

Pop as background music

No one can escape pop music in the modern world. One is even often exposed to it full blast just because one's next door neighbour is having a little building work done. It is going to some degree in almost every restaurant, hotel elevator, bar, taxi, gym and even in supermarkets. We are subjected to it on the telephone whilst being left on hold in the most inappropriate circumstances - the NHS 111 service when attempting to report a serious illness, the box office at a classical concert venue, and even a classical artists' management company agency are just three of my recent favourite incongruousnesses [is that a word?].

It was being played very loudly in the student bar of one of London's main colleges of music when I was in there with two prominent piano professors discussing the masterclass I had just given; all three of us had to shout as if we were in a downtown nightclub.

I have even experienced it through the P.A. during the interval of more than one of my own piano recitals.

Perhaps the most incongruous time of all was when I found it being pumped through the restaurant of the Philharmonic Hall in St. Petersburg immediately before a performance by its great resident orchestra [what were they thinking?].

For any serious musician this situation has to be similar to the experience a great architect like Sir Norman Foster would have if taken on a tour of the 1960s housing project of one of Britain's larger cities, or leaving Ina Garten in a town where the only restaurants are fast-food drive-thrus.

Classical music marginalised

At the same time as this, in the media, the word 'music' has progressively come to mean what we all thought of as pop music, whilst classical music has been very largely sidelined. [By which I mean that in the arts pages of many newspapers there is often a section devoted to art exhibitions (serious paintings by creative artists being reviewed by knowledgeable art experts), drama (serious theatre productions by creative playwrights and directors being reviewed by knowledgeable drama critics), and similarly cultured pieces about ballet, sculpture, and perhaps film and TV - all usually written by people who are expert in their field. Then we come to the 'music' section and we often get a review of a recently-released pop album, and the concert tour that has been manufactured to promote said album. If there is a classical music review, which these days would be quite rare, it is likely to be labelled 'classical music', in order to differentiate it from the column about 'music'.

In addition, there is constant over-loud music in many TV series - so much so that it is sometimes a real problem hearing the dialogue. This even includes documentaries, in which, loud or not, it always seems so utterly inappropriate - the sort of music you would hear to relax to with your eyes covered with cucumber slices and your body in mud in a health spa is to my mind entirely wrong as background music to a scientific program about Outer Space. Background music so often reduces the importance of the content to the level of The Beano. [I even remember a documentary about a foiled Al Qaeda attack on a Christmas Market in Strasbourg in which the background music was reminiscent of that to the movie, 'Jaws'.]

If you consult the subtitles - and sometimes even if you don't - during a section in which there is pop music in the background, you will often find listed the name of the song and the pop artists who have recorded it - i.e. it serves as a promotion of the pop concerned. If on the other hand, there is classical music in the background (which, of course, is as rare as rocking-horse crap), the subtitles say 'Classical music'.

It is often as if classical music is being sidelined. The wonderful pianist Susan Tomes has written about this very subject in her excellent blog, and says everything about it that I want to say : <http://www.susantomes.com/page/6/> ('What we call 'music').]

The evils of background music

I realise that I am in a minority, but find background music intrusive, whatever music it is, and however loud or quiet it is; I cannot stop myself listening to it and dissecting it harmonically (not that that takes long in most cases). I crave silence when I am not listening properly to music, whatever style it is. I cannot listen to music whilst in a car, or on a plane, and when someone is talking to me I want to be able to tell what they are saying without them having to shout.

Thus, my dislike of background music is unconnected to the music's quality. The relevant point is that background music's ubiquitousness - usually bad pop performed by session musicians, but not always - has led us into a situation in which so many have no ability to actually listen properly. It is not even a poor attention span that is behind the problem; it is a lack of any desire on the part of so many to pay attention at all, because their conditioning has led them to associate music of any kind with the background.

Some of it is not so bad

This feeling - plus the fact that so much of it says nothing - turns me off most pop music - perhaps sometimes unfairly. However, it does not prevent me from realising that some of it is not only worthwhile in its own way, but that it has greatly affected and reflected the moods, the highs and the lows of our society as a whole. As such, the pop - and in particular the rock - music of my youth, and the culture that surrounded it, represents a particularly colourful, exciting and dangerous era - the period between about 1963 and 1979. As with all art forms, the best examples are a lot more than entertainment or luxuries; in fact, they are neither of those.

Snobbery?

Even amongst cultured people particular areas of expertise or enjoyment can easily become reasons to look down upon the likes and dislikes of others. I am thinking particularly of the way musicologists of my youth, and many of those people who loved the music of the great Germanic Classical composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms looked down on virtually all other nations' music. [Actually, even most of the Romantic Germans, such as Schumann and Mendelssohn, didn't get much of a look in. Russian composers' tendency to attach a lower priority to the issue of form and architecture than they did to such components as melody, the magic of the moment and extremes of emotion, was seen as a weakness and a reason to think less of their music. The same went for French, Italian and Eastern European composers for a variety of reasons. British and American music wasn't even on the map. And as for Liszt.....]

However, in my youth and earlier - much less today - classical music-lovers, despite their differences, found a common enemy in the pop world. For the first seventeen years of my life I was one of those who considered pop to be completely worthless. In fact, the shutters were up from the word 'go'. Even my parents had more time for it than I - discounting my early years, when my musical tastes, like those of most children, revolved around nursery rhymes whose musical content was much the same - if not more sophisticated - than much modern day pop music.

