

# Inside the Score – “Listening Challenge”

## 30 Iconic Albums- November 2020

Before the world of online streaming or Amazon shopping, certain recordings of classical works would typically hold a ‘legendary’ status.

Without online reviews to guide buying decisions, and without being able to preview multiple recordings online, word of mouth was the primary way in which recordings were recommended. If you wanted a good recording of Beethoven’s Fifth, you would either read a catalogue of reviews, ask a friend, or ask the owner of your local CD shop (who would almost definitely have listened to most of the recordings he was selling, and would certainly know what he was talking about).

On top of this there was a factor of scarcity: there was never a guarantee that a specific recording would be in stock.

This word-of-mouth spread, plus the scarcity factor, meant that certain recordings grew to take on a ‘legendary’, iconic status, and to this day remain extremely famous and beloved by older classical listeners.

This Listening Pack is designed to showcase some of those iconic albums. I have asked several older, classical-loving friends to give their input, and this Guide was the result.

It is not all-inclusive. There are only 30 albums selected, which means there may be more guides like this to come in future.

You may also notice that just because an album is iconic, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s ‘the best’. Recording technology has come a very long way in the last 70 years, and newer recordings often bring something different to the table. Another ‘advantage’ to modern recordings is that it’s easier than ever to splice together multiple takes, to give a perfect version of something which never really existed.

In contrast, Furtwangler’s 1942 recording of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony remains iconic for various reasons which you’ll discover below – and yet, it’s a mono recording, with imperfect audio, and a performance that often sounds ‘out of tune’. However it remains legendary, partly because of its fiery interpretation, and partly because of its extraordinary history.

In any case – these recordings are here for your enjoyment.

If you want to take this as a **Listening Challenge**, then **I would recommend listening to one of these albums, every day for 30 days**. If there is text involved (e.g. Requiem masses, song cycles, or operas), then I highly recommend following it so that you get the most out of the experience.

However, feel free to take these albums at your own pace – some are longer than others, and so you might want to devote one day to shorter albums, and two days to operas or longer albums.

I should mention that these recordings are in no specific order – I tried to mix things up, so that we would hear different composers and different eras across the 30 days.

However you approach this list, I hope you enjoy the music and appreciate these albums for what they are: Monuments in Classical Recording History.

# Primephonic

You can choose to buy these recordings if you like – or you can find them on Primephonic. I've included links for each album, which will take you straight to a page where you can listen to them immediately on Primephonic. Best of all, you can do this for free! (Details below)

Primephonic is an app with a huge catalogue of catalogue of classical music, ready to listen to in ultra-high quality audio.

One of my favourite things about it is the browsing feature, which makes it incredibly easy to discover more of the music you love, and to learn more about your favourite eras, composers, performers, and orchestras.

Their browse function and their playlists make it perfect for Classical lovers.

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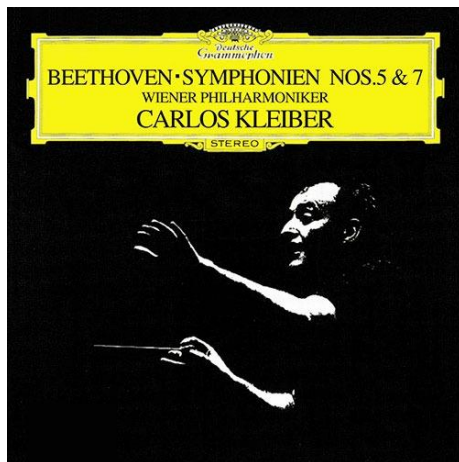
Beethoven Undiscovered Chopin Undiscovered Rachmaninov Undiscovered J.S. Bach Undiscovered Schubert Undiscovered Haydn Undiscovered Brahms Undiscovered Stravinsky Undiscovered Mozart Undiscovered Tchaikovsky Undiscovered

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## Album #1



**Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7**  
**Carlos Kleiber**  
**Wiener Philharmoniker**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947905486>

Carlos Kleiber was recently voted the greatest conductor of all time by the BBC Music Magazine (see their rankings here: <https://www.classical-music.com/features/artists/20-greatest-conductors-all-time/>).

While these rankings are in some ways arbitrary and beside the point – each great conductor has something unique and extraordinary to bring to the table – Kleiber’s recordings really do shine, due to their mix of energy, aliveness, attention to detail, and ability to let the music speak for itself, with a level of emotion that is never “too gushing”.

A friend of mine once said that in Kleiber’s recordings you can hear every detail and every instrument. That might be true. In any case, enjoy this thrilling, energised recording of two of Beethoven’s great symphonies.

