

# CLASSICAL CD HALL OF FAME

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## ABSTRACT

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The following article is a list of dozens of excellent CDs. After the following brief introduction, it is divided into two sections:

Section 1: The CDs **CATEGORIZED** with reference to mood, type, etc.

Section 2: The CDs **DESCRIBED**, with conductor, orchestra, and label information given, along with *accessibility*, *sound quality*, and *great tracks* indexes.

This list is the culmination of thousands of hours of listening to classical CDs by the author. It is designed for people new to classical music, and the rest of us.

## INTRODUCTION

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The following article is a list which I believe goes a long way towards answering the following questions in the Usenet classical music FAQ:

**Q2. I'm new to classical music and want to learn about it. What should I listen to?**

Answer: See this list — there's a category just for you! Next question, please.

**Q4. I heard this great piece on the radio, but when I went to the record store to buy a copy, I found dozens of versions. Which is the right one to get?**

Answer: this one's easy — the version you heard on the radio. The piece CANNOT be separated from the performance. Compare Scherchen's performance of the first movement of Beethoven's *Pastorale* symphony with, say, Klemperer, or the last movement of Levi's Shostakovich 5th symphony with Bernstein's performance (the 1959 recording). There are many excellent pieces of music, but there are likewise many UN-excellent interpretations of those pieces. And, the combined result, unhappily, is likewise UN-excellent, notwithstanding the inherent quality of the piece. Consequently, the following phenomenon happens all too often. Mr. or Ms. X hears that Beethoven's 5th is great — get it! Off to the store they go. Lo and behold — they find there are fifty different versions of Beethoven's 5th! Unluckily for them, they choose version Q, which happens to have scrappy playing and/or a boring interpretation by the conductor. (Why do they release these things?) They listen to it, and think, "yeah, that's okay, but this music is HIGHLY overrated." They don't listen to the CD again, they don't buy another version. That's it. They have just dismissed the **PIECE** because of the **PERFORMANCE**.

I view this as tragic, since a lack of the draw prevented them from discovering the beauty inherent in the piece which the filter of performance obscured. Future possible paths are precluded at the outset. To counter this phenomenon, I have compiled the following list of CDs which, to me, should be included in a hypothetical *Classical CD Hall of Fame*. For me, the following discs all have a special quality that separates them from the average CD one typically buys. While the performances on these CDs may not be the best performances of these pieces (I have not heard every version), I believe that they are excellent performances. In addition, I believe they are essential acquisitions for the person who loves classical music.

### HOW THIS LIST WAS COMPILED

Lists like this are always vulnerable to the charge that they are merely one man's opinion. If that were really true, this list would only work for those listeners whose consciousness precisely matched mine: probably not a very large group! Luckily, the manner in which this list was compiled rescues this list from this particular charge, at least, because the starting point for inclusion on this list is *what other people have thought*.

In 1986, I began combing the journals AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE, STEREO REVIEW, STEPHENSON'S GUIDE, FANFARE, and GRAMOPHONE, as well as several books on excellent CDs, including Cohn's RECORDED CLASSICAL MUSIC, several PENGUIN guides, and Svejda's RECORD SHELF GUIDE. My searches were active, not passive, motivated by my love for classical music and my desire to obtain excellent performances of the pieces I loved. First, I noted the discs that critics would refer to over and over again as excellent. I listed these recommendations, and then listened to them at the library. Of all the recordings I listened to (selected out of a recommended list that probably consisted of less than 5% of the total universe of CDs), I liked perhaps 20% of these enough to buy them. And, of those over 500 CDs I own, only 10% (approximately) have made it to this list. Thus, the CDs on this list have passed not one, but several hurdles: a) initial recommendation by experts in the field, b) my own opinion, and c) my final hierarchical ranking of the discs I like the best (coupled with the verification of my opinion by a close friend of mine): consequently, the CDs on this list represent probably no more than 1/5 of 1% of the total number of classical CDs. Any disc which successfully traverses so many filters has some special claim on legitimacy, in my opinion.

An additional indicator of the legitimacy of the choices on this list is that many of the recordings here were done in the 50s and 60s, and yet are still in print. That means that over the past thirty or forty years, people have continually been buying these interpretations, while many, many other interpretations have fallen by the wayside. I view this fact as significant.

## YOUR AUTHOR'S BIASES

Notwithstanding the above analysis, I do have my biases. Since I selected the discs with these biases, I believe you need to know what they are, in case your biases are totally opposed to mine: if they are, you might hate all the CDs on this list! Here they are:

- I prefer *close* vs. *distant* recordings: I like to be *in* the music, and I can't stand recordings that put the microphone in the back of a hall.
- I prefer a *raw* sound to a *polished* sound. Musicians today are technical wizards; unfortunately, sometimes the soul of the music gets lost in technically perfect playing. I gladly trade a few poorly played notes for *fire*.
- Generally, I prefer *fast* tempos to *slow*, particularly with composers like Beethoven, who too often receive the Wagnerian treatment.
- I love great sound as much as anyone, but I'll take a great performance with mediocre sound over a mediocre performance with great sound any day. Consequently, some CDs on this list fall a little short in the sound department (I note this, of course, for those who prefer great sound at all costs).
- As the above biases might already indicate, I don't require perfection. I look at the total picture; many of these discs have one flaw or another, but I don't let those disturb me if my overall impression is favorable. Others may not be quite as charitable.

## YOUR AUTHOR'S SOUND SYSTEM

Closely related to internal biases of perception are *external* biases of perception; namely, the sound system through which the CDs are played. Just as the piece cannot be separated from the performance, it is likewise true that performance cannot be separated from the medium through which it is perceived. Listening to the Verdi *Requiem* through that boombox you bought at K-Mart for \$89 is like watching *Gone With the Wind* on one of those airline TVs on the seat in front of you on trans-oceanic flights. Without an adequate sound system, much of what makes these CDs so special isn't going to come through.

Fortunately, you don't need to spend a grand on a home stereo system. I've found that an excellent pair of headphones can get you pretty close. Headphones have a powerful advantage: the music goes directly to your ears, and isn't reflected and distorted

by the walls, inferior speaker wire, the ceiling, the carpet, and/or your distance from the speakers. Actually, I prefer them for much of the music I listen to, particularly the small ensemble CDs. The headphones I used to listen to these CDs are standard issue — the Sony MDR V-6. They cost about \$69, and with a decent portable CD player (I'm pretty satisfied with my Sony D-36), even those on a budget can be wrapped in aural bliss.

At any rate, my first listening of these discs was done through my home system, a Proton 40 watt-per-channel amplifier, a DBX CD player (that died and was replaced by an inferior Sony), and a set of AWESOME speakers, DBX Soundfields (model SF-1000). A lot of my love for music has to do with this system, one I am very satisfied with. I suspect that a good deal of critical discrepancy can be traced to the fact that one critic was listening to music with a blown tweeter, another had an amp that introduced distortion, still another had a CD player that produced tubby bass, and finally, one was listening through a state-of-the-art audiophile system with no discernible flaws. No wonder agreement is so difficult to get!

