

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

by Greg Sandow

Chapter 2 – Dire Data.

(Not the final text, but a riff on what this chapter will most likely say)

[This is the short version of this riff. For the longer version, go [here](#).]

I could begin this chapter with dire facts and statistics, about the aging and shrinking audience for mainstream classical music, or about the long-term decline in classical music recording, broadcasting, and media coverage.

But I think it's more vivid, and more truthful, and even more hopeful -- because if things were better in the past, maybe they can get better once more – to begin with stories about what classical music used to be like, a generation or two ago, when it played a larger role in the world around us.

Those days seem very distant now – the days, for instance, when Toscanini, the legendary conductor, could conduct in Vienna, and have people line the railroad tracks to say goodbye when he took the train back to Italy. Or when Geraldine Farrar, a huge star at the Metropolitan Opera, had young girls who'd wait by the stage door after performances, “casting flowers and love notes in her direction when she emerged” (as one scholar puts it).

In the 1950s, classical music wasn't uncommon on network TV, and classical programs were sponsored by car companies.

Even as late as 1962, *Life* – then the most popular magazine in America – ran a feature on the piano. They profiled a small-town piano teacher, and a family buying a piano (complete with pictures of the piano being hoisted through a window, to get it into their home). The crowning glory of all this was a new piano piece by Aaron Copland, at that time America's most famous living composer, which *Life* printed, for pianists all over the country to play.

Those days, as I said, seem wildly distant now.

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So now it's time to return to this chapter's title. Here's some of the dire data I didn't want to start with.

[Dire, of course, for the classical music mainstream, or in other words for performances of standard classical repertoire, by familiar classical performing groups, orchestras, opera companies, string quartets, and the like.

[There's also – as I've written about extensively in my blog – an alternative classical world, far from the normal concert hall, where performances of many kinds take place, often of exciting new music. For some people, this world – and I'd agree with this – is an important part of the future, maybe the most important part, not just for what it offers in itself, but as an inspiration for ways that the mainstream can change.

[And so some people – taking this a little further – think we can forget about the mainstream, and let it die, if that's what's going to happen. I disagree, because at the very least the mainstream provides by far the most employment – I'm talking about paying, even well-paying employment -- for classical musicians. Even for some of those most active in the alternative classical world.

[The ripples from its death might be more than ripples – they might be tidal waves, destroying the lives of classical musicians, and, more than likely, affecting music schools as well (meaning that we might have trouble training classical musicians in the future). Who's going to give money to music schools, when the most visible, most glamorous employment their graduates can have – in mainstream eyes – all at once disappears?]

I'll begin – because it's so strong a sign that classical music has receded from our cultural mainstream – with the aging of the classical music audience.

The National Endowment for the Arts has been tracking the age of the classical audience since 1982 (as I said in my [first riff](#)). In that year, the median age of this audience was 40. In 2008, it was 49.

During that time, the population at large has grown older, too, but (as the NEA notes) the classical music audience has aged faster than the population.

And 49, I'd add, looks young, compared to what major classical music institutions typically report for their major subscription performances. A Knight Foundation study found that 63% of people buying tickets for orchestra concerts were over 55.

[In the [longer version](#): an explanation of the discrepancy.]

But for more dramatic news, look at studies from past generations. In 1937, surveys at orchestra concerts in Los Angeles and Grand Rapids, Michigan showed an audience dramatically young by our standards – with a median age of 28 in Grand Rapids, and 33 in L.A. Shockingly young! The authors of the study don't comment on this finding at all. It must have been what they'd have expected, what they saw when they went to concerts themselves.

In 1955, the Minneapolis Symphony (now the Minnesota Orchestra) surveyed its audience, and found that half of it was younger than 35.

And in 1966, the Twentieth Century Fund, a major foundation, found that the audience for all the performing arts, classical music included, had a median age of 38.

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What the aging of the audience means:

Classical music once reached a wide assortment of people, more or less of every age. But now it's a niche activity, despite all the glamour and fame it still maintains. It largely plays for a restricted audience, an older one, far removed from the front row seats in current culture.

[The older people in the audience today – people in their upper fifties, or their sixties – most likely came to classical music when they were young, at a time when younger people went to classical concerts. They kept going to concerts as they got older, and they're still with us today.]

[The [longer version](#) has a graph that shows how the classical audience changed as this generation of people moved through the years.]

[For a vivid picture of how old the audience can seem to someone outside classical music, read *The Cello Suites*, a very sweet new book by Eric Siblin. He's a former pop music critic who, with no background in classical music, fell in love with Bach's music for solo cello. So, as he says in his book, he started going to concerts to hear that music performed, and each time he describes one of the concerts, he finds himself telling us how strikingly old everyone else there seems.]

[Though here's a paradox, a very important one. The number of younger people who study classical music – and who go on to make professional careers in the classical field – doesn't seem to have dropped. This has never, as far as I know, been explained.