A little (!) personal history

Early days

My school years, like those of most, were divided into two parts - discounting the kindergarten stage - seven years at state primary school (in retrospect an exceptional one), and seven years at Chetham's. At the former, I was one of a very small few who liked classical music, and I spent much of my time there fighting my corner - very much encouraged to do so by the staff, but failing to inspire many of my contemporaries. At the latter, my first five years pre-dated it becoming a music specialist school. Thus there was a definite division between those who could not for the life of them understand why anyone would be interested in 'old' music, and those who were obsessed by it. After the school became specialist and the majority were enthused, if not obsessed, by classical music, my response was perverse - as usual; I started to like certain pop music.

Going back to the mid-fifties, I have a vague memory of the pre-Elvis hits of 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window' and 'The Laughing Policeman', and having real trouble understanding why anyone could possibly like them - I not only found them uninteresting, but positively embarrassing. Then my mother developed a liking for Chubby Checker and 'Let's Twist again', and my antipathy went into overdrive.

Later, when I was ten years old in 1963, my parents, who had just bought their first television, drew my attention to The Beatles. They were everywhere that year - constantly on TV, and talked about all around me - at home and at primary school. I put the shutters up instinctively, and rejected the whole embarrassing scene. The screaming teenage girls who seemed determined to ensure that the music remained unheard during the concerts served to make the whole thing even more embarrassing. I didn't want to know, and found the music childish, along with all other pop. That I later realised just how ground-breaking The Beatles were, and became progressively more so, makes me understand just how closed and dogmatic I actually was as a child. Looking back it is as if I was afraid of liking it - I had been determined to find it childish, and I succeeded.

Hormones

A little later, a family holiday in Dorset found me, as I always had been, much more comfortable with adults than with others of my own age - a state I remained in at least until I was an adult myself. However, setting up a conflict with this strange mindset, two sisters from Birmingham of around the same age as me were also on holiday with their parents in the same hotel, and I succeeded in developing a crush on both of them at the same time. I determined to impress them; as with everyone else, my body was programmed at that age (around 12) to take an interest, even if it did go against my mindset, which was to shy away from anyone below the age of 50. The conflict was awful, but hormones won the day.

I cannot remember why my parents were not with me one evening, but I found myself in the hotel visitor's lounge when the two girls came in and turned the TV on. [I hadn't had the wit to, and had been sitting there reading Jennings Goes to School, or something similar, when the girls came in. I had thus already established with them that I was an outcast.]

When Manfred Mann came on the telly it became obvious that the girls loved it. My opportunity to impress came when one of the girls invited me into the conversation by saying something like 'Don't you think he's great?' - rhetorically, you understand; I learned very soon that everyone other than myself in the known universe thought he was indeed great. I had never heard of him. (At the time, I was heavily into the Grieg Piano Concerto and writing my own Piano Sonata in D flat major - which turned out later to be in all but key by Mendelssohn.)

I grabbed the opportunity with both hands to chat up the girls and make myself popular by saying, "No, I don't like pop music. 'Do Wah Diddy Diddy' doesn't strike me as a very grown up title." What a great chat up line that seemed at the time....! - but in retrospect, perhaps not. One can see with the benefit of hindsight why this failed to render the girls putty in my hands.

I was sensitive enough to spot the looks they exchanged, which indicated that I was probably from another part of the Solar System, and that it was time to get the hell out of the TV lounge to rejoin their boring parents. [The older generation would have been described as 'square' at that time.] The logical conclusion is that I would have been regarded as 'cubed', and unlikely to have been a rewarding boyfriend to either of them, particularly as I was a freckly, ginger-haired little scroat, as well as having the conversational talents of Sheldon Cooper.

So Manfred Mann's 'Do Wah Diddy Diddy' will be forever associated in my mind with one of my first completely abortive attempts - of many, I should add - to link up with the opposite sex. Sorry, Manfred.

Prog Rock

Later in my school years I heard lots of chat amongst my friends about their various idols; I later realised that they had not been talking about pop in the traditional sense. This was the emergence of the Progressive Rock Scene. I heard a lot about something called 'Sergeant Pepper', but I had no idea - and less interest in - what it was.

I was an isolated child during the 50s and 60s. I often wonder if my immersion in classical music and total rejection of the pop loved by almost everyone I knew at primary school was simply a manifestation of being by nature an introvert. It certainly separated me from the rest. Whatever the reason, I was regarded by many as a freak, ostracised by some, and treated by my friends as an eccentric - not so much because I 'liked' classical music - more because I so hated pop. My first few years at Chetham's were of course different - there were many on my side of the classical/pop divide. But there were many on the other side too - it even turned to violence on occasion, and I still have the scar in my lower lip to prove it.

Be that as it may, once I reached the Sixth Form at Chetham's, I suddenly started feeling that classical musicians were missing out on something. Perhaps, in addition to my old habit of contrariness, pop music itself had changed. I discovered retrospectively as a student that there had been a strand of pop music inspired by American hippy

culture, with the strange epithet of 'The Underground'. This was not part of the BBC's presentation of the pop scene, and some of it was banned by the mainstream media. It thus had to be broadcast from ships moored outside our territorial waters in order to be heard on radio in Britain. However, it did for sure have an influence on the pop that did make it into the charts, and I suddenly realised that I had succeeded in quite liking some of it.

My attempts to use disco dancing as a way of establishing relationships with girls were a spectacular failure, and my dancing abilities remain one of the anti-miracles of the last 50 years. However, I persisted in several vain attempts to improve, as I had discovered at the age of 17 that the open rejection of the things other people liked that I had practised thus far did not attract friends. It had been a watershed moment.

