



## *Classical Music Daily*

*Big Music — Newsletter Issue 192, April 2025*

**Gillian Wills:** Jack Liebeck, artistic director of the hugely successful nine-day Australian Festival of Chamber Music, spoke to me about striking a balance between the Festival's well-established traditions and the introduction of new elements, how acoustic spaces designed specifically for performance of live classical music are crucial and his surprising wish list for the future.

Hot property as a soloist with the world's best orchestras, a recitalist and chamber musician, Liebeck describes himself as a Renaissance man. Apparently, he's a keen photographer, a physics enthusiast and science nerd. He once launched a series of concerts to commemorate Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*.

Oxford May Music in Oxfordshire (UK) is an unusual happening which Liebeck founded and now leads. It's different because of the diverse cultural programs curated by Liebeck and physicist Professor Brian Foster. Clearly a connoisseur of festivals, the violinist also heads up Alpine Classics in Grindelwald.

Liebeck regularly performed at tropical North Queensland's AFCM before taking on the directorship in 2022. His grass roots experience as a player makes him committed to the occasion's established traditions fine-tuned in the course of its thirty-four-year history. These include the Queens Gardens, St James Cathedral, Ray Golding Sunset Series and Evening concerts as well as the annual whale-watching boat trip which more often than not rides flamboyant waves to an offshore island where ticket holders are treated to an alfresco recital. This year the destination is Orpheus-Goolboddi.



Jack Liebeck

Needless to say the violinist's creative DNA is imprinted all over this year's offerings. His additions include 'Guilty Pleasures' where artists perform a piece they love regardless of the genre even if it's a blues or rock song.

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Gillian Wills: *Big Music*

**Jeffrey Neil:** In Australian writer Gillian Wills' novel *Big Music*, we get to experience the all-engrossing politics at a music school in Brisbane, where big egos clash in the pursuit of prestige or simply to exercise their right to be dysfunctional. For anybody who has spent more than the recommended time limit in academia, Wills' novel will jolt you back to tactless confrontations between professors with low EQ scores; woefully inappropriate affairs; and vindictiveness paraded around as virtue. However, she mitigates what could have been unrelenting shop talk by intertwining the story of a dying marriage and a budding romance. The writing is at its best when Wills pairs an experience in the life of her heroine with a musical reference. Whether incorporating music by Rachmaninov or David Bowie, Wills elevates her beautifully articulated musical descriptions by finding just the right moment for them. The music does not simply create the mood, but also expands and enriches the story.

The novel opens up with 'Performance', the first chapter in which Beatrice Snow, also known as Beat, is on a surreal bus ride to a competition with her students from Turalong Arts Music School. The chapter strikes a balance between lush descriptions and dialogue, plot-driven drama and reflection. For someone with a curiosity about the Antipodes, not just 'big music', Wills does not disappoint: traveling by bus to the concert, they pass 'a yard jammed with rusty cars, dismembered machinery, and a solitary goat. Farmland studded with pale brahman cattle silvered in the harsh light ... crows tearing furry strips off a rotting kangaroo

carcass on the lip of the road'. A young cellist comically must persuade a leery bus driver to let her carry her two hundred year-old, *on-loan* instrument on board with her. The chapter presents the eccentricity of musicians set against the comic banality of the world, all the while not tipping into the absurd.

That is not, however, always the case, as the novel plows deeper into the travails - and sometimes the burlesque - of the newly appointed music school dean. Beat has a deadbeat husband interminably working on his 'dissertation'. When she is not herding students or corralling faculty, she lives on a farm with her beloved horses and dogs. But, mainly Beat is about her 'job': she is in her early thirties, talented but insecure, attractive but unceasingly mocked for not making herself up. She is a pianist, but she has not played in public for years. The diminutive 'Beat' captures her persona as naive, closer in age to her students than many of the faculty over whom she has authority - at least in theory. We witness her slow and painful, partial transformation, while colliding against one ego after another, getting snubbed and openly derided, and weathering what seems to be an endless series of debacles in her professional and personal life. Wills portrays Beat as sisyphian in her attempts to please or placate, but at other times she works up a sense of defiance. Regardless of which face we see, it seems her honest work to either take modern music out of the basement, bring the faculty together, confront gender bias, or attract real audiences to mixed-genre concerts with world class talent, is sabotaged, misconstrued, or just put down.