### HOW TO GET THE CDs ON THIS LIST

Enough information is given in the headings in the second part of this article for a person to buy the right CD. Here's an example heading:

#### **BRAHMS** Violin Concerto

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*Ormandy / Philadelphia Orchestra / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 8

Note that this description gives you the composer (Brahms), the conductor (Ormandy), the orchestra (Philadelphia Orchestra), and the label (CBS Masterworks). Armed with this information, you go to the record store. The *accessibility* number is the highest it can be, 10, indicating that if you're new to classical music, this is one of the CDs you should start with (any CD with an accessibility number 6 or lower is a risky bet for a new listener). The *sound* number, 8, is pretty good; if it were 6 or less you might want to shy away from it if great sound quality is essential to you. I left off the *Great Track* number because in this case, it doesn't really apply (it's all one thing!).

Now how to find the disk:

- 1) In the record store, go to the classical section, and go to the Brahms section.
- 2) The Brahms section will probably have a sub-section devoted to concertos. Go to the sub-section devoted to the *Violin Concerto*.

3) There will be several recordings of the Brahms Violin Concerto. Note that the CD on this list is on CBS Masterworks. Find a recording on that label. (An important point: some of the versions I have may have changed labels: for example, this recording may be on Sony Classical instead of CBS, since Sony bought the label. That's why you have conductor and orchestra information. It is also possible that the performance has been re-coupled with another piece since I purchased it).

4) If the recording is conducted by Ormandy, and played by Isaac Stern, you're almost there. Make sure that the orchestra is the same (very important, because sometimes an artist can record the same piece two or three times). If it's the Philadelphia Orchestra, you found it.

## PART 1: CATEGORIES

I have categorized the CDs on this list with reference to a number of different parameters. These categories are a guide for people looking for prototypical examples of the following categories (Note: some CDs fall into more than one category.)

Remember, the recommendations in this list refer **ONLY** to the performances listed in the second section, not to the pieces themselves.

### INTRODUCTORY

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*CDs for people new to classical music.*

Mussorgsky:	Pictures at an Exhibition
Dvorak:	Symphony No. 9
Dvorak:	Cello Concerto
Mendelssohn:	Symphony No. 4
Bolling:	Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano
Brahms:	Violin Concerto
Tchaikovsky:	Violin Concerto

### INTRODUCTORY OPERA

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*CDs for people new to opera. A Carmen highlights would be ideal here, but I haven't heard a version I'm totally satisfied with.*

Rossini:	Barber of Seville (highlights)
Verdi:	La Traviata
Mozart:	Marriage of Figaro (highlights)

### VOCAL/OPERA (in order of accessibility)

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*This is music that, in contrast to most of the music on this list, uses the voice.*

Bernstein:	Candide
Rossini:	Barber of Seville
Verdi:	La Traviata
Mozart:	Marriage of Figaro
Verdi:	Otello
Verdi:	Requiem
Boito:	Mefistofele
Wagner:	The Ring
Strauss:	Elektra
Blomdahl:	Aniara

Rachmaninoff: Vespers  
 Gorecki: Symphony No. 3

### SMALL ENSEMBLE (alphabetical)

*Music which has generally less than four musicians playing. Obviously, quieter than symphonic music.*

Beethoven: Cello Sonatas  
 Chopin: Nocturnes  
 Kodaly: Solo Cello Music  
 Legnani, et al: Guitar Music (Fernandez)  
 Paganini: 24 Caprices  
 Reger: Bach Variations  
 Schumann: Scenes from Childhood

### CONCERTOS (in order of musical value)

*An instrumental soloist shines in the spotlight, with backup by full orchestra.*

Brahms: Violin Concerto  
 Beethoven: Violin Concerto  
 Dvorak: Cello Concerto  
 Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto  
 Corigliano: Clarinet Concerto  
 Russo: Street Music (harmonica concerto)  
 Rachmaninoff: Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini

### WARHORSES (alphabetical)

*The pieces of music on this list most commonly played by symphony orchestras, according to the BOOK OF CLASSICAL MUSIC LISTS.*

Beethoven: Symphony No. 3  
 Beethoven: Violin Concerto  
 Brahms: Symphony No. 1  
 Brahms: Violin Concerto  
 Dvorak: Symphony No. 9  
 Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition  
 Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6  
 Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto

### THE BIG SOUND (in order of size)

*Music for people who like have great sound systems, and like to test the limits of those systems. Play these tracks at full volume for your friends who believe that classical music is boring, while remembering to respect, of course, the rights of your innocent neighbors.*

Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 8 (Track 3)
Verdi:	Requiem (Disc 1, Track 2)
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 5 (Track 4)
Bernstein:	Candide (Disc 1, Track 1)
Bernstein:	Candide (Disc 1, Track 12)
Russo:	Street Music (Track 14)
Bruckner:	Symphony No. 9 (Track 2)
Prokofiev:	Cinderella (Disc 2, Track 10)
Mussorgsky:	Pictures at an Exhibition (Track 12)
Stravinsky:	Rite of Spring (Track 12)

### NIGHT MUSIC (in order of mysteriousness)

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*Some might call mood music. Others, mysterious music.*

Gorecki:	Symphony No. 3
Part:	Passio
Part:	Miserere
Chopin:	Nocturnes
Rachmaninoff:	Vespers

### UNDERRATED MUSIC (alphabetical)

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*Compositions worthy of more attention than they get.*

Bernstein:	Candide
Bruckner:	Symphony No. 5
Haydn:	Symphony No. 22
Offenbach:	Suite for Two Cellos
Offenbach:	La Belle Hélène
Prokofiev:	Cinderella
Reger:	Variations and Fugues on a Theme of J.S. Bach
Russo:	Street Music

### CLASSIC CDS (alphabetical)

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*Recordings widely regarded by most music critics as legendary interpretations.*

Brahms:	Symphony No. 1
Chopin:	Nocturnes
Liszt:	The Reiner Sound
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 5
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 8
Stravinsky:	The Firebird (Complete Ballet)
Tchaikovsky:	Violin Concerto
Wagner:	The Ring

### DIFFICULT MUSIC (alphabetical)

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*Music not recommended for the average person new to classical music.*

Corigliano:	Clarinet Concerto
Mahler:	Symphony No. 6
Part:	Miserere
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 8
Strauss:	Elektra
Stravinsky:	Rite of Spring
Stravinsky:	The Firebird (Complete Ballet)
Wagner:	The Ring

### OFFBEAT (alphabetical)

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*This music marches to a different drummer.*

Blomdahl:	Aniara
Corigliano:	Clarinet Concerto
Part:	Miserere
Russo:	Street Music

### HAPPY MUSIC (alphabetical)

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*Music by geniuses on their good days.*

Haydn:	Symphony Nos. 94 & 96
Mendelssohn:	Symphony No. 4
Rossini:	Barber of Seville

### SAD MUSIC (alphabetical)

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*Music by unhappy geniuses.*

Gorecki:	Symphony No. 3
Purcell:	Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 5
Tchaikovsky:	Symphony No. 6

### ANGRY MUSIC (fury)

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*Music by furious geniuses.*

Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 8
Corigliano:	Clarinet Concerto
Verdi:	Otello
Brahms:	Violin Concerto

