

Favourite Things

KEITH HOWARD PICKS HIS FAVOURITE TEN RECORDINGS, FROM HIS SCHOOL DAYS ONWARD

I enjoy a little nostalgia as much as anyone, but never wallow in it, and that applies to my musical tastes as much as anything. At any given moment my favourite music is likely to be something that I've just discovered. But, of course, certain pieces of music become a thread through your life. Some began their journey with me when I was a teenager; many more joined the bandwagon later. A few are listed below, together with the reasons why they became part of my being – which is how they feel. I've tried to put them in a chronological order of my introduction to them.



EMERSON LAKE AND PALMER Emerson Lake and Palmer

The late Keith Emerson frustrated as much as charmed me, particularly in the post-ELP years when he failed to find a new direction for his prodigious talent. But I was more than pleasantly surprised when I last saw ELP play live at the Royal Albert Hall in 1994, some 20 years after I first saw them at the Empire Pool. I was expecting a display of faded glory but actually the three of them could still hack it. And when, for the encore, part of the stage rotated to reveal Emerson's battered old Hammond – which, yes, he tipped, twisted and lay beneath, as of old – I cheered with everyone else.

ELP's eponymous debut album, which I first heard as a fifth-former, completely recast

what I thought rock music was or could be. John Peel thought ELP a waste of talent and electricity; I thought him a numbskull. Much more significant was the reaction of Bob Moog, who later said that Emerson's synthesizer solo at the end of the film *Lucky Man* – which Emerson himself wasn't too happy with – was the first time he'd really heard what his instrument could achieve.



ELTON JOHN Elton John

Here's another eponymous album which I first heard in the year leading up to O-levels, but about as different from ELP as it's possible to be. *Your Song*, the hit single, is my least favourite track and probably bears significant responsibility for John developing into a crooner. Whereas on the rest of the album he dared to be experimental, particularly in having Paul Buckmaster write string arrangements, most notably for the bitter *Sixty Years On*. The swirling, discordant strings which open it sound like a swarm of angry hornets, and I enjoy asking visitors – those who know Elton John only from *Goodbye Yellowbrick Road*, *Candle In The Wind*, etc – who they think it is by. They never get it until he sings. Looking back, this was perhaps my first experience of music that had a deliberately unsettling effect, and had no intention of sounding 'nice'. That alone makes it a personal milestone.

HILLIARD ENSEMBLE Popular Music From The Time Of Henry VIII

It was 1978, I was working on Hi-Fi Answers for the first time during a year out between universities, and I'd bought a ticket to see the series of concerts in which the Tallis Scholars performed all of Thomas Tallis's sacred music, including the mighty 40-part *Spem in Alium*. At the end of one of them I picked up a flier advertising an early music concert the next day in a church in Bayswater, close to where my girlfriend of the time lived. So we decided to go. I barely knew what pre-baroque music was and sat transfixed at alternately beautiful and bucolic songs performed by the Hilliard Ensemble, and the rich, spicy tone colours of instruments like the shawm and crumhorn, played by members of the New London Consort. This LP was on sale at the back and became an enduring favourite, despite a crappy Saga Records pressing. It's now available as *Music For Tudor Kings* on Alto CD. The Hilliards, of course, went on to be hugely famous (in classical music terms). I closed the circle by seeing them at one of their farewell concerts in St Leonard's, Shoreditch in December 2013.

Paul Simon: Still crazy after all these years.



PAUL SIMON Still Crazy After All These Years

It was also in 1978 that I first met my wife to be. She was Austrian, an English teacher in

KEITH HOWARD

Vienna, over for a summer teaching course. Exotic. We'd sit and listen to LPs together (sweet, eh?), and soon the title track of this Paul Simon album became 'our song'. Of course, there are many reasons other than our canoodling to consider it special, including Simon's inimitable lyric writing and Steve Gadd's famous one-stick drum roll at the start of the wonderful *Fifty Ways To Leave Your Lover*. Not that I had any such thoughts...