There are some memorable descriptions of performing, conducting, playing, or simply imagining music entering a scene. When they aren't politicking, the large ensemble of characters play music. There is a moment early on, for example, when teen prodigy Georgy misses her cue to play the piano, while wrenching off her shoes in front of the audience. The orchestra conductor Garrett Blue - did I mention every character has a cool name? - holds 'the silence in his upraised arms, like Atlas holding up the world'. The fantastic descriptions of music are not reserved only for explicit scenes of musical production.

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Tatar-Russian composer Sofia Asgatovna Gubaidulina was born in Chistopol on 24 October 1931. She discovered music aged five, and later studied composition and piano at the Kazán Conservatory, then composition with Nikolay Peyko at the Moscow Conservatory. She explored alternative tunings, and her transcendent, mystical and spiritual music became an escape from the realities of Soviet Russia. She was a devout Russian Orthodox Church member, and the regime, hostile to religion, called her music 'irresponsible' and 'mistaken' (although she was encouraged by Shostakovich).



'I run the bow across the strings and realize that this creaking sound is my own soul' - Sofia Gubaidulina (1931-2025). Screenshot from *To be the Oracle*, Kazán film maker and cellist Zoulfia Asadoullina's documentary film about Gubaidulina

In 1973 she was attacked and strangled, possibly by a KGB agent, in the elevator at the Moscow apartment building where she lived. In 1979 she was blacklisted by the Union of Soviet Composers for writing 'noisy mud instead of musical innovation, unconnected with real life'. In contrast, she viewed her music as restoring connections and the 'legato' of life, with percussion, particularly, being at the boundary between the conscious and subconscious. She also commented: 'I run the bow across the strings and realize that this creaking sound is my own soul'.

In the 1980s she began to become well-known in the west when Gidon Kremer played *Offertorium* (1980), her first violin concerto. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Gubaidulina was able to move to Germany in 1992, settling in a village near Hamburg.

Sofia Gubaidulina, one of the most significant composers of her time, died from cancer at her home in Appen, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany on 13 March 2025, aged ninety-three.

We also mark the recent passing of several other classical musicians, including French clarinettist Michel Arignou, Australian violinist and concertmaster Donald Hazelwood, and Italian violinist Mario Trabucco.

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Ian Venables. Photo © Michael Whitefoot

In other news, high profile musicians cancel tours of the USA, Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki is to be professor of conducting in Helsinki and Parma Recordings establishes new operations in Czechia.

Jacques Cohen's new choral work *Lancastria* commemorates the worst disaster in British maritime history, Montreal's Place des Arts announces its classical music programming for 2025/26 and beyond, and American pianist and naturalist Hunter Noack announces the tenth season of his concert series *In a Landscape - Classical Music in the Wild*.

English composer Ian Venables celebrates his seventieth birthday this summer with at least twenty-five performances this year, on both sides of the Atlantic. [READ MORE](#)

## ENSEMBLE — JOINING BEETHOVEN IN THE NAUGHTY CORNER

**Lucas Ball:** To perform Johann Sebastian Bach's *St Matthew Passion* is quite a feat. There are the German words in this near-to-three-hour long work undertaken by the Worcester Festival Choral Society (WFCS), the logistics of soloists coming on and off podiums (before and after singing the plot convincingly), the Ripieno Choir having to come on and off (before and after singing), and the orchestral contribution from the Meridian Sinfonia are all part of the integrated whole. These attributes in this mighty work obviously needed to be thought about carefully beforehand and then implemented.