## Album #2



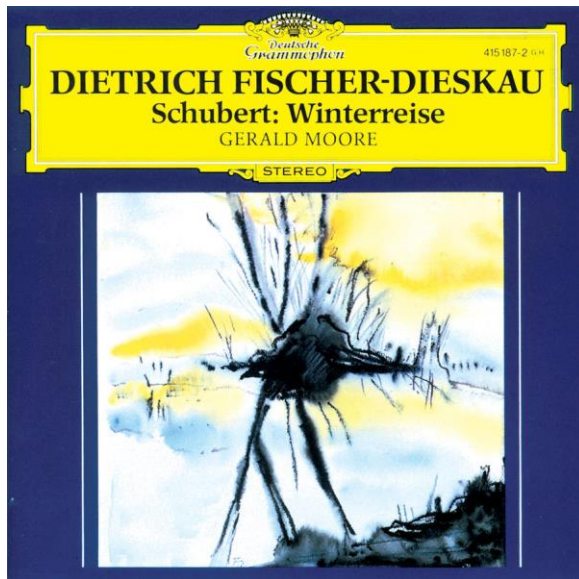
### **Chopin: The Legendary 1965 Recording Martha Argerich**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0724355680556>

This classic debut recording of one of the greatest pianists of our time was held back from release for decades, due to exclusivity clauses and legal constraints.

This album showcases a young Argerich, months after her famous win in the 1965 Warsaw International Chopin Competition, aged 24. Her youthful passion and white-hot playing marks the beginning of a world-class career that has spanned decades.

## Album #3



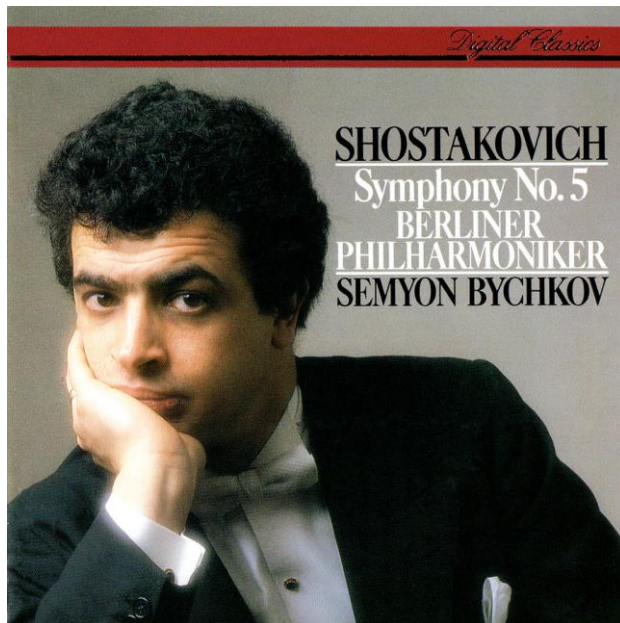
**Schubert: Winterreise**  
**Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau**  
**Gerald Moore**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028941518729>

If you search for any classic baritone song cycle, Fischer-Dieskau's recordings will almost always come up top. Most recognised for his singing of Lieder (and Schubert is the King of Lieder), this album features Fischer-Dieskau, alongside the great pianist Gerald Moore, singing Schubert's crowning vocal masterpiece.

If you'd prefer a more varied collection of songs from across Fischer-Dieskau's career, try out the album, *An Die Musik*.

## Album #4

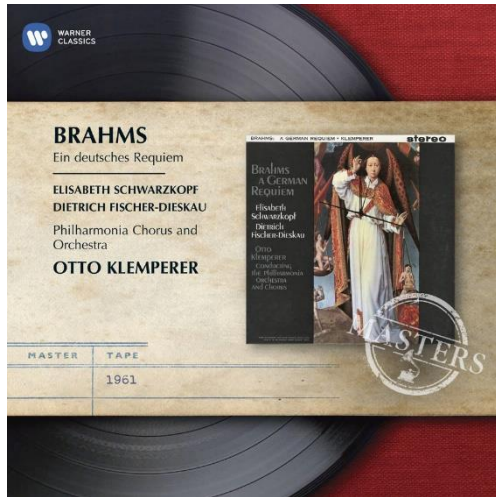


**Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5**  
**Semyon Bychkov**  
**Berlin Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947895664>

This recording, with its precise intonation, thrilling dynamics, and powerful expressivity, have made it a seminal version of Shostakovich's enduring masterpiece, and one of the most recommended recordings of this work.

