

THE DEATH OF CLASSICAL MUSIC?

The death of classical music? We cannot deny what appears to be a declining interest. Some have pointed the finger at the stiff and pompous atmosphere of classical music. In some ways they must be right; the formalised rituals of a traditional concert seem out of touch with the musical life of many people.

There's something intrinsically intimidating about concert halls ... They have their rituals - unwritten codes of acceptable and unpardonable behaviour - apparently devised specially to identify and embarrass the outsider ... designed to maximise discomfort: you are not here for enjoyment, but to be improved. (Stephen Johnson, http://www.guardian.co.uk/friday_review/story/0,3605,423963,00.html)

Addressing this issue has had a positive effect for some establishments, such as the WALLCAST of the New World Symphony (<http://www.nws.edu/Wallcasts.aspx>) and the Lincoln Center Festival (<http://www.lincolncenterfestival.org>).

However, I'd like to propose a more significant, and more challenging, reason for the declining interest. The classical music championed in the 20th century—the 'Second Viennese School', the 'American Experimental School', i.e. inaccessible avant-garde music—went too far; too far removed from the average listener, too far removed from even many classical musicians.

The rise of music that is totally without social commitment also increases the separation between composer and public... The cynicism with which this particular departure seems to have been made is perfectly symbolized in John Cage's account of a public lecture he had given: 'Later, during the question period, I gave one of six previously prepared answers regardless of the question asked.' (Michael Steinberg, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cage)

It is tempting to think of the accused musical innovations as fundamentally no different from those of great composers such as Beethoven or Chopin. In some ways this may be, but in one critical way is not. It is vitally important that the music of past 'greats', and music of their time in general, remained largely accessible and appealing.

Imagine, for a minute, what would happen to rock music if for 80+ years it became so different that many listeners and musicians did not fully embrace it. Add to this fabricated scenario performing practices that are somewhat out of touch with contemporary society and the only question would be, 'How long will the audience support it?' In the classical music community there has been relatively little newly composed music that is simultaneously promoted, performed, accessible to the general audience and respected by the classical community. This is a severe problem, one that is hurting our beloved music. Simply adapting our performing practises will improve the situation but will not entirely fix it.

The issue is not the musical and philosophical value of this 20th-century musical thought. The reason for its poor reception is also not the issue (if it were simply because listeners were unwilling, rather than unable, to accept new ideas the end result is still the same). It is simply that the classical community may not be able to survive the continued pursuit of it as its primary representative of new music. Instead, we need to embrace music, new and old, which is creative, interesting, challenging, excellent and accessible to the general audience.

[Lowell] Liebermann's personal musical style is overtly tonal, which allows his compositions to be approachable and comprehensible to the general listener as well as to performers. (Adam Binks,

<http://www.linnrecords.com/recording-liebermann-concerto-for-flute-and-orchestra-and-works-by-hue-nielsen-poulenc-katherine-bryan.aspx>)

A message to composers. Don't feel like you need to do something strikingly new for it to be worthwhile. Newness, by itself, cannot build a solid musical foundation for your audience or the classical community. You should also feel no need to conform to accepted compositional practices or to avoid unfashionable ones.

A message to performers. Don't feel like you need to 'dumb-down' your concert programmes to interest an audience. Classical music doesn't need to resemble other more popular musical styles for our audiences to enjoy it. They simply need to feel like they belong at the concert and that they can relate to the performers. If we are careful about our presentation we can teach new listeners about the beauty of our music without denying them the excellence of fine and substantial works.

So, seek out both new and old music which is accessible and excellent and then present it unapologetically to our audiences!