
MUSIC

My Favorite Classical Recordings

Terry Teachout

In honor of Neal Kozodoy

IN 1969, at the age of thirteen, I bought my first classical album, a recording of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. That purchase was the start of a life-long obsession.

Forty years later, I own 2,000 classical compact discs—a fraction of the many LP's, cassettes, CD's and digital sound files that have passed through my hands since then. The rigors of apartment living have forced me to be choosy, so it is unusual for me to retain more than two performances of the same piece, usually a 78-era version and a more modern one. But I have also become acutely aware of the relative merits of the records I continue to own, and when I bought my

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first iPod in 2005 in order to listen to music while traveling, I loaded it with the ones that I liked best. Now, after much winnowing, I have come up with a list of 25 classical records that for me are indispensable, the ones to which I return most often, both on the road and at home.

To draw up a list like this is an occasion for nostalgia—and regret. My generation of music lovers (I was born in 1956) had access to records made by celebrated conductors, singers and instrumentalists who had been born as early as the 1830's. But since I started writing about music for COMMENTARY a decade-and-a-half ago, I have witnessed and chronicled the decline of the once-mighty classical-recording industry that preserved these performances for posterity. It may well be that performances of comparable quality and individuality continue to be given today, but if so, they will go unheard by the music lovers of tomorrow, for with rare exceptions they are not being recorded. On the other hand, digital technology has made it easier than ever to hear the great recordings of the 20th century, many of which can now be downloaded from the In-

ternet, thus ensuring their permanent accessibility.*

None of the records on this list is new. I have been listening to most of them for a quarter-century or more, and to some since I was a boy. They have withstood the test of time and hard usage. Beyond choosing only performances that are currently in print, I have made no effort to balance the list in any way, and for that reason some of the composers, performers, and pieces that I love best are not represented on it. It is nothing more—or less—than a roll of personal favorites, the 25 classical recordings that have given me special pleasure throughout a lifetime of listening. Perhaps some of them will do the same for you.

**1. Jacques Thibaud, violin;
Pablo Casals, cello;
Alfred Cortot, piano.**

Schubert Trio No. 1 in B Flat, D. 898
(EMI Classics 6700, recorded 1926)

This chamber-music performance, among the first to be

* Except as indicated, all of the recordings mentioned in this piece can be downloaded from iTunes or ordered on line from amazon.com.

recorded electrically, documents the ensemble playing of three virtuosos with utterly dissimilar styles who nonetheless contrived to make music that was both coherent and full of character. While today's groups play the standard repertoire with greater polish, it is hard to imagine a more vivid interpretation than this one.

**2. Fritz Kreisler, violin;
Sergei Rachmaninoff, piano.**

Beethoven Violin Sonata No. 8 in G Major, Op. 30/3
(Naxos Historical 8.110968, recorded 1928, available only on CD at amazon.co.uk)

Another of the all-time great chamber-music recordings, this one was made by two old friends whose styles, like those of Thibaud, Casals, and Cortot, had little in common. Yet Kreisler's Viennese charm and Rachmaninoff's no-nonsense forthrightness somehow add up to an interpretation that is believably Beethovenian. The imported CD also contains their equally fine performances of sonatas by Grieg and Schubert. Would that they had made a dozen such recordings!

3. Vladimir Horowitz, piano.

Haydn Piano Sonata in E-Flat Major, Hob. XVI:52
(Appian APR 6004, two discs, recorded 1932, available only on CD)

More than any other classical pianist, Horowitz captured the imagination of my generation. It is impossible to choose a single recording that sums up his febrile style, but this performance is universally regarded by connoisseurs as one of his finest. Like many Russians, Horowitz found it hard to play Austro-German music idiomatically, but the brio of this recording suggests that he responded to Haydn's wit with a sympathy that was not often evident in his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert.

**4. Jascha Heifetz, violin;
John Barbirolli conducting
the London Philharmonic.**

Mozart Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major, K. 219 ("Turkish")
(EMI Classics 53214, recorded 1934)

This was the first Heifetz recording that I ever heard. Warm and unfussy in a way not always typical of the most famous violinist of the 20th century, it is accompanied with crisp vigor by John Barbirolli and the then-new London Philharmonic, which Thomas Beecham had already taught to play Mozart with elegance and grace.

**5. Artur and Karl Ulrich
Schnabel, piano duet.**

Schubert Rondo in A Major, D. 951
(Music & Arts CD-1173, five discs, recorded 1937, available only on CD)

Schnabel is best known for his Beethoven recordings, but he was no less closely identified in his lifetime with the music of Schubert. This piece, whose simple theme is developed with unhurried grace, ends with an exquisitely well-played coda that dissolves into a fleeting vision of transcendence. Schnabel is joined here by his son Karl Ulrich, a fine pianist who was better known as a teacher.

