

[Facing the music: David Lang](#)

From Shostakovich to Stockhausen, and plainchant to Adele and Elvis, Oscar-nominated composer David Lang on the music that inspires him.

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How do you mostly listen to music?

I listen to CDs, in my studio. I try every day to listen to something that I don't know, or that I don't know well enough. And I am a relentless CD buyer – I really like the physical connection between the music and the object that holds the music.



What was the first ever record you bought?

I became a composer because when I was nine I heard a symphony of Shostakovich, so I am pretty sure that the first LP I ever bought on my own was of Shostakovich 9 and Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kije Suite, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. It had happy, dancing women in folk costumes on the cover, I think.

What was the last piece of music you bought?

Well, I didn't buy it but I caused it to be bought for me. I mentioned casually to my wife that I had seen a copy of the LP Trans. by Karlheinz Stockhausen, on Ebay, autographed by the composer, and I reminded her that I had a birthday coming. Surprise! It is sitting on my desk in front of me right now.

If you found yourself with six months free to learn a new instrument, what would you choose?

I would learn more sophisticated ways to build instruments out of software.

Is applauding between movements acceptable?

The word "acceptable" is interesting here. Which of these experiences seems more acceptable: a packed concert hall with thousands of people in it, so excited by classical music that they can't contain their enthusiasm? Or, a hall with a few hundred very

intense listeners and 1,000 empty seats? I have been to both of these concerts and I can tell you the first option is much more acceptable.

What single thing would improve the format of the classical concert?

Music always sounds better with a drink in your hand.

What's been your most memorable live music experience as an audience member?

The first Bang on a Can festival in 1987. Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe and I had worked really hard to put on this 12-hour marathon concert, but we had no idea if, when the time came, people would actually show up. The concert sold out, and it became very emotional for me that we were all packed in together, along with composers John Cage, Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, Milton Babbitt, listening to all this great music. I'd love to sing in the choir at Notre Dame, with Léonin and Pérotin, in Paris, at the start of the 13th century.

We're giving you a time machine: what period, or moment in musical history, would you travel to and why?

I would love to sing in the choir at Notre Dame cathedral, with Léonin and Pérotin, in Paris, at the start of the 13th century. Imagine being there at that moment, when all those sweaty monks in their scratchy wool robes started adding patterns and imitation to Gregorian chant. What were they thinking?

Do you enjoy musicals? Do you have a favourite?

I love musicals, especially the ones that profess to be more serious than just people falling in love and dancing. When our children were young we watched a dvd of West Side Story every Sunday with them probably for two or three years. They know all the songs and the lines and the choreography by heart. One of my favourite musical-like experiences is The Gospel at Colonus, by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson, which tells the story of Oedipus as if it is being preached in an African American church. Really powerful, and with great tunes.

Which conductor or performer of yester-year do you most wish you could have worked with?

When I was young I fell in love with a recording of Die Schöne Müllerin, sung by the great German tenor Fritz Wunderlich, who, like Schubert, died tragically young. I hear his buttery voice in my head sometimes when I am writing vocal music. It would have been fun to make something for him.

What is the best new piece written in the past 50 years?

50 years is a long time! For me it has to be either Glass's Einstein on the Beach or Reich's Music for 18 Musicians. I can't pick.

Which non-classical musician would you love to work with?

Adele.

Imagine you're a festival director here in London with unlimited resources. What would you programme – or commission – for your opening event?

English music, of course.

What do you sing in the shower?

For years I would sing I'm gonna make you love me by The Temptations, because it has the line "I'm gonna shower" in it. I was single then.

It's late, you've had a few beers, you're in a Karaoke bar. What do you choose to sing?

I don't do karaoke. I did it once – I sang Elvis's version of Unchained Melody. I practiced in front of a mirror for weeks before so I wouldn't forget the lines, so my hand and body motions would be properly considered, and so that I would have a rendition that was true to the original and at the same time had something of me in it. I thought the performance went very well. A friend recorded it on his phone and I was shocked to see how idiotic I looked, and to hear how badly I sang. I guess if I had a year to prepare I might consider trying it again.

David Lang composed the score for Paolo Sorrentino's Youth, released in the UK on 29 January. His Simple Song #3 has been Oscar nominated for Best Original Song.