August 2017

STUDYING MUSIC AT OXFORD: some notes for Freshers

Congratulations on meeting the conditions of your offer. I am greatly looking forward to your arrival in Oxford this coming October. During the summer you will receive from the Faculty of Music a list of suggested books and reading which will help you to approach your first-year studies. The purpose of this letter is to offer some additional guidance and to encourage good habits of study.

In preparation for coming to Oxford, it is important for you to realise that—whatever you do—you should certainly not attempt to purchase all the books on the various reading lists! You will probably find it useful to possess at least one good musical dictionary (the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* is probably the best single volume reference work available) but otherwise reserve the decision to purchase until you arrive, when you will have a chance to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various publications in tutorials. You will also get a better idea of those texts to which you will want to resort most frequently. Remember, too, that you will come to make regular use of articles published in the many musicological journals through which new research is disseminated. You are not expected to subscribe to these journals, but you should make a habit of keeping an eye on new issues as they appear in the Faculty Library and the Bodleian Music Reading Room in the newly refurbished Weston Library, so that you can keep abreast of developments and get a sense of the ever-developing world of musical scholarship—you will be shooting at a moving target!

Despite this advice, you should be prepared to purchase study materials to support your work. Oxford has world-famous library holdings (remember that you will have the use of the well-stocked St Peter's library as well as the unmatched collections of the Faculty and Bodleian Libraries); but a library of your own is a vital resource. Whilst you will find it useful to possess certain books, you are strongly encouraged to build up a library of musical scores, for these will be central to your work. The idea of purchasing music to study rather than to perform may seem unusual at this stage, but you will come to see that there is simply no substitute for being able to go to your shelves and take down your own personalised copy of a score. You will find the following very useful in support of your work in the Techniques of Composition and Analysis courses during your first year; all are available in inexpensive study-score editions:

- **J.S. Bach, *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* [the '48']**
- **G.F. Handel, *Keyboard Suites***

Haydn, Mozart: you should acquire a representative selection of the string quartets, which are widely available both individually as Eulenburg miniature scores and in collected volumes published by Dover.

As to what other music you purchase, that will depend on how your tastes and interests develop as the course proceeds.
Reading a musical score is a fairly pointless exercise unless you can make some aural sense of the notes on the page. Perhaps the most important study skill that you will need to acquire is the development of the inner ear or the ability to create in your mind an accurate impression of how a reasonably straightforward musical score (a classical string quartet or symphony, for example) sounds. One way to practise this is to get into the habit of following a score when listening to a piece of music. This is another reason for you to be able to call on the resources of your own personal music library; even more importantly, it is a reminder that listening to music as widely as possible should be one of your top priorities, if not the very top priority. You should make good use of the matchless resources on the broadcast networks (especially BBC Radio 3) and even in these days of digital streaming and online listening you are strongly recommended to buy a good radio! DAB (digital) reception is excellent in Oxford and a good digital set is now only a fraction of the cost of a Laptop computer—not to mention the terrifying range of electronic gadgets, gizmos and other assorted devices that undergraduates seem to be incapable of doing without these days! You should also make good use of the summer season of Promenade Concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, either on the radio or in person. You may well see my wife and myself there. Watch out for two distinctive grey heads. If so, do make yourselves known.

It is obviously impossible to give an exhaustive list of what you should listen to, and many of you will already have considerable knowledge of the core repertoires through your experience as orchestral players and choral singers. Here is a broad range of works you should get to know a little before coming up:

Some chant repertoire, for example in recordings by the monks from Heiligenstift
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
Purcell, Dido and Aeneas
J. S. Bach, Masi in B minor, Matthäus Passion
Handel, Giulio Cesare
Haydn, representative examples of the London symphonies (Nos 93–104).
Mozart, Le Nozze di Figaro, or Don Giovanni
Mozart, Symphonies nos. 39, 40 and 41
Beethoven, any Symphony but especially Nos. 3, op.55, No 5, op. 67, and No 9, op. 125;
Any of the late String Quartets
Schubert, Die schöne Müllerin
Wagner, Tristan und Isolde
Brahms, any of the four symphonies
Bruckner, Symphony no 7
Elgar, Enigma Variations
Sibelius, Symphony no 5 or 7
Stravinsky, Le Sacre du Printemps; Symphony of Psalms
Berg, Violin Concerto, Wozzeck
Boulez, Le Marteau sans maître

Music books and scores can be distressingly expensive; but you can save money by locating good secondhand sources, some of which are as follows:

Travis and Emery, 17 Cecil Court, London WC2N 4EZ; tel. 020 7240 2129 (can be a bit pricey, but an excellent selection of secondhand music)
‘Antiques on the High’ (almost opposite the Queen’s College) has a department stocking very reasonably priced second hand books and scores. The Oxfam Charity Bookshops in Turl Street or St Giles; these are better for secondhand music than for books but anything can turn up here at ridiculously low prices.

You can also trawl around on the Internet. Second hand book-selling sites such as Abebooks or Bibliofind often have scores of the core repertoire for as little as 50p – but it’s nothing like so much fun as fuddling through a second hand bookshop and unearthing a rare treasure at the bottom of a mouldering pile. I have assembled most of my library that way – as you will discover.

It is vital to develop good study skills right from the very outset of your university career. It is also important to hit the ground running when you arrive in October. As a preliminary I am setting the following assignments to be completed in your own time before coming up.

- Locate a score of Haydn’s String Quartet in D minor Op 42. Study the complete 4tet and write an analytical essay on the THIRD movement (Adagio Cantabile). You should comment on the main structural features (including tonal aspects), motivic processes and texture.

- It is essential to read widely outside your discipline. I am therefore asking you to read two contrasting works of literature before you begin your course.

  1. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). You may know this iconic work of English poetry already. If so, read it again. If not, enjoy your first time through.

  2. Ernest Hemingway’s short Nobel Prize winning novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Why do you think this book is held in high critical regard?

Then write an essay (c. 1000 to 1500 words) giving your responses (positive or negative) and consider why you think I am asking you to read these texts in preparation for a music degree.

Essays should be either handwritten or typed (either 1.5 or double spaced).

Please submit these to Dr Allen via the Lodge on your arrival for Freshers’ Week in October.

I can be contacted by Email (as above) after mid September. In the meantime, enjoy the rest of the vacation.

With all good wishes for your time at Oxford.

Roger Allen