

Building a Classical Music Repertoire

Some suggestions for a starting point

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User's Guide and Disclaimer

I have tried to list the works in approximate order of approachability, easiest to hardest. However, I encourage you to “mix it up a little.” For example, don’t move straight from Mozart’s *Magic Flute* straight to *Marriage of Figaro*, just because it’s next on the list. Rather, try something completely different before coming back for more Mozart.

Where I have a personal recommendation for a particular recording, I have listed it. Absence of a recommendation means that I have not formed a sufficiently strong attachment to any recording that I want to recommend it. Recommendations adorned with an asterisk (*) are those I *really* like. The Appendix contains some information that may help you calibrate your tastes in recording to mine.

This is an intensely personal list, as any list of its kind must be. The ordering is approximate, and determined by my personal assessment of a work’s approachability. Omitted from the list are:

- works I’m not familiar with (of course), or that I haven’t gotten to know well, for many and varied reasons
- works I don’t especially care for
- more -esoteric works I judge to be beyond the current interest level of students taking this course

You’ll notice, for example, a pretty thin representation of Brahms and the prolific Mozart, and a total absence of several well-known composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Rachmaninov. I’ve nothing against these guys—they just don’t excite me a whole lot. As I said, it’s an intensely personal list. If our tastes intersect at all, then I think the list will provide useful guidance. By the time you get towards the final couple of sections, you should be able to navigate your own way pretty well through the classical jungle, including into the uncharted waters of the Chopins and Liszts.

You might want to download the [Word document](#), which will allow you to import the tables into Excel, Access, or whatever, so that you can sort on the various columns. The CD number is perhaps the most interesting one, because each recommended CD tends to contain several listed works. You can thus build up your collection in a more cost-effective way.

The List

Appropriate for beginners

Grieg: Peer Gynt Suite No. 1	New Philharmonia Orchestra, Andrew Davis	Sony SBK 53257
Grieg: Two Elegaic Melodies	Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy	Sony SBK 53257
Wagner: Ride of the Valkyries		
Pachelbel: Canon		
Faure: Pavane		
Barber: Adagio	London Symphony Orchestra, Andre Previn	HMV 5 72124 2
Tchaikovsky: Swan Lake	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti	London 425 516-2
Golland: Meiso	Black Dyke Mills Band, David King*	Polyphonic QPRL 047D
Berlioz: Carnaval Romain		
Berlioz: Rob Roy	Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Charles Dutoit	London D-115368
Handel: Suite from the Water Music		
Mendelssohn: A Midsummer Night's Dream		
Handel: Music for the Royal Fireworks		
Britten: Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra		
Dvorak: Slavonic Dances		
Elgar: Introduction and Allegro for Strings		
Mozart: The Marriage of Figaro Overture		
Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice		
Verdi: The Force of Destiny (Overture)		
Mozart: Horn Concertos 1-4	Alan Civil, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Rudolf Kempe	EMI CD-EMX 2004
Brahms: Academic Festival Overture		
Tchaikovsky: Marche Slave	London Symphony Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski	London 430 410-2
Albinoni: Adagio		
Copland: Fanfare for the Common Man	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Louis Lane	Telarc CD-80078
Tchaikovsky: Capriccio Italien	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim	DG 445 523-2
Mussorgsky: Khovanshchina (prelude)	London Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti	Decca 289 460 984-2
Debussy: Claire de Lune		
Wagner: Prelude to Act 3, Lohengrin		
Bach: Toccata in d minor		
Sibelius: Karelia Suite	Philharmonia Orchestra, Vladimir Ashkenazy*	London 414 534-2
Glinka: Russlan and Ludmilla		

Beethoven: Egmont	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti	Decca 289 460 983-2
Warlock: Capriol Suite	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Wagner: Prelude to the Mastersingers		
Mendelssohn: Fingal's Cave		
Mussorgsky: Night on Bare Mountain	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner	BMG 82876-61394-2
Rossini: La Gazza Ladra (The Thieving Magpie)		
Mozart: Eine Kleine Nachtmusik	Camerata Academica, Francesco Macci	Quintessence CDQ 2024
Bernstein: Candide Overture	London Symphony Orchestra, Andre Previn	HMV 5 72124 2
Mozart: The Magic Flute Overture		
Verdi: Grand March from Aida		
Rutter: Distant Land	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, John Rutter*	Decca B0001821-02
Chabrier: Valse Espana		
Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice		
Rimsky-Korsakov: Capriccio Espagnol		
Elgar: Pomp and Circumstance Marches 1-5	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Andre Previn	London 416 813-2
Vivaldi: The Four Seasons	English Concert, Trevor Pinnock*	DG Arch 400 045-2

