



## *Pirates, Castaways and the Erased — Newsletter Issue 190, February 2025*

**Frances Forbes-Carbines:** Ideally when you go to see an opera, you want to come away humming the tunes. This is almost always occasioned by the works of Gilbert and Sullivan: in *The Pirates of Penzance* are so many memorable songs that they are only matched by, in this ENO production, the brilliance of director Mike Leigh's choice of period costumes, particularly that of the swashbuckling Pirate King, performed admirably in this by bass-baritone John Savournin.

Sitting with my editor in the audience, we noticed that we were not alone in laughing uproariously at the libretto's jokes, puns and wordplay: the audience was moved to mirth throughout the performance. We then remarked that the piece had not lost its power over the audience since its London debut in 1880: human nature, perhaps, does not change over centuries to the extent that we would expect it to. Some of the scenes in *Pirates* would not be created today: the capture of the ladies by the pirate crew, for example, recalling the plight of the Sabine women, sits rather uncomfortably in the *Me Too* era, but the language and behaviours otherwise depicted are all too recognisable. When the ladies feel awkward at the sight of the pirate apprentice Frederic, they panic, get flustered and resolve to sit and talk pointedly about the weather: what could be more English, even these days? The humour translates very well from the Victorian age to our own, which really is remarkable when you consider that over 120 years have passed since the opera's composition and first performance.

The songs are, quite simply, marvellous. The Major-General's famous song, 'I am The Very Model of a Modern Major General', is surely one of the fastest Gilbert and Sullivan songs, with its speedy patter and deluge of information. It references the battle of Marathon, fought between the Persians and the Greeks in 490 BC; it speaks of the Major-General's knowledge of 'equations, both simple and quadratical'. Gilbert, ever the joker, in this song rhymes 'lot of news' to 'square of the hypotenuse' (this was received with an uproar of laughter from the audience); it also rhymes 'integral and differential calculus' with 'beings animalculous,' with the latter referring to microscopic life forms ...

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Sophie Rosa

**Mike Wheeler:** Sinfonia Viva's one-hour Sunday afternoon concerts have become regular features of the Royal Concert Hall's orchestral season, and are always delightful occasions. This time, with leader Sophie Rosa directing, the focus was on music for string orchestra from Eastern Europe - Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, UK, 19 January 2025. In **Bartók's** *Romanian Dances*, in Arthur Willner's transcription of the piano original, the first dance had plenty of poise and swagger, while No 2's skittishness was enhanced by some artful pauses. The plaintive quality of the two slow dances was heightened by Sophie Rosa's expressive solo playing, and the final fast group was given plenty of bounce and swing.

**Josef Suk** composed his poignant Meditation on the old Czech Chorale, 'St Wenceslas' for the Bohemian (later Czech) String Quartet, of which he was the second violinist, at the same time making the version for string orchestra. The players projected the music's expressive arc compellingly, from the hushed opening, through passages agitated and fragile by turns, to an impassioned climax, before winding down with just the right suggestion of tentative tranquility. [READ MORE](#)

**Mike Wheeler:** 'They're amazing' said conductor Jaime Martín, gesturing to the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain players after their stunning performance of Nielsen's Fourth Symphony, and who could possibly argue with that?

Their splendidly eclectic programme began with as engrossing a performance of **Ravel's** *Boléro* as I've ever heard, giving the lie to the composer's claim that 'there's no music in it'. It began in a whisper, as if from a great distance, and with the second violins on the right, the sound had ideal focus, enhanced by the wind principals moving, in turn, to the rear corners of the stage for their laid-back solos; principal saxophone Emily Barron, in particular, clearly enjoyed Ravel's written-in bluesy slurs. The constant clicking and whirring sound-image reminded us that this is flamenco writ large, and the growing tension was superbly controlled, ensuring that the climactic lift into E major near the end came as a real jolt.

One of the players then spoke enthusiastically to the audience about the NYO's ethos, and what it means to the members to take part in its various projects.

We've heard two pieces by Icelandic composer **Anna Thorvaldsdóttir** in Nottingham in the last few years; *Catamorphosis* was the third, every bit as compelling as I expected. The opening, a study in very soft dynamics, immediately suggested physical forces at work in the landscape, with low rumbling percussion, harp and piano, punctuated by bell-strokes, and joined by rustling string figures. As colours and textures slowly shifted, dark, but not menacing, moments were offset by bright, gleaming sounds, and the slowly evolving mosaic of individual motifs created moments of both stillness and powerful undercurrents. In the whispering string figures at the end, the players captured a real evanescent quality. Conductor and orchestra handled the work with the kind of control that enhanced, rather than impeded, the music's progress. Were the red and green lights projected onto the back wall above the choir seats intended to evoke the aurora borealis? A nice touch, if so. [READ MORE](#)

For an alternative take on the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain's January 2025 tour, read Roderic Dunnett below. Mike also listens to Opera North's *The Magic Flute*, to the Hallé and BBC Concert orchestras, to pianists Dina Duisen and David Wright, to the Sitwell Singers, Derby Choral Union and the Derby Concert Orchestra.

