



13 August 2025

Studying Music at Oxford

Congratulations on meeting the conditions of your offer and achieving a place at St Peter's! I am very much looking forward to meeting you all in Oxford in October.

The main purpose of this letter is to offer some guidance to prepare you for your first year of study. Throughout your time at Oxford you will receive extensive reading lists for your various courses, and some may even be sent to you this summer. There is absolutely no need to purchase every (or any!) book on these lists: you will be able to find most of what you need either in the well-stocked library at St Peter's, in the library of the Faculty of Music, or amidst the peerless resources of the Bodleian Library. That said, you may find it useful to buy a good musical dictionary, such as the single-volume *Harvard Dictionary of Music* or the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*.

Once you start in October, you will have a much better idea of which texts or scores you will need to consult most frequently, so I suggest that you wait until then to start building your collection, if that's your intention.

Your studies at Oxford will require you to read, but also to listen. For an easy summer listening project, tune into the nightly broadcasts of the BBC Proms on Radio 3. You may also wish to familiarise yourself with some of the canonical repertoire that you will encounter during your course. A whistle-stop tour of music history might include:

Plainchant recordings by the Cistercian monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz
Guillaume de Machaut, *Messe de Nostre Dame*
Josquin des Prez, *Missa l'homme armé super voces musicales*
Byrd, *Cantiones sacrae*
Palestrina, *Missa Papae Marcelli*
Monteverdi, *Vespers* (1610), *Orfeo* (1607)
Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*
J. S. Bach, *Mass in B minor*, *Matthäus Passion*
Handel, *Giulio Cesare*
Haydn, representative examples of the London symphonies (Nos 93–104)
Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*
Mozart, Symphonies nos. 39, 40 and 41
Beethoven symphonies (especially 3, 5, and 9); any of the late String Quartets
Schubert, *Die schöne Müllerin*
Brahms, any of the four symphonies

Mahler, any of the symphonies
Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du Printemps*; *Symphony of Psalms*
Louis Armstrong, *Hot Fives and Sevens*
Berg, Violin Concerto, *Wozzeck*
Boulez, *Le Marteau sans maître*
John Coltrane, *My Favorite Things*, *A Love Supreme*
Steve Reich, *Music for 18 Musicians*
John Adams, *Harmonielehre*

Preparatory Work

Whilst I hope that you will take time for relaxation over the summer, I do recommend that you carry out some introductory study in preparation for your matriculation at Oxford:

1. Get hold of a cheap copy of J. P. E. Harper Scott & Jim Samson, *An Introduction to Music Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), and read Chapters 1 and 2. As you read, think about the specific questions listed at the end of each chapter. The topics and questions explored in this book are good preparation for many of the courses you will take in the first year of your music degree.
2. Get hold of a copy of Donal Grout's *A History of Western Music*. There have been many editions of this text, and you may read any version of it (second-hand copies sell for less than £5 on Amazon, and public libraries will also have copies). This is a long book, but don't be intimidated; just skim the book cover-to-cover to give yourself a framework for the history of Western music to the present day – an idea of the major trends, movements, and composers. Go through it with attention, but without the pressure of absorbing every detail. Your courses at Oxford will favour depth over breadth, but it will be helpful for you to have a solid understanding of what we mean by the 'Western canon' to build upon and to question throughout your degree.
3. As a balance to these discussions of 'great' music and musical canons, get hold of a cheap copy of Simon Frith's *Performing Rites* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), and read Chapters 1 and 2. This will be a good introduction to the processes of value judgement inherent to the study of music, which will be at the heart of many of our tutorial discussions.

I will be in touch again in September with details of your schedules and tutorial plans for the sessions that we will have together. In the meantime, I hope that you have an enjoyable vacation.

I look forward to meeting you soon.

With best wishes,

Sarah.