## BEAUTIFUL MUSIC (ALPHABETICAL)

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*The kind of music that charms those savage beasts you've heard so much about.*

Chopin:	Nocturnes
Dowland:	Pleasures of their Company
Dvorak:	Serenades
Gardiner:	Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary
Gorecki:	Symphony No. 3
Offenbach:	Suites for Two Cellos
Part:	Passio
Rachmaninoff:	Vespers

## HEROIC MUSIC (ALPHABETICAL)

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*Music that doesn't "go with the flow".*

Beethoven:	Symphony No. 9
Brahms:	Symphony No. 1
Brahms:	Violin Concerto
Tchaikovsky:	Violin Concerto

## PEACEFUL MUSIC (peacefulness)

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*Music that wouldn't hurt a fly.*

Gregorian Chant	
Schumann:	Scenes from Childhood
Chopin:	Nocturnes
Rodrigo:	Concierto de Aranjuez
Dvorak:	Serenades

## HEAVEN (alphabetical)

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*For believers.*

Bach:	Tocatta & Fugue
Boito:	Mefistofele (Prologue)
Gregorian Chant	
Purcell:	Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary
Rachmaninoff:	Vespers
Verdi:	Requiem

## NATURE (alphabetical)

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*Agrarian sounds.*

Beethoven:	Symphony No. 6
Dvorak:	Serenades
Dvorak:	Symphony No. 8
Mendelssohn:	Symphony No. 4

## BRILLIANT TECHNIQUE (flashiness)

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*Lots of flashy, difficult moves beautifully executed.*

Paganini:	24 Caprices
Kodaly:	Cello Music
Tchaikovsky:	Violin Concerto

## AUDIOPHILE (sound quality)

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*CDs for people who revel in pure sound. Why can't all CDs sound this great?*

Bach:	Toccat
Stravinsky:	L' Histoire Du Soldat
Bolling:	Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano
Offenbach:	Suite for Two Cellos
Anonymous:	Clemencic and his Flutes
Legnani, et al:	Guitar Music (Fernandez)
Corigliano:	Clarinet Concerto
Beethoven:	Cello Sonatas
Blondahl:	Aniara
Berlioz:	Symphony Fantastique
Mussorgsky:	Pictures at an Exhibition
Poulenc:	Improvisations
Bernstein:	Fancy Free
Kodaly:	Cello Music (slight hiss)
Liszt:	The Reiner Sound
Ravel:	Orchestral Music
Stravinsky:	The Firebird (slight hiss)

## ONLY A FEW OF THIS ARTICLE'S MANY GLARING OMISSIONS (alphabetical)

*The following superb pieces of music are not represented on this list because I haven't heard a performance of them which I regard as definitive, much to my chagrin!*

Barber:	Adagio for Strings
Bartok:	String Quartets
Beethoven:	Moonlight Sonata
Beethoven:	Piano Concerto No. 5
Beethoven:	Symphony No. 5 (as a symphony)
Beethoven:	Symphony No. 7
Bizet:	Carmen (highlights)
Brahms:	Piano Concerto No. 1
Brahms:	Requiem
Gershwin:	Rhapsody in Blue
Holst:	The Planets
Mahler:	Symphony No. 1
Mahler:	Symphony No. 2
Mozart:	Clarinet Concerto
Mozart:	Piano Concerto No. 21
Orff:	Carmina Burana
Schubert:	Symphony No. 9
Smetana:	From My Life (String Quartet)
Smetana:	Ma Vlast
Strauss:	Four Last Songs

## INEXPENSIVE (alphabetical)

*Super performances, inexpensive CDs.*

Beethoven:	Violin Concerto
Brahms:	Symphony No. 1
Brahms:	Violin Concerto
Rodrigo:	Concierto de Aranjuez
Shostakovich:	Symphony No. 5
Stravinsky:	Rite of Spring

## HEY, THERE'S OTHER GREAT MUSIC THAT'S NOT CLASSICAL! (genre)

*How right you are! Here are a list of CDs in other genres which, in my opinion, belong in a CD HALL OF FAME in those genres. Some of them are going to be with us for many decades, perhaps centuries, to come. I have underlined the CDs in these genres which are my favorites.*

ROCK

Beatles: Sgt. Pepper's  
 Creem: Disraeli Gears  
 CSN & Young: So Far  
 Dead Can Dance: Garden of the Arcane Delights  
 Elvis Costello: This Year's Model  
 Kate Bush: The Dreaming  
 King Crimson: Islands  
 King Crimson: Lizard  
 Led Zeppelin: Led Zeppelin I  
 Pink Floyd: Ummagumma  
 Renaissance: In the Beginning  
 The Doors: LA Woman  
 The Doors: The Doors  
 Frank Zappa: Apostrophe

SYNTH

Kraftwerk: Electric Cafe

REGGAE

Bob Marley: Legend

VOCAL

Bobby McFerrin: Simple Pleasures  
 The Roches: The Roches

FUSION

Jeff Beck: Blow by Blow  
 Miles Davis: Bitches Brew

JAZZ

Joe Pass: Virtuoso  
 Charles Mingus: Mingus Ah Um  
 Michel Camilo: Michel Camilo  
 Dave Brubeck: Take Five

Well, enough of the categories. On to Part Two!

**PART 2:  
DESCRIPTIONS**

The headings in the subsequent listings usually follow this syntax:

**COMPOSER** Piece

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*Soloist (if any) / Conductor / Orchestra / Label*

Accessibility:            Sound:            Great Track:

With some music, such as chamber (no orchestra or conductor), there is minor (and self-explanatory) variation from this syntax. Indexing parameters are Accessibility, Sound, and Great Track. All parameters go from 1 to 10, 1 being worst, 10 being best.

I have included Accessibility as a parameter since some new listeners are not ready for music like *The Ring* or the Corigliano *Clarinet Concerto*: and some listeners are ready, but not in the mood! These listeners should focus on the CDs with accessibility numbers of 8 or higher. CDs that are 4 or less are definitely not for everyone. Don't say I didn't warn you!

With regards to the Sound parameter, those listeners who insist on excellent sound should stay away from discs on this list less than a 7, or else make sure they hear them at the library first.

Finally, on many of the CDs I have listed a Great Track: a track you should listen to first if you listen to the CD at the library. These tracks are the music at their best. On occasion, I have not listed a great track in those instances when the CD does not really have one single track which stands out on its own.

**MY FAVORITE CD**

**BRAHMS** Violin Concerto

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*Stern / Ormandy / Philadelphia Orchestra / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 8

Why is this my favorite CD? Simple. It's a work of philosophy, an epic tale told in music. But which tale? There are many possible, including several revolving around romance (Brahms was having a problem with unrequited love when writing this music), but try, for starters, the tale of *Moses on the Mountain*. Moses ascends, then descends, only to find that the people are worshipping golden calves! Moses' feelings upon seeing this, and his subsequent reactions, are captured in notes by Brahms, and sent out into the world by the great Isaac Stern. Both Brahms and Stern knew how Moses felt, and if you

didn't already, you will too after hearing this piece. This piece provides a metaphor for many situations you will be exposed to in your life, and the synthesis of YOUR complex emotional reactions to these situations (contained in this music) gives it its great power.