## Album #5



**Brahms: Ein deutsches Requiem**

**Elizabeth Schwarzkopf**

**Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau**

**Otto Klemperer**

**Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/5099996592557>

Brahms' personalised, intimate version of a Requiem ceremony is here expressed with beauty, grandeur, and even spirituality. The soloists are two of the most famous of their generation, and the recording maintains a sense of stature amongst others, decades after its release.



## Album #6



**Puccini: La Bohème**

**Luciano Pavarotti**

**Mirella Freni**

**Herbert von Karajan**

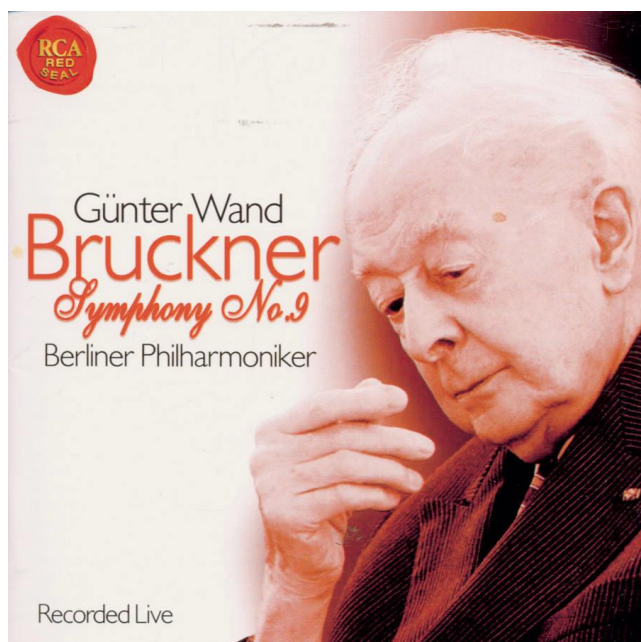
**Berlin Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028942104921>

This is a shining recording of one of the world's most popular operas – this all-star cast gives a heart-rending, powerful performance, with unbeatable singing, playing, and great audio quality.



## Album #7



### **Bruckner: Symphony No. 9 (Live Performance)**

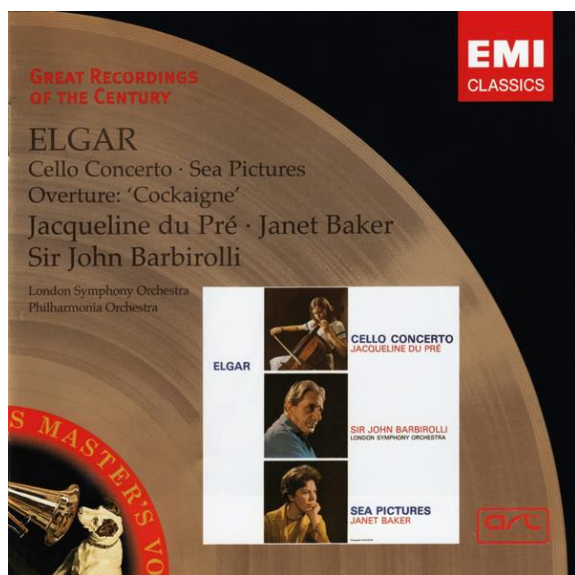
**Gunther Wand**

**Berlin Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/743216324422>

This entire series of live Bruckner symphony recordings with Wand and the Berlin Philharmonic is quite frankly incredible. Bruckner's towering mammoths are brought vividly to life, with sparkling sound quality, earth shattering playing, and brilliant interpretation. I also highly recommend the 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony in this series.

## Album #8



**Elgar: Cello Concerto /// Sea Pictures /// Cockaigne Overture**

**Jacqueline du Pré**

**Janet Baker**

**Sir John Barbirolli**

**London Symphony Orchestra**

**Philharmonia**

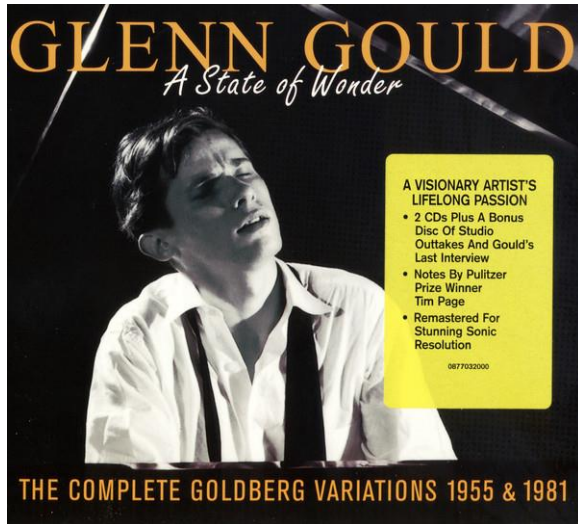
<https://play.primephonic.com/album/5099962307550>

This is a classic recording of the famous cellist, Jacqueline du Pré, playing the piece which brought her to fame. In this recording she is aged 20, and from the very first minutes of the concerto you can hear her raw expressivity and passion, balanced by powerful playing from a world-class orchestra.