**6. Lawrence Tibbett,
baritone; Wilfred Pelletier
conducting the Metropolitan
Opera Orchestra.**

Verdi "Credo in un Dio crudel"
(Preiser 89576, recorded 1939)

Tibbett was among the first important classical musicians to be born and trained in America, as well as one of the first to "cross over" to a popular audience. Today, however, he is remembered not for his film and radio career but for the recordings of opera arias that he made in the 20's and 30's, before alcoholism cut short his career. Not only was his voice brilliant and vibrant, but he was a natural actor whose imposing

stage presence is clearly suggested in this performance of Iago's "Credo" from *Otello*, which ranks among the most powerfully communicative Verdi recordings ever made.

**7. Joseph Szigeti, violin;
Béla Bartók, piano.**

Debussy Violin Sonata in G Minor
(Hungaroton HCD 12330, recorded live in 1940)

Szigeti's characterful, incisive style is heard to ideal advantage in this live recording of Debussy's wryly ironic Violin Sonata. At the keyboard is Béla Bartók, as great a pianist as he was a composer; he left behind only a handful of commercially released recordings, of which this is the best-known.

**8. Peter Pears, tenor;
Benjamin Britten, piano.**

Britten Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, Op. 22
(Pearl GEMM CD 9177, recorded 1942)

Not all great voices are conventionally beautiful. Peter Pears had a reedy-sounding, occasionally unsteady tenor instrument, but he used it with such creativity that its technical defects became irrelevant. Benjamin Britten, who like Bartók was also a pianist of the first rank, wrote this resplendently romantic song cycle for Pears and himself to perform in recital. Their first recording of the work, made shortly after the London premiere, remains unrivaled.

9. Dinu Lipatti, piano.

Chopin Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60
(EMI Classics 66956, recorded 1948)

Lipatti's chaste lyricism was well suited to Chopin's most successful large-scale composition, which the pianist recorded only two years before his death from Hodgkins' disease at the age of thirty-three. Lipatti is said to have been dissatisfied with the performance—it was not

released until after he died—but it is impossible to see why. No other recording of the Barcarolle is purer or more noble.

**10. William Kapell, piano;
Antal Dorati conducting the
Dallas Symphony.**

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 3
in C Major, Op. 26
(RCA Victor Red Seal 68993,
recorded 1949)

Like Lipatti, Kapell died young, but not before leaving behind enough recordings to show why he was hailed as the most promising American instrumentalist of the postwar era. The hurtling momentum of his explosive rendition of Prokofiev's Third Concerto remains unmatched—even by the composer's own version.

**11. Arturo Toscanini conduct-
ing the NBC Symphony.**

Brahms Symphony No. 4
in E Minor, Op. 98
(RCA Victor Red Seal 55838, two
CD's, recorded 1951)

I learned the standard symphonic repertoire from the recordings that Toscanini made with the NBC Symphony in the 40's and 50's; many of them were issued on budget-priced LP's in the late 60's and early 70's. Since then, I have never been without his soaring version of Brahms's E Minor Symphony, an object lesson in how fervor and precision can be combined to thrilling effect.

**12. Dennis Brain, horn;
Gerald Moore, piano.**

Dukas Villanelle
(EMI Classics 06010, four CD's,
recorded 1952)

Brain was the greatest horn player to make recordings and the first to establish himself as a soloist. He died in a car crash at the age of thirty-six—far too soon, but not before he had recorded most of his repertoire, including this lovely performance of an encore piece by Paul

Dukas, the composer of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, that shows off his warm tone and supple phrasing. At the piano is Gerald Moore, whose sensitive ensemble playing can be heard on hundreds of records made between 1921 and 1972.

**13. Maria Callas, soprano;
Giuseppe di Stefano, tenor;
Tito Gobbi, baritone; Victor de
Sabata conducting the Orches-
tra and Chorus of La Scala.**

Puccini *Tosca*
(EMI Classics 56304, two CD's,
recorded 1953)

This may be the best recording of *anything* ever made, a vade mecum of Italian operatic style and a priceless souvenir of the foremost singing actress of the 20th century. I am too young to have seen Callas in person, but the first of her two *Tosca* recordings makes it clear why she continues to be remembered by those who did.

14. Glenn Gould, piano.
Bach Goldberg Variations,
BWV 988

(Sony Classical S3K 97703,
three CD's, recorded 1955)

Fleet, preternaturally exact, and breathtakingly light on its feet, this performance, Gould's commercial recording debut, made him a star. It has never been out of print, and he would never do anything better, least of all the 1981 remake with which it is coupled in this three-CD set.

