

THE VINYL ENIGMA

By Robert Love

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PART I

THE DISCOVERY

Chapter One

Have I really chosen this strange journey for nearly a decade, or has it been forced upon me by powers I cannot imagine? I am compelled now to pen a brief account, regardless of how others may judge my sanity.

I live alone in London's Chelsea district, occupying a moderate-sized apartment with a partial view of the Thames River (partial enough to bring about a much higher rent). I work part-time in a music-publishing firm, which provides basic sustenance. Prior to this, I studied music at Juilliard (focusing on cello, and later composition), and once held a position in the London Symphony Orchestra as first cellist.

In May of 1989, I traveled to Leningrad with the LSO as part of a rare tour of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was a time of remarkable thaw, politically and weather-wise, and I often had the liberty of roaming the streets without escort. I even heard rumors of the city being renamed to its original Saint Petersburg. One chilly evening, I left Shostakovich Hall and strolled past Arts Square with its statue of Pushkin, eventually reaching an old, narrow street with a small record/book store tucked under the first level of a crumbling apartment building. After I'd entered and browsed through stacks of Soviet-era recordings, the owner appeared – a small, thin fellow with scrambled gray hair and long, slender fingers, which suggested the hands of a musician.

To my surprise, he began a conversation in English. "I saw you play last night, and enjoyed your interpretation of the controversial Shostakovich Fourth Symphony. It was presented as nicely as our own orchestras did in the sixties."

"Well, thank you very much," I said, humbly impressed with his historical perspective. "I'm fond of twentieth century Russian composers, and I'd like to purchase this collection of Prokofiev piano sonatas."

The owner nodded, but then seemed distracted by a flash of intense thought. He tugged slightly on my sleeve and motioned

toward a back exit. I followed him along a dimly lit, tunnel-like hallway, which looked disproportionately long for the building. His words echoed off the hard, plaster walls as we walked. "I have a very special item that may interest you." Soon we entered a storage room cluttered with a variety of dusty containers and books. I wondered if I was the first foreigner to stand there.

With trembling hands (from age or anxiety?), the old man handed over a thin cardboard box labeled in Russian: *Classical Music*. I carefully pulled out the standard-sized LP phonograph record and scrutinized it for obvious defects, as I always did before purchasing. It appeared perfectly round, yet the disc's thickness was difficult to assess by touch, which I blamed on the stiffness in my hands after the cold walk outside. The black surface had a strange, featureless character, but I dismissed the perception as a consequence of poor lighting in the room. At least the album had no obvious scratches, nicks, or breaks. Out of sheer curiosity, and because of the low price he was offering (perhaps too enthusiastically), I included this item with the sonatas and paid the owner.

As I exited into the crisp night air, he stood in the doorway and shouted one last comment. "Would you believe that I played violin with the Moscow Philharmonic in 1961 at the Fourth Symphony's world premiere under Kondrashin? Perhaps one day you will hear that performance." I made a mental note to check on any documentation of the event.

I didn't examine these purchases again until I returned to my flat in London the following week. As I mounted the generic record on my turntable for the first time, I noticed an absence of two things: a sheen normally arising from multiple grooves, and rings indicating separation between tracks. Therefore, I placed the tonearm down somewhere near the middle. The total silence that followed was surprising, given the unlikelihood of randomly finding a break between movements. Also odd was the lack of background noise typical of vinyl records.

Suddenly a confusing mixture of sounds greeted me; not quite music, but more like rapids in a large river. This transformed

quickly into a series of identifiable, though extremely short, pieces of music in many styles. Occasionally I could pick out bits of classical music. Then, silence again.

I was beginning to view the disc as a practical joke when orchestral music emerged. It was a symphony, starting from the beginning, which I recognized as a work by Haydn. The performance and recording quality were so impressive that I sat transfixed in my chair, listening to the entire piece. The lack of any text accompanying the LP made it impossible to identify the orchestra, location, or conductor with any certainty.

Immediately afterward, I tried to reseat the needle in the same position, but a different selection emerged – a Mozart violin concerto from the same time period; again starting from the beginning. Driven by sudden exhilaration, I moved the needle close to the record's end (near the center), and heard contemporary performances by composers like Steve Reich and John Adams. Moving the needle to the start (outer edge) gave early Renaissance music, not all of which I could identify, but which had apparently been performed in large cathedrals with distinctive reverberation.

After many weeks of trials, it was clear that the record contained an unknowably large number of performances of “Western” classical music, in roughly chronological order. The selection to arise was unpredictable, except for approximately the time period in which it was written, and ranged from solo instruments and quartets to concertos and operas. To the best of my memory, I never heard the same performance twice, no matter how accurately I tried to return the tonearm to its original position. Thus, each listening event became a unique moment in time, not to be interrupted unless its permanent “loss” was acceptable.

An equally disturbing observation was that the tonearm, once in play, never advanced noticeably in a radial direction across the record, even with very long pieces such as an opera. Nor could I see the small needle itself riding on the disc; instead it seemed to

become enveloped in the ill-defined black surface, as if dipping into a pool of smooth, black tar.

Occasionally, I had an acquaintance drop by for dinner, and played some “background music” from the record, to exclude the possibility of auditory hallucinations. On these visits, I didn’t reveal the disc’s extraordinary nature. With audiophile friends, who might intuitively recognize and question the continuous playback of a long piece from the single side of an album, I allowed only short works to reach completion.

In the beginning, I naturally assumed I was hearing performances from the previous fifty years or so, during which time reasonable quality recording equipment was available. After several months I was less sure, and began to ponder the unthinkable; that with this record I might (eventually) hear all performances ever given of any composition, including events that were centuries old.