Her promising career was tragically short-lived; multiple sclerosis forced her to stop performing at the age of 28, and she died aged 42.

The other, lesser-known gem in this album is Janet Baker singing Elgar's Sea Pictures – a wonderful set of songs which should really be performed more often. Her performance in this album is close to my heart.

## Album #9



<https://play.primephonic.com/album/886443371651>

### **Bach: Goldberg Variations**

#### **Performed by Glenn Gould (1955 recording)**

It is the 1955 recording that is of particular note (the first recording on this disc). This recording launched Gould's career, and became an instant bestseller almost literally overnight.

In terms of Bach interpretation, this one broke the mould when it came out. The Goldberg Variations had been an obscure piece, considered dry, obscure, and awkward to play; Gould, with his articulation, pedalling, and virtuosity changed the game.

Gould was insistent on re-recording each section until he was happy with it – the first aria alone was recorded 21 times.

This recording also has very little of Gould's infamous humming and muttering – which might be a pro, or a con, depending on who you are.

## Album #10



**Beethoven: Triple Concerto /// Brahms: Double Concerto**

**David Oistrakh**

**Mstislav Rostropovich**

**Sviatoslav Richter**

**Herbert von Karajan**

**George Szell**

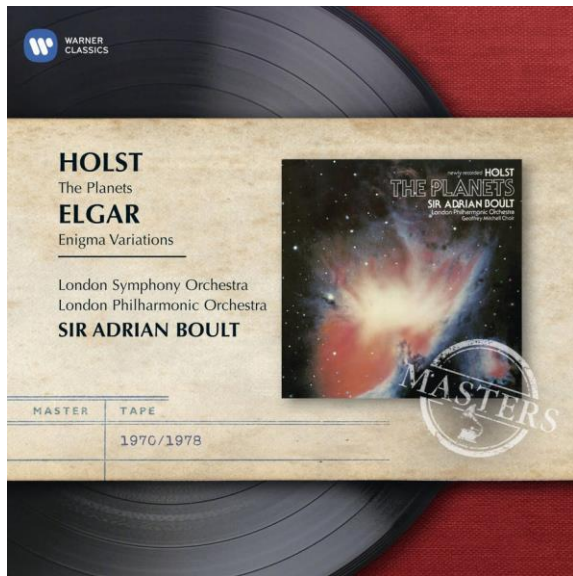
**Berlin Philharmonic**

**Cleveland Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0724356690257>

Another all-star cast! The Triple Concerto performance is utterly electrifying, and the Double Concerto showcases Oistrakh and Rostropovich playing together at their best.

## Album #11



**Holst: The Planets // Elgar: Enigma Variations**

**Sir Adrian Boult**

**London Symphony Orchestra**

**London Philharmonic Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/5099962307758>

This recording was chosen for its seminal performance of *The Planets*. However, it also showcases another English masterpiece: Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Conducted by Sir Adrian Boult, a great interpreter of English music, and two of London's great orchestras, the performers produce a wonderful, noble sound worthy of the English 20<sup>th</sup>-Century musical renaissance.

## Album #12



**Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 19 /// Piano Concerto No. 23**

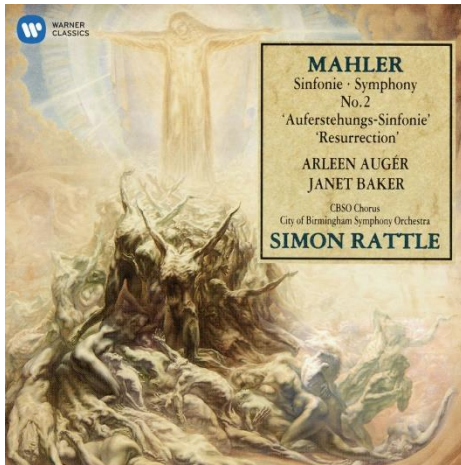
**Murray Perahia**

**English Chamber Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/886443813212>

Murray Perahia's Mozart Concerto performances are divine. Here, Perahia plays and conducts two of Mozart's greatest. The A Major Concerto, no. 23, with its famous movement in F# minor (the only thing Mozart ever wrote in F# minor) is particularly wonderful.

