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IDEAS

An orgy of musical sustenance at WHRB

Harvard's radio station has been my go-to listen for decades, and never more so than during its glorious 'Orgies.'

By **Megan Marshall** Updated December 5, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



WHRB "Hillbilly at Harvard" host "Cousin Lynn" Joiner introduced the next song during his 9 am to 1pm Saturday time slot in 2003. DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

It's [Orgy season](#) again! As listeners of WHRB, 95.3 FM, may know, Harvard's student-run radio station offers orgies of the musical kind during the two-week period at the end of each semester. While students study for finals and write term papers, "WHRBies" —

pronounced “Werbies” — as the student DJs call themselves, do their best to soothe their stressed-out schoolmates with extensive playlists devoted to an eclectic variety of musical subjects, anchored by generous samplings of a particular classical composer’s work.

According to station lore, the Orgy, Harvard’s trademarked name for the play-a-thons, began in 1943, when a frazzled WHRB staffer took refuge at the station after a rough exam and spun all nine Beethoven symphonies in a row, flipping the 78s like so many shellac-resin pancakes. I’ll never forget my first — an all-Chopin affair that must have been in 1999, the 150th anniversary of the composer’s death from tuberculosis at age 39.

When I tuned in, WHRB was playing every Chopin piece in chronological order, amounting to an aural biography of the Romantic-era virtuoso pianist. I stayed up until midnight, listening on the kitchen Bose Wave, to hear the last composition, “Mazurka Op. 68, No. 4, posthumous,” a piano piece in the Polish waltz style that Chopin favored in his French self-exile. The simple melody wove among strange harmonies from minor to major and back again for a little over 90 seconds, and then went silent. I was in tears.



Sheet music for a Chopin nocturne. GUILLAUME SUEUR/ADOBE

Now the centennial of Giacomo Puccini's death has already brought two six-hour blocks of arias, overtures, and full operas, with one more to come tomorrow. All of it preceded by a six-hour Leonard Cohen Orgy as counterbalance to the soaring lines of Callas and her sister sopranos. I wish the "Word Chain" Orgy ("Imagine a word chain of song titles, each new song title beginning with the last word of the previous song title") hadn't been scheduled for 1 a.m. on a Thursday. Too early in the morning — or too late on a work night — for me. Before the season ends on Dec. 17, I'm looking forward to Native American composers, Bruce Springsteen, and the Boston Six, a sextet of composers active a generation before the better-known Parisian Les Six, who merited an Orgy in 2021, the centennial of their first productive year.

I never listened to WHRB — or any other station — when I was in college. I was on full scholarship, and I had no money for extras like a radio, let alone a stereo system with a top-of-the-line tuner, amplifier, turntable, and perfectly balanced AR speakers like the

ones in many of my classmates' rooms. But it was more than that. I was a passionate amateur pianist, and I believed I could make all the music I wanted to hear on the college's practice pianos or in dormitory living rooms playing chamber music with friends.

As an English major, I couldn't count music lessons toward course work, so each year I made an appointment to ask Radcliffe President Matina Horner for funding from an arts budget to cover my extracurricular piano lessons — first with a grand dame of the keyboard, sequestered in a Brookline Village high rise, who claimed a pedagogical line of descent from the great Polish pianist Theodor Leschetizky; then in the far funkier Cambridge home of Patricia Zander, a mesmerizing presence who was also Yo-Yo Ma's accompanist. It felt like begging, but I needed those lessons the same way, over the years, I've come to need WHRB: as musical sustenance, an education for no purpose except pleasure.

By my 30s, motherhood and the pursuit of a writing career had banished music-making from my calendar, except for my daughters' Suzuki violin recitals, where I supplied piano accompaniment. I was driving the girls and their friends all over Greater Boston on afternoons and weekends to sports practices and games, orchestra rehearsals and concerts. The car radio became a haven, one the kids I was ferrying mercifully didn't begrudge me, though none of them was willing to play "guess the composer" as I had with my mom on car rides in my California childhood, listening to L.A.'s commercial all-classical station, KFAC. Tuning in mid-symphony or -concerto, we'd try to figure out from orchestration, rhythm, and dynamics who'd written the piece, and then wait for the announcer to crush or vindicate our hypotheses when the music came to an end. Complex counterpoint? Bach. Crashing chords? Beethoven maybe, or Brahms. My mom, who'd gone to college as a music major, usually guessed right.