### **BEST CD FOR PEOPLE NEW TO CLASSICAL MUSIC**

#### **BOLLING** Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano

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Rampal / Bolling / Milan

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: 7

A wonderful CD to introduce people not only to the idiom of classical music, but also that of jazz. This very accessible music deftly merges these two structures (the flute remaining in the classical idiom, the piano generally in jazz), so seamlessly that one is not aware of this distinction. Two weeks after its release, this CD was at the top of the Billboard charts, and kept its position for nearly two years, garnering gold and platinum records along the way. The Suite stayed on the charts for a total of 530 weeks, in a virtual dead heat with Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* for the honor of being the album/CD with the record for that achievement. When you hear the music, it's not hard to see why. As a bonus, the sound of this disc is impeccable: one of those too-rare moments when music, performance, and sound are all at their best.

### **FOUR MORE CDs FOR PEOPLE NEW TO CLASSICAL MUSIC**

#### **Beethoven** Symphony 9

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Hogwood / Academy of Ancient Music / L'Oiseau-Lyre

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: 4

The format of the compact disc owes its existence to this piece. Prior to the formation of the CD standard, the then-president of Sony Corporation, Akio Morita, insisted that the minimum criterion for the length of the compact disc was that this piece should fit completely on one disc. And the other compact disc partners agreed. There could be no finer indication of this music's status in the eyes of the world.

Beethoven's masterpiece, sung by the people in Japan *en masse* in stadiums every December, here gets nearly the recording it deserves. However, I doubt that any performance will capture the personal nature of Beethoven's work or bring out the many fascinating details contained in it, but in this performance, there is clear attention to the intent of the composer, and the musicians play energetically. Tempos are typically brisk (not slow) as indicated by the composer, and the music is played on "original instruments", in a recording which clearly highlights the individual tonal strands. As I've already hinted, however, this performance is not perfect. The main problem in the last

movement is the chorus, which is not quite as *luminous* as it should be. In addition, tempos slow to a crawl at critical points (9:00 and 11:15 [grrr!]). Finally, there is also a very strange note that I hear on headphones at 17:55 — I don't know what it is, but I wish it had been caught. Ah well. Luckily, these imperfections aren't fatal, and this is still the best all-around version for the person who does not yet own this piece.

The key to the ultimate meaning of this epic lies in the fourth movement. After a huge outburst, Beethoven re-introduces the previous three themes, as if to say “here's where we were — now here's where we're going.” Then, in a very modern twist, Beethoven himself enters the scene in the role of the baritone (5:40), commenting on the music as it plays itself out. Suddenly, Beethoven calls for an about-face:

*O friends, not these sounds!  
Rather, let us turn to sounds more pleasant and more joyful.*

Then, throughout the rest of the work, Beethoven quotes excerpts from the *Ode to Joy* by the German poet Schiller, verses he had loved for at least thirty years. We could all do to listen to the words of Schiller as set to Beethoven's music — music that has inspired people for a century-and-a-half:

*Joyfully, as his suns speed  
through the glorious expanse of heaven,  
brothers, run your course,  
joyously, like a hero towards victory!*

*Receive this embrace, you millions!  
This kiss is for the whole world!  
Brothers, above the starry vault  
a loving father must surely dwell.*

*Do you fall prostrate, you millions?  
World, do you sense your Creator?  
Seek him above the starry vault,  
he must surely dwell above the stars!*

## **OFFENBACH** suites for Two Cellos

*Peclard & Pidoux / Harmonia Mundi*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: 1

My nominee for underrated disc of the decade. I taped this off the radio 10 years ago, but forgot to name it. I loved the music, but didn't know what it was. Finally, a

couple of years ago, a cellist from the LA Philharmonic who I met on GENie listened to it over the phone, and told me who the cellists were, the label, and, of course, piece and composer. (Something tells me I'm going to like this Information Age!) I went out and bought it, and sure enough, he was right. I'm in his debt — thanks, Roger.

### **DVORAK** *Symphony 9* (New World)

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*Kubelik / Berlin Philharmonic / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 8    Great Track: 4

This symphony starts quietly, but don't set the volume too high. This music is very easy on the ear, and perfect for the person new to classical music. This piece has it all: beautiful melodies, drama, big dynamic range, and lots of optimism.

### **DVORAK/HAYDN** *Cello Concertos*

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*Du Pre / Barenboim / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / EMI*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 6    Great Track: 6

Two excellent performances of two excellent pieces, which introduce new listeners to the style known as the concerto. The Haydn concerto on this disc was actually discovered only a few decades ago, and for that reason is not more well-known than it is. DuPre's intense playing is really impressive. Few musicians had her ability to make their instrument sound so much like the human voice. This is soul music from a different perspective.

Alas, this is not one of those discs that was blessed with a sound engineer monitoring the sound levels; there is some pretty bad sound breakup in certain loud passages which you can clearly hear in track 1 of this CD; if that sort of thing bothers you, better skip this disk for now.

## **SYMPHONIC MUSIC**

### **BEETHOVEN** *Symphonies 1,3,6,8*

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*Scherchen / Vienna State Opera Orchestra / MCA*

Accessibility: 9    Sound: 5    Great Track: 8

The sound of these 50's recordings (on two separate discs) is very forward, which I like, but there is hiss which some will find annoying. Still, these are fifth-gear performances of some of Beethoven's greatest works. These symphonies are taken at breathtaking tempos, underlining the passion clearly contained in the music, but which

too many conductors miss. This is Beethoven raw and unpolished and brimming with excitement. (Note: the track referred to as a great track is on the disc with Symphony No. 8).

### **BERLIOZ** [Symphony Fantastique](#)

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*Solti / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / London*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 10      Great Track: 5

Lots of dynamic contrasts in this piece (quiet and loud), with most of the quiet in the first two movements, followed by a beautiful third movement. The last two movements of this are huge. This is one of those warhorses that never die, never fade away.

### **BERNSTEIN** [Fancy Free](#)

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*Bernstein / Israel Philharmonic Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 12

This disc contains two of Bernstein's best instrumental pieces, conducted with the hell-bent-for-leather verve you expect from Bernstein. *Fancy Free* gets a 10 for accessibility, but the *Serenade* it is coupled with gets a 5, so people new to classical music should skip to track 7.

### **BERNSTEIN** [Symphony 1](#)

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*Bernstein / Israel Philharmonic Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 9      Great Track: 2

The pieces on this CD, along with *Chichester Psalms*, *West Side Story*, *Candide*, *Fancy Free*, and *Serenade* are Bernstein's greatest compositional musical legacies.

### **BRAHMS** [Symphony 1](#)

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*Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS Odyssey*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 8      Great Track: 1

Superb interpretation by a great Brahms conductor, Bruno Walter, in this model example of the heroic romantic symphony, a concept that went away far too early: like much of Brahms music, this symphony conveys a very clear philosophical perspective.

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**BRAHMS** *Symphony 4*

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*Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS Odyssey*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 7    Great Track: 1

One of Brahms' finest achievements, this symphony gets the rich performance it needs from that master Brahmsian, Walter. This disc also contains an excellent performance of the *Tragic Overture*.

