

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

by Greg Sandow

Chapter 3 – The Culture Ran Away From Us (first part)

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

There's an important book for anyone interested in the future of classical music – and it's a book that doesn't mention classical music at all. Except, I guess, in its title, *Pictures at a Revolution*, which of course is a play on the title of a Mussorgsky piece so familiar that even people outside classical music know it.

But the title doesn't matter. This is the story – written by Mark Harris, and published in 2008 to great and well-deserved acclaim – of a 1960s revolution in Hollywood. And the classical music connection is that classical music never had a revolution like that.

The book starts quietly, in New York, in 1963, where we watch a magazine art director heading into a movie theater to see – for what might have been the twelfth time -- Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim*. Which of course is now a classic, but played in those days only to a cult audience.

Over time, though, this cult audience grew. A new generation wanted something the older generation hadn't given it. "The deep chord of longing [these films] sounded," Harris writes, "was understandable. Emotional ambiguity and grown-up sexuality were virtually black-market items in American movies of the time."

Now move ahead a bit. The art director mad about Truffaut wrote the screenplay for one of the breakthrough movies of the '60s, *Bonnie and Clyde* (collaborating with friend who was equally obsessed with European films). In 1967, *Bonnie and Clyde* was released. In 1968 it got a dozen Oscar nominations.

And now there was a revolution. A new breed of moviegoer – young, informal, very '60s – lined up to see *Bonnie and Clyde* (along with other '60s films like *The Graduate*, which reflected the same new culture, and were filmed with the same new verve).

At Hollywood parties, the guests split in two, with older and younger film professionals barely speaking to each other. The *New York Times* fired its film critic, because he didn't understand the new films. And *Time* magazine, which had panned *Bonnie and Clyde*, retracted its review in a 5000-word cover story, declaring that it had not just been wrong, but drastically wrong.

This truly was a revolution, and without it, we wouldn't have any of the emotionally complex films – or at least not in the movie mainstream – that we take for granted today.

So back to the hidden classical music connection. Classical music never had a '60s revolution. We never had the revolution that – widening our focus beyond Mark Harris's book – also happened in pop music,

painting, politics, race relations, and even in everyday life, which changed forever (this is a grand statement, but we all know it's true), becoming freer, more informal, more creative, more spontaneous.

And this is one way (though certainly not the only way) to look at how classical music grew distant from the culture around it. The rest of the world changed, and the classical music world went on playing Bach and Beethoven. Wearing formal dress.

So now let's imagine that things had turned out differently. Suppose the movies hadn't had their revolution. Suppose that when the Oscars came around, the nominees were old-style musicals like *The Sound of Music*, with taut, truthful films like *The Hurt Locker* nowhere to be seen. Maybe then the movie audience would in large part be older people – just like the classical music audience really is right now.

And what if classical music had had a '60s revolution? Would Brahms and Beethoven now share the concert stage – on an equal basis – with lively, sometimes searing, and sometimes wildly popular contemporary works?

And would the classical music audience now be young?

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I'm using the '60s as a kind of test case, the clearest possible demonstration of how classical music hasn't changed when our culture changes. And I'm pointing here at what I think is the most serious problem classical music has, its separation from our wider culture. This separation is the reason, in the end, for the aging audience, and for declines in ticket sales and funding. Classical music just hasn't kept up with the world, and so the world has been leaving it behind.

[Disclaimer! Of course things are changing. Classical music will be reborn. So take what I'm writing here as a description, sometimes a sharp one, of the problems that we'll learn to overcome.]

[Note, too, that some people will think the divorce of classical music from our society is a good thing. Essentially they're saying that our culture, with all of its changes – or perhaps because of them – is rotten. And that classical music serves as a refuge from the rot. If this line of argument is valid, then of course we have worse problems than the fading of classical music. Though I don't think it's valid, and I'll argue with it later in the book. Here's one small part of that argument: Can you think of a time when our culture was better? Think hard, and cast your net wider than classical music. If you've chosen what you think was a better era, what were its politics like? Were there public executions? What wars were fought? What was life like for women and minorities?]