[READ MIKE WHEELER'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)



**Roderic Dunnett** on national youth orchestras: Bavaria has two (the State Youth and the Opera Youth) ... In the United States the Portland Youth Philharmonic, the world's oldest, dates from 1924; countless other cities and states have followed.

Romania, Ukraine - all the countries of Europe - have realised the importance of such enterprises. The Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester is based in Vienna. The European Union Youth Orchestra is also based west of Vienna, at Grafenegg on the Danube. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, an example of true humanity bringing together Jewish and Arab players - one of the finest and most humanist achievements, among so many, of Daniel Barenboim, overseen by the *daniel-barenboim-stiftung.org* in (as it happens) Berlin - has its share of younger performers. The Palestine Youth Orchestra has just turned twenty years old. Perhaps the most remarkable are the Gaza (Youth) Orchestra; and amazingly, the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq, founded and given new life from 2009 by my good friend Paul Macalindin. In short, there are miracles occurring the world over. [READ MORE](#) [READ RODERIC DUNNETT'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)



Members of the National Youth Orchestra of Iraq

**Ron Bierman:** This year's final subscription concert at the new Jacobs Music Center began with Richard Strauss's tone poem *Don Juan* and ended with his equally familiar *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. In between, Inon Barnatan was featured in two twentieth century piano concertos by **Dimitri Shostakovich**.

The familiar *Don Juan* lives up to its name. It's a tone poem for orchestra with a mix of romance, heroism and tragedy. San Diego Symphony Music Director and conductor Rafael Payare was at his enthusiastically acrobatic best. The music's many moods were reflected in his motions and facial expressions and then realized in the orchestra for an exciting performance. [READ MORE](#)



Paul Merkelo, Inon Barnatan and members of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Photo © 2024 Ron Bierman

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## CASTAWAY — TALES OF A MODERN-DAY ROBINSON CRUSOE

**Peter King:** Standout concert performances are best seen as well as heard. There was a time, a mere three generations ago, when a castaway had to be content with a clutch of gramophone records to listen to and nothing more than the balmy waters lapping at the shore to observe. Nowadays, when the buzzword is 'connectivity', no modern-day Robinson Crusoe worth his salt would dream of being seen without a screen.

The ability to surf the web is a *sine qua non*: no signal, no sleepy lagoon. A smartphone in a joined up location is a must, providing the gateway not just to the sound of music, but also to the sight of captivating performances staged in glittering concert halls around the globe.

When *Desert island discs* was launched in Britain in 1942 the wireless ruled the waves. Americans, too, were basking in a golden age of the power of radio. Orson Welles, in his dramatization of *The War of the Worlds*, had just recently been able to exploit the enormous reach of the popular medium to persuade his fellow countrymen that a Martian invasion was actually under way.



Newspaper coverage in *The New York Times* of the effect of Orson Welles' 1938 radio dramatisation of H G Wells' *The War of the Worlds*

Today an exile from most of the perks of 21st century life would insist, for his one luxury, on the means to tap into video clips to help him navigate his life's musical journey. His pampered visual sense would no longer be satisfied with the simple soundtrack of his days deemed fitting fodder for his forebears. He would want to picture his selection of magical musical moments too.

A castaway trawling clips that might help to sustain him now would be spoilt for choice. One strong contender, compelling almost as much by sight as by sound, would perhaps be the appearance of the late lamented baritone, **Dmitri Hvorostovsky** - opera's Siberian tiger - at the Last Night of the Proms in 2006.

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[PETER KING'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)

## ALBERT SCHWEITZER — ERASED MUSICIAN?

**A P Virag:** Albert Schweitzer was profiled in the great American magazine *Life* on 6 October 1947 with the headline: 'The Greatest Man in the World: That is what some people call Albert Schweitzer, Jungle Philosopher.'

