

Music that changed me

Robert Fripp

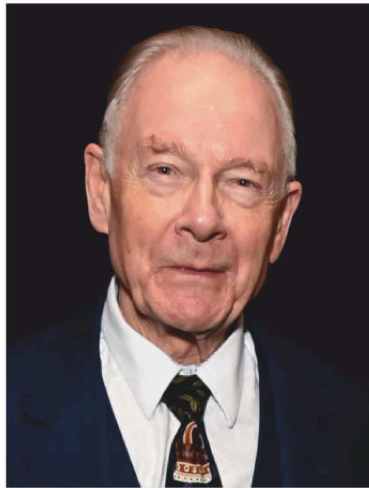
Guitarist

Robert Fripp is the guitarist and producer who founded King Crimson, one of progressive rock's most influential bands. He has worked with Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel, David Bowie and Blondie, developed the Guitar Craft music programme and, through his association with the Gurdjieff Movements, supports the Thomas de Hartmann Project, recording the work of the little-known Ukrainian composer. Hartmann's opera *Esther* is released on the Pentatone label in April.

I didn't choose the guitar – it chose me. On 24 December 1957, my mother and I went to Bournemouth, and though she'd already bought my Christmas presents, I suddenly announced that I wanted a guitar. Maybe Elvis Presley's guitarist Scotty Moore was speaking to me, or I felt the power of Chuck Berry, but as an 11 year-old I was tone deaf and had no sense of rhythm, so to pick up an instrument seemed strange. Within three months I knew that the guitar was my life, but at the same time I knew my life was to go into estate agency and my father's firm, so this was profoundly irrational. These two different directions culminated in a dilemma at age 20 to 21, when I was accepted for university.

At grammar school, my music education had included classical composers such as Stravinsky and Wagner, but it was **BARTÓK** string quartets that changed my life. I could not understand where this music was coming from. Then I had an epiphany – I realised that music is one, but speaks through many different voices and dialects. If we confined my musical listening to 'conservatory' music, it would all begin after 1893 with the opening bars of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. But there is something about **BEETHOVEN**'s later string quartets, the 12th in particular, with a movement that flies into space. It's the universality of this music that reaches out and whispers in our ear, and we listen.

In 1968 I was a founder member of King Crimson and our debut album,



'I knew the guitar was my life, but I was meant to join my father's firm'

In the Court of the Crimson King, came out in 1969. At the time we were considered part of so-called underground rock, which shortly after became progressive rock and since the 1980s has been termed prog rock, a term that I singularly dislike. It's said that part of progressive rock was an influence from conservatory-derived music. Within King Crimson, although all the musicians were narrowly defined as rock musicians, their listening was very broad, particularly Ian McDonald, whose background was in an army band. **HOLST**'s 'Mars, the Bringer of War' was part of our set and I remember hearing it for the first time as a nine year-old in the TV series of *Quatermass*.

World music and minimalism then became part of my active musical life. I went on retreat in 1975-76 and moved to New York in 1977, which was an extraordinary period for music in the

city. I was able to see Meredith Monk in a Soho loft, the Merce Cunningham dance company with John Cage, and Philip Glass performances. I was at the Bottom Line seeing **STEVE REICH** close up, doing *Clapping* with his ensemble.

I moved back to England in 1980 and resumed work with a touring band called League of Gentlemen, then, in 1981, King Crimson went back on the road. In 1984, struck once again by the madness of it all, I went into retreat in the Claymont Center in West Virginia. The Claymont Society for Continuous Education asked me to give a guitar seminar, and that was the beginning of the Guitar Craft seminar programme, conducted mainly on acoustic guitars, which continues to this day.

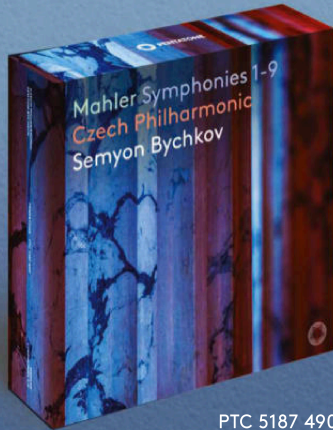
By 2000, travelling constantly, I found I was missing Englishness and my wife, Toyah Willcox, so I deepened my listening to English composers. If you're away from home in an American shopping mall, **FINZI**'s *Romance in E flat*, or Vaughan Williams's *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus* are so evocative of our landscape and culture.

THOMAS DE HARTMANN (1884-1956) was a Ukrainian-born composer who until recently had been airbrushed from history. I'd been introduced to his music through the Gurdjieff Movements in London in 1974. From 2006 we began the Thomas de Hartmann Project to bring the work into public view. There are now recordings of the Piano Concerto (Elan Sicroff), Cello Concerto (Matt Haimovitz), Violin Concerto (Joshua Bell), and in April Kirill Karabits and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra release his 1940s opera *Esther*.

I've listened a lot to **PHILIP CASHIAN**, professor at the Royal Academy of Music, who invited me to speak with his students. I said to him, 'What I like about your music is that it swings. There's a lilt to it.' I wasn't surprised to hear that he listens to a lot of jazz. His works for Spanish guitar are the only guitar music that has sparked my interest in 40 years, and I recommend watching Kevin Loh playing Cashian's *Spoor* on YouTube. 🎧 *Interview by Amanda Holloway*

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