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**BRUCKNER** *Symphony 5*

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*Solti / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / London*

Accessibility: 7    Sound: 10    Great Track: Disc 1, Track 1

Couple an orchestra famous for their brass and a composer famous for his writing for brass, and the sound of this disc shouldn't be too surprising. Bruckner's start-and-stop style takes some getting used to, but those with huge speakers will revel in the enormous first movement. (This disc is paired with an atonal piece by Schoenberg, one of the most bizarre couplings in recording history).

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**BRUCKNER** *Symphony 7*

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*Solti / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / London*

Accessibility: 7    Sound: 9    Great Track: 3

To me, this is Bruckner's best symphony. Bruckner is sort of a cross between Mahler and Wagner, for those of you who've never heard him. Those who know Solti's expertise with Wagner will thus find his expertise with Bruckner no surprise.

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**BRUCKNER** *Symphony 9*

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*Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 7    Sound: 9    Great Track: 2

The huge second movement of this piece (which many will find reminiscent of the "Mars" section from Holst *The Planets*, though Holst meets pre-Prokofiev at 3:52) gets an energetic performance from Walter and the CSO. Did this guy ever make a bad record?

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**DVORAK** *Symphony 8*

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*Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 9    Sound: 8    Great Track: 5

Gentle music, rolling hills, green pastures: that's the Dvorak 8. Just one more example of that famous Walter string sound. Coupled with an excellent version of instrumental music from Parsifal, which is the great track listed above. I heard this recently with a friend of mine, and we were blown away by this disc. A lot had to do with the volume (loud), the closeness of the sound (about six feet away), and the solid bass provided by his four speakers. I'm still thinking about it! (When I heard it, I imagined getting into Dvorak's head in the last movement, thinking he was thinking, "Now I'm REALLY going to blow them away!")

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### **DVORAK** Serenades 22, 44

*Marriner / Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields / Phillips*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: 6

Pastorale music, perfect for a lazy summer evening. Play this one to remind you that another world is possible.

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### **HAYDN** Symphonies 22, 63, 80

*Orpheus Chamber Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 9    Sound: 10    Great Track: 2

Beautiful music by "Papa" Haydn, historically considered to be the preeminent father of classical music.

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### **HAYDN** Symphonies 94 & 96

*Hogwood / Academy of Ancient Music / L'Oiseau-Lyre*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: 4

Sunny music by Haydn. Sharp performances, and the original instruments sound great here.

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### **MAHLER** Symphony 3

*Bernstein / New York Philharmonic / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 6    Sound: 10

A massive symphony (the longest ever written by a major composer) given a massive performance, on two discs. This isn't Bach and Handel, that's for sure. Mahler was a late Romantic composer who wanted to stretch not only the capacity of the orchestra, but also the intellectual capacity of the audience. Here, over the span of an hour and forty-six minutes, he weaves together an epic musical journey through what the

liner notes refer to as his “cosmological ascent.” The original titles Mahler gave to the movements indicate the nature of this music, beginning with “What the Flowers tell me” and “What the Beasts of the Forest tell me,” and even quoting Nietzsche’s “Midnight Song” from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* along the way.

You had to feel sorry for Stravinsky and Schoenberg. How could they follow this stuff?

### **MAHLER** Symphony 6

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*Bernstein / Vienna Philharmonic / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 5      Sound: 8

When I saw Bernstein conduct this at Carnegie Hall, the feeling of an EVENT was definitely in the air. The performance on this disc is not quite as good as I remember that evening (which left the audience stunned in dead silence at its conclusion), but its an essential one for Mahler lovers, who probably already have this disc.

### **MAHLER** Symphony 9

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*Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 8

Walter has a special claim on this music; he not only wrote a book on Mahler, he was also Mahler’s protege, and in fact, Walter conducted the world premiere of this symphony. It gets a superb performance here in very good sound. (Note: this is the version recorded in 1962, not the earlier version Walter did in the 30’s). Filled with Mahlerian angst, the last movement is reportedly Mahler’s meditations on death. This disc has the beautiful string sound so typical of Walter, and so appropriate for this music.

### **MENDELSSOHN** Symphony 4

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*Davis / Boston Symphony Orchestra / Philips*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 9

Completely un-neurotic, sunny music. This performance now appears on a 150 minute-long budget compilation called *The Best of Mendelssohn* on Philips, a superb collection of performances, including the *Ruy Blas* overture, and an emotional performance of the *Violin Concerto* by Salvatore Accardo.

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**MOZART** Last 6 Symphonies

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Walter / Columbia Symphony Orchestra / CBS Odyssey

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 9

Brahmsian, romantic Mozart. Lush, not clean. (Note: this two-disc set may be on Sony Classical now, and it has also been released individually, with two symphonies on a disc instead of three).

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**MUSSORGSKY** Pictures at an Exhibition

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Ashkenazy / Philharmonic Orchestra / London

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 10      Great Track: 12

Another disc to think about getting if you're new to classical music. This piece was originally written for piano, but entered the repertory in a re-orchestration by Ravel, and, in the modern era, Emerson, Lake and Palmer! Now re-re-orchestrated and conducted with great success by Ashkenazy. One of those pieces everyone should own. Coupled with the original piano version. Since the orchestral version is more interesting, new listeners should begin listening at track 7.

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**PROKOFIEV** Cinderella

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Ashkenazy / Cleveland Orchestra / London

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 10      Great Track: Disc 2, Track 10

The total opposite of Penderecki's *Utrenya* (coming up later – beware!), and an undiscovered treasure. Extremely fresh melodies and orchestration.

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**RAVEL et al.** the reiner sound

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Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / RCA Living Stereo

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 9      Great Track: 2

Originally recorded in 1956-59, there is only a slight amount of hiss that reveals the age of this sonically resplendent recording. A n historical disc.

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**RAVEL et al.** Orchestral music

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Paray / Detroit Symphony / Mercury Living Presence

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 2

This disc contains many of Ravel's most well-known pieces, including *Rapsodie Espagnole* and *Alborada del Gracioso*, and also music by Ibert. Ravel was a master of orchestral tonal color, which is probably why he's featured on so many audiophile discs. This disc is a prime example of the Mercury Living Presence philosophy, which involved minimal miking and no electronic limiting, boosting, equalizing, or mixing used during the recording sessions.

### **SHOSTAKOVICH** *Symphony 5*

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*Bernstein / New York Philharmonic (1959) / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 7      Great Track: 4

The next time you hear someone say one interpretation is just as good as another, play for them Bernstein's performance of the last movement of this symphony, and follow it up with Yoel Levi's performance on Telarc (and, to a lesser extent, Bernstein's own second traversal of this music). Night and day. In this famous 1959 performance, which took place in Russia at the height of the Cold War, Bernstein finds exactly the right tempo, and the New York Philharmonic is with him all the way. High energy, crackling with excitement.

### **SHOSTAKOVICH** *Symphony 8*

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*Mravinsky / Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra / Philips*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 8      Great Track: 3

This piece was considered by conductor Serge Koussevitzky to be the greatest orchestral work of this century. Well, it may or may not be the "greatest," but its up there – way up there. This symphony was first performed by the eminent Russian conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky, and Shostakovich dedicated the work to him; thus, the passion of the playing here should be no surprise – how would you conduct a piece if someone dedicated that piece to *you*?