An unexpected link

T Rex's 'Hot Love' and 'Get it On' were both big at the very end of my school years, and will always be evocative of those confusing but heady days when I left school, having no real idea of which branch of the music world I wanted to devote my life to. I had decided against the college of music route, in favour of entering the music department of Leeds University. The new Professor of Music was Alexander Goehr, who was known to me as a member of the rebellious trio of composers from the Royal Manchester College of Music along with Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies. Up the road at York University was Professor Wilfred Mellors, who was including the study of pop music - most notably that of The Beatles - in his degree course. The rebelliousness of this new generation of musical academics was the pertinent characteristic and what attracted me.

One of the most profoundly life-changing events in my early musical life was my first visit to the Henry Wood Proms in 1969, when I was taken to see Messiaen's Turangalîla Symphony played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Charles Groves, with John Ogdon and Jeanne Loriod as soloists. The Messiaen was preceded by a group called Musica Reservata who specialised in music from the Renaissance, playing mostly works by Dufay. It was a superb piece of program-planning, and very characteristic of Sir William Glock, the then Controller of Music for The Proms. The poster announcing the concert outside had the word 'LOVE' plastered across it, and this attracted the attention of a large contingent of hippies who were that summer enjoying the peace and love of Kensington Gardens, in which they brought their diverse modifications to the air they breathed. They came into the promenade area and carried on as if they were at a rock concert, particularly during movements 5 and 6 of Turangalîla (in the fifth they waved 'peace' gestures in the air, and in the sixth many of them, particularly on the front row, were crying with the beauty of it - and possibly from the substances they had in their bloodstreams).

The atmosphere of that concert remains one of the most extraordinary I have ever experienced. It went a long way towards persuading me to take on some of the superficial attributes of hippiedom myself a little later, but it also went a long way towards making me what I am now - Messiaen as a whole, and Turangalîla in particular having played a pivot role in my performing life at every stage.

I resolved to go to more Proms. Never did anything quite like the Turangalîla experience happen again, but one other stands out in my memory, as an example of the breaking-down of the barriers at that time. This was a late night concert in 1970, featuring the first ever appearance of a rock band at the Proms, by the jazz-rock fusion group Soft Machine -

a very serious and pioneering group. I found the atmosphere of the concert very seductive, although I was still somewhat closed to the culture and difficult to convince. [I was very intrigued recently to discover that a later member of the group was one Karl Jenkins, who became a very prominent composer in recent times. Karl wasn't in the Prom concert, however, as he had not yet joined Soft Machine.]

I relate these two episodes because they highlight the way that the Progressive Rock movement of the time struck a chord in tune with the discovery of my natural affinity with the 'serious' music of the Twentieth Century. The latter initially manifested in my obsessive interest in Bartok, followed by Stravinsky, and the Second Viennese School and eventually by Messiaen and the mid-century revolutionary figures of Boulez, Stockhausen, and the 'Manchester School'. But it was to some degree inspired by my transient desire to become a professional timpanist/percussionist, rather than by some musicological revolutionary idealism. Thus, I also loved the more traditional and less overtly intellectual composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Walton, Britten, Tippett etc. I dreamed of taking part as an orchestral player in that wonderfully exciting music. I had not yet returned to Rachmaninov - a step too far for my anti-romantic stance of the time - although later I came to regard him as one of the most inspired, original and courageous composers of them all. But for all my 'modernism', I never for a moment lost my original love for Bach, Beethoven and Brahms - a love that was there from the outset and will never leave me. It was Mozart, Chopin and Tchaikovsky who came under my axe at that time, and of course - given that contrariness was a key feature of my early life - it was for no better reason than that they were the most popular composers ever.

There is no question that rock music's acceptance into the contemporary serious music scene in ways like the Soft Machine Prom made a difference to the tolerance level of people like me. If I am totally honest with myself, it was the shock value of all those 'serious' composers that attracted me. And then, quite suddenly in my case, Progressive Rock sneaked up.

I was already a member of my school's debating society, known as The Renaissance Society. We were supposed to debate political and social issues, as well as listening to guest lecturers. One day, just before leaving school for university, one of those eternal schoolboys who had left two years before but couldn't keep away was invited to give a talk called "The History of The Blues". I went along in an attempt to be 'cool'. One of the key features in this talk was a famous album from the American Blues band Canned Heat called 'Livin' the Blues'. It was a double LP, the second of which was live from Kaleidoscope Hollywood, and consisted of one number by the name of 'Refried Boogie', lasting well over half an hour.

Unlike any pop of which I had hitherto been aware, it had a form that was not just a series of verses and a repetitive chorus. Starting pretty gently on a single electric guitar, a rhythm is established that gets the audience going. After some time, the guitar solo comes to a tense and expectant pause. This is followed by the full group crashing in with the main chorus. Then comes a long bass guitar solo - this time with the drums accompanying. For its raw aggression, the climax of the bass solo when the chorus came in again was one of the most exciting moments in music I had encountered. There is then a long lead guitar solo that descends into pulseless-ness. Yet another chorus heralds a drum solo that also loses direction. The second half is undoubtedly less exciting and interesting, but nevertheless the overall impact was astonishing to me at the time. It was basically a series of gradual buildups of excitement, which was entirely the opposite of the static nature of all

pop music I had encountered - essentially all limited to 3 minutes and without contrast throughout, as most of it still is in the present day.]

Whether it was because of the fact that Canned Heat had created something of such size, or the ethos of the era (1971), or the stage I was at in my own life, or indeed the quality of the actual music-making, I was very struck by it.