HENRY PURCELL Funeral Sentences

Preston/Christchurch Choir, Oxford
Whenever I hear the Purcell Funeral Sentences performed live, I cry. The one exception was when John Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra performed the *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* (of which the *Funeral Sentences* are part) at Southwark Cathedral on 14 February 1989. I'd been at Richmond Register Office at 10.30 that morning, getting married, and was still on cloud nine. Actually Purcell's original *Funeral Sentences* of c1682 never formed part of Queen Mary's funeral, but as they are so sublimely superior to the two verse settings that were performed (together with Purcell's non-polyphonic rewrite of *Thou Knowest Lord*), it's hardly surprising that posterity has forgone historical accuracy. This recording – made during a golden period for Christchurch Choir, Oxford, wonderfully directed by Simon Preston – is the most moving I know.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN/ECO Variations On A Theme Of Frank Bridge

It may be a sign of naivety on my part but I tend to be most drawn to Benjamin Britten's earlier music, composed before WW2 – pieces like *Les Illuminations* (which I saw commandingly performed by Ian Bostridge at the Proms a few years ago), and this. Although Britten was just 23 when the *Bridge Variations* was premiered in Salzburg in 1937, it's a *tour de force* of orchestral writing that oozes youthful bravado and vigour. I expect there are numerous worthy recordings of it but I have yet to hear one which matches Britten's own with the English Chamber Orchestra, fittingly recorded in the Snape Maltings concert hall that Britten

helped create. The recording isn't one of Decca's finest, sadly, but it's an electrifying performance worthy of the music.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis Barbirolli/EMI

I'm a sucker for the modal harmonies of Vaughan Williams, which burrow straight to my emotional core. The famous Tallis *Fantasia* was the first of his compositions to bring this home to me, followed by many more: the *Oboe Concerto* and choral works like *Valiant for Truth*, for instance. 'Glorious John' Barbirolli's 1962 recording for EMI is not the finest you'll ever hear technically but for sheer emotional power it's unsurpassed. I will never forgive Peter Weir for choosing this piece for the drowning scene in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* – as if music originally composed for the Three Choirs Festival in 1910 (Vaughan Williams revised it twice thereafter) could possibly be relevant to the Napoleonic war. Unlike the delightful Boccherini piece at the end of the movie, composed about 1780.

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL La Resurrezione Hogwood/Academy of Ancient Music

The 1980s was a great decade to be a convert to original instrument performances of baroque music. Like art restorers removing layers of discoloured lacquer from famous paintings, there were soloists, small groups of musicians and even whole orchestras playing music you thought you knew, with tone colours and tempi that transformed the drab into a Technicolor extravaganza. Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music were big names in this movement and yearly produced recordings that were revelatory. When it comes to Handel oratorios, Hogwood/AAM are best remembered for reminding us what Messiah should sound like but my favourite is this, the lesser-known *La Resurrezione*, with an Italian libretto. The first side of what used to be a two-LP boxed set is just fantastic, with Emma Kirkby and David Thomas both on terrific form as the Angel and the Devil. I will never forget one eve-of-show occasion, ensconced in the Celestion room, listening

to it on SL6s with my HFA colleague John Bamford and the late David Inman. The world switched off for 20 minutes.

GIACOMO CARISSIMI Jephte McCreesh/ Gabrieli Consort and Players/ Meridian

Talking of oratorios, even Handel tipped his hat to Carissimi, whose *Jephte* is supposed to have inspired him to write *Messiah*. If there's a better recording of it than this by the Gabrieli Consort and Players, directed by Paul McCreesh, originally on Meridian Records, I've yet to hear it. Meridian Records was the creation of recording engineer John Shuttleworth, whose name first entered my consciousness for the Hilliard Ensemble recording already mentioned. Shuttleworth was a purist and always, so far as I know, used a crossed-pair microphone technique. He obviously had an eye for talent, spotting McCreesh and the Gabrieli before they became minor royalty. Shamefully, this fabulously moving performance is not listed in the discography on the artists' web site – although it does appear to be available on CD.

EDWARD ELGAR SYMPHONY NO 2 Elder/Hallé Orchestra



There are two obvious reasons for going to a concert: to hear a piece or an artist you already know you like, or to expose yourself to something

new. In hearing Elgar's second symphony for the first time at the Proms in 2013, with Daniel Harding conducting the LSO, I was inexplicably doing the latter. How could I never have heard this piece before? I have no explanation. Whatever – and despite poor reviews of the performance – I sat rooted to my chair, sharing an emotional journey the like of which I've seldom experienced. The next day I bought this fine recording: the Hallé Orchestra/Mark Elder one. But of course it cannot match that transcendent Royal Albert Hall experience.