

# The man who taught me to listen

**Could Alex Ross, New Yorker critic and author of *The Rest is Noise*, get Tim Teeman to appreciate modern classical music?**

**T**here were men playing cacti, performers speaking over one other, discordant violins and a lot of clanging. A day immersed in the music of John Cage, accompanied by Alex Ross, the classical music critic of *The New Yorker*, had been designed to test whether I could fall, knowledgeable, in love with classical music — and I could talk about it afterwards beyond: “That was great . . . hmm . . . great . . . er . . . shall we go for tapas?”

We honoured the centenary of Cage’s birth at a number of events at Symphony Space on New York’s Upper West Side. “You don’t have to like Cage,” Ross said. “Hating Cage is part of the fun. One friend shouted, before walking out of one of his concerts: ‘I love you dearly, John, but I can’t take it any more.’ Even at that moment of rejection, Cage would have thought something had ‘clicked’ for that person.”

Ross, the author of the erudite, best-selling 2007 history of 20th-century music *The Rest is Noise*, (which has now inspired a major London festival), has many friends who “blunder in a few times a year” to classical concerts. “People may have seen many things, but feel uncertain about how to describe them,” he says. “Five minutes after you’ve seen a movie you’re out on the street discussing the acting and direction. But people find it difficult to describe what they liked and didn’t like in a concert hall. They shouldn’t be afraid of hashing it out in whatever language comes to hand.”

Between January and December there will be 100 concerts and 150 events in Southbank Centre’s *The Rest is Noise* festival, which was launched yesterday. It is not just a survey of a century of music but a bold, multi-disciplinary attempt to woo a new audience and banish a few myths about “difficult” 20th-century composers. The festival will feature the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Sinfonietta, music from Sibelius to

Rachmaninov to Britten to Gershwin, as well as screenings of some key 20th-century films. BBC Four will also be screening a complementary series: *The Sound of Fury: A Century of Modern Music*. Ross, who will give five talks during the festival, the first on January 19 and 20, hasn’t been involved in its programming, but his most desired ticket is a production of Kurt Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* on March 2.

Our day of Cage — “Caged”, Ross called it — was both treat and education, Ross as wryly illuminating and eloquent in person as on the page. He started listening to Cage in college. “I don’t love everything he did, but there are some incredibly beautiful and powerful pieces — taking a bunch of junk instruments and crafting a compelling piece out of differences in timbre.”

We watch a recitation of Cage’s *Lecture on the Weather* featuring composers speaking as a collective *melée*. Adam Tendler played *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (a piano with objects placed inside to change its sounds). “It could be more aggressive,” Ross says. Like all the best teachers he’s a tough crowd.

So, how should one become a classical convert? “Go to several concerts,” Ross advises. “Be patient and willing to try again. You’ll begin to make comparisons, especially if you see the same piece performed differently. You’ll find yourself saying: ‘That latest performance took it pretty fast. I enjoyed the visceral excitement of it; the other one appeared sluggish.’”

To hone your critical vocabulary, Ross advises reading Paul Griffiths’ *The New Penguin Dictionary of Music* “elegantly explains historical periods and technical terms”. Leonard Bernstein’s *The Joy of Music* and *The Infinite Variety of Music* have “terrific enthusiasm on the page”. Aaron Copland’s *What to Listen For in Music* is “excellent”. Feast online, Ross recommends: the San Francisco Symphony has mini-sites explaining famous works while in London the Philharmonia orchestra is about to introduce an app that explains all the instruments of an orchestra.

The 20th century has been “the greatest era” for musical development”, insists Ross and a good “way in” for the classical music newbie. “I’m a very big believer that you don’t need to begin with Bach or Beethoven, but rather Stravinsky, Messiaen and Steve Reich. In Beethoven’s time the ‘new’ was prized; it was only during the 19th century that classical music began to hark back to its deep past.

“Now contemporary composers are accused of turning off audiences because of their experimentation.



That’s nonsense: there are a lot of melodies and tonality in modern music, but even if there weren’t I’d recommend people listen to modern classical. Think of it as you would a modern work of visual art which can seem strange and alien when you first see it, then it becomes thrilling and leads you to other things.”

There is no “perfect point of entry”, he adds, but “it’s pretty essential” to listen to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. “Every strand of 20th-century music, from pop to jazz, takes cues from it.”