**J S Bach's *St Matthew Passion*: Worcester Festival Choral Society and Meridian Sinfonia (rear) with (front, from left to right): Miriam Allan, Tom Lilburn, Ruairi Bowen, Richard Bannan, Samuel Hudson, Sebastian Hill and David Shipley.**  
Photo © 2025 Michael Whitefoot

The 'chorus' is, of course, divided into two in the score and there are moments - for instance 'Ja nicht auf das Fest' (Not indeed, during the Festival) - when they echo one another and this adds to the sense of acting as the 'crowd' in the unfolding plot. Coordinating this must again have taken some preparation for the WFCS. Very impressive.

The rather out-of-this-world tone of countertenor Tom Lilburn conveyed the intricacies of the Lutheran text with intervals in his line handled with apparent ease. It is easy to enjoy Tom Lilburn's runs as well. On occasions when a character's input was somewhat brief - Judas to name one example - this, nevertheless, added an extra necessary layer to the plot.

The big role of the Evangelist - remarkably sung here by tenor Sebastian Hill - is, at times, interspersed in Bach's score - 'Und Joseph nahn den leib' (And Joseph took the body), for example - with the choruses again acting as the 'crowd', and it again felt very well-coordinated. The 'chorus' numbers had some intervals in their lines that may have taken some getting used to. These were handled with apparent ease - their lines being anything but easy.

In 'So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen' (Thus my Jesus is now captured), the chorus was also very incisive in contrast to the lamenting sentiments from the soprano (sung by Miriam Allan) and countertenor.

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A scene from Puccini's *Turandot* at Covent Garden. Photo © 2025 Tristram Kenton

**Frances Forbes-Carbines:** Our English word spectacle is from the Latin *spectaculum*, meaning 'public show'. When people attend an opera they attend not only for the music, but for the visual extravagance: we want to feel as though we are transported from the everyday into a land of fantasy. *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House truly is a spectacle: from the lavish sets, to the amazing costumes, to the synchronised dances, everything certainly has the wow factor.

Andrei Șerban's spectacular production remains a Covent Garden favourite: it draws upon Chinese and Italian theatrical tradition to evoke a richly imagined Peking, in a dazzling display of colour, drama, and dance.

First staged at Covent Garden in 1984, the production grew out of the deep creative partnership between director Șerban and his designer, the late Sally Jacobs. Șerban's interpretation was rooted in the 1762 play by Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi, upon which Puccini based his opera. Gozzi recast the ancient tale - originally from Persia - as a fable set in an ancient, legendary China, replete with legend and deeply-held beliefs about ancestors. This revival is directed by Jack Furness who is joined by the original choreographer Kate Flatt: despite being forty years old, the production is as vivid and as incredible as if it had been created yesterday. I was amazed by the terrifying masks worn by the characters; the executioner's body painted green to match his monstrous mask as he wields a mighty scimitar.

The lighting and *mise-en-scène* are truly phenomenal: shards of light fall through the wooden shutters of the ancient Chinese palace: sometimes it is illuminated by moonlight; at others, light from lanterns as the guards pace the corridors.

Every detail is informed by the history of Chinese art, from the golden clouds that flank Turandot's ailing father, King of Heaven, to the dark inky clouds that grace the humungous moon and Turandot's red mantle.

Acclaimed American-Canadian soprano Sondra Radvanovsky performs as the icy Princess Turandot in the first cast, with Polish-American soprano Ewa Piłonka taking on the role from 12 April 2025 onwards. Radvanovsky was a triumph: carrying the role with aplomb, she masterfully evoked the transition from cruel princess to smitten lover as the narrative progressed.

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**Mike Wheeler:** It was Opera North's Theatre of Sanctuary designation that provided Annabel Arden's new production of **Wagner's** *The Flying Dutchman* with its starting-point: the Dutchman and his crew were refugees - Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 22 March 2025. Solitary figures crossed the stage at the start of each act, and we heard the recorded voices of real asylum-seekers describing their experiences. The figure at the start of Act II was followed on stage by a young woman who turned out to be Senta, a clue to what happens later.