Each day brought new questions. Would this album include even rehearsals, or performances at small venues in someone’s home (e.g., Chopin playing in the salons of Paris)? After several years of intense scrutiny, such diversity seemed unlikely, since I always detected some audience noise, and the acoustic character (ambience, echoes) always suggested a sizeable room. I concluded I was consistently hearing live, formal performances in large halls with significant attendance (even during solo instrument recitals).

Nevertheless, the number of events available for playback seemed exceedingly large. I was comforted only by the logic that the total number of performances must be finite. I often found myself asking: Is the disc an advanced storage device, or some kind of time portal linked to specific musical events? Why (thus far) does it offer only performances involving larger venues with audiences? Is this related to some necessary critical mass of listeners forming a “collective consciousness,” if such a thing exists?

In any case, the seeming impossibility of a vinyl record encoding so much information was soon forgotten as the wonderful presentations filled my modest living room. I eventually adjusted

my daily schedule to revolve around playback, and didn't initiate any session without adequate preparation for listening to its entirety. All my attempts to document playback using magnetic tape mysteriously failed. Each event was like viewing a magnificent sunset – never to be repeated. In short, I became obsessed with the disc.

The uniqueness of each experience led to a number of frustrating moments; for example, during an electrical storm when power was interrupted and the stereo system shut down during an exciting version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I also vividly recall one instance during the second year, when an enchanting rendition of Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde was underway. It featured a soprano's voice more beautiful than any I had heard before, yet I chose to walk away and sleep, since I was tired and had concerns over business matters. Of course, I was never able to locate this piece again, and deeply regretted the decision for months, as if I had passed up a perfect opportunity to make love with someone I desired greatly and who was in my presence for only one night.

Several incidents besides the Record (as I have come to call it) have influenced my routine over the last decade, yet these have always seemed trivial compared with the disc's impact. Not long after my return from Russia, I broke off an engagement with a woman (a fellow musician) whom I had known for several years. A car accident in 1993 ended my professional career with the orchestra because of nerve damage to my left arm, although the limb remained functional for everyday activities. An unforeseen family inheritance in the mid-nineties permitted me to end full-time work at my firm and devote more attention to the Record, and thus better chronicle each listening session. All of this only fueled my growing isolation. Eventually, I yearned for a sign that my "duty" (if that is the appropriate word) toward study of the Record had expired.

One intriguing prospect emerged this week. I heard a performance of Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony, almost certainly under Kondrashin and perhaps the 1961 live world premiere, but

not the first taped recording from 1962 (the album of which I own). If correct, then I have witnessed what the Leningrad shop owner referred to long ago. Unfortunately, no further information from that source is now possible. In 1997, I traveled back to St. Petersburg and conducted a futile search for the store. Not surprisingly, the entire block had been converted into modern housing units, and the shop was gone. The old man's whereabouts were unknown to local residents.

At this point, it seems inappropriate, perhaps even perilous, to hand over the disc for objective scrutiny such as scientific analysis at a university or museum. I fear I have become a confidential guardian of something sacred, like a successor in a long chain of ancient priests assigned to oversee and pass along a holy relic. Perhaps I was indeed "chosen" by the Leningrad musician, who may have been the previous "keeper" (and may have studied the disc for a longer period than myself). Should I now seek the most promising apprentice for scholarship?

In the last couple of years, my thoughts have evolved toward an even higher level of speculation: Could the Record's music be a manifestation of some profound message? Thoreau wrote, "Music is the sound of universal laws promulgated." Perhaps the selections available are a code, waiting to be deciphered for the delivery of some incredible revelation to humankind (or at least to musicians!). This hypothesis leads to even greater anxiety regarding the disc's fate. I may have a unique opportunity in the history of civilization to unlock a momentous secret, if only I have the patience to continue listening. But for how long? And for what, exactly?

The uniqueness of each event on the Record, the regret of lost listening opportunities, and the sacrifices required to listen patiently, all mirror aspects of everyday life, yet they lack one simple and critical component: sharing the experience with others. There is a loneliness I have ignored almost completely over the past decade. This is the revelation for me – the need for human interaction. I must now part with the disc and return to the world I

knew before, even at the risk of abandoning some insight hidden within.

Therefore, I have packaged the Record with great care. My plan has been made and I have contacted the appropriate people to help accomplish the final steps. Soon I'll be free of this miracle and curse, and shall begin the slow, painful, but necessary process of putting my life back together.

*Nigel Thompson
London, 1998*

Addendum: It is now the summer of 2000, and the "London Eye" has become a fixture on the horizon. To me, this magnificent Ferris wheel, with its endless, circular route, symbolizes the Record and its boundless potential. Yet I believe the Record embodies something far beyond our ability to comprehend at this time. Furthermore, the task of finding the proper heir has been daunting, and the responsibility on my part overwhelming, given the burden that ownership would place on a friend or colleague.

It was thus my decision last year to bury the Record beneath this glorious symbol, until at a later point in history it can be uncovered and relished as an archeological treasure. I recruited a friend who was an engineer on the Eye project, and who had access to the large pit dug for the foundation. I obtained a strong steel box to enclose and protect the Record. On the night before the first of many layers of concrete was poured, I instructed my friend to place the container at the bottom of the pit. I am confident that some future technology will allow detection of an odd metal object embedded deep beneath the Eye, just as the pyramids of Egypt are scanned today for inner chambers.

Meanwhile, I return to my intended role in the present – namely, efforts at musical composition. As Mahler stated, "To write a symphony is to construct a world." Through my scores, I hope to create emotional worlds for all, and if I am fortunate, a few performances of my work will be immortalized on the Record, for the ears of a distant generation.