

Robert Philip – A Little History of Music

Edinburgh author Robert Philip's latest book is published on 11 April 2023. A Little History of Music is part of the Yale University Press series and follows the adopted format of 40 chapters of around 2,000 words each.

Robert explained: "The book is aimed at people who know little or nothing about the subject. The original book, Ernst Gombrich's Little History of the World was written for, I think, a 17-year-old. And he wrote it when he was a research student in some incredibly short time back in the 1930s. And that was the model on which the series was based with it's 40 Little chapters at 2000 words each. So it's meant to be really accessible to everybody."

The Edinburgh Reporter sat down with Robert at his home and his wife, concert pianist, Susan Tomes delighted us by playing some Robert Schumann from Bunte Blätter (and all the while pointing out that she had not even warmed up beforehand!). Listen to this episode of our podcast here, or read the article below.

Robert will talk about his book at Topping & Company 2 Blenheim Place EH7 5JH on 12 April at 7.30pm.

<https://www.toppingbooks.co.uk/events/edinburgh/robert-philip-2023/>

You can listen to the podcast [here](#).

ROBERT PHILIP

A LITTLE
HISTORY



MUSIC



'A joy to read, whether you are musically expert or
don't know your opera from your hip-hop.'

John Rutter

We began by asking how he started on the book with such a lot of material to cover.

Robert said: "Well the first thing I did was to decide that I had to do this, because when I was a music student back in the 1960s, at first at college, then University, if you picked up a history of music, it would just be the history of Western classical music.

"There might be an occasional nod to other cultures, but basically, that was all we learned about. I learned classical instruments played classical music. Of course, you know, on the side we got interested in jazz and pop music as it developed, but we weren't trained in anything but classical music. And we weren't trained to know about other music.

"Now, it seemed to me, when there's this whole situation we are now in, where we're questioning all our pasts, our relationship with other cultures, all the issues of slavery, colonisation, and all that stuff, you can't I think, call a book, a "Little History of Music" and just write about Western music, let alone just about Western classical music. So I decided to try and do everything, which is ridiculous in a tiny book like this, but I thought I'd try.

"I tried to start at the beginning, basically, in the womb, with, you know, the sound of our mother's heartbeat, the sound of our mother's breathing, these two, you know, rising and falling... Because we're exposed to that for months, it's hardly surprising that we're born with – or most people are born with – some sort of sense of rhythm.

"And then, you know, the way mothers and others talk to their babies in an exaggerated baby way? Well, "there's a clever boy, where's granny?" This baby talk is not just a sort of Western thing. All cultures in the world, pretty much, have some sort of version of this. It seems natural to sort of sing to your baby. The baby instinctively understands – they don't understand the words of course, but this intonation and the sort of emotion behind it, the baby responds to, so those origins of rhythm and melody and singing seem to me two basic

things that one can start with.”

Robert really did go all the way back in history first explaining about Neanderthal bone flutes and how these are evidenced in cave paintings.

He continued: “The earliest possible evidence for early music making – of course, there isn’t evidence for the earliest music making nothing’s recorded -but you do get very early cave paintings of people dancing, clapping, and playing astonishingly ancient instruments, sort of bone flutes. There’s some from Germany, I think it was 40,000 years old and then a bit later, there are lots of bone flutes from China, which are still playable. So you can get an idea of the sort of scales that they were using and so on, on these instruments. So I start with very ancient music-making and then having covered a bit of that I then tried to go through the major cultures, musical cultures of the world before getting on to European familiar Western things.”

We asked him about the influence of the church on music, and there is a chapter on Chanting in the Church and Singing in the Streets.

He replied: “Well, it’s certainly very, very influential. As soon as Christianity got going and spread to Europe, one of the things that would happen – Christianity obviously was based in the Jewish faith, and Jewish chanting would have been what Christ and His disciples would have known.

“But as soon as the church, the Christian church became established as a separate thing, they wished to sort of separate themselves from this Jewish tradition, more and more. And one of the ways they did this was to establish their own way of chanting. And one of the interesting things is that as soon as the church became a sort of established, well, as soon as it became an establishment, with its hierarchies, and so on, it wanted to control the way people did things in all

sorts of ways. And they wished to control how people chanted, and the Pope in Rome would send out emissaries to different countries, to teach them how to chant in the Roman way. Now, if you imagine trying to do this, in the days before music was written down before any notation, it's an impossible task.

"You can imagine, you can't have a fixed chant, if it's just a memory, and everything is by ear. But then, around the ninth or tenth century, you get notation developing in sophisticated ways. So then the pitches are determined, at this point, then you can have fixed chants. And these chants were circulated in this written form, and this was the way you were supposed to do it. And that's why we've got this repertoire of Gregorian chants that persists to this day."

This three year project coincided time wise with much of the time spent in lockdown over the past three years, and so research in libraries was impossible. But Robert had that covered.

He said: "Well, I have a secret to reveal, which is that we all have tens of thousands of research assistants. And they are online. Now, of course, the internet is a very dangerous place, there's lots of rubbish. There's lots of stuff that looks so authoritative because you see it stated dozens of times and different sites.

"But very often, this just derives from one source and it can be wrong. So you have to check all the time. But online, there are available scholarly articles. One source I found tremendously useful for getting a grip on what people talk about in music history now, particularly in different cultures, and in pop music, all these areas that I didn't know that much about – one source is conference papers, You get abstracts of conference papers of ethnomusicologists, music colleges of all sorts. And you can very quickly get an idea of what people are talking about, what are the current research topics? What are the views about how people talk about

different aspects of music history.”

Of course this makes little reference to his own knowledge, which is vast, as his career began with a degree at university, followed by a career with the Open University, as arts producer with the BBC and the World Service.

But being locked down and having a book to write was really no hardship for him.

Robert said: “I felt very, very privileged because I was asked to put in a proposal for this book about six months before the first lockdown. And so by the time we were locked down, I was actually working on the book knowing that I was going to write it.”

And of course we had to ask what he might be writing next.

He replied: “Well as you can imagine, I’ve got a huge amount of material that I couldn’t cram into the book so I’m trying to sort of work up an idea for a book on what you might call the themes of music, how music is made, making music, not historical, but just thinking about all the different ways in which people make music and what the implications are on how it all works.”

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