

# Music & Politics

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## Music and Politics on Disc, 2006

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Compiling a list of recordings connected to music and politics is a daunting task, both because of the enormous volume of recorded sound released in a given year, and because of the many possible definitions of “politics” (or, I suppose, of “music”); some impossibly restrictive, others overwhelmingly inclusive. What follows, then, makes no pretense of being a comprehensive list, but is merely a series of suggestions of ways that recordings can preserve and transmit information about the music and politics. I hope that restriction of this edition of the list to Western art music will be accepted as a temporary starting point, rather than as evidence of snobbery. The preponderance of music from the last century and of music connected to war may reflect either the prejudices of the recording industry or the biases of the present writer.

It is too tempting to resist to begin a list of recordings associated with music and public life with a recording of music connected to the putative beginnings of politics as we know it in the Western world. The ensemble Malpomen has released a disc called “Music for an Athenian Symposium” (Harmonia Mundi HMC90 5263).

Perhaps the most obvious category of recording of music connected to politics is that of recordings of works conceived in direct response to political events. This category is potentially larger than it is useful – do we need an annual list of recordings of the Eroica? – but there have been new issues of many such pieces in the past year. Moving roughly in chronological order of the events commemorated through the twentieth century, these include a 2005 live performance of the Britten *War Requiem* with Kurt Masur and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, on the LPO’s own label (LPO LPO0010), Svetlin Roussev’s new version of Karl Amadeus Hartmann’s *Concerto funebre*, a piece whose quotes of Czech and Soviet themes are a subtle protest against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia (Polymnie POL610 434), and another live recording from 2005, the Philadelphia Orchestra’s rendition of Bohuslav Martinů’s *Memorial to Lidice*, which commemorates one of the most tragic events of that occupation (Ondine ODE 1072-5). More recent events have also elicited musical commentary, such as David Del Tredici’s *In Wartime*, a work for wind band in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq that quotes the Persian national anthem and Stirling Newberry’s *In the Year of Storms*, which was inspired by Hurricane Katrina. The Del Tredici has been recorded by Jerry Junkin and the University of Texas, Austin Wind Ensemble (Reference Recordings RR104CD), and the Newberry in an electronic realization of the score, intended for string quartet (Xigenics 634479 187971).

War and imperialism can also be musically reflected in less direct ways. Gerald Francis Cobb’s *Barrack Room Ballads*, which set twenty poems from Kipling’s collection, including “On the Road to Mandalay” (Campion CAMEO2056), the Helios disc, “War’s Embers,” of songs by Browne, Butterworth, Farrar, Finzi, Gurney and Kelly (Helios CDH55237) and a DVD issue of a 1984 English National Opera production of Britten’s Coronation opera *Gloriana* (ArtHaus Musik DVD 102 097) all evoke different aspects of the British Empire. 2006 was also the centenary of Shostakovich’s birth, and the flood of Shostakovich recordings included some that foregrounded the political contexts of his works, most notably a reissue of Valery Gergiev’s recordings of the fourth through ninth symphonies with the Kirov Orchestra, titled “The War Symphonies” (Philips 470 8412PM5) and the associated film by Larry Weinstein, “Shostakovich against Stalin: The War Symphonies,” which features excerpts from different Gergiev performances of those symphonies (Philips DVD 074 3117PH).

Recordings can also be documents for which the political content derives more from the circumstances of the performance than from the works that are performed. There is for instance, nothing obvious political about the program of Chopin and Schubert that John Browning offered on November 22, 1963. That, though, Browning presented the recital mere hours after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, that he added a Bach chorale dedicated to the late president at the beginning of the program and that the recording preserves the sounds of footsteps leaving the silent hall at the applause-less conclusion of the concert makes in a political document, indeed. The print ads for the disc, incidentally, make no mention of Kennedy, but merely give the date of the recital and the following quote, “I have been asked by the Dean, and Dr. Dolmetsch, to go ahead with the recital tonight...” (MSR Classics MS1120). In the case of Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, formed to bring together young Arab and Israeli musicians, any concert has political import, but few more than the one presented at Ramallah, released both on CD (Warner Classics 2564 62791-2) and in a film by Paul Smaczny (Warner Music Vision DVD 2564 62792-2). John Tavener’s *Lament for Jerusalem* was not intended as a statement about recent events, but the December 2004 performances in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem of a reduced version by the Choir of London inevitably place it in a contemporary context (Naxos 8 557826). Moving back to end of the Second World War, a German-language performance of Dvořák’s *Rusalka* was presumably released more because of the circumstances of its production, in Dresden, December 1948 than because of the intrinsic merits of the music document.