## Album #13



**Mahler: Symphony No. 2, 'Resurrection'**

**Arleen Auger**

**Janet Baker**

**Simon Rattle**

**City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and Chorus**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0094634580250>

It was Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony that, allegedly, inspired Rattle to become a conductor. Later, as a student, it was a performance of this piece that kick-started his career, when he was spotted by a talent agent.

This incredible recording features top singers, a world-class orchestra, a dazzling acoustic, and brilliant interpretation and energy. It might just change your life...



## Album #14



**Mahler: Symphony No. 5**  
**Leonard Bernstein**  
**Vienna Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028942360822>

While we're on that Mahler high, why not another? Bernstein was a champion of Mahler, at a time when Mahler wasn't hugely well known or appreciated.

This album almost plays like a love letter to Mahler – Bernstein wears his heart on his sleeve, and that's why he and Mahler often pair so well together. Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup> was arguably Bernstein's favourite. The Adagietto was played at his funeral, and he was buried with the score of this symphony laid across his chest

## Album #15



**Chopin: 4 Ballades**

**Krystian Zimerman**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028942309029>

Zimerman is another of the greatest pianists of his generation. Any recording of his tends to be captivating to listen to. Here, he brings these four masterpieces of Chopin to life, with ingenious rubato, and intimate expression in his solo playing.

## Album #16



**Strauss: Four Last Songs**

**Elisabeth Schwarzkopf**

**George Szell**

**Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra**

**London Symphony Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/5099996594155>

Strauss' swansong, which his publisher described as "a farewell of serene confidence", are sung here by the legendary Schwarzkopf. Gramophone magazine famously wrote that this recording was, "a heavenly record, so beautiful that it goes against the grain to analyse it". Schwarzkopf voice seems to float effortlessly, and yet there is sheer beauty and a compelling poetic sincerity in her voice.

Following the poetry as you listen is, in my opinion, a must.

## Album #17

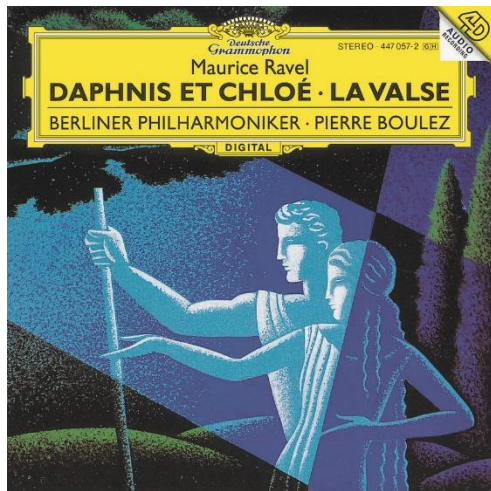


**Schubert: Piano Sonata No. 21 /// 3 Klavierstücke D. 946**  
**Mitsuko Uchida**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028945657226>

Uchida is one of the great interpreters of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert, as captivating to watch as she is to listen to. Hear her masterful playing of Schubert's profound final sonata. The first few bars alone transport me to a different realm entirely.

## Album #18



**Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé /// La Valse**  
**Pierre Boulez**  
**Berlin Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028944705720>

Boulez was a conductor and composer with an extraordinary ear for detail. This recording showcases that incredible clarity of detail – you may feel like you can hear every part of the texture (see, for example, the section of *Daphnis et Chloé*: “*Lever du jour*”). Boulez’s recordings tend to be impeccably in tune and wonderfully balanced, and therefore he is often the perfect choice for 20<sup>th</sup>-century repertoire.

## Album #19

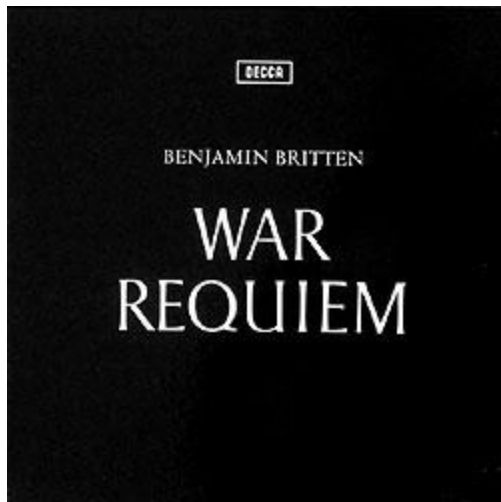


### **Beethoven: Late String Quartets** **Takacs Quartet**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947084921>

Often considered Beethoven's most intimate masterpieces, these late quartets are treated as sacred by music lovers. The Takacs Quartet present a stellar, pitch-perfect performance, blending surface-level beauty with a deep, structural understanding of Beethoven. Enjoy communing in intimacy with this well-realised recording.