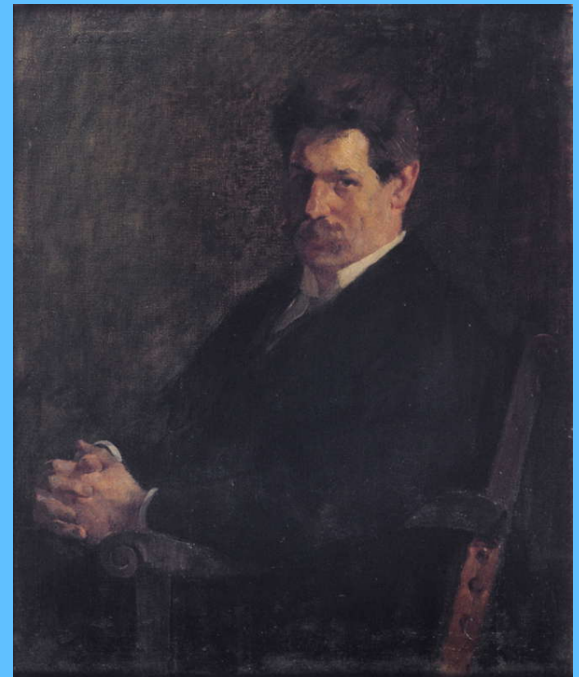
Who exactly was this man?

Well, let us see:

Born in 1875 and died in 1965. Doctoral level degrees in Philosophy, Theology, Medicine. It is often claimed he had a doctorate in music for his book on Bach, though the exact status of this eludes me. I do not deny it, the details just elude me. He was also a Lutheran pastor and in 1952 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The reason for the award is given as:

'...for his altruism, reverence for life, and tireless humanitarian work which has helped making the idea of brotherhood between men and nations a living one ...'

(See [nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1952/schweitzer/facts](https://nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1952/schweitzer/facts))



1912 portrait of Albert Schweitzer by Émile Schneider

Schweitzer wrote numerous books on theological subjects, the most famous being *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. He also wrote a giant biography with analysis of J S Bach, as well as critiques of Western Civilization and modern ethics. (Amazingly these books were published by the same publisher as brought out Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. They make for a fascinating comparison covering as they do much similar ground, and yet being so vastly different.) Above all, Schweitzer sought for and believed he had indeed found an elemental idea that could reinvigorate modern ethics and civilization which he described by the deeply suggestive apothegm: 'Reverence for Life'.

Along with his shelf full of books and articles, he performed many concerts of the music of Bach (and even César Franck) after his studies with the great organist Charles Marie Widor. He was very active in preserving historic organs in Europe and deeply investigated organ construction and design. He made numerous recordings as well.

But, it is as a medical doctor in Africa that engendered his great fame in his lifetime. After much soul searching he decided that training as a medical doctor and serving the people of Africa was the path his life should take. Thus, he gave up his academic and musical careers. He then spent many years in Gabon (at that time in *circa* 1910, part of the French colonial empire until independence in 1960) and the clinic (known as *Hôpital Albert Schweitzer*) that he established with his wife Helene Bresslau Schweitzer still exists.

**Albert Schweitzer** continued his work in Gabon until his death in 1965. It was widely considered an act of the greatest self-abnegation for an intellectual of such vast achievements before he was thirty years old, to give up all and become a doctor in a remote portion of the world.

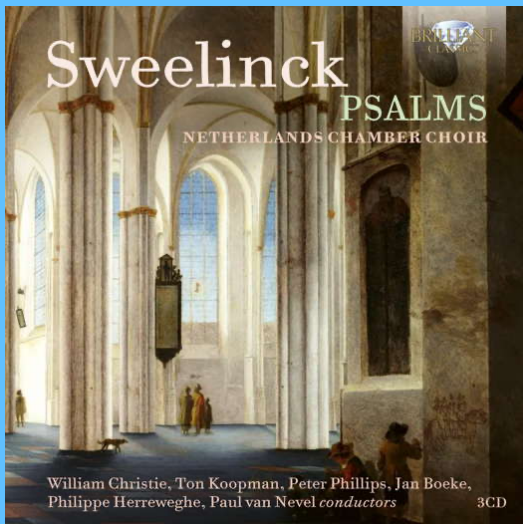
It was as both as a scientist and as a theologian/philosopher that Schweitzer also spoke out in the 1950s against atomic weapons, atomic testing and the dangers of atomic radiation. Some say he was one of the first to do so. Certainly, this Nobel Prize winner (1952) was amply positioned (and qualified) to draw attention to the dangers and risks of nuclear weapons. Remember, this was an era of 'good' atomic energy and the Cold War. Issues about atomic weapons, testing and the dangers of fallout were both new to the world and intricately involved in the political intrigue of the era.