Visually, the stage was dominated by a video of sea and sky as mirror-images - waves became clouds became waves, moving in opposite directions to each other - emblematic, perhaps, of the Dutchman's fate as an endless loop, without resolution. Act I takes place in the Home Office. Daland is Home Secretary, with his crew of civil servants, and ever-changing digital data projected on to various pieces of the set suggesting a different kind of storm.



The men of the Chorus of Opera North in Opera North's production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*.  
Photo © 2025 James Glossop

At the start of Act II, the girls are not spinning, but sorting through piles of donated clothes, toys, etc.

While some aspects of the production did not seem, at first, to gell, musically it was everything you could have wished for, with Opera North's Music Director Garry Walker running, if you'll pardon the expression, a tight ship. Principals, chorus and orchestra - everyone was on cracking form. Maybe the overture was not as wind-swept as some, but it's the role of an overture to set the scene, not tell the whole story, and there was plenty of primeval turbulence to come. The Act III storm was particularly thrilling, and the way tension was held over various pauses in the action ensured there was no slack in the rigging.

Robert Hayward brought a seedy world-weariness to his tormented Dutchman. His Act I monologue told us all we needed to know about the huge weight on his shoulders. Canadian soprano Layla Claire will be a great asset to the company whenever she can be persuaded back. Playing Senta like a teenager with a crush on her favourite rock star, she even dressed like the Dutchman, in long grey coat and wide-brimmed hat. Every top note was securely in place, and her account of the Act II Ballad was riveting. [READ MORE](#)



**Mike Wheeler:** Following Sinfonia Viva's one-hour Sunday afternoon concert in January, the orchestra was back with a full evening's programme, and Delyana Lazarova, recently appointed Principal Guest Conductor with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, on the podium - Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, UK, 7 March 2025.

Like Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn has been overshadowed by her more famous male relative, but as her Overture in C shows, there is no reason for her not to be acclaimed in her own right. Yes, there are family resemblances, particularly with Felix's overture *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, but Fanny's work is by no means diminished by the comparison. The serene opening strings-and-woodwind dialogue was a perfect foil to the scurrying figures that took us into the fast music, typical of the performance's balance between expansive lines and bustling energy.



**Hana Chang.**  
Photo © 2023 Kaupo Kikkas

Hana Chang was the soloist in Mozart's Violin Concerto No 4 in D. The orchestra's crisp opening was well matched by her neat, deft, first entry, which set the tone for an engaging partnership. She projected the cadenza as though exploring as much of the music's possibilities as she could tease out. The second movement had a dancing quality, like a reflective kind of minuet. There was abundant poise and elegance in the third movement's rondo theme, and bouncy, nimble playing all round in the quicker episodes.

Caroline Shaw's *Entr'acte*, originally for string quartet and later re-scored for string orchestra, is something of a contemporary classic. As Delyana Lazarova commented in her spoken introduction, it is not a piece that grabs you, but which 'invites you to come'. Prompted by hearing the Minuet and Trio from Haydn's F major String Quartet, Op 77 No 2, it explores some extraordinarily varied sonorities, including pulsing chords, the whispered sounds of bows just skating lightly over strings, a sonorous *pizzicato* section and wispy harmonics. It leads us from one section to another with no obvious links, but with no sense of jarring jump-cuts, either. The players were obviously completely immersed in the piece, and principal cellist Deirdre

Bencsik brought dignified calm to her strummed solo epilogue.

And then Beethoven brought a box of party-poppers in the form of his Symphony No 8. The first movement set off at a good brisk tempo, and we were left to admire his art of doing so much with so little. The recapitulation, buried deep in the cellos and basses while the rest of the orchestra tries to drown it out, made its comic point, as did the soft ending following a fierce climax. Pert ticking characterised the second movement, as the butter-wouldn't-melt theme was from time to time savaged briefly by swarms of angry wasps. Beethoven's heading for the third movement carefully points out that it is simply in minuet tempo, not an actual minuet, and Delyana and the orchestra took the hint. In the trio section, the comic incongruity of the spiky cello line against the smooth horn duet was somewhat played down delivered as a solo line - Deirdre Bencsik, again. In the finale we just have to take the rough with the smooth, as Beethoven lets himself off the leash for a good run around. Conductor and orchestra happily joined him in the naughty corner, and rose magnificently to the challenge.