'Now I'm telling you people that the boogie is easy to do' - one of the lines of the chorus - became something of a mantra amongst my widening circle of friends. Despite the very idea of any dance at all being easy to do was complete fantasy in my case, it is for sure that doing the boogie is a damn sight easier than is playing the Grieg Concerto, or anything else on the piano for that matter. [I had a year before taken an external A.R.C.M. with Prokofiev's Sonata 6 amongst other things, and had just played Stravinsky's Three Movements from Petrushka for the practical section of music 'A' and 'S' Levels ['S Level' had a different meaning at that time], so I was looking for an easy alternative that was more girl-friendly than early 20th Century piano music had proved to be.]

I was already studying symphonic timpani and percussion very seriously, and Fito de la Parra's long, live drum solo on this album made me want to do something similar and form a group. The latter didn't happen until two years later, but the seed was sewn, and I set about joining up with my own age-group in their head-banging and obsessive involvement in each others' album collections.

The Summer of '71 [(!) a good title for a rock number?] was for me a total immersion in my newly-discovered obsession. It was only inhibited by the two very short-lived summer jobs I took - one cleaning the kitchens overnight at Manchester Airport's only restaurant, and the other humping bags of cement on the half-built M62 near Saddleworth - in both cases I found myself unemployed after two days. It was largely the discovery of Progressive Rock that kept me in touch with many of the others in my school year and above, most of whom did not share my interest in classical music at all. I came across Pink Floyd, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin through the intense obsessiveness of two twin brothers who became friends of mine, and whose lives were completely dominated by a passion for this emotional outlet.

[Do you remember those days of passion? When enthusiasm for something was not regarded as nerdy and uncool? Young people en masse at that time seemed to be more obsessed and passionate about everything they got involved with than at any other time. I don't believe my parents' generation's liking for the dance music of their youth or for such superstars as Frank Sinatra became on the whole all-consuming. Perhaps there were those who idolised Hollywood stars, but theirs doesn't seem to have been such an all-consuming passion as my generation seemed to have for all things musical, political, or social. That there was something decidedly different in the air between around 1965 - 1977 is something that has been acknowledged widely and discussed endlessly. But I don't think I have heard very much by way of explanation of why the Western World was like that; just that it was, and isn't now.]

University hippiedom

Then, in the Autumn of 1971, I went to Leeds University. My friends were largely not from the music department, but students of completely different subjects such as physics, mathematics and engineering. We shared almost nothing in terms of what we expected to

do professionally. What we did share was a passionate interest in the lifestyles of the musicians and the music of the rock world.

The realities of the same of the classical world were still a mystery to me, and remained so for a very long time after. However, I could identify with the rebellious nature of the then superstars of rock, and with the aggressive, anti-establishment nature of much of their music. The rawness of the music itself, the sometimes embarrassing, in retrospect, pretentiousness of the words, the degree to which the musicians took themselves seriously, the way their fantasy lifestyle was marketed, and in particular the way it shocked the older generation to the degree that the music did not get a proper hearing on the media - all these things struck a chord with me.

More than any other single feature was the natural and instinctive sense of pulse that any jazz, rock or even pop musician has to have to even start. The essential underlying pulse of all great classical performances is often obscured by the vast numbers of other interpretative qualities and skills classical musicians instinctively have, or grow into. Not so with any other form of music that I am aware of, from whichever period or part of the world it emanates. Pulse is everything, and it came to be perhaps the single most important component of my own classical performance style later on. I falsely perceived in myself a weakness in my sense of rhythm and pulse, and it perhaps this awareness that made me so obsess about it later. And to a large degree, I have my brief exposure to the rock world, plus my experience of serious timpani and percussion playing, to thank for my awareness.

Rock musicians as snobs?

I have preserved my liking for certain of the groups I followed then to the present day, long after most of the non-musician student friends of those days turned their backs on the culture of the time. Many of popular culture's critics - for example the late John Peel - later became almost contemptuous of the Progressive Rock movement because of what they perceived to be pretentiousness, plus the tendency of the musicians to take themselves seriously, when actually all they were was entertainment.

I don't think I can agree with that. British rock groups were largely a product of the golden era of UK education - people who were attracted to a form of music-making that was not classical, but that did demand a lot of skill and hard work. It was an outlet for youthful aggression, making a statement that was much more than purely commercial. That the statement was often immature, pretentious, half-baked and hypocritical is hardly different to any other form of contemporary art.

Most importantly, even if they never realised it, primary school music, hymn-singing, dancing, school orchestras and choirs, all contributed to the content of contemporary rock music. And it would never have gotten off the ground in the first place if it hadn't had a big audience - largely highly educated and motivated young people 'into' something that bound them together in a frightening world. Much of the music was about protest, and, God knows, there was plenty to protest about and to be frightened of, particularly in the form of a potential World War Three.

The pop world that I had always found embarrassing and rejected was nothing like this. I still cannot get away from the impression that most commercial pop acts since the early 1970s to the present day have consisted of increasingly expensive and spectacular but predictable stage-shows, shielding music with considerably less content than a nursery rhyme.

It is the latter quality than I still find so depressing in so much of it - the fact that both words and music are so childish - to say nothing of the presentation. And it is more so now than ever. It is much the same in the programs - and particularly in the commercials - on the TV media, with, of course, some exceptions. This at a time when governments and media have realised the benefits to themselves of the infantilisation of the masses, and entirely in keeping with the concept of the Marxist-style theory that an ill-educated public makes for an obedient consumer in an over-capitalist society such as we have had since 1991. Perhaps that explains why, at a time when there is, again, an awful lot to protest and worry about, there is now no equivalent of the Progressive Rock movement.

