

Christopher Gillett **Composers in Residence**



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Los Angeles is a soulless concrete jungle – a place where art goes to die. Right? Not at all, says temporary LA resident Christopher Gillett, who is discovering the rich classical music history buried beneath the city's burger joints and strip malls.



It's easy to write off Los Angeles as a town with no depth, a place where you're only as good as your last hit: a fashion-conscious city where they devote more energy brewing ridiculously-priced 'single estate' coffee than to tuning their ear to real art. Heck, I knock it all the time. But Los Angeles holds many surprises for the classical music lover. I'd even go so far as to say that, with a little searching and a car, it can almost rival Vienna for connections to music's past.

The last time I was in Vienna I went to see the house in Heiligenstadt where Beethoven wrote the famous Testament, the long letter to his family in which he bemoaned his increasing deafness. The house is something of a hallowed spot. I paid the entrance fee, walked through the door and spotted a sign which announced that historians were now certain that Beethoven had never set foot in the place. The house where he lived was probably somewhere else but this one would be a lot like the one in which he had lived. Wherever that was. Oh.

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At least in LA you can be certain about these things. The problem is that they do have a tendency to knock buildings down. The Garden of Allah used to be a rather exotic and naughty hotel on Sunset Boulevard at the foot of the Hollywood hills. It's now a strip mall. In the late 1920s Harpo Marx checked into one of its many cabins.

'My little bungalow in the Garden of Allah was a peaceful retreat. It was the best place to practise I ever had – until a piano player moved into a bungalow across from mine and shattered the peace. I was looking forward to a solid weekend of practice, without interruptions, when my new neighbour started to

bang away. It only got more overpowering. This character was warming up for a solid weekend of practice too. I went to the office to register a complaint. One of us had to go, I said, and it wasn't going to be me because I was there first. But the management didn't see it my way. The new guest, whose playing was driving me nuts, was Sergei Rachmaninov.' ([/uk/learn/composers/sergei-rachmaninov](#))

Rachmaninov bought a house on Elm Drive in Beverly Hills, where he used to play duets with his old chum Vladimir Horowitz ([/uk/learn/artists/vladimir-horowitz](#)). His funeral in 1943 was held in the Russian Orthodox church just a few yards from where I'm writing this in Silver Lake, and where he was a regular celebrant. We've been living in this house for over a month and I had no idea until a couple of days ago.



Igor used to hang out with fellow émigrés Aldous Huxley and WH Auden at the Farmers' Market in West Hollywood

Stravinsky ([/uk/learn/composers/igor-stravinsky](#)) lived longer at the foot of the Hollywood hills than he ever did in Russia. I took a picture of his house yesterday but I didn't linger for a good look, deterred by signs warning of armed security patrols. Igor often used to hang out with fellow émigrés Aldous Huxley and WH Auden at the Farmers' Market in West Hollywood, still a popular place to eat and shop.



If you walk through Hollywood you can buy maps claiming to show you 'The Homes of The Stars'. I was starting to think that someone should do the same for classical musicians when I stumbled upon this [directory of classical Hollywood \(http://www.thekentstudios.com/Resources/SchoMap.pdf\)](http://www.thekentstudios.com/Resources/SchoMap.pdf), from a concert series held by the LA Philharmonic in 2001. Look at those names! George Gerswhin, Alma Mahler, Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, Brecht, Mann... I haven't yet been able to discover where [Erich Korngold \(/uk/learn/composers/erich-wolfgang-korngold\)](/uk/learn/composers/erich-wolfgang-korngold) lived, but I'll keep working on that.

I'm very proud that I once had lunch in [Schoenberg \(/uk/learn/composers/arnold-schoenberg\)](/uk/learn/composers/arnold-schoenberg)'s house in Brentwood, with nearly all of his children. We had Wiener Schnitzel and Sachertorte, expertly cooked by his daughter-in-law Barbara (daughter of the composer Eric Zeisl), around the same table where the great serialist used to eat his breakfast cereal. His music may seem difficult and obscure, but his family is warm and jovial – as was the great man himself, I'm told, who loved nothing more than a game of tennis in the California sunshine.

And as if to demonstrate how well the Schoenberg family assimilated with their Hollywood neighbours, Arnold's grandson Randol is now the subject of a movie, *Woman in Gold*, which tells the story of how he fought the Austrian government on behalf of the holocaust survivor Maria Altmann (Helen Mirren) for the return of her family's painting, Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*. It seems unlikely that Hollywood will ever make a film about his grandfather – surely one of its most important and culturally influential residents – but it's good to see the family name in lights. That's show business for you.



Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs). The tenor's own blog is christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk/>).

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