Mike also listens to J S Bach, Chopin, Schubert and Beethoven from Benjamin Frith, to Vaughan Williams, Elgar, Ravel and Saint-Saëns from Derby Concert Orchestra and Friday Voices, and to the *Metamorphic Variations* by Arthur Bliss, played by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra.



**Delyana Lazarova.**  
Photo © Marco Borggreve

## SPOTLIGHT — ENCHANTINGLY LUMINOUS



'... beautifully played.'

**Geoff Pearce:** The violinist Lea Birringer provides a stirring and more than competent recording of the Sibelius concerto. She has a beautiful sound, firm technique, can be fiery in temperament when called upon, her sense of phrasing is admirable and she does not overdo her vibrato in the slower sections.

The orchestra is fine and responds well to the direction of Benjamin Schwartz. The recorded sound is sumptuous. Sometimes I would like a little more forward presence from the soloist, but that is very subjective, and she is certainly not lost in the passages where she plays with full orchestra. There are odd times when my sense of intonation is different from hers: the opening minute of the third movement is a case in point ...

The little Armas Järnefelt *Berceuse* was written in 1904, at about the same time as the Sibelius concerto, and was inspired by watching the composer's daughter sleeping. This is a lovely work, and as soon as I heard it, I knew that I had heard it before.

It is tender, sentimental and more than a shade wistful. This is beautifully performed by both soloist and orchestra. There is also a lovely section where the opening theme is doubled between solo violin and cello, and this was particularly beautifully played. [READ MORE](#)

Geoff also listens to two recordings on the Ablaze Records label - *Orchestral Masters Vol 11* and *Watching glass, I hear you*, and to Grace Williams' *Missa Cambrensis* on Lyrita Recorded Edition.

### GEOFF PEARCE'S LATEST REVIEWS

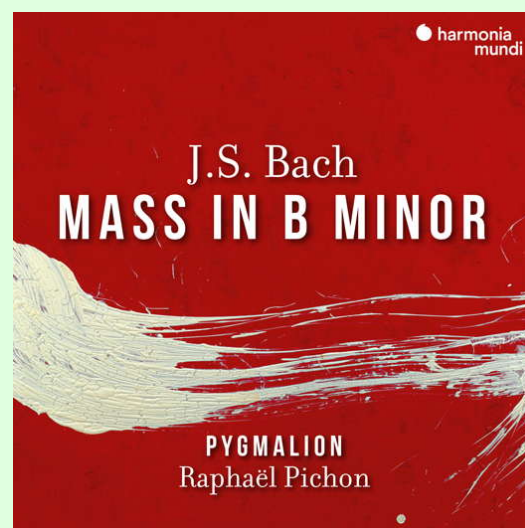
**Gerald Fenech:** Sublime, extreme and all-embracing are some of the superlatives needed to describe J S Bach's Mass in B minor. In between an awe-inspiring 'Kyrie' and the jubilant final 'Dona nobis pacem' there are nine completely unique arias and duets, fourteen impressive ensemble sections for four, five, six and even eight voices, a broad spectrum of instrumental solos and an incredible variety of styles. It was with good reason that in 1748-49 Bach brought together some of the highlights of his long career ...

There has been much speculation about the question of why Bach compiled a Mass at the end of his life. Today this great masterpiece is generally regarded as the 'magnum opus' of his vocal works, and Bach may have opted for the Ordinary of the Mass because it gave him a lot of freedom. Also, there are no rules about the number of movements that should be included. Furthermore, the words of the Mass - unlike those of the cantatas - are universal rather than being a product of their time.

### READ MORE

Gerald also listens to Seong-Jin Cho's recording of Ravel's Piano Concertos on Deutsche Grammophon.