Starting to get a little more demanding

Britten: Simple Symphony	London Symphony Orchestra, Benjamin Britten	London 417 509-2
Vaughan Williams: The Wasps	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Adrian Boult*	HMV 5 72162 2
Elgar: Serenade for Strings	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*	Chandos CHAN 8479
Tchaikovsky: Nutcracker Suite		
Vaughan Williams: Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Bryden Thomson	Chandos CHAN 8502
Vaughan Williams: The Lark Ascending	New Philharmonia Orchestra, Adrian Boult*	HMV 5 72162 2
Vaughan Williams: Fantasia on Greensleeves	London Symphony Orchestra, Adrian Boult	HMV 5 72162 2
Verdi: Nabuco (Overture)		
Wagner: Rienzi Overture		
Berlioz: Benvenuto Cellini		
Mozart: Piano Concert No. 21 (K.467)		
Respighi: The Pines of Rome	Philadelphia Orchestra, Ricardo Muti	EMI Angel CDC 7 47316 2
Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner	BMG 82876-61394-2
Holst: St. Paul's Suite	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Holst: A Moorside Suite (for brass)	Grimethorpe Colliery Band, Gary Cutt*	Chandos CHAN 4553

Grieg: Holberg Suite	Bournemouth Sinfonietta, Richard Studt	Naxos 8.553106
Ireland: A Comedy Overture	Britannia Building Society Band, Howard Snell	Doyen DOY CD 019
Delius: On hearing the first cuckoo in spring	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Delius: Summer night on the river	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Delius: Irmelin Prelude	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Alan Barlow	Academy Sound CD QS 6070
Sibelius: Finlandia	Cleveland Orchestra, Yoel Levi	Telarc CD-80095
Vaughan Williams: Serenade to Music	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Adrian Boult	HMV 5 72162 2
Wagner: Tannhauser Overture		
Elgar: Cockaigne Overture	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim ¹	Sony SBK 56510
Vaughan Williams: In the Fen Country	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Bryden Thomson*	Chandos CHAN 8502
Vaughan Williams: Norfolk Rhapsody	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Bryden Thomson*	Chandos CHAN 8502
Holst: The Planets	Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Charles Dutoit*	London D-115448
Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 2	English Chamber Orchestra, Anthony Newman. Wynton Marsalis, trumpet*	Sony SK 66 244
Bach: Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 1, 3-6		
Wren: Serenade for Strings	Bournemouth Sinfonietta, Richard Studt	Naxos 8.553106
Vaughan Williams: Toward the Unknown Region	London Symphony Orchestra, Bryden Thomson*	Chandos CHAN 8796
Copland: Appalachian Spring	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Louis Lane	Telarc CD-80078
Copland: Rodeo	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Louis Lane	Telarc CD-80078
Britten: Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra		
Debussy: Prelude a l'apres-mide d'un faune	Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin	Telarc CD-80071
Beethoven: Symphony No. 1		
Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4		
Berlioz: Les Francs Juges (Judges of the Secret Court)		
Rodrigo: Concerto de Aranjuez	Carlos Bonnel (guitar), Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Charles Dutoit*	London 417 748-2
Fantasia para un gentilhombre	Carlos Bonnel (guitar), Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Charles Dutoit*	London 417 748-2

Now we're starting to get serious

Haydn: Symphony No. 99		
Beethoven: Symphony No. 6 (Pastoral)	Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Andre Previn	RCA 7747-2-RC
Elgar: Enigma Variations	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim ¹	Sony SK 92763

¹ This recording features the organ, an important feature to my mind, but marked ad lib by Elgar.