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**A P VIRAG'S LATEST REVIEWS**



## SPOTLIGHT — SPEAKING FROM AN EARLIER TIME



'... beautifully performed ...'

**Geoff Pearce:** Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621) ... was very highly regarded by his contemporaries. Students came from far and wide to study with him, and his knowledge of all the main schools of composition of the period was legendary. He was especially well known as an organist and harpsichordist, and his music for those instruments has drawn the most attention. This I find quite interesting, because it was as a vocal composer that I first became acquainted with his music.

This set of three CDs encompasses works that are representative of his Latin-based psalms (as opposed to the ones in French which were for private use and written throughout his life). The period was a complex one, both regionally and religiously, and his life straddled the junction between the Renaissance and the Baroque. The programme notes are excellent, going into considerable detail about the thirty-nine works presented here and about Sweelinck's place in history generally.

On opening the first disc, the first work presented is *Psalms 150*. This is for choir alone. One is struck by the rich textures and the superb choir. I have always been impressed with this choir whenever I have heard it, and this certainly does not disappoint. [READ MORE](#)

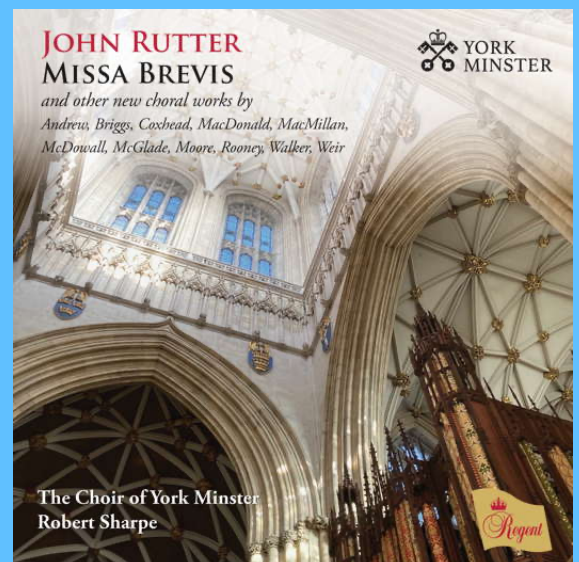
Geoff also listens to music by Messiaen and Salieri - both on Brilliant Classics - and to chamber music by William Busch on Lyrita. [GEOFF PEARCE'S LATEST REVIEWS](#)

**Gerald Fenech:** John Rutter's latest *Missa Brevis*, written for Robert Sharpe and the Choir of Westminster in memory of composer Richard Shephard, is the major work in this collection of recent sacred choral music by living composers.

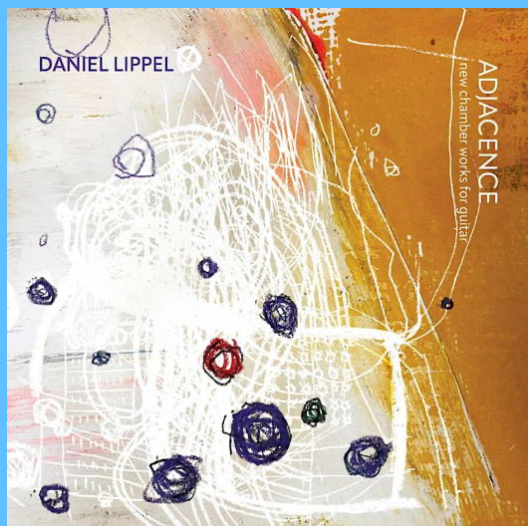
Indeed, this heartwarming programme also includes contributions from long-established composers of church music **Cecilia McDowall**, **Judith Weir**, Philip Moore and **James MacMillan**, among others whose works can be considered new emerging voices in this genre - the majority being young female composers such as Annabel Rooney, Lucy Walker, Kerensa Briggs and Becky McGlade.

With most of these pieces receiving their first commercial recording, York Minster has always been renowned as a place that has maintained and advanced the artistic endeavours of its music. The works on this album reflect the breath of invention in the continually developing tradition of sacred choral music over the last twenty-five years (1997-2020) in a wide variety of styles. [READ MORE](#)

Gerald also listens to Debussy from the Nash Ensemble on Hyperion, and explores the Huehuetenango Songbook on Glossa. [READ GERALD FENECH'S LATEST CD REVIEWS](#)



'Expressive performances from a choir at the top of its powers.'



