

Title:

Classical for Beginners

Word Count:

1777

Summary:

Now and then, people ask me for advice on where to begin with the daunting world of classical music recordings. They've heard bits here and there, they're curious, they imagine they'd probably enjoy it once they got involved.

Keywords:

mp3 downloads, free mp3 downloads, music downloads, free music downloads, online music, audio books

Article Body:

Now and then, people ask me for advice on where to begin with the daunting world of classical music recordings. They've heard bits here and there, they're curious, they imagine they'd probably enjoy it once they got involved, but they wouldn't know where to look if they walked into -- oops, I mean logged onto eMusic.com and started poking around. My strategy is always to offer a handful of suggestions, in as wide a variety as possible. "Try these," I say. "See what grabs you, and we'll work from there."

That's the idea behind this Dozen. Here are 12 recordings selected to entice people who have had little exposure to classical music, but who know they want more. I've carefully contrived the list to cover a wide range of colors and styles, instruments and moods, shapes and sizes. Some pieces are light, some heavy; some charming, some imposing; some dramatic, meditative, amorous, tragic, lofty, goofy. All in all, the selections encompass 1,200 years of music history -- and they've all been chosen to make a good first impression and whet your appetite. They're "gateway" works, if you will. I'd be surprised if there were anyone who couldn't find something on this list that pleased and intrigued them. Think of it as a sampler, a tapas menu: if you don't care for the stuffed olives/Renaissance Mass, try the garlic shrimp/20th-century string quartet.

Are these the twelve greatest works ever? No, though some of them could justly claim a place on such a list. Most of these are works I actually have suggested to people, and which have gotten a favorable response. Others I have seen appeal to newbies in ways I never expected. Others are just a few personal favorites which I proselytize for whenever possible.

Gregorian Chant For Easter

Artist: Capella Antiqua, Munich

Release Date: 2006

The recorded history of "classical" music in the Western "art" tradition (so many of these terms are so problematic) begins in the medieval period with music composed for church use -- settings of sacred texts in Latin for choirs singing in unison, just one note at a time. The serene meditateness of Gregorian chant (named for liturgical reformer Pope Gregory, 540-604, who launched the practice according to legend) has made it popular in recent years, usable as a backdrop for anything from yoga to post-rave chilling. There are plenty of chant CDs out there, some with hipper packaging, but these performances by the male voices of Capella Antiqua, Munich, surrounded by a cathedral-like halo of reverb, are stately and gorgeous.

Ockeghem: Requiem

Artist: Ensemble Organum, Marcel Pérès

Release Date: 1993

A friend of mine, also a musician, has played a number of classical pieces for his infant son, and reports that Allen seems to like the music of Johannes Ockeghem (c. 1410-1497) best. It could be the way this Renaissance composer weaves voices together to create a sort of ear-blanket. Or perhaps this music's low gentle murmuring reminds him of sounds in utero. Either way, the Ensemble Organum's performance of this Requiem (a Mass to honor the dead) is spacious and calm, but also possesses a sort of authoritative, virile resonance.

Bach: Six Concertos for the Margrave of Brandenburg

Artist: Trevor Pinnock

Release Date: 2008

Incomparably joyous and sparkling, these six pieces can claim to be both the greatest of baroque instrumental works and, with the possible exception of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" concertos, the most popular. Composers in the baroque era (roughly 1600-1750) prioritized a musical skill called counterpoint, the practice of combining independent instrumental or vocal lines into a complex whole. Johann Sebastian Bach had no rivals (and surely never will) in this art, giving every section of the orchestra something rewarding -- and fun -- to do.

He built structures of grandeur and irresistible energy. Each of these concertos are scored for a different combination; if you'd like a taste, try the first movement of the Concerto no. 2, in which four bright-toned soloists (violin, flute, oboe and trumpet) dance festively around the accompanying string orchestra, or the fleet finale of the Concerto no. 3, a whirlwind showpiece for strings alone.

MOZART: Overtures

Artist: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

After Bach and his contemporaries had brought Baroque counterpoint to its peak, composers of the next generation reacted by lightening the texture of their music. The melody line dominated, and the middle and bass instruments were entrusted with harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment rather than with independent lines of their own. This new style, though, was no less bubbling and energetic -- see the overtures (instrumental preludes) which Mozart (1756-91) wrote for his operas. Brilliant attention-getters, arresting but never too pompous, full of catchy tunes, cheeky wind solos and stirring trumpet-and drum passages, these overtures are played with great verve by Capella Istropolitana.

CHOPIN: Etudes Opp. 10 and 25

Artist: Freddy Kempf

Release Date: 2004

Frederic Chopin's music, full of innovations in nuances of harmony and delicate coloristic effects, pushed the boundaries of what a piano could do. In these two sets of etudes (completed in 1832 and 1836), he also pushed piano technique, making unprecedented demands of virtuosity in works that are still among the most richly dazzling ever written. Not all the pieces are finger-tanglers, though; some are studies in sensitive touch and singing melody. Though pianist Freddy Kempf's technique is precise, these etudes are for him poetry first; in op. 10 no. 3 in E or op. 25 no. 1 in A-flat, he phrases the surface melody with the expressivity a great vocalist might bring to it.

