

# Too many records

My mother was passionate about music and hence my earliest memories were all formed around hearing music. We had a gramophone in both her bedroom and in the dining-room, which were the main rooms for most activities in the house. In her bedroom we listened to what she called 'morning music', which included Mozart piano concertos (particularly Nos. 17 and 21) and the Haydn *Surprise* and *Clock* Symphonies. Downstairs, in the dining-room, the dominant diet was opera.

Both my parents were Jewish and in the dangerous years following the Second World War my mother escaped from Budapest and my father from Brno. They met in London and, despite their very different characters, they realized that they came from very similar worlds. My father drove a large Bentley. The wonderful smells of leather and of his huge Havana cigars are still vivid. He would put on tapes of his beloved Viennese waltzes by Strauss and operettas such as *The Merry Widow*. We were, in every sense, transported into the world my father had left behind.

My mother's record collection grew. I remember two additions, both of which were strong favourites with me: a recording of the Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky Violin Concertos, with the most wonderful cover of a violin, flowers, and the whole image slightly blurred. I fear my memory of the cover and music is clearer than that of the artists. Another memorable recording was of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, K662 with Jack Brymer, and the Concerto for Flute and Harp. Even at this early stage the clarinet concerto was a firm favourite.

My mother was a member of the English National Opera. Our first operatic experience, both live and on record, was *Orpheus in the Underworld*, quickly followed by *Meistersinger*. A family ritual developed where my sister would read us the plot of each opera before the curtain rose; another ritual developed with me sleeping through the third act (however, I was never reprimanded as my mother allowed us to appreciate music for its own sake and left us to enjoy it at our own pace and find our own level).

I was five when I started learning the piano, but sadly I had a teacher for whom grades were the only focus. I began to hate piano lessons but I do remember that my love of music was never in any doubt, primarily because around this time I attended a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, conducted by Harry Blech. I was allowed to stand up in the choir seats and conduct the music with my mother's nail file. The composer Graham Williams became my piano teacher and finally my eyes were opened to playing the wonderful piano repertoire. I studied piano at the Purcell School and was encouraged to explore the possibility of playing

I've had to cut this quite a bit to make it fit. Could you suggest any further cuts so we can have a bigger picture?

Thanks,  
Máire

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an orchestral instrument. Through the combination of Brymer's sound and a family friend, who had a cheap clarinet, my choice became clear. The clarinet became the centre of my life – I was 11 years old.

As my clarinet playing developed, my mother had heard that Roger Fallows was a terrific teacher and so she wrote to him. It was at this time that I remember being given a recording of the Brahms sonatas with Gervase de Peyer and Daniel Barenboim and so while we awaited a response from Roger we visited Hampstead Hi-Fi (our favourite record shop) to buy a recording of Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, Op. 118. As we listened to the different versions available (the ultimate choice was Karl Leister with the Amadeus Quartet) I fell into conversation with a fellow customer. A few days later my mother received a letter from Roger, saying that it was he to whom I had been talking in the shop and he agreed to take me on as his student. I will never forget the incredible joy and excitement I felt the day of that first lesson, which signalled the start of the most special teacher-student relationship. It was a lifelong friendship, which lasted until Roger's untimely death over ten years after my mother took her own life in 1974. The records which helped her in the final stages in her life were Mozart's Violin Concerto and Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* (the classic recording with Peter Pears and Barry Tuckwell), a piece which she had discovered with great joy some years earlier.

My mother's passing inevitably brought about significant change at home and it was a somewhat older school friend, who had become a part of the family in my mother's lifetime, who was to become the stabilizing factor in my life and was later to become my husband. Richard Ralph was also a pianist at the Purcell School. He was passionate about recordings and was an avid collector, and still is! Some would say that it is he who has *too many records*. Richard

opened my ears to many wonderful piano recordings and pianists. Two recordings I particularly remember were Michelangeli playing Chopin *Mazurkas* on DG (which had a wonderful silver cover) and the complete box set of Rachmaninov Piano Concertos with Ashkenazy and Previn. These were the first of many piano recordings which fell into that grey area of, 'Richard, is this yours or mine ...?'

In 1977 I won a Foundation Scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where I continued my clarinet studies with Colin Bradbury and bass clarinet with Stephen Trier. It was there that I became aware of the essential clarinet records, both historical and new, and most importantly Colin's own series of recordings of 'The Victorian Clarinetist' (later re-released on Clarinet Classics).

My collection of clarinet recordings and repertoire expanded as my career path as a solo and chamber player developed. I was fortunate to discover and give the world première performance and recording of Copland's own realization for clarinet of his 1947 Violin Sonata. This marked the launch of Clarinet Classics, which I founded with my brother Nicolas in 1992. Nicolas had given me the first record I owned as a child: Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 with Emil Gilels, which I was always to refer to as 'The Tiger Record', as it had a picture of a tiger behind bars.

It was the desire to have my own record label devoted to the clarinet and to clarinet players past and present that drove me to launch Clarinet Classics. We have released over 60 recordings, with six releases planned for 2010 (including a number of saxophone recordings on its sister label, Saxophone Classics, launched in 2008). It is important to me that Clarinet and Saxophone Classics do not sit on the sidelines but continue to be considered as the specialist clarinet and saxophone labels. Despite the increasing demand for downloads Clarinet and Saxophone Classics will continue to produce CDs. However, both labels are set to launch the most comprehensive download shop devoted to the single reed. This is my latest and most ambitious project, again driven by my passion for the single reed and recorded music.

Writing this article has shown me how many recordings have played a crucial part in my personal and playing life. Two in particular come to mind, Karajan's *Rosenkavalier* and Gigli in *La bohème*; I can still hear where the scratches are and clearly remember the changes of side!

My three children have grown up surrounded by music and only time will tell how the recordings they are hearing in our home will influence and bring back memories during their lives as music has for me.

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