

WQXR Blog

11 Conductors Choose Their Pieces of a Lifetime



Sep 25, 2018 · by [James Bennett, II](#) and [Max Fine](#)

Some may argue that “impossible questions” are futile exercises — after all, what’s the point in wondering circumstances that in all likelihood will never be made reality?

That’s a fair argument, but that’s not exactly a “fun” way of moving through life and assessing those myriad things that bring you joy and happiness. Which is why we asked a handful of conductors to share with us the one piece they would

choose if they could only conduct that music for the rest of their lives. Here's what they said.

Leon Botstein: American Symphony Orchestra



Conductor Leon Botstein (Matt Dine)

The work I would wish to conduct for the rest of my life would be

the Eroica Symphony of Beethoven, No. 3 in E-Flat Major, Op. 55, from 1804–

1805. It has drama, intimacy, grandeur and urgency. It is capable of many varied

approaches and, particularly in the first and last movements, it reveals the power

and potential of ideas in music and how thinking and storytelling through music can be achieved without words and images.

James Conlon: LA Opera, RAI National Symphony Orchestra



Conductor James Conlon (Michele Rutigliano)

*Impossible to decide, but if I had to, I would choose *The Ring of the Nibelungen*.*

When steeped in his music, Wagner is the one composer who makes me forget that any other music exists. This might help me live with the loss of the rest.

JoAnn Falletta: Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Virginia Symphony Orchestra



Conductor JoAnn Falletta ([Steve Earley/The Virginian-Pilot](#))

Music that could sustain me for a lifetime? My personal choice would be Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony — the longest of the symphonies, but to me the most concise in its musical voyage. From the heart of nature to the heart of God, each movement unfolds like the petals of a flower, and Mahler moves from Nietzsche to folk song, from the profound to the simple, on his pathway — a journey that could be a mystical revelation of the meaning of life, if only we could fully understand his message. In this incomparable music, I feel I could search for that answer all of my life, from the peeling horns of the opening to the consummate serenity of the final movement (and I am sure I am not the only one brought to tears by Mahler's expression of "What love tells me"). Who could not be moved

by his words in music: “Joy is deeper than heartache,” and “Let no creature be lost.”

Knowing that Mahler intended yet another movement (redirected to become the finale of his Fourth Symphony) brings a certain comfort, too, of a life that continues, of a world without boundaries, of an infinity beyond our comprehension.

Thierry Fischer: Utah Symphony



Conductor Thierry Fischer (Scott Jarvie)

Having to conduct only one piece for the rest of my life would simply make me stop conducting. I would fatally miss contrasts, variety, novelty, the unknown,

mysteries, discoveries, conceptual challenges and above all the capacity of wondering. Therefore the only answer I can give: I would choose two composers, BACH and STRAVINSKY. And of course a “surprise bag” with an unknown score from a living composer, on a regular basis.

Jane Glover: Royal Academy of Music



Conductor Jane Glover (Lancome Teintldole)

This is extremely difficult, as there is so much to choose from. But if really pressed, I would opt for Haydn's Creation. It is a monumental work, encompassing drama, narrative, humor, profound religious belief (whether one agrees with it or not, it is utterly compelling), great serenity and challenging

complexity. Every time I do it I am convinced it is one of the greatest pieces ever written, and it is both exhilarating and humbling to bring it to life.

Sarah Ioannides: Tacoma Symphony Orchestra



Conductor Sarah Ioannides (Sarah Ioannides)

Well, this verges on the devastating question; which one of your children would you keep if you had to choose just one? So even here I can't do it; I'd choose Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, Wagner's The Ring Cycle, and I couldn't pass up the Brahms' Four Symphonies as my third treasure of a lifetime!

Jeri Lynne Johnson: Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra (Philadelphia)



Conductor Jeri Lynne Johnson (Courtesy of the artist)

If I absolutely HAD to choose “one” piece, it would be Strauss’s Four Last Songs.

I have loved Hermann Hesse’s works since high school, and these settings of his (and Eichendorff’s) poetry are stunningly beautiful and would offer me something upon which to reflect at each stage of life.

Bernard Labadie: Orchestra of St. Luke's



Conductor Bernard Labadie (Dario Acosta)

My ultimate desert island list definitely includes Mozart's Requiem (which I will conduct with Orchestra of St. Luke's in my first concert as principal conductor on Oct. 25) and Mass in C Minor, as well as Bach's St. Matthew Passion and B Minor Mass. But I would make sure a wide selection of Bach cantatas would be parachuted onto the island on a regular basis.

Susanna Mälkki: Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra



Conductor Susanna Mälkki (Stefan Bremer)

I think I would choose an opera - not only in order to maximize the material, but also to have room for many different experiences doing it with different teams: Tristan.

Francisco J. Núñez: Young People's Chorus of New York City



Conductor Francisco Núñez (Stephanie Berger)

It would be impossible for me to choose one piece, because the visceral act of singing together with text and the relevance of what the text means and how it encompasses the universe of sound makes the decision very challenging. But if I really had to choose one piece, I would be looking for a piece with different emotions and concepts that equate life. I would look at the rhythms first, and the feelings of the rhythms and the clusters of sound that create intensity and musical impact. To answer this question, I decided to go with my instinct and pick the first piece that came to mind. And that piece is Carl Orff's Carmina Burana. It has the simplicity and the complexity I need, as well as joy and fear, and, especially, the rhythmic attitude that I am always looking for.

Xian Zhang: New Jersey Symphony Orchestra



Conductor Xian Zhang (Fred Stucker)

Mahler's Third Symphony. The music and the text speak very personally to me.

Conducting and performing it feels very emotional — more so than other pieces.