Ross can’t remember “a period when I wasn’t listening to classical music”, growing up in Washington DC, the younger son of two geologists. His parents had many classical records. “I was listening more than they were: Toscanini conducting Beethoven and Brahms, Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Around 8 or 9 I heard Beethoven’s Third Symphony, the *Eroica*. It was my gateway to classical music culture: listening to something again and again,

**Alex Ross and Tim Teeman, right, after an encounter with the music of John Cage**

then different performances and recordings, and that being the jumping-off point to other pieces.”

Ross had a “wonderful” piano teacher “who was very gung-ho on Schoenberg”. He recalls hearing Berg’s Piano Sonata for the first time (Berg had studied under Schoenberg), “which starts out like a tonal piece, then the chords become strange”. He had “a visceral, emotional response” to it.

He was a “pretty quiet” teenager; music was his refuge. “It became my way of avoiding social, sexual issues,” he says. Ross is gay and came out in his twenties, after college. “It was the era of Aids and rather dark,” he says. “I wasn’t bullied, but I was content to busy myself by myself,” he says of his teen years. By 10 he was composing pieces and by 14 he “was writing quite a bit and not totally hopelessly”. At college, where he studied English literature, Ross hosted a modern classical radio show.

The young Ross was “very much a ▶

**“People find it hard to describe what they liked and didn’t in a concert**

Ross's top five for the modern classical beginner

There are more than 34 million vehicles in Britain and we've got to park them somewhere, shelter them, fix them and fill them with petrol. That's an awful lot of infrastructure to build. Still, it's funny how little attention we pay to the car's effect on our surroundings. Perhaps that's because — in recent decades, anyway — "carchitecture" has been so bloody ugly that we try to blank it out. The multi-storey car park must rank among man's most hideous bequests to Planet Earth: one of the horsemen of the apocalypse that wrecked so many British towns in the Sixties, alongside the tower block and the ring road.

But car-related buildings weren't always so ugly, as English Heritage has recognised this week by giving 13 of them Grade II listing. Among them is the 1926 East Sheen filling station in Richmond-upon-Thames, the best surviving example of an early, purpose-built station. In the fashionable American style, the projecting canopy and office are under a single tiled roof — a mock Tudor roof to match the suburban surroundings.

At Colyford filling station in Devon the 1928 steeply pitched roof, with a half-timbered gable, covers a charming set of original 1950s lurid yellow pumps straight out of Edward Hopper's lonely roadside America.

The most dramatic listing is the former Pennine Tower Restaurant at Lancaster service station on the M6. The 1965 hexagonal restaurant on a concrete stalk now has a Stalinist Star Trek look to it. When it was built, at the dawn of the motorway age, it was the height of road chic, symptomatic of an era when we still revelled in the freedom brought by the car. You could step out of the Pennine Tower on to a sundeck and thrill to the thrum of cars whizzing beneath your feet.

That optimism wasn't to last, as a new book, Carscapes by Kathryn Morrison and John Minnis, reveals. For the first 60 odd years of the 20th century, the combustion engine produced lovely garages, petrol stations, showrooms and road signs. Those were the days when the car was a wondrous thing, a much admired, expensive object of beauty and liberty.

Now that the car is a dreary, mass-market metal box it is sold and parked in steel sheds and concrete prisons. The architects of the Happy Eater and the Travelodge will not rest among the angels. Those towns

designed for the car, such as Milton Keynes, do not set the heart racing.

Just occasionally, though, carchitecture was a thrilling thing. The glitterati filling their faces at the Wolseley — the Piccadilly restaurant with the best interior in London — may not realise it, but they are sitting in a car showroom. The soaring domes, Doric columns and arches above their heads were built in 1922 as a place to flog Wolseley cars.

The Twenties and Thirties were peak years for elegant carchitecture. New materials — huge sheets of glass, curving Crittall windows and steel frames — were ideal for showing off a beautiful generation of cars. Art Deco and modernist styles even borrowed their swirling lines from the car. The Chrysler Building in Manhattan is topped by a series of stainless steel discs inspired by car wheels.

The 1911 Michelin Building on Fulham Road in London borrows from the same source. Tyres and wheels bounce throughout the structure — as column capitals, corner domes, pediment roundels and gable ornaments — in a thoroughly integrated, deeply original way.

Like the Wolseley, the Michelin Building became a restaurant — Bibendum, owned by Terence Conran, who also turned the 1924 Blue Bird Garage on the King's Road in Chelsea into a restaurant. In the golden age of carchitecture the showroom floor really was so beautiful you could eat your dinner off it.

Carscapes: The Motor Car, Architecture and Landscape in England is published by Yale University Press. Harry Mount's How England Made the English is published by Viking

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