

Desert Island Disks — Andrew Rees

It is so so hard to try to confine oneself to a selection of eight pieces to take onto a desert island. What should the criteria be? Should they be the pieces that one enjoys the most, or should they be ones that mark a significant phase in life? A balance seems appropriate but I am going to cheat a little — sorry — and mention some also-rans which didn't quite make the main cut.

1. Fauré: Requiem

An exceptionally popular work which has been sung by almost every church choir and amateur choral society. Perhaps it is the quintessential liturgical work for church choirs because of the sense of calm, peace and serenity, unlike the undisguised anger which marks sections of Verdi's somewhat operatic Requiem, for example. It is one of the few without a Dies Irae movement.

This was the very first choral work that I sung as a teenager, hence its presence here. The head of music at my grammar school was also the organist and choirmaster at the local anglican churches, and he syphoned off the musical pupils to sing in what was a remarkably good choir. When I joined the choir another member, a sixth former, was Mark Drakeford, the present First Minister of Wales, and I have the photographic evidence somewhere!

Another reason for this choice is that I have performed at least five different parts over the years! In that first one I was an alto, soon to transition to bass via the usual creaks and squeeks which, I have to admit, I milked a little since my voice broke quite early at about 14. There are different arrangements and I have sing bass, played both the viola parts, the violin part, and the solo line too. Indeed, one of the performances was also my first ever concert playing the viola, the short B major section being a bit of a shock to the system!

I have chosen a recording of the Pie Jesu movement arranged and sung by the incomparable Voces8. It is a pity that no other movements appear to have been given the Voces8 treatment.

2. Stravinsky: The Firebird.

This is the absolute ultimate in personal significance. Sat near the back of second violins in the National Youth Orchestra of Wales I found myself next to a certain viola player — guess who! Apart from Siân, the other major memory was the pile-driver-like top A piccolo interjections at the start of the Infernal Dance. Violas, I know your pain!

Since then we have played it twice, once with BCO and again with KO. I have found the leader's desk to be a more pleasant place to be from the point of view of the inverse square law!

I have no favourite version of the Firebird because none of them come close to being in a 140-strong group of enthusiastic teenagers, but this is a rendition from a very scruffy but lively Gergiev in 2000.

3. Tippett: Concerto for Double String Orchestra.

This was one of my four set works for Music A level, the others being the four Ballades by Chopin, Handel's Chandos Anthem "O Praise the Lord with One Consent" and Haydn's String Quartet Op.77 No.2 "Fifths". I have since performed the Handel with the choir at St. Johns, leading the small orchestra. I have hacked my way through the Haydn a few times without paying guests being present. I was offered a chance to play the Tippett during my last year at Imperial College but it was during my finals and I was a borderline case and I just had to decline. It turned out to be a good call degree-wise, but there hasn't been a subsequent opportunity. My dream concert would be to combine the Tippett and Shostakovich's 14th Symphony with its mad second movement (5m 49s).

This is by far Tippett's most approachable work, entirely tonal and following neo-baroque lines with all sorts of fugal tricks being played. The false relation during the violin solo near the start of the second movement is a delight.

4. Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade.

I have played this maybe five times over the years, but 2012 was when it was my turn to attempt those solos. As things turned out, I was co-chairing an international conference at the university during the preceding week. That was immensely stressful and I guess that the only way that I can describe how stressful it was is to say that the Scheherazade solos were therapeutic simply because they were completely within my control. Not a hint of nerves. Everything that I had planned and practiced worked. Joy! My finest moment musically. Gergiev again.

5. Rabindranath Tagor: Badhu Kon Alo Laaglo Chokhe.

A song by Bengal's most revered poet and sung by the very well-known Arundhati Holme Chowdhury. This was my first taste of Indian music although I was in Bangladesh at the time, an invited speaker at the 10th Bangladesh Mathematics Conference. Conferences in the subcontinent always have a Cultural Programme half of which involves vocal, sitar and tabla performances from skilled local musicians, while delegates fall over themselves to perform in the second half. I have performed Bach and Bartok for them, each of which is somewhat different from what they are used to!

Further encounters with Indian classical music included a visit to the Madras Music Festival with a knowledgeable academic from the local IIT whispering to me about the structure of the pieces. Very informative.

If Indian songs are not to your taste, then I also offer the bamboo flute and tabla concert by Rakesh Chaurasia and Zakir Hussain who display astonishing virtuosity and musicianship.

6. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Violin Concerto.

One of the last great 20th century violin concerti, and one of the few recordings by the superb Pamela Frank. The second movement (8m 45s) is based on Bach's Chaconne in Dmin and at one point it dives off into a grotesque parody of the chaconne's theme. It may well be that history's judgement will relegate her behind Joan Tower and Jennifer Higdon, but this is certainly my favourite work of hers.

7. Krzysztof Penderecki: Symphony No. 7. "Seven Gates of Jerusalem".

An unknown absolute masterpiece. This is epic, epic in the same way that Verdi's Requiem is epic but with Penderecki's neo-Romantic vibe. His use of melodic fragments, driving rhythms and chromatic ramblings (often in the violas) which are reminiscent of the walking bass in trad jazz, all combine to create a definitive style of composition, at least for his symphonies. Perhaps this is his most approachable work, but his string trio is also worth checking out as a rather unusual work.

8. Biber: Passacaglia in Gmin.

Heinrich, as opposed to Justin! It is a stand-alone movement from his set of Rosary sonatas where almost every movement has the violin in scordatura; fortunately this one is in accordatura which is a profound relief when doesn't have a baroque violin or gut strings.

In the last couple of years I have had the great pleasure of performing this three times in various acoustics. In the above video link the acoustic is stunning. Such solo pieces are like a time trial on the bike – it is the race of truth, absolutely nothing can be hidden. When it works, life is great.

Postscript.

Well that seems to be the eight, unfortunately, and there are so many more that I could have mentioned which reflect better my eclectic tastes. So I won't mention any of the following: Deep Purple's Smoke on the Water, Kate Bush's Babooshka, Jethro Tull's Heavy Horses, Kraftwerk's Autobahn, the scherzo from Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, Grapelli and Menuhin Summertime, Quarter Chicken Duck, Arne's Alfred, Jeff Wayne's War of the Worlds.

What does Jethro Tull's Heavy Horses have in common with Rachmaninov's Vespers?