Of course the target audience for pop music is the younger generation, as they are deemed to have the most disposable income. It has always been the case, so do we assume that the younger generation is more childish than its equivalent thirty plus years ago? It is a thought, enhanced by the widely-held belief that young people's attention span is a lot shorter than it used to be. [I am not sure about that, given that large numbers of the present younger generation are quite happy to watch the night-time coverage on Big Brother. i.e. they watch the 'housemates' in bed asleep, and are quite capable of staring at it for hours at a time, presumably in the hope of a bit of rumpypumpy starting up - now that's what I call an attention span. On a more serious note, perhaps if we stopped assuming that young people cannot concentrate we would stop dumbing down, and thus stretch and encourage the lengthening of their attention span instead of playing down to it.] In any case let us not forget how unbearably childish some of the pop acts of earlier times tended to be. Anyone remember Freddy and the Dreamers, and the ridiculous stage antics of Freddie Garrity between each verse of 'You Were Made for Me'? I mean, really....

ELP

One particularly drunken evening in the first few weeks of my year at Leeds University, one of my newly-acquired obsessive friends had a group of us back to his room, the air full of all manner of strange and expensive aromas. I was very much the wet-behind-the-ears and recently initiated member of the group, as this was for me the first of many such colourful occasions; the others were dyed-in-the-wool armchair socialists, all of whom had at least one years' experience on me, as I was the only fresher amongst them.

We got down to some serious philosophical, psychological and sociological discussions, as one did when one's bloodstream had an exotic tinge. Then we started in on a serious album-playing session. [Everything was serious in those days, and a sleepover (for that was what it essentially was, although wakeover would be a more accurate description, given that we regarded it as bad form to go to bed before the sun came up) tended to be like an alcohol-induced caricature of a session between Socrates and Plato, plus some other followers, except that the main agenda was rock music. The main guru was usually the owner of the LPs, the chief follower the provider of the beer, and the rest of us were the hangers-on to every word - and hangers-over during the next mornings' lectures, as we were often the main consumers of the refreshments on offer.]

Firstly we listened to some of the others' familiar favourites such as King Crimson, Yes, and The Who, most of which I didn't know, but later got to like very much.

I was certainly taken by some of it. But the one that stood out, and made an impact on me that has lasted until the present day, was entirely new to me, including the name of the group. This was the first album of Emerson, Lake and Palmer - the progressive rock group

whom I grew to like more than any other, and whose work I wanted to emulate, both as a drummer and as a keyboard player - as if I stood a chance....

It was partly the obvious fact that the trio were genuinely classically aware, and openly demonstrated their respect for classical music. It was also that they formed a genuine fusion between rock and jazz. But, most of all, it was their virtuosity and their uninhibited aggression that attracted me.

All three had a command of several instruments, and an inventiveness of which I was unaware in any other rock group. Given that my primary musical discipline was the piano, I admired Keith Emerson's finger brilliance very much, and found his use of the piano, electric piano, electric organ, other electrical keyboards, and perhaps most of all, the recently developed Moog synthesiser, quite fantastic. Greg Lake's voice was very distinctive, and his lyrical contribution on various different guitars and vocal lines was a great contrast to Emerson's extravert brilliance, and he often led from the bass when the music was less lyrical. But it was the percussionist, Carl Palmer, with whom I most identified. There have been some very brilliant drummers from the jazz and rock scene - Buddy Rich, Ginger Baker (I don't want to name too many for fear of missing out anyone's favourite) - but to my ears no one had exploited the percussion world in the way Palmer did. Not only was he a consummate technician, with seemingly limitless energy, but he progressively widened his set of instruments to include tubular bells, timpani, gongs and eventually electronically synthesised drums, as well as the traditional expanded drum set of side drums, bass drums and differently sized suspended cymbals.

On ELP's first album, a number called 'The Barbarian' was effectively an arrangement of Bartok's Allegro Barbaro, and the main theme from the opening movement of Janacek's Sinfonietta formed the basis of 'Knife Edge'.

Very soon after my first encounter with their music, they produced a live recording of their highly suspicious version of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, which although crass and pretentious, was also great fun, and I enjoyed hearing it many times.

[I have only played Pictures - in its original form of course - three times in my life thus far, and all three were during 1971-72. The final time was when I returned to Chetham's to give a recital after nearly a year at Leeds University, to which some non-music student friends from Leeds accompanied me. One of them maintains to this day that my interpretation in that concert owed more to ELP than it did to Mussorgsky, but I think he is referring more to the degree to which I beat the hell out of the piano than to my artistic insights.]

However, it was an item called 'Tank' that really struck me most - the very first track I ever heard by ELP - in that it highlighted the keyboard brilliance, the importance of the bass guitar leading rather than following, a long drum solo and the prominence of the Moog, all in one number. This was as far removed from my first impressions of pop as was Wagner Opera (which I had as yet to discover).

I spent the next months revelling in all their releases to date, going to several of their concerts - from the second one onwards I wore ear plugs. I found that the live performances were generally much faster than the recordings, and sometimes gabbled. I didn't realise just how parallel with the classical music world that was. I presumed they wanted to go faster and it never occurred to me that they were rushing, which I now realise they were. What they lost in clarity through playing everything very fast, and amplifying it beyond ridiculousness - a de rigueur macho thing in rock music at the time - they gained in

spectacle. Creating the sight of all that equipment being controlled by three blokes was nothing if not a power trip. And as for Carl Palmer's drum solo during 'Tank' - impressive though it is on the recording, in live performance it was one of the most spectacular things I have ever witnessed to this day.