Haydn: Symphony No. 102		
Berlioz: Symphonie Fantastique		
Haydn: Symphony No. 104		
Boyce: Concerti Grossi (3 of them)	Cantilena, Adrian Shepherd	Chandos CHAN 6665
Dvorak: Symphony No. 9 (From the New World)	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*	Chandos CHAN 8510
Bach, JC: Sinfonias Op. 18 (6 of them)	Failoni Orchestra, Hanspeter Gmür*	Naxos 8.553367
Boyce: any or all of the 12 overtures	Cantilena, Adrian Shepherd	Chandos CHAN 6665
Sibelius: Symphony No. 2	Cleveland Orchestra, Yoel Levi	Telarc CD-80095
Still: Symphony No. 1 (Afro-American Symphony)	Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*	Chandos CHAN 9154
Saint-Saens: Symphony No. 3 (Organ Symphony)	Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Charles Dutoit*	London 410 201-2
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti*	London 425 516-2
Hummel: Trumpet Concerto	Wynton Marsalis (trumpet) National Philharmonic Orchestra, Raymond Leppard*	Sony MK 37846
Sibelius: Symphony No. 5		
Beethoven: Symphony No. 5		
Dvorak: Symphony No. 8	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*	Chandos CHAN 8666
Beethoven: Symphony No. 3		
Franck: Symphony in D		
Berlioz: Harold in Italy		
Mozart: Symphony No. 39		
Beethoven: Symphony No. 7		
Debussy: La Mer	Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin*	Telarc CD-80071
Haydn: Trumpet Concerto	Wynton Marsalis (trumpet) National Philharmonic Orchestra, Raymond Leppard*	Sony MK 37846
Beethoven String quartet Op 18 No 6	Jerusalem Quartet*	BBC MM95

...and more serious still

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, James Levine	RCA RCD1-5355
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti	Decca D 125038
Vaughan Williams: Symphony No. 2 (London Symphony)	London Symphony Orchestra, Bryden Thomson	Chandos CHAN 8629
Schubert: Symphony No. 8 (Unfinished)	Philharmonia Orchestra, Giuseppe Sinopoli	DG 445 514-2
Beethoven: Symphony No. 8		
Dvorak: Symphony No. 4	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi	Chandos CHAN 8608
Elgar: Cello Concerto	Jacqueline du Pre, Philadelphia Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim	Sony SK 92763
Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto		

Beethoven: Symphony No. 9		
Elgar: Symphony No. 1	London Philharmonic Orchestra, Bryden Thomson*	Chandos CHAN 8451
Schubert: Symphony No. 9		
Shostakovich: Cello Concerto No. 1		
Stravinsky: The Firebird		

Pushing the envelope here

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi	Chandos CHAN 8650
Shostakovich: Symphony No. 1	Scottish National Orchestra, Neeme Järvi	Chandos CHAN 8411
Nielsen: Symphony No. 5	Royal Scottish Orchestra ² , Bryden Thomson	Chandos CHAN 9164
Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring		
Vaughan Williams: Variations (for brass)	Black Dyke Mills Band, Geoffrey Brand	Chandos CHAN 4510
Bartok: Concerto for Orchestra	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti*	London 400 052-2—10
Bartok: Music for Percussion, Strings, and Celesta		
Bruckner: Symphony No. 4	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim	DG 2530 336

And now we're going way beyond the beginner stage

Bruckner: Symphony No. 7	Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Georg Solti*	London 417 631-2
Ives: Symphony No. 2	Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*	Chandos CHAN 9390
Shostakovich: Symphony No. 11	National Symphony Orchestra, Mstislav Rostropovich*	Teldec 9031-76262-2
Shostakovich: Symphony No. 10	London Symphony Orchestra, Mstislav Rostropovich*	Teldec 9031-74529-2

² The Scottish National Orchestra was renamed the Royal Scottish Orchestra, and then renamed again Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Appendix—Calibrating your taste

Orchestras

To help you calibrate your tastes against mine, I should divulge that my favorite orchestras are:

Tier 1

Chicago Symphony Orchestra; London Symphony Orchestra

Tier 2

National Symphony Orchestra; Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Tier 3

Academy of St. Martin in the Fields; Cleveland Orchestra; Detroit Symphony Orchestra; London Philharmonic Orchestra; New York Philharmonic; Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal; Philadelphia Orchestra; Philharmonia Orchestra; Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; St Louis Symphony Orchestra

You may notice that there are no orchestras from continental Europe on my list. These omissions are not an oversight. I'm simply pointing out my personal biases so that you can be aware of them and adjust accordingly for your own tastes and biases. It's perfectly fine by me if your taste says that Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic on Beethoven symphonies is the apotheosis of Western music. That's not my taste, and I'm simply making you aware of it. I have no desire to enter into debate over which orchestra is better than which other.

As a trumpet player, my taste in orchestral sound is strongly influenced by the tone quality, strength and power of the brass section. I understand that for other people a strong brass section may be a non-issue, or even a negative factor. I'm sure there are many who identify with Richard Strauss' acid remark, "Never look at the trombones—it only encourages them."

Record Labels

The labels that occur in my list do a fine job of orchestral recording. The one that stands a cut above the rest, to my ears, is Chandos. Their recordings are always absolutely top class. Again, your mileage may vary, so just be aware of my heavy bias toward Chandos.