

MUSIC IN WORDS

Beyond Words

A novelist shares his love of music.

By Damian Fowler

The British novelist Julian Barnes admits to a life-long love of classical music. He is the author of twenty books, including *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *The Sense of an Ending*, for which he won the 2011 Man Booker Prize. In his most recent book, *Levels of Life*, Barnes describes the quiet devastation he suffered after the death of his wife. In this grief-stricken state he fell in love with opera, a sudden revelation: "Now, in the darkness of an auditorium and the darkness of grief, the form's implausibility suddenly dissolved.... Opera cuts to the chase — as death does." Barnes will further explore the connections between life, literature and music at New York City's Le Poisson Rouge in March when he collaborates with pianist Angela Hewitt for "An Evening of Words and Music." *Listen* spoke with Barnes about this musical and literary event — and his life with classical music.



A fine pairing. Julian Barnes has collaborated with pianist Angela Hewitt (left) on 'words and music' programs.

To what extent has classical music been an important part of your life?

Ever since my brother sold me his unwanted LP of the 1812 Overture about fifty-five years ago, it's been a major and necessary part of my life. First, with records and the radio; later, when I could afford it, going to concerts. When I am away travelling, I miss music, and it is always important to me which piece I hear after I am away from it. If I was given a limited time left to live, I would probably spend it listening to music rather than trying, say, to reread *Madame Bovary*. Music is the higher and the more primal art, I willingly admit.

Is there a relationship between music and your imagination as a novelist?

I'm not aware of any, and on the whole I think the two art forms are best kept apart. When music becomes over-literary and programmatic, it seems to me to lose some of its force, and any novelist trying to write a story in, say, sonata form is doomed to disaster. But the music of the sentence is — or should be — vital to any prose writer.

What is the idea behind the New York event with Angela Hewitt, and how did it come about?

I was invited to Angela Hewitt's annual music festival on Lake Trasimene — now in its tenth year — this past summer, and rather than be interviewed about my writing, I suggested putting together a 'words with music' evening. Poetry and prose (some of my own among the latter) with music which responded to it, or was at an angle to it, or was referred to in it. There was a fuller cast — piano, soprano voice, violin, cello and clarinet — so there was a much greater range of pieces to choose from. It was a two-hour program, and the audience seemed to enjoy it, as well as the performers. This time it's just Angela and me, and a one-hour program. So it's not a one-off, and we might well take it elsewhere if we find it works.

Could you provide some highlights of the literary selections you've made — both your own and those of other writers, I understand — and why you chose them?

Well, the program hasn't been decided yet, but it might include Robert Browning's great poem about music, Venice and death, 'A Toccata of Galuppi's'; a section from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (about a young society woman playing Mozart); part of a short story of mine about Sibelius; a Tomas Tranströmer poem about Haydn... you'll be able to work out roughly what Angela will choose to play, but not exactly. But the literary selections have to be pieces I admire, as the music has to be something Angela is keen to play. Neither of us has bullied the other into choosing anything unwanted. And — quite rightly — there will be more of Angela's piano than of my voice.



Has a classical piece ever inspired a story?

No, but I've written two short stories around classical music — one about concert rage [("Vigilance")], and one about Sibelius's famous thirty-year silence [("The Silence")], both published in the short story collection *The Lemon Table* (2004)].

What are the particular challenges when it comes to writing about music, which perhaps defies narrative description? Adjectives don't really cut it.

Yes, head-on description of music is very hard (quite right, too) and I don't think I've ever much tried it. But description of the effect of music on someone is the easier course.

Do you agree with the sentiment (sometimes attributed to Hans Christian Andersen), 'Where words fail, music speaks'?

Yes and no — yes because music goes beyond words, bypasses their trudging usefulness by having its effect direct from soul to soul — and no because words and music can often work together and effect a double magic.

Were you exposed to classical music when you were growing up? Do you play any instruments?

There was always a piano in the house and it was never played. My mother had been a good amateur pianist when she was growing up, but was defeated by a particular piece by Scriabin, decided she would never master it (and by extension, more difficult things), and stopped playing. But the piano, never tuned, followed her from house to house, with a pile of sheet music (including that Scriabin piece) on top of it. For myself, I once tried learning the classical guitar but gave up at a much earlier stage than my mother.

How have your tastes in classical music evolved over time?

At first I liked only orchestral music, and much preferred the fast movements. Slowly, I came to appreciate chamber and instrumental music, and some choral and vocal



pieces (though lieder remain a stumbling block, I'm afraid). I came to opera in my sixties. I've always just followed my nose and ears. And nowadays I probably prefer slow movements to quick ones — or at least, find myself more attentive in them.

I listened to your 1996 Desert Island Discs and was curious to know if some of your selections would remain the same, e.g., Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Brahms's *Sextet*, Franck's *Violin Sonata*.

Yes, those are still high on my list.

Is there a composer with whom you most closely identify?

Brahms, Mahler, Sibelius, Shostakovich. (I don't know what that tells you about me.) But if I was only allowed the music of one composer in my life, it would — as for many — have to be Mozart.

In *Levels of Life* you talk about falling into a love of opera during your grief after the death of your wife. Was this a sudden revelation and does this appreciation of opera remain?

Yes, very sudden. And yes, my love of opera remains strong. Last week I had an American writer friend in town and we went to the opera three times in five days. But it means my theatergoing has suffered.

How do you prefer to listen to classical music? For example, in the concert hall, or at home on the stereo?

Increasingly, I have to hear music in the concert hall (or opera house). And I am lucky enough to live in London, where each night there is a wide choice available. I find I concentrate better, and understand music better when I see it as well as hear it. Not the conductor's gesture, but rather that moment when the violist in a quartet looks knowingly across at the first violin, and then picks up a phrase of his and embellishes it, before handing it on to the cellist. And some big pieces can — or should — only be heard in the concert hall. Most of Mahler for a start. I think 'Rite of Spring' should only ever be heard live.

Could you name a few of your favorite pieces?

Well, more or less as they come into my head: Brahms's Op. 117 *Intermezzo*, Sibelius Four, Prokofiev Six, Mozart's G minor String Quintet, Mahler Two, Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, Shostakovich Five, Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Ravel's Violin Sonata, Copland's *Old American Songs*, Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*; Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Berlioz's *Vilanelle* from *Les Nuits d'été*, Arensky's String Quartet, Bach's *Magnificat*... oh, stop me.... ■