A couple of years later, in the course of my serious study of timpani and percussion whilst still a student, one of my teachers was the retired principal percussionist of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Gilbert Webster - one of the most remarkable characters and most profound influences on my life at that time. He casually mentioned one day that a drummer called Carl Palmer, who was 'apparently quite well-known and a very nice chap', had at one time approached him for lessons in symphonic timpani and percussion playing, with the intention, not only of extending his instrumental skills beyond the standard rock group kit, but also of learning to read music..... What an extraordinary scenario. Palmer was already an international superstar, with a drum playing technique to die for, and an ear and musical memory for integrating with the other two guys that left a great many classical musicians standing. And he came to Gilbert for lessons on such things as the timpani part of the William Tell Overture, which evidently gave him a 'little trouble' because he had yet to learn to read the part. I was amazed and humbled by this. Those who are unfamiliar with his playing would be gob-smacked.

There was also a show of violence at the end of each performance as Keith Emerson made as if to have a fight to the death with his electronic organ, which he stabbed several times and produced fake blood. This phallic symbolism was the naff side of ELP's style, but of course it created a talking point and added to the ethos of aggression that we all loved.

[Why? We must ask ourselves why our generation - the one that benefited from the Golden Age of British education - felt the need to express itself so violently and angrily. I have my theories (Oh, 'quel surprise', did I hear you say?), but that is for another time and another long plane journey].

I certainly loved the megalomania, and the spectacle, but underneath all of that there was big musical talent that really struck home. I was particularly taken by the way a piece like 'Take a Pebble' was expanded in live performance way beyond the basic number that was on the album - Greg Lake's short quiet interlude on the original being expanded to include other songs, and a really exciting old fashioned jam-session for all three. I now know that this kind of approach - expanding the original album number into a much more extended section that sometimes included other numbers, known as 'intersections' - was quite widespread, but in 1971 this was a voyage of discovery for me, and it was the first time I had come across it.

As an aside, 'Take a Pebble' included what I thought for years was one of my very favourite 'pretentious' lyrics - 'Photographs of grains are scattered in your fields'. Yes - slightly posey, definitely an attempt to be profound at an early age, and a bit gauche, but nevertheless quite potent to the young people of the time. We were sceptical of the values of the older generation - the one that thought Britain was still Great Britain, that we perceived to be on the whole racist, snob-ridden, complacent and closed to new ideas, and the one that thought that a good spell in the army would sort out the younger generation, remove the drug problem, stop us protesting and staging 'sit-ins' and indulging in Soviet-inspired lefty thinking - the one that unquestioningly supported the Americans in the Vietnam War, who were so confrontational with the Soviet Union that World War Three felt inevitable. This is the way I, and plenty of my friends, used to think in those heady

days. We felt that those values needed overturning. Yes, on the whole, the hippies were naïve, immature, and were indulging in impractical idealism. In addition, there were many who could not resist hitchhiking from any passing bandwagon. However, on the whole, I am so glad that I was at least part of its periphery.

The photographs of grain are still scattered in the fields; only now, we don't have the level of concern and protest from the younger generation who were educated under more recent governments - governments, by the way, which are largely populated by people who received their education at the same time as I did. In other words, large numbers of those 'idealists' of my generation have turned into the very people they were protesting against, and somehow nothing like the same level of protest is being levelled against them this time round.

Yes, the words do seem a little pretentious, but isn't it better to create something that you can fire that criticism at than to produce endless strings of the usual vapid nursery style of the majority of pop music?

I had attributed to singer-songwriter Greg Lake these 'profound', yet youthful words. Imagine the degree to which I felt foolish when I discovered over thirty years later that I had misheard them for all the hundreds of times I had played the album and seen the performances, and that actually what he had written and sung was : 'Photographs are grey and torn, scattered in your fields'. Diction, Greg - diction.....

Tull

By the end of 1971, I was eking out my student grant [remember those?] by gigging fairly regularly as a free-lance timpanist/percussionist. I spent virtually all my extra income on rock albums - some of which I still have. I tried to find other groups I liked as much as ELP, and succeeded with Jethro Tull - a very different style but brilliantly inventive - and Colosseum - another brilliantly fusion-oriented group. Many of the ones I saw live were engaged by the Leeds University Student Union, and I went for an ear-battering several times over the next year.

The Union 'Ents' put on many of the best and most successful groups in the world at that time, and I lapped it up. This was partly because certain of my non-music department friends were so 'into' rock that it put into the shade the apparent passing cerebral interest in classical music of most of the university music department. It was also partly because it was a new discovery at a formative time - one that brought me together with some very interesting and genuine friends who were not in any way competitive. It was most of all, however, because many of the groups I became interested in were damn good at what they did. The professionalism of the shows put on by, in particular, ELP and Jethro Tull made much of the presentation of classical music seem unenthusiastic, dull and - yes - pretentious. Not the music itself, of course, but the lack of passion for the music itself, the disdain for the listeners and the self-regarding ego-tripping displayed by so many performers. That there were many exceptions was undoubtedly true, but I was unaware of many of them at that point.

Yes!

Another group whose music fired my imagination (I never saw them live), even before encountering ELP, was Yes. The sound of Jon Anderson - the lead singer's - voice was, and still is, very distinctive, and all the instrumentalists were fantastically inventive in their

own different ways. That the lyrics were consistently nonsensical was part of the group's charm - again, many would say pretentiousness - but they did manage to convey a mystical atmosphere in many of their best numbers, and the sound they had was quite different to any other.