The intensity of this music reveals a very troubled individual behind the scenes (living under Stalin was troubling, apparently. A friend of mine, after hearing the third track of this CD, said that the movement was about the beginning and end of the universe).

### **STRAVINSKY** *THE Rite of Spring*

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*Abaddo / London Symphony Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon Galleria*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 10      Great Track: 12

This piece which caused those famous Paris riots has some unusual sounds, but there's nothing like it in a concert hall. It makes less of an impact at home, but it's still worth experiencing if you haven't already. The *Firebird* on this disc is not at the same level, and is no substitute for the following.

### **STRAVINSKY** *Firebird (Complete Ballet)*

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*Dorati / London Symphony Orchestra / Mercury Living Presence*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 9      Great Track: 19

Anyone who thinks that great sound has to be digital should hear this recording from 1959, an analog recording which puts many modern digital recordings to shame. Other than slight hiss audible in quiet passages, you will find it very difficult to believe that this CD was recorded thirty-five years ago! One of the great mysteries is why, if someone can get this sound one time, it can't be achieved over and over. Strange. Anyway, this is a real audiophile disc, one of the best examples of the Mercury Living Presence recording philosophy. The music itself, however, will not be to all tastes.

### **TCHAIKOVSKY** *Symphony 6*

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*Bernstein / New York Philharmonic / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 10      Great Track: 4

Bernstein's handling of the last movement of what is probably Tchaikovsky's greatest work (the tempo is nearly twice as slow as that taken by other conductors) demonstrates what separates Bernstein from other conductors. This disc is Tchaikovsky for people who thought they hated Tchaikovsky, and Mahler for people who thought they hated Mahler. Tchaikovsky killed himself a week after conducting this work for the first time, and Bernstein clearly understands what's behind this music.

## CONCERTOS

### **BEETHOVEN** Violin Concerto

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*Stern / Bernstein / New York Philharmonic / CBS Masterworks*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 5

Extremely prominent hiss obscures the beauty of Stern's playing. Still, a fine performance for those who can get past the hiss (on the plus side, the recording puts Stern right up front).

### **CORIGLIANO** Clarinet Concerto

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*Smith / London Symphony Orchestra / RCA*

Accessibility: 1      Sound: 10      Great Track: 3

Warning: new listeners, beware! This modern music will NOT be for all tastes. Brilliant sound coupled with a performance to match by Richard Stoltzman, the Hendrix of the clarinet. Some of the sounds in the third movement will remind you of a jungle filled with wild elephants. Coupled with a great-sounding version of Bernstein's *Prelude, Fugue, and Riffs*.

### **Liszt** piano concerto 1

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*Rubenstein / Wallenstein / Symphony of the Air / RCA Living Stereo*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 5-9      Great Track: 8

My friend called me on the phone, and said, "listen to this". He then proceeded to play the opening movement from this piece. I didn't have to listen for more than 30 seconds before concluding that this was the performance I was looking for — and over the telephone yet! Subsequent listening in person confirmed my opinion that this disc had *it*. I guess I'm not alone in my opinion: nearly 40 years after it was put on analog tape (in Carnegie Hall), people are *still* listening to this recording. Why? One reason: here, as in too few performances, the musicians play like it's a *privilege* to play. The aliveness of the playing is striking, and super-close recording gives a snap to the sound that matches it. Rubenstein's playing is, as always, superlative. Unfortunately, not is all rosy: the other (excellent) performances on this disc aren't quite as lucky in the sound department, with hiss that will annoy many, and send others scrambling for their treble control.

### **RACHMANINOFF** Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini

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*Slatkin / St. Louis Symphony Orchestra / Moss Music Group*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 9      Great Track: 4

This warhorse played beautifully by Abbey Simon. Surprisingly good sound.

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**RODRIGO** *Concierto de Aranjuez*

*Tokos / Banfalvi / Budapest Strings / LaserLight*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10

This music is the complete opposite of the Corigliano *Clarinet Concerto*. Quiet music, superb sound.

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**RUSSO** *Street Music*

*Siegel / Ozawa / San Francisco Symphony Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 7    Sound: 10    Great Track: 14

Offbeat music — an harmonica concerto! But hey folks, it works. Huge last movement and a very nice fugue. Coupled with a pretty good performance of Bernstein's symphonic arrangement from *West Side Story*.

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**TCHAIKOVSKY** *Violin Concerto*

*Heifetz / Reiner / Chicago Symphony Orchestra / RCA*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 7    Great Track: 1

Sound isn't the best, but you'll want to pick up this disc to hear one of this century's greatest violinists, Jascha Heifetz. Lots of acrobatics here. Coupled with a fast and furious version of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*.

Another excellent performance of this music is by Vlado Spivakov on the *Encore* label (you'll want more than one version of this piece).

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**VIVALDI** *Four Seasons*

*Sparf/BIS*

Accessibility: 10    Sound: 10    Great Track: All

A great disk. Get it!

## OPERA

### **BLONDAHL** *Aniara*

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*Westerberg / Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra / Caprice*

Accessibility: 3      Sound: 10

If I had to use one word to describe this set, that word would be *impeccable*. This is a practically flawless recording of Blomdahl's "space opera." Few CDs marry so beautifully performance, interpretation, and sound. However, this opera has some VERY unusual sounds, some of them pretty spacy, so some people may never warm up to this CD.

This opera is the one that contains the famous "blare-blah" song you've heard so little about. Allow me to quote:

With blare-blah in space I'm sent away,  
and cry out blare-blah all the way.  
Though sorrow is a load to bear,  
with blare-blah we need not despair.  
In deepest nonsense night,  
blare-blah is the space-soul's light.  
Come along in blare-blah  
blare-blah steers  
come blare-blah blare in the blare-blah years.  
On many a good planet I've stayed,  
but my faith in blare-blah's never strayed.  
When life became empty and dull,  
with blare-blah I filled the lull.  
In the deepest sea of doubt,  
blare-blah comforts the devout.

### **DEBUSSY** *Pelléas et Mélisande*

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*Dutoit / Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal / London*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 10

Debussy's opera is given the same impeccable treatment received by *Aniara*. The catch for most will be the music. To me, Debussy here is more like Wagner than an impressionist, and this music tends to unfold slowly. There aren't a lot of "big scenes", and few tunes to hum. This is opera with a difference.

**MOZART** *Le Nozze Di Figaro* (highlights)

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*Marriner / Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields / Philips*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 9      Great Track: 1

Think you hate opera? Check out this highlights disc.

**offenbach** *La belle Hélène*

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*Plasson / Choeurs et Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse / EMI*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 9      Great Track: Disc 1, Track 11

I love this music! This is a *totally* underrated opera, extremely light and fresh, with melodies as memorable and accessible as that of any Broadway show; in fact, for me there are so many “hit songs” on this set that picking a “great track” was difficult. Jessye Norman and John Aler are in superb voice, and Plasson’s conducting is as lively as the music. The sound is excellent, failing to reach “10” status only because of some minor breakup in certain loud passages.