**15. Fritz Reiner conducting the
Chicago Symphony Orchestra.**

Bartók Concerto for Orchestra
(RCA Red Seal 61504,
recorded 1955)

Hungarian by birth, training, and character, Reiner was a legendary tyrant of the podium who understood Bartók's music from the inside out. This boldly colored early-stereo performance of Bartók's most popular and accessible composition is all but flawless. Coupled with it is a

similarly impressive 1958 recording by Reiner and the Chicago Symphony of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*.

**16. Arturo Benedetti
Michelangeli, piano;
Ettore Gracis conducting the
Philharmonia Orchestra.**

Ravel Piano Concerto in G Major
(EMI Classics 67258,
recorded 1957)

Michelangeli was a pianist of phenomenal technical control and uncanny tonal finish whose personal eccentricities prevented him from making more than a handful of successful recordings. This is the best one, a scintillating version of Ravel's popular Piano Concerto that has been regarded as definitive ever since its release a half-century ago.

**17. Frederick Fennell
conducting the Eastman Wind
Ensemble.**

Grainger Lincolnshire Posy
(Mercury 432 754, recorded 1958,
available only on CD)

While Percy Grainger was by no means a great composer, his settings of English folksongs are full of charm, and this six-movement suite for concert band is the most attractive of his large-scale works. Frederick Fennell's gorgeously well-engineered recording, played by an ensemble of gifted young musicians drawn from the student body of the Eastman School of Music, is a miracle of collective virtuosity comparable in quality to the finest orchestral recordings of the 50's.

**18. Sir Thomas Beecham con-
ducting the French National
Radio Orchestra.**

Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*,
Op. 14
(EMI Classics 67972, recorded 1959)

The recording of Berlioz's masterpiece. The very French orchestral playing may not be to all tastes, but Beecham's conducting, at once

elegant and supremely vital, leaves nothing whatsoever to be desired.

**19. Nathan Milstein, violin;
William Steinberg conducting
the Pittsburgh Symphony.**

Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto
in D Major, Op. 35
(EMI Classics 58035,
recorded 1959)

Milstein plays Tchaikovsky's popular concerto with the patrician poise that it deserves but rarely gets, handsomely accompanied by a "provincial" ensemble whose well-drilled playing *circa* 1959 was indistinguishable in technical finish from that of any of America's so-called Big Five orchestras.

**20. Leonard Bernstein
conducting the New York
Philharmonic.**

Bernstein Fancy Free
(Sony Classical SMK 60559,
recorded 1963)

Every classical musician who grew up in America in the 60's was touched by Bernstein's slapdash genius. As a conductor he was exciting but inconsistent in everything but his own music, which he always led with tremendous panache. In *Fancy Free*, the ballet score that he composed in 1944 for Jerome Robbins, he blends Copland, Gershwin, and Stravinsky to heady effect, and the New York Philharmonic rises effortlessly to the occasion, sailing through his jazzy syncopations like a big band in full cry.

**21. Jaime Laredo, Leslie
Parnas, Samuel Rhodes,
Alexander Schneider, and the
Guarneri String Quartet.**

Mendelssohn Octet in E-Flat
Major, Op. 20
(Sony Classical SMK 46251,
recorded 1965)

The most mature piece of classical music ever to be written by a teenager is rarely played in concert because of its unusual instrumenta-

tion for double string quartet. This performance, taped at the Marlboro Music Festival by a group of celebrated string players led by Alexander Schneider, who was better known as the second violinist of the Budapest String Quartet, all but crackles with *joie de vivre*.

**22. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau,
baritone; Gerald Moore, piano.**

Wolf "Nun wandre, Maria"
(DG 457 726, two CD's,
recorded 1967)

I first heard Hugo Wolf's haunting Christmastide vignette (from the *Spanish Songbook*) as a high-school student and fell in love with German art song on the spot. It has been recorded by many distinguished recitalists, but never more beautifully than by Fischer-Dieskau and Moore. While the baritone's text-driven style sometimes lapsed into hyper-articulated fussiness, he was also capable of singing with unmannered subtlety, and this magical performance has long been close to my heart.

23. Helmut Walcha, organ.

Bach "Schmücke dich, O liebe
Seele," BWV 654
(DG 310 102, two CD's,
recorded 1971)

"If life were to deprive me of hope and faith, this single chorale would replenish me with both," Felix Mendelssohn said to Robert Schumann. Its tender *Innigkeit* is fully realized by the blind German organist whose Bach recordings set a standard that has yet to be surpassed. The version listed above is part of *Glorious Pipes*, a two-CD an-

thology of popular works for organ played by several noted organists; it is also available on a boxed set of Walcha's complete stereo recordings of Bach's organ music (DG Archiv 419 904, 12 CD's).