Of course there are many more examples of classical music losing touch with our wider culture, examples far beyond the '60s, and which I'll get to later in this riff. But first I want to qualify a few things that I've said.

First – as I’ll be stressing throughout this book – I don’t mean that we shouldn’t play Bach and Beethoven. It’s how much we play them that I think is a problem. (And maybe how we play them, too – we could use more individuality in our performances – individuality, I could stress, that came into all of our culture in the wake of the ‘60s, though classical music had a lot of it even earlier than that. But this is something I’ll talk about later.)

And second, it would be wrong to say that classical music during the ‘60s didn’t change at all. Some leaders in classical music – briefly, anyway – embraced at least at least one part of the ‘60s revolution. They fell in love with the Beatles. Leonard Bernstein did this, and so did Ned Rorem, noted composer and classical music bad boy (a reputation he carefully cultivated with flamboyantly gay diaries). Note, though, that Bernstein and Rorem didn’t fall in love with rock itself. You didn’t find people in classical music raving about rock beyond the Beatles, about the Rolling Stones, Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Who, or the Band. The Beatles, in fact, were loved inside the classical music world precisely because they weren’t like other rock, because they sounded closer to classical music than other bands did, because they used melody and harmony in ways that classical musicians were used to.

So the people in classical music who praised them were definitely *not* embracing ‘60s rock.

[Wilfrid Mellers, a British music scholar, was an exception. He wrote passionate books about the Beatles and Bob Dylan, and at least in the Dylan book, really did seem to be embracing rock itself. He doesn’t quite get the music, from any serious rock point of view, but his love for it is touching.]

And then some new classical trends – new stirrings, new ways of doing things – did in fact appear. The biggest change in classical music, in fact, was very much of its time, though not linked to the peace/love/hippie ‘60s. It was closer to the jet set and glamour side of the ‘60s, which emerged earlier than the hippie ‘60s did, and were exemplified by James Bond novels, the Rat Pack (Frank Sinatra and his Vegas buddies), and, in the US, by the glamorous reign of Jack and Jackie Kennedy.

It may seem strange, even perverse, to link classical music to James Bond, but the link goes through the jet set. James Bond was, in his way, a jet-setting international superstar. And because of ‘60s prosperity, because of jet travel, and because of international distribution of recordings, classical music also developed jet-setting stars, people like Georg Solti, Herbert von Karajan, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who towered over the classical music scene in a way that no one in past generations ever quite did. [

[The one possible exception was Toscanini, whose fame in the US in the 1950s was titanic, eclipsing – by miles – all other conductors. As I vividly remember from my childhood, Toscanini’s boxed LP set of the Beethoven symphonies was likely to be in any home my family visited. But this might be precursor of what happened in the ‘60s, since Toscanini’s unparalleled fame was media-driven, the result of corporate promotion by the company that owned his record label, RCA, and the NBC network, on whose broadcasts Toscanini conducted an orchestra that had been created especially for him.]

Fischer-Dieskau, one of the most polished artists ever to sing classical music, is a particularly good example, because he eclipsed every other singer in his category. His specialty wasn't what most glamorous singers would sing, namely opera, but instead the much more intimate art song repertoire, especially (since he was German) German lieder. And here he reigned supreme, so much so that many classical music lovers who formed their taste at the time might never hear any other lieder singer.

[I remember this, too, vividly, because I was a singer then, sang lieder, and was eventually surprised to discover that other baritones like Gerard Souzay and Hermann Prey sang the same music. I auditioned for a refined and artistic voice teacher, Martial Singher (who had been one of the leading baritones singing the French repertoire in previous decades), and I remember him saying, in a voice tinged with kindly regret, "You have been listening to Fischer-Dieskau." And, without meaning to, copying his mannerisms.]

But here are some other changes in classical music from that period, some of them clearly linked to other kinds of '60s culture. It's worth looking at them, to see how limited they were. Or at least how limited they'd look to the outside world, even if some of them made a big difference inside the classical music bubble.