## Album #20



**Britten: War Requiem**  
**Conducted by Benjamin Britten**  
**Sir Peter Pears**  
**Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau**  
**Galina Vishnevskaya**  
**London Symphony Orchestra**  
**London Symphony Chorus and Bach Choir**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947860235>

The War Requiem was commissioned for the opening of the new Coventry Cathedral; the old one had been bombed to rubble in the Second World War. Britten, a well-famed pacifist, blends the traditional Catholic Requiem texts with highly ironic selections of poems by the renowned war poet, Wilfred Owen (who himself died on the last day of the First World War).

This recording is conducted by Britten himself, with the cast of the first performance. A notable moment is Britten's setting of Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting*, where a British soldier comes face to face with a German soldier he has killed. Britten insisted, controversially, on having a British singer come face to face with a German singer, on stage at the first performance. And so, we have the poignant, post-war meeting of two great talents: Sir Peter Pears, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. The choice of Vishnevskaya, a Russian, as the soprano soloist was also symbolic, though she was banned by the Soviet government from singing at the actual premiere.

I highly recommend following the text as you listen, to see how Britten brilliantly intersperses the Catholic Requiem text with ironic war poetry.



## Album #21

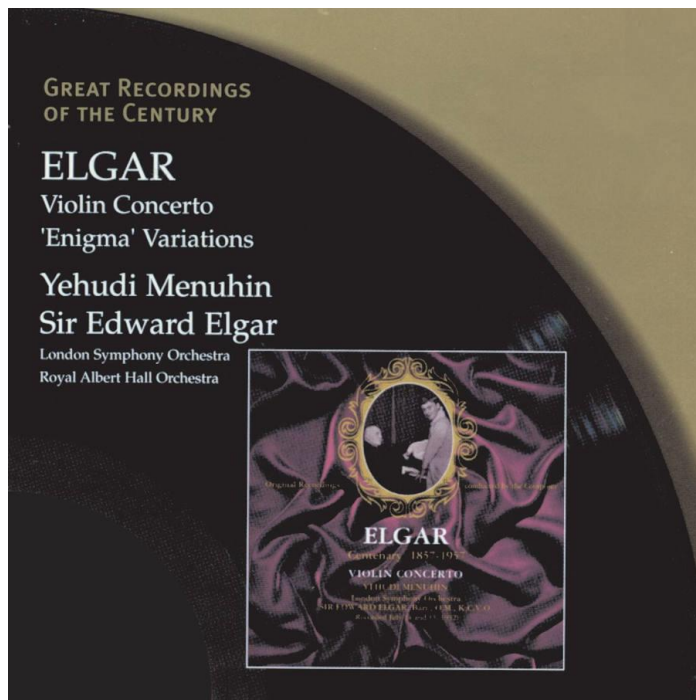


**Verdi: Requiem**  
**Dame Joan Sutherland**  
**Marilyne Horne**  
**Luciano Pavarotti**  
**Martti Talvela**  
**Georg Solti**  
**Vienna Philharmonic**  
**Vienna State Opera Chorus**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947577355>

Another Requiem – why not? Solti is famed for the raw, enormous energy and sound of his recordings. And here, they make a monumental sound, bolstered by world-class soloists such as Sutherland and Pavarotti. This recording is a real thrill ride.

## Album #22



**Elgar: Violin Concerto // Enigma Variations**  
**Yehudi Menuhin**  
**Sir Edward Elgar**  
**London Symphony Orchestra**  
**Royal Albert Hall Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0724356699458>

This recording of Elgar's Violin Concerto is seminal – the 74 year old composer collaborates with a 16 year old prodigy, to produce a remarkable performance of an underappreciated work. Menuhin said, on meeting Elgar, "he dispelled every anxiety, a figure of great dignity, radiating a sense of comfort and warmth. The memory of this, my first true introduction to English music, remains with me forever." Menuhin went on to become one of the most famous violinists of his time.