Political content can be even more explicit than in works mentioned above. One example would be Mikel Rouse’s “A President Up My Sleeve,” in which the composer digitally inserts

himself as a candidate in CNN's 2004 election coverage (EXITMUSIC Recordings 1007 + DVD). Compositions may also set overtly political texts, like Allen Ginsberg's "Plutonian Ode," which is used in Philip Glass's Sixth Symphony. The symphony has been released in a performance by Dennis Russell Davies and the Bruckner Orchestra Linz, which includes second disc with Ginsberg's recitation dubbed over the symphony (Orange Mountain Music OMM0020). Compositions may also reflect personal or identity politics, such as the compositions of Julius Eastman. A New World CD collects recordings made by the late composer-performer, including "Gay Guerilla," "Crazy Nigger" (both from 1980) and "Evil Nigger" (1979) (New World Records 80638-2).

Opera has made only tangential appearances so far, but could certainly play a far more prominent role. Libretti may be the main source of political import, as is the case for Aulis Sallinen's *The King goes forth to France* (Ondine ODE1066-2D) or Brian Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime*, in which Walter Benjamin meets Hitler, Einstein and Karl (and Groucho) Marx (NMC NMCD123). Or, it may be the production itself that becomes part of public discourse, like Calixto Bieito's scandalous 2001 *Don Giovanni*, now released on a DVD of a Barcelona production (Opus Arte DVD OA0921D).

Finally, to conclude with a crushingly obvious example of political music, in honor of the 2006 World Cup, Deutsche Grammophon rereleased Herbert von Karajan's album of orchestral versions of twenty European national anthems, rounded out with *Nessun Dorma* and the finale of Beethoven's Ninth (DG 477 5957GM).

#### Recordings Cited

"The Anthems Album." BPO, Karajan (DG 477 5957GM)  
Bach, Chopin and Schubert. John Browning (MSR Classics MS1120)  
Britten, *Gloriana*. ENO, Mark Elder (ArtHaus Musik DVD 102 097)  
Britten, *War Requiem*. LPO, Kurt Masur (LPO LPO0010)  
Cobb, "Barrack Room Ballads" (Campion CAMEO2056)  
Del Tredici, *In Wartime*. UT Wind Ensemble, Jerry Junkin (Reference Recordings RR104CD)  
Dvořák, *Rusalka*. Staatskapelle Dresden, Joseph Keilberth (Profil Medien PH06031)  
Eastman, "Unjust Malaise" (New World Records 80638-2)  
Ferneyhough, *Shadowtime* (NMC NMCD123)  
Glass, Symphony No. 6, "Plutonian Ode." Bruckner Orchestra Linz, Dennis Russell Davies (Orange Mountain Music OMM0020)  
Hartmann, *Concerto funebre*. Svetlin Roussev, Auvergne Orchestra, Arie van Beek (Polymnie POL610 434)  
Malpomen, "Music for an Athenian Symposium" (Harmonia Mundi HMC90 5263)  
Martinů, *Memorial to Lidice*. Philadelphia Orchestra, Christoph Eschenbach (Ondine ODE 1072-5)  
Mozart, *Don Giovanni*. Directed by Calixto Bieito (Opus Arte DVD OA0921D)  
Newberry, String Quartet No. 7, *In the Year of Storms* (Xigenics 634479 187971)  
"The Ramallah Concert." West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim (Warner Classics 2564 62791-2)  
"The Ramallah Concert." A film by Paul Smaczny (Warner Music Vision DVD 2564 62792-2)  
Rouse, "Music for Minorities." (EXITMUSIC Recordings 1007 + DVD)  
Sallinen, *The King goes forth to France* (Ondine ODE1066-2D)  
Shostakovich, "The War Symphonies." Kirov Orchestra, Valery Gergiev (Philips 470 8412PM5)  
"Shostakovich against Stalin: The War Symphonies." A film by Larry Weinstein (Philips DVD 074 3117PH)  
Tavener, *Lament for Jerusalem*. London Orchestra, Choir of London, Jeremy Summerly (Naxos 8 557826)  
"War's Embers." Songs by Browne, Butterworth, Farrar, Finzi, Gurney and Kelly (Helios CDH55237)