Here's a list:

- *The rise of the early music movement.* Which brought new ways of playing some of the music in the classical repertoire, starting with music from the Baroque period and earlier (which means the Renaissance, and medieval music), and later on moving into the later 18th century, the time of Haydn and Mozart. No one can say this didn't have a long-lasting effect on classical performances. By now it's not entirely uncommon – to cite just one lasting change – to hear mainstream orchestras play Bach without vibrato (since early music scholarship has determined that string players didn't vibrate their fingers on the notes they played, which meant that they made a cleaner, less intense and far less lush sound than we're used to hearing from string players today).
- *Civil rights.* Black musicians – in a clear reflection of the civil rights movement – started playing in major orchestras. More of them sang with major opera companies.

[Though even in recent years there's been an issue with male black singers, especially tenors. When I wrote an article in the '90s [about African –Americans in classical music](#), every African-American personage in the business I spoke to felt that black men weren't given leading roles in opera, because the white people who ran opera companies didn't want them doing love scenes onstage with white women. One white director of a major opera company strongly agreed that this was true.]

- *Mahler.* Here we had a composer from the past, someone who bridged the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and who died 50 years before the '60s, in 1911. His music had fallen out of fashion, and when it came back in the '60s, it could almost have been – or

at least it seems this way in retrospect -- a '60s metaphor. That's because Mahler has an almost psychedelic streak, in his wild, uneasy yearning for transcendence.

- *Classical composers.* Some of them wrote pieces that fit right into '60s culture. We'll see that they did this only on the fringes of the classical music world, but some examples are:
 - *George Crumb.* He used unusual instruments, with which he created otherworldly sounds. And he noted his music in unusual ways, which made the written scores of his pieces look like works of art in their own right.
 - *Terry Riley.* As early as 1964 he wrote *In C*, which in true '60s fashion was a communal piece, almost a musical happening, in which musicians – any number, playing any instruments – work their way at their own pace through a series of musical phrases, creating a sound that magically evolves on its own, in almost trance-inducing ways that no one can predict.
 - *Karlheinz Stockhausen*, who bought into the '60s eagerly, writing pieces like *Aus dem sieben tagen*, whose written scores are just a few words of text, for instance:

*wait until it is absolutely still within you
when you have attained this
begin to play
as soon as you start to think, stop
and try to reattain
the state of Non-Thinking
then continue playing*

Musicians were supposed to absorb the meaning of these words, and improvise in their spirit. But maybe Stockhausen's most striking '60s piece is *Stimmung*, premiered in 1969. Six singers for more than an hour, chanting on the notes of a single chord (or, in musicians' language, on the overtones of a single note, B flat, which of course create a single, unchanging chord). Sometimes they intone the magical names of deities. Very '60s, as anyone can see, and quite a gorgeous, absorbing, meditative piece, too, even if the magical names can sometimes sound a little wacky.

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But as I've said, these changes were limited. As ought to be obvious, because if they hadn't been limited, classical music would have had its revolution, and now might look a lot more like the world around us.

Let's measure the limits:

Early music.

Classical music concentrates too much on repertoire from the past, and the early music movement didn't change that. If anything, it focused even more attention on the past.

And if another classical music problem is a top-down approach, a sense that classical music feeds on scholarly considerations far beyond the understanding of normal people, then the early music movement made that even worse, by adding new scholarship that everyone now had to learn about (or feel insufficient for not learning).

Finally, the early music movement didn't, in the '60s, inspire performances that had any kind of '60s style or spirit. There was nothing free about them, nothing spontaneous. To be fair, in our own era some of them have taken off into really wild places, but in the '60s, early music performances – as has often been observed – functioned almost as a kind of modernism. They seemed detached and analytical, focused on stylistic details.

Black musicians, black music.

Yes, barriers fell. Nobody barred black musicians – or at least formally barred them – from singing in opera, or playing in orchestras. But black faces remained uncommon in classical music.

[And one form of apparent discrimination did remain. For decades afterward, African-Americans in classical music believed, and not without justice, that African-American men had trouble getting romantic leading roles in opera, because of fears that a white audience wouldn't want to see them singing love scenes with white women.]