**24. Aaron Copland conducting
the Columbia Chamber
Ensemble.**

Copland Appalachian Spring
(original version)
(Sony Classical SM2K 89323, two
CD's, recorded 1973)

As a rule, Copland was a competent, uninspired conductor, but in this recording of the original 13-instrument version of his 1944 ballet for Martha Graham, played by a crack team of New York session musicians, he led a luminous performance of the greatest American classical composition of the 20th century. This two-CD set also includes a fascinating 17-minute rehearsal sequence.

**25. Herbert von Karajan
conducting the Berlin
Philharmonic.**

Stravinsky Apollo
(DG 415 979, recorded 1973)

Overrefinement was the defect of the virtue of Karajan's style, and it is unlikely that Igor Stravinsky would have approved of the silken sounds that he drew from the string section of the Berlin Philharmonic in his recording of *Apollo*. Yet anyone familiar with George Balanchine's lucid choreography for this landmark of neoclassicism will find Karajan's seraphic reading both apposite and hard to resist.

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The Forgotten Refugees

Why does nobody care about the Jewish refugees from Arab lands?

The world is greatly concerned about the Arabs who fled the nascent state of Israel in 1948. But no mention is ever made of the Jewish refugees from Arab lands. Their history is as compelling and arguably more so than that of the Arab refugees from Israel.

What are the facts?

Jews in Arab countries. Jews have lived since Biblical times in what are now Arab countries. After the Roman conquest, Jews were dispersed, mostly to what are now the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Many Jews migrated to the Iberian peninsula – Spain and Portugal. They were expelled from those countries at the end of the 15th century. They mostly migrated to the Arab countries, where, by now, they have been living for almost 500 years, many Jews for over 2,000 years.

There is a myth that Jews had an easy life in Muslim/Arab countries. The opposite is the case. Jews under Islam were treated as second-class citizens and worse. The relationship was governed by a system of discrimination, intended to reduce the Jews in those Arab countries to conditions of humiliation, segregation and violence. They were excluded from society, from government, and from most professions. They were barely tolerated and often, under the slightest pretext or no pretext at all, were victimized by vicious violence.

When Israel declared its statehood in 1948, pogroms broke out across the entire Arab/Muslim world. Thousands died in this violence. Their homes and businesses were destroyed, their women violated. The vast majority of those Jews fled from where they had lived for centuries. They had to leave everything behind. Most of those who were able to escape found their way to the just-created state of Israel.

Over 850,000 Jews were driven from Arab countries, most of them in 1948, at the birth of Israel. Most of the remainder were chased out during or immediately following the Six-Day War in 1967, when, in fury about the disastrous defeat, the “Arab street” erupted and subjected its Jewish population to bloody pogroms. Israel received every one of those Jewish refugees from Arab countries with brotherly open arms; it housed, fed, and quickly integrated them into Israeli society. They and their descendants now make up more than one-half of the country’s population.

Jewish refugees from the Arab countries are the forgotten refugees. The world, and especially of course the Arabs, claim compensation from Israel for the Arab refugees and insist on their return to what has been Israel for over 60 years. The Jewish refugees from Arab countries, all Israelis now, have no desire to return to their ancient homelands, where they had been treated so shabbily and so brutally. But if there is to be any compensation, those forgotten Jewish refugees are certainly entitled to such compensation as much as the Arab refugees. Anything else would be an outrage and a great injustice.

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Facts and Logic About the Middle East
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A different history. It is instructive to compare the history of those Jewish refugees with that of the Arabs who fled from Israel during its War of Independence. There were about 650,000 of them. Most left following the strident invocations of their leaders, who urged them to leave, so as to make room for the invading Arab armies. After victory was to be achieved, they could return to reclaim their property and that of the Jews, all of whom would have been killed or would have fled.

In contrast to the Jewish refugees, who were quickly integrated into Israel, the Arab countries resolutely refused to accept the Arab refugees into their societies. They confined them into so-called refugee camps. Those camps are essentially extended slum cities, where their descendants – now the fourth generation – have been living ever since. The reason for the Arabs’ refusal to accept them was and still is the desire to keep them as a festering sore and to make solution of the Arab/Israel conflict impossible. These “refugees,” whose

number has by now miraculously increased from their original 650,000 to 5 million, are seething with hatred toward Israel and provide the cadres of terrorists and suicide bombers.

The Palestinian refugees occupy a unique place in the concern of the world. Since 1947, there have been over 100 UN resolutions concerning the Palestinian refugees. But there has not been one single resolution addressing the horrible injustices done to the nearly one million Jewish refugees from the Arab states.

There have been many millions of refugees in the wake of the Second World War. With only one exception, none of those refugee groups occupy the interest of the world and of the United Nations in a major way. That one exception are the Palestinian refugees. In fact, a special branch of the United Nations (UNRWA) exists only for the maintenance of those “refugees.” In the almost sixty years of the existence of this agency it has cost many billions of dollars, most of it – you guessed it – contributed by the United States.

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