**John Dante Prevedini:** *Adjacence* is the recent release from New Focus Recordings of solo and chamber compositions featuring guitar from a variety of contemporary classical composers. The 128-minute double album is available in both CD and digital format, and it includes a booklet with liner notes by Daniel Lippel, a guitarist on all the pieces showcased in the album. In addition to Lippel, the album features an extensive group of performers, specifically guitarist Oren Fader, guitarist John Chang, guitarist William Anderson, soprano Nina Berman, soprano Elizabeth Weigle, bassist Randall Zigler, clarinetist Amy Advocat, flautist Roberta Michel, dulcimerist Nathan Davis, violist Wendy Richman, violist Jessica Meyer, percussionist Jeffrey Irving, percussionist Haruka Fujii, percussionist Clara Warnaar, pianist Eric Huebner, pianist Karl Larson, pianist Cory Smythe, pianist Renate Rohlfing, saxophonist Timothy Ruedeman, violinist Nurit Pacht and bassoonist Rebekah Heller.

'... an astonishing diversity of creative voices ...'

This double album highlights works by composers from across the landscape of 'contemporary artists', to use Lippel's

terminology, though it appears to focus specifically on the established academy-supported subgenre of contemporary classical music in the United States that often identifies itself as 'New Music', based on the composers and sonic profiles included. (Lippel himself does not use this identification here.) This idiom is, one might say, characterized by a kind of maximalism in miniature. There has evolved within academy-adjacent circles a compositional vernacular which intentionally and regularly brings to the fore the full range of modern and contemporary sonic innovations in Western art music, compressed in scale for the purposes of cohesive presentation and study in an intimate studio setting by would-be contemporary composers. It is this New Music vernacular which is audibly present throughout this album. Within this audible context, Lippel articulates the goal of this guitar project as 'a chronicle of an attempt to make music not in opposition to any one credo or in uncritical embrace of another, but on an adjacent path', the implication being that the art form in question otherwise trends toward ideological motivations which remain unnamed in the booklet essay. In any case, such ideological associations are what this project seemingly aims to transcend by reframing these pieces of music through a novel perspective of pure sonic focus. To this end, Lippel has assembled an astonishing diversity of creative voices contributing to the guitar repertoire in the New Music context.

The album opens with Daniel Lippel's *Utopian Prelude* for electric and microtonal classical guitar, a freely atonal piece juxtaposing polyphonic and homophonic textures.

This is followed by *Cantione Sine Textu* (meaning 'song without text') for soprano, clarinet, bass clarinet, flute, piccolo, alto flute, bass and guitar, composed by Mario Davidovsky on the text of the piece's title itself. Another freely atonal work, the piece continuously alternates between dense and sparse ensemble textures. [READ MORE](#) [READ JOHN DANTE PREVEDINI'S LATEST CD REVIEWS](#)

Recent reviews of Cantonese choral music on Navona Records, music by Philip Glass from Third Coast Percussion and music by Edward Nesbit on Delphian are also available.

Our reviews of recorded music are worth exploring in more detail than shown here. They are all illustrated with short sound samples, usually chosen by the author of each review, and each review has a detailed information page about the album under scrutiny.

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## CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS - 'THE C[CRITIC]S CAN DROWN IN THEIR BATHS'

Jessica Duchen's new book about British pianist Myra Hess will be published this month, on 25 February 2025. It's the first new biography of the British pianist for nearly fifty years.

In Oliver Cotton's play *The Score* which opens in London UK this month, J S Bach is summoned for a meeting by King Frederick II of Prussia. Stephen Sondheim's last musical, *Here We Are*, runs in London, UK from from 23 April until 28 June 2025.

Potential competitors have until 3 April 2025 to apply for the 2025 Donatella Flick Conducting Competition. The Classical Next: 2025 conference takes place in Berlin, Germany in May 2025.

We have details of forthcoming concerts at the Curtis Institute, celebrating its anniversary, plus a European tour by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, concerts at home by the Taiwan Philharmonic and details of Festival Napa Valley and the 2025 Rossini Opera and Madeira music festivals.

We're changing the way we deal with new releases - details of this are also online, and if you haven't yet seen our January 2025 video newsletter, *Music and the Visual World*, that is available to watch too.

We also mark the passing of many classical musicians in December 2024 and January 2025. [READ MORE](#)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC WORD-SEARCH PUZZLES

Canadian composer **Allan Rae**'s latest classical music word-search puzzles, **Mandobass** and **Neoclassical** have been published to keep you busy, if you have time.

You'll find more than twenty of these puzzles linked from **Allan Rae's page**, and we're currently publishing one each month.

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