

Desert Island Discs – Steve Hoddell

I would estimate that there are several hundred pieces of music that I would miss should I be marooned on a desert island, so the choice of just eight is a serious challenge. There are, of course, some pieces that I would be more or less willing to go to a desert island in order never to have to hear them again, a list which is headed by the Radetzky March by Johann Strauss.

In compiling this list, I have cheated, in that I decided to exclude pieces already chosen by others. That takes out the Bach – Second Partita for Unaccompanied Violin, of which the final movement, the Chaconne is probably my all time number one. It also removes Sibelius Symphony No 7, which in reality I would be hard put to do without. The eight that remain are therefore:

(1) **Verdi – Falstaff.** His last opera; throughout the time he was composing this he insisted that it was not for performance but merely for his own pleasure. Fortunately it was then performed, and it remains one of the finest comic operas ever written. Julian Budden, writing about operas based on Shakespeare many years ago, placed them in three categories. Category 1 – those where the opera is a greater work than the play; Category 2, those where the two are of equivalent standing; and Category 3 where the opera is inferior to the play. The occupants of each category were intriguing. In category 1 there was one opera, Verdi's Falstaff. In category 2 there was one opera, Verdi's Otello; all other operas based on Shakespeare were dismissed into category 3. Apart from Verdi himself (and of course Shakespeare), Falstaff and Otello had one other thing in common – the libretti were both written by another genius – Arrigo Boito, who never made much of name for himself as a composer, but wrote two of the greatest opera libretti of all time, and cajoled Verdi into writing the music. Difficult to choose a particular performance, but there is a good live production from the Vienna State Opera at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNW4IDNkhCc>

(2) **Wagner – Parsifal.** I first encountered Wagnerian opera (sorry, music drama) in the 1970s. I was fascinated by the music, but somewhat put off by the plots. I have seen the whole Ring cycle on three occasions, with steadily increasing distaste for parts of Siegfried, and for the whole concept, for all that I do still enjoy much of the music. It was said that there was a Japanese translation of the Ring cycle which was recorded some time in the 1970s, and became very popular in Germany – at last people could listen to the music and not have to think about the words. I came to Parsifal, Wagner's last opera, a bit later, and again, the plot is not that brilliant, but the music is simply wonderful. There is a recording of a 2013 Proms live performance, which I attended, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLcCrCIum_w

(3) **Richard Strauss – Four Last Songs.** I seem to have rather focused on the last things that composers wrote, and this is no exception. Strauss composed these four songs in 1948, when he was 84. They present a very moving sense of acceptance and resignation. There are many many recorded versions of these songs – Renée Fleming does them well at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9eEHZ9n4y0>

(4) **Elgar – The Music Makers.** I would definitely want to have at least one piece by Elgar in my small collection. It was a close run choice between his oratorio The Kingdom, and The Music Makers. Neither are as well known as they deserve, and I finally settled on The Music Makers because of the way it quotes from other works of his – so you get a choral version of Nimrod thrown in. Janet Baker sings the solo part in a recording conducted by Sir Adrian Boult in 1967 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJGDOrZ-6Y>

(5) **Mahler – Symphony No 2 – Resurrection.** A couple of years ago I got the chance to play this in a workshop day with the Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra. We met in a fairly draughty hall in Crickhowell. The double basses were near the door, so we were particularly well placed to enjoy

the arctic blast coming in from the Brecon Beacons. The day ended with a play through of the whole symphony, and I played the last movement with tears blurring my view of the music. I found it an enormously moving experience to be part of that wonderful ending – and I completely forgot about the draughts. There is an excellent live recording from the Proms by the Simon Bolivar Orchestra, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbovYqWT-LM>

(6) **Vaughan Williams – Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.** This is another piece that I played recently, with Warwick Strings. I was one of the two double basses in the first orchestra – there is another bass in the second smaller orchestra. For some of time the first orchestra basses are divided into two parts, so it was one instrument per part. Challenging, but I really enjoyed this, and I could see why its first performance, in Gloucester Cathedral in 1910, made Vaughan Williams into a star overnight. And there is another reason for including this – I get echoes of Tallis, another very great English composer, thrown in for free. Andrew Davis conducts a superbly atmospheric live performance also in Gloucester Cathedral – at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihx5LCF1yJY>

(7) **Beethoven – String Quartet No. 13, Op.130.** Beethoven has to be in there, and while almost any of the symphonies could make the cut I finally decided on one of the late string quartets. Again, they are all wonderful works, but I am particularly drawn to the Op. 130 quartet, played with the Grosse Fuge (Op. 133) as the final movement – which is what Beethoven originally intended. There is so much variety in this work, that it would keep me occupied for some time. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i29LA1fy5r4>

(8) **Bach – Mass in B minor.** I have always found this music rather intriguing. For all that Bach was one of the greatest musicians of all time, he was a professional who composed music because that is what he was paid to do. So, working as he did in staunchly Lutheran north Germany, why did he write this quite astonishing setting of the latin mass? It was never performed in his lifetime, and for the music he assembled many of the best bits from various other works he had composed throughout his life. But as there cannot have been a demand for the latin i.e. catholic mass to be performed in the churches in Leipzig where he spent the last years of his life, it would seem that he created this just for his own pleasure. And for me the other big question is just how did any composer since Bach think that it was worth writing a Sanctus after the glorious setting that Bach incorporated into the B minor? Finally, if I had to sacrifice seven of these pieces in order to save one, then this is the one I would save. John Eliot Gardiner's 2016 live performance in Paris is superb - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT6vRpmYiW0>

A luxury and a book are in some ways more difficult to choose, probably because only one of each is allowed. For a luxury, I think perhaps a wood-turning lathe. I enjoy working with wood, and as I have never had the chance to try my hand at wood-turning, being stuck on a desert island might be exactly the chance I need. For a book, I think I would stick to the generally musical theme, and choose Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, a novel which I enjoyed enormously the first time I read it, and would happily read again.

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