Alas, there is one small caveat that must be noted. Due to the nature of the libretto (which is pretty funny), there is a significant amount of spoken dialogue in French on these discs, and much of this dialogue is not tracked separately. Some people want to hear opera without hearing spoken words; they won’t get that here. As for me, I like hearing the French language (even though I don’t understand it), so it doesn’t bother me at all. As a matter of fact, this set and its included libretto would make an excellent educational resource for French teachers.

**ROSSINI** *Barber of Seville* (highlights)

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*Marriner / Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields / Philips*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

A thing of beauty is a joy forever. You’ve heard track one of this disc about two zillion times (“Figaro, Figaro”), but have you heard the rest? This comic opera, still fresh after all these years, is filled with super melodies and lots of fun. If you are new to opera, this is the first opera disc you should get. If you have a VCR, get the Beverly Sills video done at Lincoln Center. Fast forward to the parts where she sings, and then sit back in amazement.

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**STRAUSS Elektra**

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*Bohm / Dresden State Opera / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 2      Sound: 5

This super-intense music is marred by poor sound (breakup in loud passages), and its harsh musical language is definitely not for everybody. But if you like hot expression, you'll like this — a lot.

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**VERDI La Traviata**

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*Ceccato / Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / EMI*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 6      Great Track: 3

*La Traviata*, an opera that practically defines opera, has been pretty unlucky on recordings. This recording is no exception; the sound definitely leaves something to be desired. But when you hear the opening movement so lovingly conducted by Ceccato, you think “hmmm, this may be it.” It is. This recording has the awesome Beverly Sills in the title role, and superb conducting. If you are not too picky about sound, this is definitely one *La Traviata* you want to have.

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**VERDI Otello**

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*Levine / National Philharmonic Orchestra / RCA*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 9

Fiery singing by Domingo, Scotto, and Milnes. Shakespeare's all-too-contemporary tragedy gets the operatic treatment in this, one of Verdi's last works. Lots of passion here.

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**WAGNER The Ring**

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*Solti / Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra / London*

Accessibility: 4      Sound: 9

A monumental set of 15 CDs. Yes, folks, this is four operas, many hours long. Some people hate Wagner. But others are able to find their way into Wagner's hypnotic, mysterious world. Getting into this music is like entering another dimension. This recording by Solti is widely considered to be one of the classic examples of recorded music; there's even a videotape out of the recording sessions. The first opera in this set, *Das Rheingold*, actually was at the top of the pop charts with Pat Boone and Elvis Presley!

## CHAMBER MUSIC

### **ANONYMOUS** Clemencic and His Flutes

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*Clemencic / Harmonia Mundi*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

Superb sound played on ancient recorders. Fascinating music. For those who'd like a taste of something different. (Note: this disc may be out of print).

### **BACH** Toccata & Fugue in D Minor

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*Hurford / Argo*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

The piece that opened *Fantasia*. Telarc-sound, but this isn't Telarc. 1st track potentially speaker-blowing in the wrong hands.

### **BEETHOVEN** Kreutzer and spring violin sonatas

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*Perlman / Ashkenazy / London*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 2

The complete set from which these pieces were taken was called by the *Penguin Guide* "self-recommending." Great sound, and the playing is what you'd expect from these two.

### **BEETHOVEN** Symphony 5 (piano transcription)

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*Katsaris / Teldec*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

I can hear the howls already! "*Symphony No. 5 on piano??!! Are you out of your mind??!!*" Well, there's no doubt that you lose a great deal when you go from 90 musicians to 1. However, in this case you also gain a great deal: namely, the most satisfactory interpretation of this dynamic music I have heard to date. This most famous of symphonies is too often played with a smooth, glossy veneer; the underlying music, however, is raw and coarse (like Beethoven himself, from all published accounts), with great, immediate leaps of tempo, dynamics, tone color, and the like. Katsaris brings these out in a big way, stretching the music dynamically and elongating tempos, with massive percussive attacks, what is called in symphonic circles by some critics *underlining the*

music, but what in theatre is called *getting into the role*. This music is played the way I'd like to hear it played by an orchestra one day!

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### **BEETHOVEN** Cello Sonatas 3 & 5

*DuPre / EMI Studio*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 2

DuPre at her best. And this time she gets excellent sound.

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### **CHOPIN** Nocturnes

*Rubenstein / RCA*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 8      Great Track: Disc 1, Track 1

Widely considered to be a classic recording, this music will calm the most savage of beasts. Tailor-made for the night, as the title indicates. The colors Rubenstein gets from the piano are what make these performances special.

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### **DEBUSSY, et al.** guitar music

*Amsterdam Guitar Trio / RCA*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: 13

Pretty guitar music. This disc has a very distinct sound world.

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### **KODALY** Sonata for unaccompanied cello

*Starker / Delos*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 10      Great Track: 4

Like that in-your face sound? I do, and that's one reason why I love this CD. Starker's ferocious playing of Kodaly's masterpiece for solo cello is another. The slight hiss audible over headphones does not preclude me from saying . . . GET THIS!

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### **Legnani, et al.** Guitar Music

*Fernandez / London*

Accessibility: 10      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

A vivid recital of music by Legnani, Giuliani, Diabelli, and Sor. Very accessible pieces, recorded with in-your-room sound. This disc may be out-of-print; I haven't seen it around recently.

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### **PAGANINI** 24 Caprices

Mintz / Deutsche Grammophon

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 10      Great Track: 1

Paganini was a 19th century violinist known for pyrotechnical displays. Paganini would have admired Mintz's performance of these pieces for solo violin. Best over headphones, and best sampled a few tracks at a time.

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### **POULENC** Improvisations

Roge / Decca

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10

For those who've heard one too many Beethoven, Haydn, and Mozart piano sonatas, this disc will come as a pleasant surprise. This music is very fresh, and unlike most you've heard before. The sound of this disc is truly *palpable*; as is Roge's dynamic performance.

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### **REGER** Bach Variations and Fugue

Serkin / CBS Masterworks

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 8      Great Track: 7

A noble melody by Bach (for solo piano) morphed into contemporary music by Max Reger, with unusual, varied harmonies. Dramatic music well-played by Rudolf Serkin. Inappropriately coupled with a performance of Haydn's C-major sonata.

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### **SCHUMANN** Scenes from Childhood

Tipo / EMI

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 8      Great Track: 1

Lullabies for us grown-ups.

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### **STRAVINSKY** L' Histoire Du Soldat

Chicago Pro Musica / Reference Recordings

Accessibility: 4      Sound: 10

An audiophile disc *par excellence* — about as close to perfection as you can get, played by the principal members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Keith Johnson of *Reference Recordings* has proven over and over that he is an engineering genius. If you

like this music (and many will not), this is the version to get. The Walton disc by the same team is also excellent, and makes a good follow-up.