Pearl Fishers and Other Famous Operatic Duets

Artist: Various Artists

It occurred to me that an album of duets might make an even better introduction

to opera than one of solo arias -- even though those big diva/divo moments are what the general public thinks of when they hear the term opera. Duets, of course, display the character interplay that the dramatic side of opera is all about: love, conflict, friendship -- or betrayal, as in the searing finale to Act II of Verdi's *Otello*, when Iago falsely swears loyalty to the title character. Two rapturous and justly popular duets recorded here come from French operas, the rest from Italian. Complete recordings of many of these operas are also available on eMusic, so if these excerpts whet your appetite, you can move on to explore the entire work.

Dvorak / Haydn / Shostakovich: String Quartets
Artist: Quartetto Cassoviae
Release Date: 2000

Contained on this disc is a mini-history of the string quartet itself: an elegant, buoyant piece (1799) by Franz Josef Haydn, a pioneer of the form; a fragrantly tuneful example (1893) by Antonin Dvorak, written under the influence of American folksong; and a bitter, semi-autobiographical work (1960) by Dmitri Shostakovich, reflective of his state of mind during a life lived under Soviet oppression. The Quartetto Cassoviae's performance of this last quartet is perhaps the disc's most impressive: it's taut, wiry, grippingly expressive and even a little nightmarish.

Alexander Borodin: Symphony No.2 - Conducted by Carlos Kleiber & Erich Kleiber
Artist: Kleiber
Release Date: 2003

I chose this symphony because I clearly remember my sister, eight or nine at the time, dragged to one of my school orchestra concerts and, at its conclusion, telling me she liked this piece best. The brusque gesture that launches Alexander Borodin's Second Symphony (1876) is definitely one of the more arresting openings: glowering, passionate and Russian, Russian, Russian. Compare it to the sinuous oboe melody that comes later, and you hear the two sides of Borodin's musical personality: barbaric vs. sensuous, both tinged with the exotic folk colors of ancient Asian tribes. This disc is also the only one I know that offers father-son performances of the same work, by Erich (1890-1956) and Carlos Kleiber (1930-2004).

STRAVINSKY: 125th Anniversary Album - The Rite of Spring / Violin Concerto
(Stravinsky, Vol. 8)
Artist: Jennifer Frautschi

When Igor Stravinsky got a commission to write music for a ballet depicting

ancient fertility rituals, did he intend from the start to revolutionize musical history? He filled his colorful score (completed in 1913) with pounding, asymmetrical rhythms and harsh dissonances -- unprecedented elements at the time; he's one of the many composers in the first few decades of the 20th century who tossed a bomb into the middle of Romantic-era assumptions about what music could be. This earthy, viscerally intense showpiece still startles audiences -- especially those who see classical music as something stuffy and genteel. Think of it as heavy metal classical. Robert Craft, a longtime colleague of the composer, conducts a particularly gutsy and un-pretty performance.

Strauss: Symphonia Domestica / Eine Alpensinfonie / Oboe Concerto / Duett-Concertino

Artist: Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Release Date: 2006

This disc shows the two sides of composer Richard Strauss. In the *Symphonia domestica* (1903) and *Eine Alpensinfonie* (An Alpine Symphony, 1915), he capped the tradition of German romanticism with two of the grandest and most opulent orchestral works ever; in his two nostalgic concertos (one for oboe from 1945, the other for clarinet and bassoon from 1947), he revived the spirit of Mozart in slender, tuneful, but autumnal pieces for a (much) smaller orchestra. Oboe soloist Jonathan Small, in particular, plays with ravishing fluency, and conductor Gerard Schwarz is especially adept in this soaring, sweeping music.

Daughters Of The Lonsome Isle

Artist: Margaret Leng Tan

Release Date: 1994

Just by inserting screws, rubber erasers and other tidbits between a piano's strings, John Cage (1912-1992) was able to turn the instrument into a miniature percussion orchestra. This was just one of the avant gardist's many innovations. On this disc, keyboardist Margaret Leng Tan, the world's foremost toy piano virtuoso, pays homage to Cage's experiments, his rhythmic vitality and the Zen-inspired spirit that led him to ask profound conceptual questions about music. But even as Cage challenged traditional notions of music, it's not hard to find great beauty, wit, depth and spiritual gentleness in his work. It's scarcely possible, for example, not to fall in love with Cage's pulsing, gnomic *Bacchanale* or the elegiac *In the Name of the Holocaust*, which proves that the instrument he called a "prepared piano" was just as capable of stark intensity.

Reich: Different Trains

Artist: The Duke Quartet, Andrew Russo & Marc Mellits

As a child in the early '40s, composer Steve Reich used to travel across the U.S. by train each year. In thinking about the very "different trains" he could have been riding as a Jew had he grown up in Europe, Reich was inspired to compose this powerful work for string quartet and tape. Snippets of recorded interviews with actual railroad employees are woven among the urgently churning string parts, with their licks echoing the speakers' vocal inflections. Also included here is Reich's 1967 Piano Phase, which was a groundbreaking early work that used a compositional technique that caught his imagination: complex rhythmic effects achieved by subtle shifts in temporal coordination between musicians, creating a trance-like rippling effect.