In the wake of the '60s, popular culture and the media started including – even featuring – minorities. Black faces showed up in print advertising, and in TV commercials. And in movies. We all know the stereotype: A judge, in a movie trial scene, is likely to be black, even (or maybe most often) a black woman.

Reflecting all of this – but going further, embodying really deep currents of change – the pop world felt an upsurge of black music in the '60s. Bands like the Rolling Stones took inspiration from old blues and R&B songs, Motown (a black-owned record company) put black artists high on the pop charts, and singers like Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin brought a gospel sound into mainstream pop. James Brown went even further, creating a new black style of his own, based heavily on rhythm, and without many chord changes, harking back, consciously or not, to the music of Africa.

Nothing like any of this happened in classical music. We didn't see pieces drawing on black or African musical idioms, and, inside the classical music mainstream, we still don't see much of that today.

Mahler.

Yes, the resurgence of Mahler echoed the '60s, more closely by far than anything that happened in early music, or with minorities. But even so – and in true classical music style – it strengthened the hold of music from the past, by bringing more of it into the classical repertoire. Classical music could, conceivably, have found a genuine '60s sound, but instead it used music from the past as a covert '60s echo.

Which brings us to...

'60s composers.

The new trends in '60s composition lived on the margins of classical music. Where else could they live, in a field that's focused on the past? Stockhausen, in the '60s, was a world-famous figure on the avant-garde. But hardly anybody talks about him today, and you can go to classical concerts all your life and never hear *Stimmung*, or even hear anyone talk about it.

As for George Crumb, he became an honored composer, at least in the new music corner of the classical world, but soon enough the vogue for him passed.

Terry Riley's *In C* became a new music classic, often played on festive occasions. Or, rather, on festive occasions outside the classical mainstream. It never found a mainstream place, even though – or so you might think – it would (just for example) fit wonderfully into orchestral programs, giving orchestra musicians a chance to step out on their own, doing something with no conductor, that they themselves fully control. But then that kind of '60s thinking never made much headway in the classical mainstream.

Terry Riley of course was one of the first minimalists. And when minimalism flowered into fame with Steve Reich and Philip Glass, this also happened outside the classical concert hall. The moral of that story? Even when something new in classical music gets famous in the outside world, it still doesn't get much traction in what ought to be its home.

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And now for some other eras when classical music didn't fully reflect the world around it.

We could start in the 1950s, with the beat generation, which clearly left no mark on classical music. You might ask why that matters, since you also might think the beats didn't leave much mark on mainstream culture, that they didn't change it, the way the '60s changed it.

But I don't think that would quite be right. The beats, first of all, got major notice, even in staid and stately mainstream fortresses like the New York Times, which gave the beats some major space, in a

notable magazine section piece, for instance (“This Is The Beat Generation,” by John Clellon Holmes, published on November 16, 1952). And also in a rave review of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, in the eyes of the public back then more or less the founding document of the beat generation, and now an accepted American classic.

[The review, by Gilbert Millstein, appeared in the *Times* on September 5, 1957, and at the very beginning says: “[This book’s] publication is a historic occasion in so far as the exposure of an authentic work of art is of any great moment in an age in which the attention is fragmented and the sensibilities are blunted by the superlatives of fashion (multiplied a millionfold by the speed and pound of communications).” People describe our culture now in almost exactly the same terms. *Plus ça change.*]

Why does the beat generation matter? *On the Road*, writes Michael Greenberg in the *New York Review of Books* (the current issue as I write this, March 25, 2010), has a “relentless ethos of nonconformism.” So did J. D. Salinger, Greenberg says. And in fact conformity was a major issue in the ‘50s, going way beyond the beats, and explored in then-famous books, among them David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (a sociological study of alienation and “other-directedness”), William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (a popular look at corporate conformity), Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (about how advertising entices people to conform), and Sloan Wilson’s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (whose title speaks for itself).

[I read all these books – I was in high school -- when they came out.]

In this light, Kerouac can be linked to Salinger as protests against conformity, but beyond that, especially with Kerouac, as antidotes to it.