### VOCAL MUSIC

#### **BERNSTEIN** *Candide*

*Bernstein / London Symphony Orchestra / Deutsche Grammophon*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 10      Great Track: Disc 1, Track 12

With this, one of his final recordings, Bernstein demonstrates that *Candide* has, unlike *West Side Story*, received far too little attention. Over-the-top playing by the London Symphony Orchestra and over-the-top singing by the LSO Chorus, and, of course, great conducting. Most of the best pieces on this two-disc set are on an excellent single highlights disc (which, alas, does not have the lyrics, as does the full set [by what must be a record-setting number of contributors, Richard Wilbur, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Lillian Hellman, John La Touche, and Dorothy Parker]). This disc won a well-deserved *Gramophone* award. Here's a sample of some of the sonically brilliant words in this show from the show-stopping *Auto-da-fé* number (lyrics not by Sondheim, as you might expect, but John La Touche and Richard Wilbur):

Oh my darling Paquette,  
She is haunting me yet  
With a dear souvenir  
I shall never forget.  
'Twas a gift that she got  
From a seafaring Scot,  
He received he believed in Shalott!

In Shalott from his dame  
Who was certain it came  
With a kiss from a Swiss  
(She'd forgotten his name),  
But he told her that he  
Had been given it free

By a sweet little cheat in Patee.

Then a man from Japan,  
Then a Moor from Iran,  
Though the Moor isn't sure  
How the whole thing began;  
But the gift we can see  
Had a long pedigree  
When at last it was passed on  
to me!

*Auto-da-fé* Copyright © 1955,1976,  
1982, 1990 by Amberson, Inc.

#### **DOWLAND et al.** *pleasures of their company*

*Battle / Parkening / Angel-EMI*

Accessibility: 9      Sound: 8      Great Track: 7

“A voice with moonlight in it” — that’s Kathleen Battle (she’s accompanied by guitarist Christopher Parkening). Few recitals are as beautiful as this one.

### **PURCELL** music for the funeral of queen mary

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*Gardiner / Monteverdi Orchestra / Erato*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 9      Great Track: 10

This music appeared in Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*. To hear this music, you’d think that Queen Mary’s death in 1694 was some kind of awful, significant event. As the liner notes put it, “Purcell provided surely the most fitting and moving music that has ever been composed for a royal funeral. One feels that in expressing the national mood of mourning, Purcell was also voicing personal feelings of genuine grief.” My sentiments exactly.

The first piece on this disc (*Come, Ye Sons of Art*) is also superb, but some may not care for the sound of the countertenor voice.

### **RACHMANINOFF** Vespers

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*Shaw / Robert Shaw Festival Singers / Telarc*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10

Robert Shaw is a prominent choral conductor, and this disc is one of the best things he’s done. Seamless blending of the voices and an ethereal quality.

### **VERDI** Requiem

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*Shaw / Atlanta Symphony Orchestra / Telarc*

Accessibility: 7      Sound: 10      Great Track: Disc 1, Track 2

Velvety-smooth blending of the voices by Robert Shaw and singers Dunn, Hadley, Plishka, and Curry in this piece, as powerful as it is beautiful. Very nice with headphones. Watch out for the *Dies Irae!* (Track 2). This recording won many awards, including *Choral Record of the Year* by three organizations.

### **VERDI et al.** Recital

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*Ramey / EMI*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 10      Great Track: 10

This CD is different from the above, in that is a vocal recital by the bass Samuel Ramey (a selection of arias from various operas). On stage, Ramey overpowers anyone

who's near him. This recording will give you some exposure (though not in person) to his very special voice.

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### **WOLF et al.** vocal recital

*Upshaw / Garrett / Musicmasters*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 10      Great Track: 3

A vocal recital by soprano Dawn Upshaw. Upshaw's silvery voice shines on this immaculate recording. For me, this disc was quite a discovery, introducing me to the haunting music of Hugo Wolf, a German composer. The selections here are based on Goethe's poems.

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### **ANON.** Gregorian Chant

*Dopf / Gregorianischer Choral / Phillips*

Accessibility: ?      Sound: 10

Monks made the pop charts in America! So there's hope for this music yet. You either love this music or hate it (that's why the ? for accessibility). If you love it, however, this disc creates a most convincing illusion that you are there back in the 15th century with these very religious people.

### **MYSTERIOUS MUSIC (VOCAL)**

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### **GORECKI** Symphony 3

*Zinman / LS / Elektra*

Accessibility: 8      Sound: 10      Great Track: 2

Modern music which topped the pop charts in Europe, and did pretty well here, too. Yes, some modern music IS beautiful: here's proof. Magical night music, with luminous singing by Dawn Upshaw.

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### **PART** Miserere

*Davies / Hilliard Ensemble / ECM*

Accessibility: 6      Sound: 9

Music in the same halo as the Gorecki Symphony 3. You'll see what I mean. If you like this, you'll probably like *Passio*.

**Part PASSIO**

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*Hillier/ Hilliard Ensemble /ECM*

Accessibility: 5      Sound: 8

This CD has only one track, which should be your first clue as to the nature of this music. To me, haunting, beautiful, and religious, the aural counterpart of Kubrick's masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Part is in a very special mental space.

**penderecki utrenya**

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*Markowski / Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir/ Muza*

Accessibility: 0      Sound: 8      Great Track: You've got to be kidding!

This piece is subtitled *The Entombment of Christ*. Actually, when you hear this music, I doubt that Christ will come to your mind. To me, this piece should be subtitled, *Descend Into Hell With Penderecki*. Stanley Kubrick used this music in this film *The Shining*, and if you saw that movie, you know what this music is about. Could it be . . . SATAN? I find this music very gripping, and some people are going to be put into its spell: it has a very strange appeal (and I mean *strange*). However, most people will find this disc useful only for weirding out their Aunt Nettie beyond any hope of recovery.

## VIDEO

### **THE 1973 NORTON LECTURES at harvard university**

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*Bernstein / Kultur*

Imagine the following: a man of great intelligence and passion is born. This man decides to devote his life to studying and performing music. Over the years, this man not only becomes famous for *performing*, and not only for *conducting*, and not only for *composing*, but also for, over the years, *teaching music appreciation on television*, honing his pedagogical skills over a period of two decades. Then imagine that Harvard University, an educational institution of much renown, invites this individual to give a prestigious series of lectures on poetry (formerly given by incumbents such as T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, Robert Frost, Igor Stravinsky, and Aaron Copland). Over six months this individual, who also happens to be extremely well-read not only in music, but also in the fields of poetry, psychology, and linguistics, synthesizes everything he knows about music and poetry and psychology and linguistics and *teaching* in a super-concentrated form, over six lectures. Imagine, finally, that this individual, at the peak of his popularity, is given the financial resources he needs to put these lectures on videotape, thus preserving them forever.

If you can imagine the above, then you can imagine these videotapes, one of the luckiest completions around!

These lectures are not only the most in-depth analyses of music you'll ever be exposed to, but, in addition, a Platonic example of great teaching (which will come as no surprise to followers of Bernstein). In fact, any educator who has not viewed and *studied* these tapes (and Bernstein's eclectic teaching style) must be viewed as having committed preparational malpractice, especially in these days of multimedia synthesis.

Through musical, visual, and linguistic illustrations, Bernstein makes arcane concepts such as syntax and transformational grammar relatively simple to understand, and shows how these concepts can be used to understand what some may have seen as disembodied notes. You'll understand what's going on in music far more deeply than you did before after seeing these lectures, and you'll realize like never before what the world lost when it lost Bernstein.