– Introduction –

This is a book about music, yet it's also about much more than that. Yes, there is a fair amount of detail and background information about the pieces I've chosen, but I'm not claiming to be in any way objective. In fact I'm not even sure that it's possible to be objective when writing about such an elusive subject. Neurology has made some significant advances when it comes to understanding how our brains process the phenomenon we call music, but so much still remains mysterious. 'When we listen to music', wrote the philosopher Ernst Bloch, 'what we really hear is ourselves.' That doesn't just apply to the emotions we feel in response to a piece, or to the images we connect with it; it's also true of technical musical analysis, based on the printed notes of the score – the kind of thing I was once taught was 'scientific'.

What I'm talking about here is my own experience of music, and how I believe that experience has changed my life, for the better – very much for the better. That means the inclusion of a lot of personal detail, more even than in my previous book *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*. I admit, I struggled with this

(one chapter in particular gave me migraines), not just because the subject matter could be difficult, painful to describe, but because too much self-revelation is just as much a turn-off for me as for any other reader. But I drew strength and a firmer sense of purpose from a conversation I had with the philosopher Roger Scruton, as I was starting work on the Shostakovich book. I expected, in fact I more than half-hoped, that he would tell me to go easy on the personal stuff. (Scruton could be both wonderfully and maddeningly old-fashioned.) What he said surprised and touched me.

Scruton reminded me how I'd told him, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, that at the age of sixteen or seventeen I'd read and been deeply stirred by St Augustine's *Confessions*. Keep that in mind, he said: while there is plenty of personal material in *Confessions*, it's there, not because Augustine wants you to admire him or feel sorry for him, but because he's saying, 'Look at me – it works. I'm the proof!'

That above all is what I want to say in this book. If I talk about the trauma of my upbringing (a subject I would now be quite happy to put in a box and bury) or the tribulations of coming to terms with genetically inherited mental illness, it's because I want to show how powerful and benevolent a force music has been in my life. There's a great deal of cynicism and despair evident in modern society. I could have stumbled, or let myself drop wearily into that pit too, but I firmly believe now that music was one of the things – perhaps at one

time the only thing – that prevented me from doing so. 'Without music, life would be a mistake,' wrote Nietzsche; for me the converse of that is also true: that with the help of music, we can discover that life is *not* a mistake. There is meaning, waiting to be found, though the journey to that meaning may be long, arduous, and at times perplexing.

Roger Scruton's comment about Augustine's *Confessions* raises one big question however: what is this 'it', which by examining himself and his experiences Augustine wants to show 'works' for him, and which I believe (though with a lot less dogmatic assurance) has worked for me too? Readers who are hoping for a solid, rational answer had better prepare themselves for a thumping disappointment. It's still essentially a mystery to me; but in probing these pieces of music and what I feel they have done for me, to me, my own thoughts have become more focussed, and my intuitions stronger. I hope that will become evident to my readers too.

For the moment, though I'll end with a thought from Kafka's *Metamorphosis.* It's a story that's often spoken of as unsparingly bleak, and yet towards the end there is one memorable chink of light. Gregor Samsa, hideously transformed into a kind of monstrous insect, hears his sister playing the violin. The music touches him profoundly, reminds him that he's still a human being, whatever his outward appearance: 'How could he be a brute beast, if music could make him feel like

this?' Kafka continues, 'It seemed to point the way to a mysterious, long-desired nourishment.' Of course, it all goes horribly wrong (this is Kafka), but the memory of that flash, that brief hint of possible transcendence, lingers, and for me it has grown stronger with time. I think the story I tell in this book gives some idea why; and it is my deepest wish that it can show the reader that to give up – to opt for despair, deadening routine or some kind of nihilistic hedonism – is to deny oneself the possibility of hope, and of meaning.