So where was all of this in classical music? Nowhere, at the time. Well, maybe Glenn Gould – a wildly original, reclusive pianist – was a nonconforming figure. But how many others like him were there?

In pop music, conformity also wasn’t treated explicitly. But the very existence of rock & roll – which erupted, seemingly from nowhere, in the ‘50s -- was an anti-conformist surge.

[And was seen, by the established powers of the time, as the end of civilization. If, that is, they didn’t see it as a passing fad, though some might have thought of it, hardly logically, as both at once. The point, though, is that they felt it as a threat.]

[Classical music, in fact, could be seen as a force *for* conformity, in the ‘50s, and even now. Aren’t classical musicians supposed to play classical music the way they’re taught it ought to go? Aren’t audiences told when they should applaud? If we look at the mainstream classical audience – I mean literally; go to a concert and look at them – do they look like people about to burst out of any established bounds?]

And we can go back earlier, too, but before doing that, we might ask why classical music seems to lag behind the culture it’s part of. I can think of two possible reasons, while noting that essentially I’m speculating, that this is a question that (to my knowledge) hasn’t been much discussed, and that the

discussion, while fascinating, is, in the end, not crucial for my book, because the fact remains that classical music does stand apart from our culture, whatever the reasons might be.

Though it's good to see, as we shortly will, that classical music doesn't have to stand apart. Because what it faces now, in a quickly changing world, is far more challenging than anything it faced in centuries past.

I can think of two reasons why classical music might lag behind the rest of culture. First, people form a deep emotional bond with music, and thus perhaps are more troubled when they hear music going in a direction they're not used to, than when they see a painting doing that, or read a novel that upsets them. Contradicting this, though, might be a survey done in the 1990s by the American Symphony Orchestra League (now the League of American Orchestras), about what people in the core orchestra audience like about orchestra concerts.

Essentially they find the music uplifting, and even inspiring (which was a relief for the League, which worried that people might go to concerts largely for social reasons, to see and be seen). But along with this came a curious, almost touching discovery, about what people in the orchestral audience think about other arts. Many people in this audience also go to the theater, but a surprising percentage of them get upset when a play deals with unpleasant subjects.

So now we see people tied to classical music who (or so it seems) might like to avoid anything upsetting in the culture around them. We might wonder, then, if – rather than a deep bond with classical music evoking a wish that the music wouldn't change – it's the conservatism of classical music that attracts certain people to it. Or in other words that people who bond with classical music might do it, at least in part, because the music – precisely because it stands apart from our culture – is more or less guaranteed to be comforting.

A second reason for classical music's special status might be its cost. Large classical music events – orchestra concerts, opera performances, choral performances – are expensive to produce. And since, especially in past centuries, it's been the established powers in our society that have the money classical music needs, it's hardly a surprise that classical music has often avoided anything radical.

We can see that happening if we roll back the clock to previous centuries. What we find – if we look at the place music held in the culture of past eras – is something I haven't seen others talking or writing about, though it's hard to believe I'm the only one who's noticed it. If we go back before the 20th century, we *still* see deep disconnects between classical music and the society it functioned in, even though classical music clearly was far more central than it is now, even though it was used for worship and for entertainment, even though you couldn't go to church without hearing it, even though young Victorian women played classical music on the piano in every genteel drawing room, and even though music from Verdi's operas was played (at least in Italy) on barrel organs in the streets.

Despite all that, classical music lived in a conservative space. Go back to the 18th century, and while you'll find writers who were skeptical of both social forms and religion, you won't find classical pieces based on their work. You won't, for instance, find oratorios with skeptical, sardonic texts by Voltaire.

Mozart might have written some jokey music, for private use, with sexy texts, but you'll never find a Voltaire line like this one, anywhere in 18th century music: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."

Certainly you won't find a line like that in any large 18th century choral work. The people with money to pay for those pieces – typically monarchs, or princes of the church – were locked into the established world, and weren't about to present anything radical.

[But don't think there weren't freethinking composers.

[Beethoven was one, and so was Brahms. Brahms wasn't necessarily a Christian, and offended some of his friends by choosing Biblical texts for his Requiem that didn't mention Jesus.