### READ GERALD FENECH'S LATEST CD REVIEWS



'... this reading possesses a fluent and exuberant aura that brings out all of Bach's genius with enviable clarity and superbly controlled tempi.'

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.

### LATEST CD REVIEWS

### NEW RELEASES



## A WORTHY CAPTAIN — PETROC TRELAWNY

**Peter King:** Day breaks on a brighter note in the company of Petroc Trelawny. For the last fourteen years the presenter of BBC Radio 3's weekday *Breakfast* show has been a voice of calm, reassuring his listeners that - whatever the chaos elsewhere - there is still something right with the world.

When he introduces Bach before seven you are reminded that there continue to be corners where eternal verities burn brightly. The effect is like listening to the chimes of Big Ben or seeing Jack Warner as the understanding bobby in the long-running BBC television series, *Dixon of Dock Green*, signing on with his trademark catchphrase, 'Evening all'.

For Trelawny's regular listeners, the news that he is set to hang up his early-morning boots and switch to the late-afternoon programme, *In tune*, in April 2025, as *Breakfast* is uprooted to Salford, will come as a disappointment. Many will fear that dawn will be the poorer.

The presenter's name is a tribute to two of Cornwall's finest - an imprisoned local hero, Trelawny, who famously features in *The song of the western men*, and the fifth-century Petroc, who ministered throughout Dumnonia and has been labelled the 'captain of Cornish saints'.

The broadcaster's style is convivial and urbane. He reminds you of those eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists, Fielding and Thackeray, who have time for asides as they draw their armchairs closer to crackling fires, inviting the reader - their companion and their equal - to join them on their leisurely journey. There is something democratic, too, about the daily top temperatures contest in which the Davids such as Lytchett Matravers in Dorset and Mablethorpe in Lincolnshire jostle for position with the odds-on favourite and regular winner, the Goliath of London.

Trelawny relishes going on the road with the show, dropping in on Yorkshire jewels, including the Aysgarth Falls in Wensleydale and the ruins of the mighty Jervaulx Abbey, and travelling lough-to-lough across Northern Ireland or coast-to-coast through the Scottish Highlands.

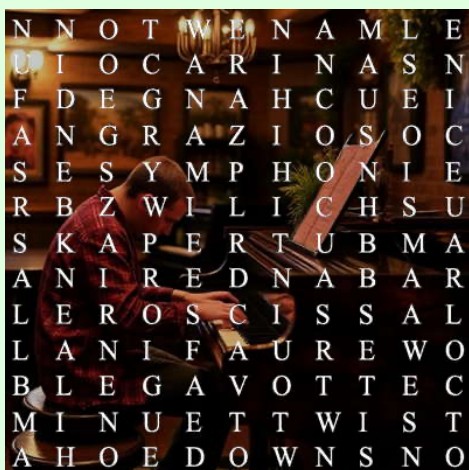
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BBC Presenter Petroc Trelawny was born in Worcester, UK in 1971. Photo © 2020 BBC

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## CLASSICAL MUSIC WORD-SEARCH PUZZLE — BARRELHOUSE



Canadian composer **Allan Rae's** latest classical music word-search puzzle, *Barrelhouse*, has been published to keep you busy, if you have time.

The image on the right has been derived from a small section of this puzzle (which includes the word 'barrelhouse'), superimposed over an image of barrelhouse piano playing.

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

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## COMING SOON ...

Coming soon at *Classical Music Daily*, Ron Bierman discusses San Diego Opera's production of *Salome* by Richard Strauss. Gerald Fenech listens to the albums *Jewish Vienna* on the Onyx Classics label and to *The Last Rose - songs, tunes and dances from a mysterious manuscript* on Harmonia Mundi. Geoff Pearce reviews music by Justin Connolly on Métier Records.