[And I think that this phenomenon is double-edged. On one hand, we do get younger people involved in classical music. But as they make professional careers, they move away from others of their generation. And so the gap between classical music and the world at large becomes a gap in their own lives, between them and their friends – friends who, in all other respects, are much like them, but can't relate to their involvement in the classical music world.]

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Which now brings me to more of the dire data I promised. As classical music retreats from the cultural foreground, its retreat has measurable consequences:

There's less classical music on the radio:

Commercial classical stations have been dying out. Two of the biggest – as if unable to sustain themselves commercially – were recently bought by big public radio stations.

And public radio has cut down a lot on the amount of classical music it broadcasts. Why? Because its listeners don't want to hear it.

Classical recording isn't what it used to be:

Go back a generation and classical record labels, large and small, were profitable. Prominent classical recordings might sell 50,000 copies. Now they're lucky if they sell 3000. (A collapse that's even worse than it looks, because the population has grown. A few classical recordings do still sell in large numbers, it's only fair to say.)

And the small classical record companies that have sprung up in recent years are largely nonprofit, often requiring the artists they record to pay the cost of the recording.

There's a lot less media coverage of classical music:

Newspapers are shedding their classical music critics.

And the decline of media coverage has been going on for decades:

In the early '80s, I was classical music critic for *Vanity Fair*, right after the magazine launched. Its original editors, before Tina Brown came on the scene, assumed, as they would have in previous generations, that a serious magazine needed a classical music critic.

When Tina Brown took over in 1984, getting rid of classical music coverage was just one of the culturally savvy moves she made, moves that turned the magazine into such a raging success.

The '80s were a pivotal decade for classical music coverage. In 1980, *Time* magazine printed two classical reviews for every pop review it published. By 1990, the proportions were reversed.

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And now comes the complex question of ticket sales.

You'd think this wouldn't be a complex question. You'd think the classical music world would know how many tickets it sells.

But – as I said in my first riff – this data largely doesn't exist for classical music. Chamber music ticket sales aren't tracked at all (at least on an aggregate basis; individual chamber music presenters presumably know how many tickets they sell). And sales by presenting organizations, presenting any kind of classical music, aren't tracked.

But everything I'm able to learn says the numbers – for all areas of classical music -- have been falling.

In 2006, the League of American Orchestras (formerly the American Symphony Orchestra League) made public a steady drop in attendance at orchestra events, beginning in the 1997-98 concert season. And private data from our largest orchestras showed a long-term fall in ticket sales, beginning around 1990.

[In the [long version](#), I explain why the League's figures and the private data from large orchestras are different.]

For opera companies, Opera America, which represents opera companies in the US, hasn't reported any drop in ticket sales. But the NEA reports a drop between 2002 and 2008 in the percentage of Americans who go the opera. And Peter Gelb, who took over the Metropolitan Opera a year ago, publicly acknowledged a serious drop in ticket sales, in the years before he came on board.

And for chamber music, I've heard anecdotal accounts about falling ticket sales, from people who present chamber music concerts.

[A couple of years ago I got precise numbers from one of these presenters. Each year for a decade, this group had lost 10 to 20 subscribers. At the time, the group had around 700 subscribers, so if we assume an average drop each year of 15, that means that in 10 years the subscription sales had fallen 18%, from 850 to 700.]

In the two or three years just before the recession hit, some of these numbers – especially for major orchestras – had begun to go up. The simplest reason for that was marketing. The big orchestras got scared, as they watched their numbers fall. So they started marketing more heavily, and worked the numbers up again.

But this new upward trend wasn't strong enough to turn the multiyear decline around. And as we'll see, the recent uptick carried deep within it the seeds of its own demise.

But here's the scariest data. This fall, the National Endowment for the Arts released new numbers, showing that the percentage of adult Americans who go to classical music performances had declined nearly 30% since 1982.

And that decline now affects all age groups, except people over 65 – the only people now left in the audience who grew up at a time when younger people still went to classical performances.

The League of American Orchestras then did its own study, and found that the NEA numbers were correct. The League also came to a radical conclusion, which they very bravely stated in public. They concluded that the classical music audience now is both aging and shrinking, and that – if things continue as they are -- in the future it won't be replaced.

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So why don't more people notice what I've just recounted? Partly because some of the data is kept private, because large institutions don't want to frighten their donors.

The press, meanwhile, doesn't ask tough enough questions.

[It's also hard to measure a long-term decline simply by going to concerts and looking to see how many seats are empty.

[If the X Symphony sold 95% of its tickets 15 years ago and sells 85% now, that's a serious decline, which puts pressure on the orchestra's finances. But someone looking around a concert hall that's 85% full can truthfully say they don't see many empty seats.]

As for the NEA data – corroborated by the League – the percentage decline in classical music attendance has been largely balanced, so far, by a growth in population. So the percentage decline doesn't translate (yet) into a large decline in absolute numbers.

That's why we don't see concert halls with empty seats.