[Beethoven definitely wasn't a Christian, in the last part of his life. His religious yearnings, which were very strong, would now most likely be classified as "new age." But he never wrote music that set out his true religious views. Instead, keeping to the practice of his time, he wrote Christian religious works, including two Catholic masses, one of them truly huge, the *Missa Solemnis*, which he poured his heart into. In only one place in that piece did he show his true thoughts. When he came to the line in the mass about acknowledging one holy Roman Catholic church, he evidently disapproved of it, and buried it so deep within the music that the words can barely be heard.]

Moving into the 19th century, we don't see operas that deal with the subjects we find in novels of that time – for instance poverty, so vividly painted in Dickens, or the minutiae of bourgeois life, which we find in Flaubert, or the unruly urban life of Paris, pictured so explosively in Balzac. The rule in 19th century opera was – in an odd prefiguring of classical music today -- to present stories set in the past, typically the middle ages or the renaissance, involving kings and queens, doomed medieval heroes, and doomed heroines.

And again the reason might have been money. Opera was expensive. And though it was often produced as private enterprise – in Italy, for instance, impresarios rented opera houses, and hoped to make a profit selling tickets to the operas they presented – the most crucial ticket-buyers were the aristocracy, and no opera that displeased them was likely to succeed. Opera also might be censored by the government, because opera productions were prominent entertainment, and might seem dangerous if they seemed to call for any kind of social change.

But as time passed – as the industrial revolution made the world more prosperous, as the power of the aristocracy diminished, as democracy spread, as radical ideas caught on, as culture began to change more quickly than it ever had before – then, at least briefly, classical music did catch up with the culture around it. Wagner's operas were a touchstone for radicals in politics and art. And it's no accident, I think, that Wagner – exiled from Germany for taking part in a revolution, and unable to get performances of his new pieces, because they were musically so radical – conquered the music world from the outside, persevering until social forces moved in his favor (and, of course, until he found a patron).

And at the turn of the 20th century, radical music moved into the mainstream. Wagner, by this time, was wildly popular. Richard Strauss could write an opera, *Salome*, full of decadent sexual excess, and watch it enter the operatic repertoire, even if it was banned in several places, including New York. (An infallible sign, of course, that something important was going on.)

Move ahead two decades, and we get to the jazz age of the 1920s, which might be the time when popular culture as we now know it emerged, taking over the world with unstoppable verve. But there wasn't much thought, at first, that popular culture could threaten the classics. And so classical composers took a delighted interest in the new sound of jazz, putting it into some of their pieces. Which isn't to say that Jazz swept through the classical world, but it did leave its scent in a few repertory works, *Rhapsody in Blue*, to take an obvious example, and of course other Gershwin pieces, but also in music by Ravel, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and many others.

After that, though, classical music pulled back once again, and retreated from our culture. The continued explosion of popular culture into the 1930s and the 1940s – movies, radio, popular songs, Fred Astaire – left little trace in the concert hall. A modern feeling swept through the other arts, and took root, eventually, in the arts mainstream. But not in classical music! I've seen lines around the block for a Jackson Pollock show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But classical music still centers – as we hear it in major concert halls – around romantic emotion, and anything modern is marginalized.

And, as I've said, even when popular forms of new music arose – when the minimalists found a new audience of their own, in the '70s and '80s – the mainstream classical world barely noticed.

But most of all, classical music stood apart from changes in everyday life.

(To be continued)

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Other Rebirth reading:

[Outline of the book](#). Brief but thorough. Newly revised, and subject to ongoing changes.

Chapter one:

[A riff on chapter one](#). "Rebirth and Resistance." What the first chapter of the book is likely to say. Fairly long. Brings together, in revised form, the four riffs on chapter one that I put on my blog. (See below.)

[Riff on chapter one -- shorter](#). For those who want a shorter read. Many details, subtleties missing. But also some small revisions, maybe making a few things clearer.

Chapter two:

[Riff on chapter two](#), "Dire Data," in which I document the quantifiable part of the classical music crisis.

[shorter version](#)

Chapter 3

[second part](#)

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