

The Classical Cloud

The pleasures and frustrations of listening online.

BY ALEX ROSS



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CREDIT ILLUSTRATION BY MAURICIO ALEJO

Recently, while moving my CD collection to new shelving, I struggled with feelings of obsolescence and futility. Why bother with space-devouring, planet-harming plastic objects when so much music can be had at the touch of a trackpad—on Spotify, Pandora, Beats Music, and other streaming services that rain sonic data from the virtual entity known as the Cloud? What is the point of having amassed, say, the complete symphonies of the Estonian composer Eduard Tubin (1905-82) when all eleven of them pop up on Spotify, albeit in random order? (When I searched for “Tubin” on the service, I was offered two movements of his Fourth Symphony, with the others appearing far down a list.) The tide has turned against the collector of recordings, not to mention the collector of books: what was once known as building a library is now considered hoarding. One is expected to banish all clutter and consume culture in a gleaming, empty room.

Yet I'm wedded to the wall of plastic. I like browsing the spines—Schnabel, Schnebel, Schnittke—and pulling out disks at random. Even in the age of Wikipedia, liner notes and opera librettos can be informative. (Not everything exists online: I tried and failed to find the libretto for Franz Schreker's "Christophorus," which begins with the lines "Her eyes—hot summer. / Her thinking—cool.") I get a pang of nostalgia in seeing recordings that I bought almost thirty years ago, using money earned through an inept gardening business: the cover of Karajan's Mahler Ninth bears the scratches of a dozen college-era moves. My working process as a critic revolves around a stack of disks that I call the Listen Again pile: recent releases that have jumped out of the crowd and demand attention. None of this happens as easily on the computer. I experience no nostalgia for the first music I downloaded, which appears to have been Justin Timberlake.

The idiosyncrasies of aging critics aside, there are legitimate questions about the aesthetics and the ethics of streaming. Spotify is notorious for its chaotic presentation of track data. One recording of the Beethoven Ninth is identified chiefly by the name of the soprano, Luba Orgonášová; I had to click again and scrutinize a stamp-size reproduction of the album cover to determine the name of the conductor, John Eliot Gardiner. A deeper issue is one of economic fairness. Spotify and Pandora have sparked protests from artists who find their royalty payments insultingly small. In 2012, the indie-rock musician Damon Krukowski reported that his former band Galaxie 500 received songwriting royalties of two hundredths of a cent for each play of its most popular track on Spotify, with performance royalties adding a pittance more. Spotify has assured critics that artists' earnings will rise as more people subscribe. In other words, if you give us dominance, we will be more generous—a somewhat chilly proposition.

Such objections fall away in the case of institutions and ensembles that offer streaming audio and video of their own performances. Here the aim is simply to reach a broader audience and, perhaps, to make a little extra money from subscribers. The Glyndebourne Festival, the Bavarian State Opera, the Detroit Symphony, and the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonics, among others, offer fairly high-quality streams; my favorite is Detroit's, since it represents the try-anything spirit of an orchestra recovering from a brush with financial catastrophe. A good guide to this increasingly crowded landscape is Charles T. Downey, the proprietor of the arts blog lonarts, who features dozens of audio and video links every Sunday: a recent edition included

everything from Rameau's "Les Boréades" in Aix-en-Provence to Steve Reich's "The Desert Music" at the BBC Proms.

If I were a music-obsessed teen-ager today, I would probably be revelling in this endless feast, and dismissing the complaints of curmudgeons. No longer would I need to prop a tape recorder next to a transistor radio in order to capture Bruckner's Sixth Symphony. The thousand-year history of classical music would be mine for the taking. But there is a downside to the glut of virtual product and the attendant plunge of prices. As the composer-arranger Van Dyke Parks has argued, in a recent essay for *The Daily Beast*, the streaming model favors superstars and conglomerates over workaday musicians and indie outfits. Its façade of infinite variety notwithstanding, it meshes neatly with the winner-take-all economy. And if it ever comes crashing down—streaming services have struggled to turn a profit—hoarding may return to fashion.

My Listen Again pile currently contains a formidable new recording, from Deutsche Grammophon, of Strauss's "Elektra," with Christian Thielemann conducting fluidly and Evelyn Herlitzius slashing through the title role; a reissue of arias and cantatas by the seventeenth-century singer-composer Barbara Strozzi, recorded back in 2001 by the Milanese ensemble La Risonanza for the Glossa label; a two-CD set of whispery, meditative chamber works by the contemporary British composer Laurence Crane, from *Another Timbre*; a Naxos survey of intricately expressive harpsichord pieces by the Elizabethan courtier Ferdinando Richardson, with Glen Wilson performing; and "All the Things You Are," a recital by the pianist Leon Fleisher, on *Bridge*. In each case, the physical object adds something to the experience, whether it's Wilson's erudite notes about Richardson ("He waited at the feet of Queen Elizabeth of famous memory" is a line from the composer's epitaph) or a letter from the composer George Perle reproduced with Fleisher's release ("My piano music is quirky and takes some getting used to").

The Fleisher disk is the one I've listened to the most, nearly to the point of obsession. At the age of eighty-six, the pianist remains a musician of magisterial powers; this CD, containing music of Bach, Perle, Federico Mompou, Leon Kirchner, Dina Koston, George Gershwin, and

Jerome Kern, is one of his finest hours on record. In the mid-nineteen-sixties, Fleisher began suffering from focal dystonia, and for several decades he lost the use of his right hand. Eventually, thanks to experimental treatments, he returned to playing with both hands, but he still gravitates toward the left-hand repertory, much of which was commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, one of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's brothers, who lost an arm during the First World War. Fleisher has expanded that repertory further, and draws upon it in "All the Things You Are."

The central work is Bach's Chaconne in D Minor for violin, arranged as a left-hand piano exercise by Brahms. In a letter to Clara Schumann, Brahms told of his love for the Chaconne—"a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings"—and said that he enjoyed struggling in solitude to execute it with one hand, because "one does not always want to hear music actually played." The miracle of Fleisher's account is that, while he performs with astonishing dexterity, he retains that atmosphere of exploration, as if no one were listening. The most wrenching passage in the Chaconne comes toward the end, when, after an upward-striving, light-seeking section in D major, there is a shuddering collapse back into the minor. Here, as sonorous, multi-register figuration gives way to spare, confined lines, you may remember what you might have forgotten, that the pianist is using one hand, and that the impairment of the other has caused him much sorrow.

The remainder of the program extends the ruminative mood. Perle's, Kirchner's, and Koston's pieces, all informed by Schoenbergian modernism, find a mysterious rapport with the bluesy chords of Gershwin and Kern. By the end, as Kern's "All the Things You Are" unwinds at a last-call, closing-time tempo, we seem to be in some transcendent hotel lounge, with Bach and Brahms sequestered in a corner and Gershwin flitting about. Bridge Records, a family-run concern, has placed most of its releases on Spotify and other streaming services, and you can have equally intense encounters there. But only by buying the albums are you likely to help the label stay in business.

Alex Ross has been the music critic of The New Yorker magazine since 1996. This article appeared in the Sept. 9, 2014 issue. He also maintains a blog titled "The Rest Is Noise" found at: www.therestisnoise.com.