In music-rich Boston in the late '80s and '90s, there were two good choices: WGBH (now folded into the once terminally bland WCRB), which played classical music all day until the afternoon news programs came on; and WHRB for afternoons and evenings, my peak

chauffeur hours. It was then I began to notice how unguessable much of WHRB's programming was (still is). Rarely did I hear the same piece twice, and if it was Bach, it wasn't the Brandenburgs but rather partitas for the keyboard or solo cello suites. WHRB's student DJs might cue up Brahms's magisterial piano quintet or his heartrending "Four Serious Songs" (which I heard last year for the first time) but almost never his hackneyed "Hungarian Dance No. 5."

On Saturday mornings I tuned in to "Hillbilly at Harvard," four hours of bluegrass, Cajun, and country music hosted by a duo of alums: "Cousin Lynn" Joiner, then the director of Northeastern Records, and Brian "Ol' Sinc" Sinclair, a graduate of North Quincy High who'd ditched his linguistics PhD to work as a data manager at Harvard and remained "the soul" of the show until his death from leukemia in 2003. I might be driving to Cambridge to drop my daughters at the Longy School of Music to rehearse Mozart and Mendelssohn, but I liked catching the occasional cowboy song familiar from grade school and, better yet, opening my mind to a world of music I'd never heard before: Bill Monroe, The Oak Ridge Boys, Garth Brooks, Emmy Lou Harris, Alison Krauss, Patty Loveless.

In the fall, Saturday morning jamborees gave way to Harvard football, sometimes heralded by Bobby Bare's "Drop Kick Me Jesus (Through the Goalposts of Life)": "I've got the will, Lord, if you've got the toe." I rarely hung on for the Church of the Crossbar, but on early Sunday mornings in winter I listened to The Blues Hangover while driving an hour to West Bridgewater for indoor soccer, my goalkeeper daughter snoozing in the back seat. I liked pretending I'd had a late night and needed 'HRB's hair-of-the-dog in the mournful lyrics of Muddy Waters, Lead Belly, Bessie Smith, and B.B. King: "Nobody Loves Me But My Mother."



Michael Haggerty, then a jazz DJ at WHRB, interviewed jazz artist Ron Carter in 2000. FRANK O'BRIEN/GLOBE STAFF

By 2009, the kids mostly grown, I was commuting to a new teaching job at Emerson College when I discovered WHRB's weekday morning show, *The Jazz Spectrum*, and the remarkable fact that the station's main transmitter, perched atop One Financial, emitted a signal so powerful I could stick with whatever tune I was enjoying on the drive in all the way down to the lower level of the Boston Common Parking Garage. I'd often idled in my driveway at home until the end of a sonata or symphony. Who could stop listening to a *Jazz Spectrum* set like the one I heard recently, all ballads sung by Betty Carter, Carmen McRae, Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald, and an artist new to me, Samara Joy?

Now I had time to become an opera fan while grading papers on post-football Saturday afternoons, thanks to WHRB's Metropolitan Opera live broadcasts, and to take in Tom Waits, Etta James, and Charles Aznavour Orgies as they came around. I fell hard for Aznavour's wistful "Hier Encore," a French existentialist's "My Way." The ["Pilipino Music" Orgy](#), vividly narrated by then-college junior Jeromel Dela Rosa Lara, told "the

story of the Filipino community, which has experienced colonialism, dictatorship, fetishization, and racism” through a wide-ranging musical catalog. No Spotify algorithm or iPod Shuffle could ever have given me these happy surprises, this important learning.

Living alone since the death of my partner five years ago and hiding out lately from the news, I’m tuned to WHRB pretty much 24/7 these days, ever more grateful for the contagious — orgiastic! — enthusiasm of the station’s young DJs. I’ve discovered that WHRBies do have some recurring favorites, but they aren’t Ravel’s “Bolero” or Handel’s “Water Music.” Instead: Philip Glass’s violin concerto, Einojuhani Rautavaara’s “Cantus Arcticus: Concerto for Birds and Orchestra,” and, on the jazz side, Nina Simone’s “Don’t Smoke in Bed.” I’ve also found time to turn off the radio and sit down at the piano to play pieces I’d never have known without WHRB — “Fleurs de France” by Germaine Tailleferre, a winsome early modernist suite I picked up from the 2021 *Les Six Orgy*; that haunting last mazurka of Chopin’s.

The piano I play is my grandparents’ Steinway, the one I played in the crowded living room of their Altadena bungalow after Sunday dinners as a child. Yet on those rare occasions when my native California calls out to me, I envision driving the 5 or the 210 without WHRB playing on my car radio. It’s then I know where home is.

Megan Marshall’s essay collection, “After Lives: On Biography and the Mysteries of the Human Heart,” will be published in February.

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