvel. Since the extraordinary performance of

Gieseeking playing it and Cantelli conducting it is no longer available (when will they stop cutting out a first-rate performance on mono in favor of a second-rate one on stereo?), get the Casadeseus recording conducted by Szell on Columbia M731814--especially since you get on the other side the Concerto No. 24 (K. 491), which is another of the Mozart greats. Casadeseus and Szell join forces again for another combination of fine ones, No. 23 (K. 482) and No. 24 (K. 488) on Columbia MS-6194, and No. 26 (K. 337) and No. 27 (K. 595) on

Columbia MS-6403. The most noteworthy of the early piano concertos is No. 9 (K. 271) performed by Ashkenazy on London 65-1. Having heard these, you have reached the culmination of orchestral music of the 18th century.

Recordings carried by BFL:

Nonesuch 73014 (3 records). Music at the Courts of Italy, Sweden, and France, 16th to 18th Centuries.

Turnabout 34232. Musiques Royale. a Notre Dame (Lully, Motet, Lalande).

Turnabout 34101. Music at Verailles at the Time of Louis XIV.

London 2225 (two records). Bach: Brandenburg Concertos.

Nonesuch HE-73001 (five records). Bach: Harpsichord Concertos.

Turnabout 34188-91 (four records). Mozart: concertos for horn, trumpet, clarinet, flute, and bassoon.