## Album #23



**Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 /// Piano Concerto No. 5, "Emperor"**

**Daniel Barenboim**

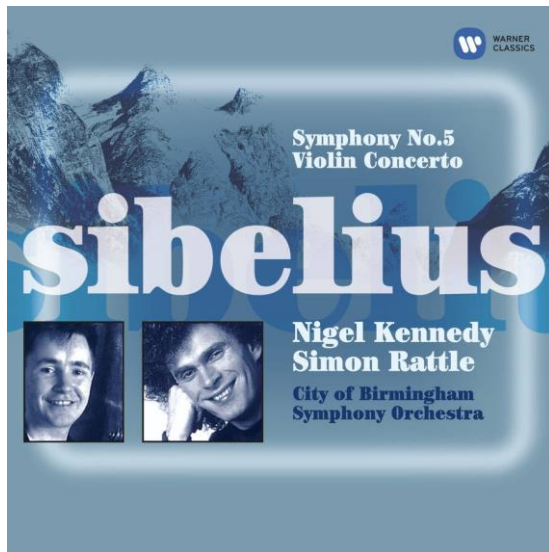
**Berlin Philharmonic**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0724357298056>

Daniel Barenboim is arguably the greatest living interpreter of Austro-Germanic Romantic music. Whether you view him as one of the world's greatest pianists, or one of the world's greatest conductors, his interpretations of Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner are often considered amongst the best.

This recording showcases him simultaneously as pianist and conductor, playing repertoire he has been intimately familiar with since his earliest years.

## Album #24



**Sibelius: Symphony No. 5 /// Violin Concerto**

**Nigel Kennedy**

**Simon Rattle**

**City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/0077774971751>

Both these pieces are gems of Sibelius – but the crown here goes to Nigel Kennedy's exquisite playing of the Violin Concerto, with delicacy, intimacy, and crystal clear sound quality.

## Album #25



<https://play.primephonic.com/album/825646315239>

**Puccini: Tosca**

**Maria Callas**

**Tito Gobbi**

**Giuseppe Di Stefano**

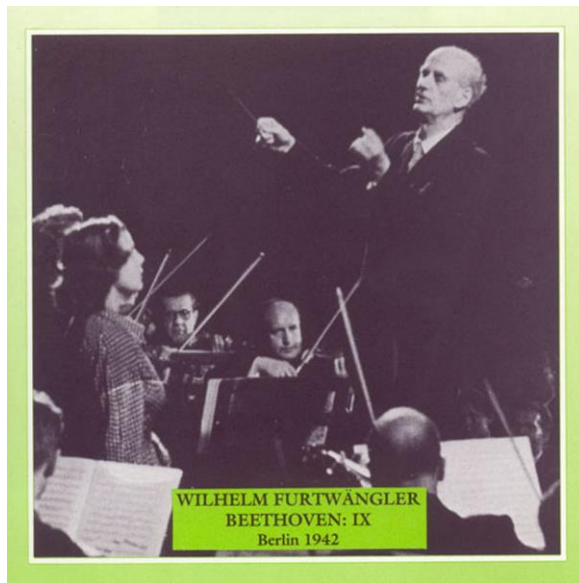
**Victor de Sabata**

**Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala di Milano**

The audio quality here might be on the older side of the spectrum. But imagine that you were born 80 years ago, and were suddenly able to have a performance of this quality in your living room; I've known many older fans of classical music who go mad for this recording.

This album has been hailed as an all-time classic, and with good reason. It showcases a gold standard of passionate singing; Callas and Gobbi make a thrilling duo of melodramatic foes.

## Album #26



### **Beethoven: Symphony No. 9**

**Wilhelm Furtwängler**

**Berlin Philharmonic**

**1942 Recording**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/017685065323>

Furtwängler is famed for his interpretations of Beethoven's symphonies. He arguably defined a style of playing Beethoven which has been mimicked by many of the greats who have followed him (Karajan, Barenboim, etc.).

This recording is particularly seminal – it is a live performance for Hitler's birthday in 1942, attended by many Nazi soldiers. Video footage of this concert can be found online, along with the famous, controversial handshake between Furtwängler and Dr. Goebbels.

As Tom Service has written in the Guardian, this album, "may be the most terrifying music-making that I know; a performance for Hitler's birthday in 1942 that seethes with a daemonic intensity. The end sounds more like a scream of pain rather than a shout of joy."

Whilst Furtwängler was working under the Nazi party, many have come to see this performance as a protest against Hitler, rather than as support for his regime. There are differing opinions on Furtwängler's true allegiances; however, this performance remains utterly captivating, violent, and a thrilling listen, both for its performance and its historic occasion.

## Album #27



**Verdi: Otello**  
**Plácido Domingo**  
**Cheryl Studer**  
**Sergei Leiferkus**  
**Myung-Whun Chung**  
**Orchestre et Choeurs de l'Opéra Bastille**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028943980524>

From the first chord of this opera, it should be apparent why this album is on this list. After 10 minutes, it will be even more obvious. Once the first Act is over, you'll have no doubt that this album is an all-time gem amongst Verdi recording. Yet another stellar cast, and an extraordinary energy make this album a thrill to listen to.