## VIDEO NEWSLETTER RECORDING ON 23 APRIL 2025

Our next newsletter will be a video discussion, rather than a PDF document. We will be recording it on Wednesday 23 April 2025, and everyone is welcome to join the one hour session on Zoom. The subject will be *The performing artist as co-creator*, and the discussion will be led by John Dante Prevedini.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

## SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY AT CLASSICAL MUSIC DAILY

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## PROFILE — OCCASIONAL INTERVIEWS, TRIBUTES AND PROFILES

*Profile* is *Classical Music Daily's* occasional series of tributes to, profiles of and interviews with classical musicians.

The series has recently featured Jack Liebeck, Graham Lustig, Albert Schweitzer, Vadim Suchanov, Kyle Lang, Gerard Schurmann, Jenny Wei, Kathleen Parlow, Ian Venables, Allan Rae, Arthur Nikisch, Ronald Stevenson, Michelle Bradley, Nicolas Reveles, Stephanie Blythe, Diana Botelho Vieira, Gabriela Lena Frank, Rafael Payare, Margaret Ruthven Lang and Andriy Lehki. **READ MORE**

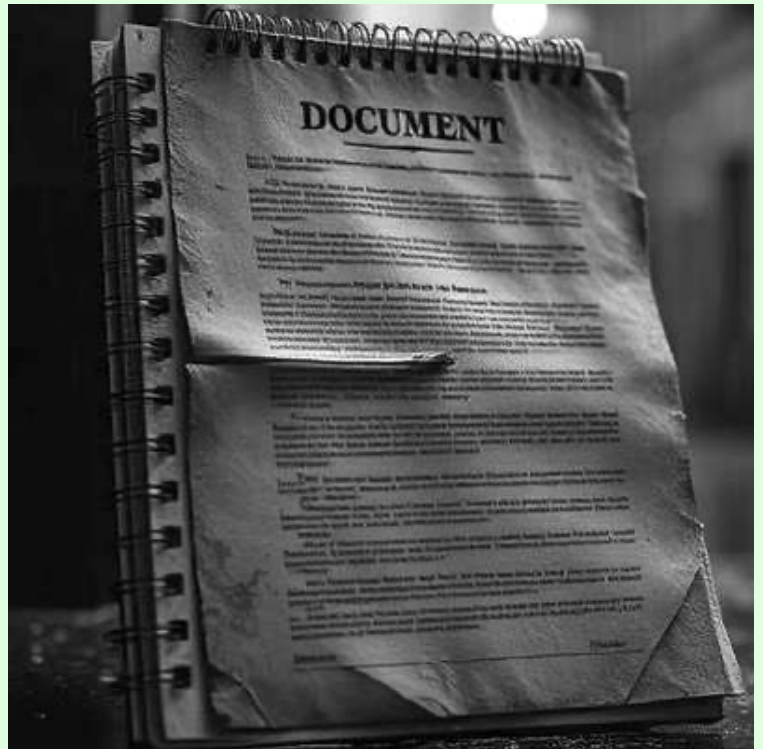


## THE TITLE — INTRODUCING THE PIANISTIC CROWN

RT: Recently I encountered in an antiquarian book shop a strange document, spiral bound and somewhat battered. It was a paper for a course in Music History (Piano) written at a small North American university. A grade of C- was given it, and the professor added a host of scurrilous insults to the student author. Red marks abounded.

Sadly, the student vanished from the face of the earth. Eventually, I located his family and asked of his whereabouts. They said he had travelled to the East and they had lost touch with him for nigh on fifteen years. Assuming his death (as the legal situation had already certified) they granted me permission to publish this document. The text has been reformatted for the web, but not altered in any way. Any typographical or grammatical errors are found as in the original. I have removed the footnotes and bibliographical material which radically encumber the reading. (One footnote is over five hundred words long.) Some required 'editorial' intrusions and are marked as such.

References to the student, year of writing, university and professor (still on faculty after fifty-eight years) have of course been removed for the sake of privacy. The professor's remarks (with one exception) are removed, of course. [READ MORE](#)



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The image used at the very beginning of this newsletter is Samantha Gilmore's 2024 photo of The Strand, Townsville-Gurambilbarra, Queensland, Australia.

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