Regrets

Sadly, across the years there have been some truly brilliant groups of whom I remained ignorant. One that I wish I had got to know better during my students years is the Moody Blues (still touring), whose material and sound was so fresh and original that even some of my colleagues in the Leeds University music department admired them.

Many years later, in 2005, at a festival in the South of France, I was rehearsing some Debussy at the church where I would be playing a recital the next day, and a guy in an expensive-looking suit was busily moving chairs and generally setting up the audience area. He then came over to the piano and stood listening. This is something I would normally not encourage in a rehearsal, but this man demonstrated that he was particularly enthralled by the Debussy, so I continued. He didn't tell me who he was but I gathered later that he was Justin Hayward - lead vocalist and guitarist of the Moody Blues. It wasn't so much the fact that such a rock superstar was involved in the small classical music festival at Beaulieu sur Mer, as the fact that he didn't tell me who he was, and, more particularly, that he was helping out with stage management - he even offered to make me a cup of tea - that so impressed me. I have recently learned that the group originated in Birmingham and the name Moody Blues was created around the initials M and B in order to help clinch a promised sponsorship deal with the Birmingham brewery M & B - the deal never materialised, but the name lives on.

Later came the extraordinary Queen. My wife had been an admirer long before we met, and it was she who introduced me to their music. Some of it is quite fantastic, although it is as much the performing skills and phenomenal energy and conviction of all the group's members that is so virulent as the musical content. Freddie Mercury's death contributed to his almost being sanctified for his performing and writing abilities, which were beyond compare, but the other members were in their various different ways equally great. [Just as an aside: am I the only one to notice the remarkable similarity between the tune of 'We are the Champions' and the Soviet National Anthem? Is it significant?] One of the most significant tracks ever recorded by a rock group - Bohemian Rhapsody - went by unnoticed by me at the time it was released, although I now know it inside out.

Influence of school music

Since then, although there have been some exceptions, the vast majority of pop music has been so obviously commercialised and aiming for the lowest common denominator that it has almost completely ceased to have any relevance to music at all. One notices that hardly any pop musicians play an instrument; most are bad singers and/or bad dancers, and the instrumental background is either invisible and electronically synthesised, or provided by an anonymous backing group. There was often a backing group and sometimes added invisible instruments in earlier pop music of course, but most of the actual members of the group usually played something as well as vocalising.

Could this perhaps have something to do with the decline of instrumental teaching in schools - not to mention the demise of hymn-singing and other religious activities? In my youth there was huge interest in playing guitar or drums amongst my contemporaries.

These were people with no desire to play anything classical; however, the rudiments of music had been taught to them, and that gave them a head start when they began to learn the instrument they desired in order to play pop.

The exceptions, of which of course there are plenty, tend to make my statement specious. In years since the end of the 1970s, we have seen the advent of such excellent performers and writers as Michael Jackson, Beyonce, Paul Simon, Abba, Natasha Bedingfield, Sting, and Shania Twain. There have been many others, and I am sorry if I have left any of my readers' heroes out. However, there are thousands of pop acts every year, with record labels desperately attempting to make short-term profits from one after another, that sound so similar it is almost like they are the same artists in different disguises.

And in 1997 came 'Girl Power'. [Here I am paraphrasing one of Ben Elton's standup routines from around fifteen years ago, with apologies and many thanks to him.] The Spice Girls were a phenomenon felt and described by many to represent the newly-found genuine desire for equality of the feminist movement. It wasn't just pop music. It was being described as a socio-political development. They were supposedly the embodiment of youthful female empowerment and post-modern feminism.

With that in mind, say the words of 'Wannabe' to yourself slowly to fully savour them.

"I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want.
So tell me what you want, what you really, really want.
I wanna ha,
I wanna ha,
I wanna ha,
I wanna ha,
I really really wanna zig-a-zig ha."

Over a hundred years ago, Mrs. Pankhurst and her followers successfully fought for the female vote by starving themselves, chaining themselves to railings, and facing police beatings; now that IS Girl Power.

OK - you do the rest.....

[Actually, I quite like it in retrospect. However, marketing people: successful pop song and money-spinner aimed at kids, yes. Girl Power? - now come on....]

Real culture

It does seem to have been inordinately difficult to persuade the majority of the greatness of classical music, and very easy to persuade them of the greatness of completely vacuous garbage through marketing. I do not believe that the answer to that is either to increase the novelty or sexiness of classical music presentation, to dumb it down, to market it for the masses, to make it 'cool' or to throw good money after bad in search of the perfect marketing campaign. Those things have proved time and time again to fail. And the reason is that to do that is to try and emulate the marketing of empty and talentless pop acts with nothing to offer other than looks, audacity or celebrity. The only reason to market something superficially would be that what you are trying to sell is superficial. Classical music has so much to offer society that it must be publicised honestly on the basis of elevating and stretching the people who do listen - i.e. a form of education. Real culture is not superficially spectacular or commercial or based on novelty, any more than medicine,

transport, education, the arts or any other public services should be treated as profit-making businesses - oh.....

Pop music doesn't need an educated audience - in fact, it has a vested interest in the audience being ill-educated and thus more easily led by the marketing of very little.

Rock music, on the other hand, was the product of a great period of education. Many of the audiences and fans of the greatest rock bands were embarrassed by most mainstream pop, and their music was an expression of a much deeper spectrum of emotions and thought processes - albeit often immature ones - than pure commercial entertainment.

