

Client: Chatto and Windus
Source: The Sunday Times (Culture)
Date: 13 January 2013
Page: 34
Reach: 914685
Size: 358cm2
Value: 17413.12

Tuned in and turned on

From ancient bird-bone flutes to the real birthplace of blues, composer **Howard Goodall** conducts a zippy tour through some 45 millennia of music

CHRISTOPHER HART

THE STORY OF MUSIC

by HOWARD GOODALL

Chatto £20/ebook £20.87 pp359

The oldest known musical instrument is a bird-bone flute from around 42,000BC, found last year in Germany, while the oldest extant recording of tribal music is of some Passamaquoddy Indians in Maine in 1889. Full of such entertaining Classic FM-style snippets, Howard Goodall's *The Story of Music* is a lively zip through some 45 millennia, with the author determinedly jumping back and forth between classical, folk and pop. Goodall, a composer of choral music as well as stage musicals and television scores, well understands — as did Bartok, Dvorak et al — that classical music remains alive only through regular transfusions from its folk roots.

Goodall is a populariser rather than a dumber-down, never assuming his readers are stupid, and he is soon leading us confidently through dominants and tonics, fourths, fifths, major and minor thirds, expecting us, quite reasonably, to keep up. None of these basics is hard, and all are essential for grasping how music works. Stopping briefly at ancient Greek drama, he takes us reverentially through Gregorian chant to the first stirrings of modern harmony in Hildegard of Bingen. (The crucial triad, the three-note chord, was developed by a 15th-century Englishman, John Dunstaple, a name new to me.) Then it's on through the "perfectly calibrated whirring and spinning of cogs" represented by baroque music, the fruitful idea of the symphony as a journey, and the complex legacy of Beethoven, after whom the Wagners and Berliozes began to consider themselves not just composers but Legislators and Leaders of Mankind.

Desperate not to be judgmental, and always egalitarian, Goodall compares Josquin des Prez's "melismatic" style to that of Mariah Carey. We also get Rihanna and Adele (the latter compared to Schubert), but no mention of Allegri or Gesualdo, Tavener or Taverner, Weber or Webern. But then Goodall writes excellently and at length on Liszt, pointing out that the "immortal" Tristan chord, as Wagner bores call it, is really a plain diminished

chord, frequently used by Liszt before Wagner began promoting himself.

There are some minor errors: spellings such as "cross-pollenating", dating Attila the Hun's final defeat to AD415 (it was 451), and writing that Catherine de Medici wore the "world's first high-heeled shoes". The transvestite boy-emperor of Rome, Elagabalus, liked his stilettos, too, as did the more fashionable ancient Egyptians.

Goodall has a strong "music for pleasure" aesthetic, and though I'm not convinced Mozart wrote exclusively to "make us feel good", he is surely right that atonalism has produced "not one piece of music in 100 years' worth of effort that a normal person could understand or enjoy". More riskily, he points out that blues, far from being quintessentially African, is rooted as much or more in Anglo-Celtic folk music, with its pentatonic scales (the black notes on the piano) and 12-bar form, traceable to 17th-century folk songs such as *Pretty Polly*. Saying this on some American campuses nowadays could get you silenced for life.

The revolution in modern music, he further points out, wasn't atonalism, jazz or Boulez, but sound recording. Recorded music means vastly greater accessibility, but also passive consumption, not active creation, singing, fiddling or tooting, however amateurish. It has changed everything, making music ubiquitous, hugely commercial-



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ised, incessantly piped; and this floodtide of noise necessitates extreme and constant judiciousness about what you give your time to.

One glaring oddity is Goodall's attitude to religion, especially Catholicism. He writes sensitively about Bach, reminding us more than once that he composed not for the sake of art but for the love of God, yet Goodall sounds like the prissiest of secularists when he complains that carols that not only celebrate Christ's birth but also foreshadow his death are "rather morbid". And when he writes that the Spanish conquest of the Americas cost the lives of up to 20m Aztecs, and terms it "religion-endorsed slaughter", he makes it sound as if it was specifically ordered by the Vatican. How does this fit with the vehement protests of Dominican fathers such as Antonio de Montesinos, Francisco de Vitoria, "the father of international law", or the Laws of Burgos? The Story of Music is soon to be a "major new television series", as they say, on BBC2. I'm sure Goodall will feel at home there.



Popular touch: Howard Goodall

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