But this isn't good news. What we *should* be seeing, given the rise in population since 1982, is a large rise in attendance.

Which brings me back to the small rise in attendance that major orchestras, at least, saw in the two or three years just before the recession.

The League, studying the rise in ticket sales, found something very troubling: While total sales were up, the number of individual ticket buyers had fallen. Fewer people, in other words, were buying concert tickets, but they were going to concerts more often than they'd gone before.

This doesn't sound like a trend that can be long sustained, especially if the number of people buying tickets keeps slipping downward.

[The longer version has details about another troubling implication of the NEA report, which you can also read about in my [blog](#).]

[I'm often asked, by the way, if these trends are purely American, or if they're replicated in other countries, maybe throughout the world. The answer is that these trends do seem more or less universal. In Germany, just for instance, one study shows that – based on current demographic trends -- the audience for German orchestra concerts might shrink 36% in the next two decades.]

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Funding. That's the final subject I'll discuss in this chapter.

Classical music, as everyone knows, is expensive, at least at the big institutions. And as everybody surely knows, big classical music institutions – big orchestras and opera companies -- can't make the money they need from ticket sales alone. So someone has to make up the difference.

That's why the big institutions work hard to raise money from private donors, and from corporations, foundations, and government agencies. And it's why, within these institutions, more people work on fundraising than on anything else.

But as our culture grows even less interested in classical music, and the established classical audience starts to shrink, won't fundraising get more difficult?

Common sense says it will.

[Musical interlude.

[You may remember, from my riff on chapter one, that throughout the book there'll be musical interludes, digressions – or sidebars, or celebrations – in which I talk about music itself. I'm thinking that there should be one in each chapter.

[This one would be about what we get when we spend a lot of money on classical music – star musicians, well-honed orchestras, exquisitely rehearsed opera productions, string quartets that can spend full time honing their performances, composers who can give their music all the time it needs. Musicians can earn a decent living, getting paid what professionals in other fields might earn.

[And there's the chance, too, to play really large compositions, works that aren't only huge and grand, but go very deep, emotionally and spiritually, pieces like Wagner's *Ring*, huge Mahler symphonies, or smaller works that use many more musicians than are normally found in standard ensembles, or use musicians in unusual combinations.

[Not just star quality is at stake here, but quality. And the full scope of the classical repertoire. After some general comments (of the kind I've just made), I'll try to evoke this more fully by bringing alive one of the pieces that can only be performed with huge forces – the *Ring*, maybe or Mahler's Eighth Symphony. And maybe also something more modern – a big orchestra piece, let's say, by Boulez or John Adams, or one of Philip Glass's operas.]

So, coming out of the interlude – where does funding for classical music stand now? Has it already fallen off?

You might think not, because we've lately seen a surge of large gifts from wealthy private donors.

But this isn't wholly good news. These gifts tend to go to institutions in trouble. They're designed, of course, to bail the institutions out.

But here's the crucial question. Can these gifts be repeated? Surely not (or at least not in most cases). Even wealthy donors don't have unlimited money.

And so what happens if financial troubles continue? What will the institutions getting these large gifts do then? Their day of reckoning – if that's what's facing them – has only been postponed.

And normal funding has been harder to find. Corporations and foundations, which used to give money to classical music, now may not want to. They've turned their attention to social causes, among other things.

There's also a generational change. Younger people with money may not care much for classical music, and so they won't give money to it, or at least not as much as their parents' generation did.

[That's notably true of young tech zillionaires, as classical music groups in Seattle have unfortunately found out.]

Now put this in a larger context. In any city, only a very small fraction of the population regularly goes to classical performances. (For a major orchestra in a very large city, I've seen that number stated as just one half of one percent.)

And yet these institutions have been lavishly funded. How long can that continue?

And, especially, how long can it continue as we move toward a majority non-white population? And once we firmly understand that classical music isn't the only music that we can call art?

[This already may be more than a theoretical discussion.]

[A recent front-page story in the *New York Times* discussed a new consciousness in charitable giving. Studies show that only 10% of charitable donations go to causes that actually improve how people live. The other 90% goes to things that rich people enjoy — new buildings for elite universities, and (sigh) the arts.

[According to the *Times*, at least a few wealthy donors are starting to react to this, by aiming their donations away from classical music and other elite, expensive forms of art.

[And – if we're to believe an article than ran in *New York* magazine – the latest generation of rich and powerful New Yorkers doesn't take an interest in the arts.]

[The [long version](#) of this riff has more details about all this.]

[There's one other funding problem to deal with in this chapter – an economic principle called Baumol's Dilemma (or, sometimes, Baumol's Curse, or the "cost disease"). It shows why funding, over time, grows more and more difficult. Again, for details, read the longer version.]

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Other *Rebirth* reading:

An [outline](#) of the book (subject to revision)

A [riff on chapter one](#), "Rebirth and Resistance"

A [shorter version](#) of the chapter one riff

An evolving [web page](#), with links to everything from the book

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