Perhaps in the final analysis, the contrast between totally commercial pop, less commercial rock and non-commercial classical music is down to two major issues. One is the class system, and the way that, at least in British society, a person's social status is so easily assessed on the basis of his or her personal taste, likes or dislikes. The other is the role of music in society - any type of music. It is increasingly regarded as part of the background to other activities; working, driving, sitting on a train, shopping, eating and drinking, or even conversing - none of these are done in silence by more than a tiny minority. [I suggest that the tiny minority concerned perhaps do all of those things more mindfully and productively, but I have no scientific evidence to prove it.] That most background music, particularly in public places, is regurgitated pop music, it is pop music that gets the bad rap from me by association, again perhaps sometimes unfairly, if we are judging music on its content, its emotional impact and its performance standard.

Listen properly!

If young kids are taught by example that the purpose of music is to disco to for the young, and to put on in the background during a dinner party for the old, how on earth can that conditioning be removed later? Classical music demands to be listened to, or you get nothing out of it. You simply cannot dance to Beethoven's Symphonies. Neither can you put them on in the background. You might as well put on a televised version of a Shakespeare play whilst the members of the family open their Christmas presents. The same applies to almost all classical music - try playing the Rite of Spring during your next dinner party, and if that doesn't work for your guests, put it on afterwards in the lounge and get them to dance to it. Then see if any of them ever wants to come again to one of your dinner parties. The reason it wouldn't work, incidentally, is not that the Rite of Spring is a loud piece and has a few awkward rhythms - if you put on a quiet piece in 3/4 time, no one will be able to hear it because they will be talking, so there is no point to playing music in that situation at all. The reason trash musak seems appropriate to some is that it has no extremes, no ups and downs, no meaning, and no points of interest - I think it is often described as atmosphere. It pisses me off in supermarkets, hotel elevators and restaurants, so I as sure as hell cannot abide it at dinner - and it is even worse if it is Baroque music played at half-volume, rather than musak. Music is as for concentrated listening as food is for mindful eating.

As I am now of an age where everything from thirty years ago tends to seem better than now, I have to be careful of falling into the same trap as the oldies of my youth. But as with contemporary 'serious' art - including music, as opposed to pop - none of it shocks, everything is acceptable, and there are no ceilings against which composers or performers must bang their heads against in order to be accepted; the only thing they need is to be heard, which is harder than ever before. Once they have achieved that, the world is their oyster - at least for a short time.

Classical musicians are different to the rest

One fundamental and obvious difference between the study of classical music and any other form - and one that is often overlooked in any comparison - is that we classical musicians are mostly reproducing the music of another - usually from an earlier era - and the others are mostly not. In the final analysis, perhaps that is the definition of 'classical' - I have been looking for one that works since my early years. It is, however much we try to work with relevance to the present, a museum piece, with all the positives and negatives that go with it.

It means we have less freedom than the rest. On the other hand, it also means that it is far more rewarding and longer-lasting. Apart from the truism that it can be one's whole life - for one's whole life; even as a listener rather than as a performer, it is a limitless and ever-more profound study and a source of inspiration.

It is not restricted to any particular age group, although marketing does tend to assume, not only that classical stars need to be young and glamorous, but also that their target audience is all oldies and needs infantilising. Hence the direction of classical CD sleeves over the last twenty-five years, artists' marketing campaigns, the presentation of classical music on radio and television, and the inclusion of musicals and film music under the bracket of 'classical music'.

Age catching up?

Having said that, some of the rock groups of the 1960s and 70s are still touring and recording. Why not? There is often a kind of ridicule levelled at them for performing rock and pop at 'their age'. If their music is good, what does it matter what age it is or they are? Much though I admired the comedy of Jasper Carrott, and amusing as his line is "I can't get no Sanatogen", whilst taking the piss out of the Rolling Stones, I cannot subscribe to the view that the music is old hat. As long as Mick Jagger can still leap and prance about the stage, and command the audiences he does, he should. If he is good at it, that should be enough, and he is one of the best there ever was. That he is in his sixties and can continue merely means that he is very fit - the music hasn't changed in standard just because the musician is older.

He is also a damn sight more responsible than he used to be, and a better role model as a result. The immature behaviour of certain pop and rock stars when they were drunk with early success was a dreadful example to their fans.

It is such a good thing that no classical musicians who achieve major success at an early age never fall into that trap. Oh.....

Playlist

I have put together a list here of some of the rock numbers that I still find telling and return to. There are many other great ones of course, but these are the ones that sum up the era for me.

Readers will probably notice that this list essentially comes from the same short period - a formative one for me, at the same time as being a watershed for society in so many ways.

My brief immersion in this music pre-dated my decision to finally commit myself to the life of a concert pianist by about four years. That decision was a long-delayed acceptance of my fate that was delayed by my involvement with percussion-playing, the study of contemporary music, learning to play a variety of other instruments very badly, my uninspired attempts at composition and following rock music. It took a combination of maturing out of my rebelliousness, my two-piano partnership with Martin Roscoe and my re-discovery of Chopin, Mozart and Tchaikovsky to do that.

Beatles - A Day in the Life from Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band
Rolling Stones - You can't always get what you want - from Let it Bleed
Emerson Lake and Palmer - Just Take a Pebble (live)
Yes - Yours is No Disgrace - from The Yes Album
Led Zeppelin Dazed and Confused - From Led Zeppelin 1
The Who - Won't get Fooled Again - From Who's Next
Colosseum - Rope Ladder to the Moon
Jethro Tull - Thick as a Brick (Complete album presented as one number with many different sections)
King Crimson (Greg Lake's previous group before the formation of ELP) - In the Court of the Crimson King
Cream - Toad

As always, if you have been, thank you for reading.