## Album #28

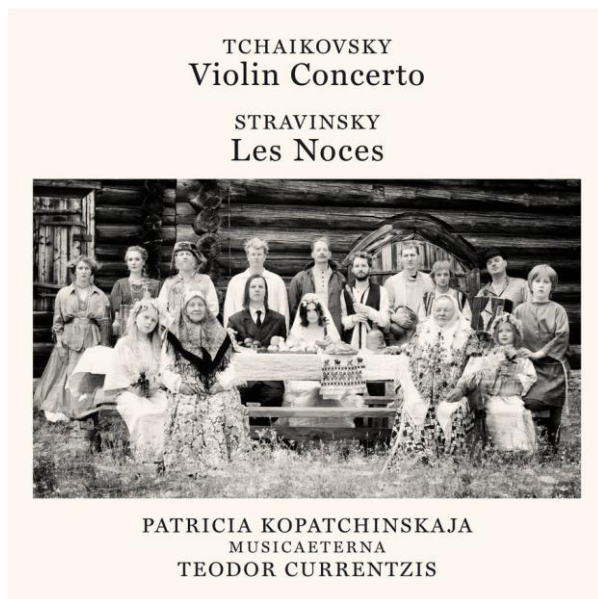


**Beethoven: Piano Sonata No. 14, 'Moonlight' /// Piano Sonata No. 8, 'Pathetique' /// Piano Sonata No. 21, 'Waldstein'**  
**Radu Lupu**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/00028947831839>

Another of the greatest living pianists plays three of Beethoven's most loved piano sonatas. This album may be Lupu in his prime; his performance is at times intimate, and at other times thrilling and awe-inspiring.

## Album #29



### **Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto /// Stravinsky: Les Noces**

**Patricia Kopatchinskaja**

**Teodor Currentzis**

**Musica Aeterna**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/886445509304>

It might be surprising to include Currentzis here, as he is relatively modern. However, there comes a time where one has listened to so many recorded versions of a piece that they all begin to sound mostly the same.

This never happens with Currentzis.

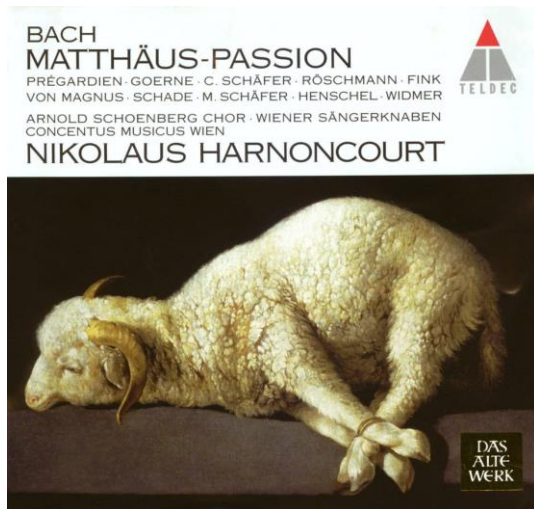
His recordings are always utterly unique, and unlike any other. He recently made a splash with his recordings of Mozart's Da Ponte operas: finally, after decades of recordings, many Mozart lovers said that it was like hearing these operas for the first time. It was an experience of rediscovering something, as if you had never heard it before – and what a joy it was to be given that experience!

It's the same here with his Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. Patricia Kopatchinskaja had never recorded the Tchaikovsky concerto. And so, in collaboration with Currentzis, they decided to do something totally different from anything that had ever been done before. No, it doesn't follow every marking on the score, to the letter, but that makes things so much more interesting. It truly is like hearing the work for the first time (assuming you already know the piece!)

Similarly, I had never enjoyed *Les Noces* until I heard this recording. Every other version is sung so operatically, and played so perfectly, even if they try not to be. But finally, Currentzis gives us something totally different – something *truly* raw and primal. The chorus sound is thrilling, and the performance made me fall in love with the piece. The only trouble is that I'm unable to listen to any other recording of it – no other recording does it the same justice!

And so, Currentzis has pride of place here for changing the game of interpretation, and truly bringing something *totally new* to the table.

## Album #30



**Bach: St Matthew Passion**  
**Nikolaus Harnoncourt**

<https://play.primephonic.com/album/685738103669>

This recording made a serious impression on me as a teenager, and helped convert me to Bach. The second half is particularly well realised, with fantastic soloists, and a genuine, heart-felt performance. Emotive tempi and crisp audio make this performance of an all-time masterpiece a must-have.