

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

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Chapter 5 – The Myth of Classical Music Superiority (part one)

(not the final text, but a riff on what this chapter will say)

Once, at least in the west, pretty much everybody thought that classical music (by which of course I mean western classical music) was the best kind of music. Routinely it was called “good music,” “art music,” or “serious music,” reflecting a belief that other kinds of music weren’t artistic, or serious, or even good (or at least not good on any high level).

But now times have changed, our culture has shifted, and people who think classical music is superior are now a small minority.

Or at least they are in the culture at large. But in the classical music world, they still have some influence, and that causes trouble. If classical music is going to survive, it will have to take its place among all the other kinds of music we’ve got right now, coexisting with them, learning from them, being influenced by them (just as happened in centuries past, when classical music was shaped by all the music around it)—and above all not claiming to be better than they are. (Other musical styles, of course, will continue to be influenced—as they’ve been for decades—by classical music.)

People who insist that classical music is superior make it harder for this to happen. So we need to understand why they’re wrong.

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The first problem with their belief is very simple. It’s easy to argue that *any* kind of music might be superior, virtually any kind at all.

All you have to do is make appropriate assumptions.

For instance, suppose someone thinks that mainstream, mass-market pop is the best music. Maybe this will seem crazy to people who pride themselves on their fine musical taste (and here we’d get agreement from two otherwise warring constituencies, high-culture purists and rock critics.)

But the argument can be made. Mainstream pop might be the best music because it brings people together, uniting them around the culture they share, around feelings they have in common.

Now, maybe you think that isn’t convincing. Maybe you think the culture these people share isn’t worth much. Or maybe you think music could easily be bad, even if it brings people together in a good way. Which would mean—and this isn’t unreasonable—that musical value and social value aren’t at all the same thing.

But that, as we'll see, backs us into a corner. Because, again as we'll see, defenders of classical music often say that its musical value has a moral component, or in other words that precisely because of its musical value, classical music can make us better people.

And if that's true, then maybe the reverse also works. If mainstream pop music does some good things socially and culturally, if it really does bring people together—in good ways—then maybe it has musical value, too. Since we seem to think that musical value has social consequences.

And if we resist this idea too strongly, what does that say about us as people? Carl W. Wilson, a Canadian rock critic, turned that question on himself in a brave little book called *Celine Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*. Celine Dion, of course, is one of the biggest mass-market pop stars, thoroughly vilified by highbrows for (among so much else) her huge (and, for many people, commercial and cloying) hit "My Heart Will Go On."

Which gets even more despised because it comes from what many people thought was a commercial and cloying movie, *Titanic*.

But now we have a social and moral problem, if we hate this song, because people loved it with unusual depth and passion. Pop radio stations always could tell when showings of the film got out, because people would call on their cell phones, requesting the song. That may never have happened before. Should we assume—dare we assume—that everyone who loved this song is somehow inferior? Or ethically and morally misled? Maybe some of them were admirable citizens, far more active for the common good than many of us are.

Here's where Wilson comes in. Since he's a rock critic, he's more or less required to hate Celine Dion, a hate magnified in his case, because she, too, is Canadian, and looms even larger in Canada than she does elsewhere.

Wilson decided—bravely—to examine that hate, to see if he could turn it around, to try (as sympathetically as he could) to discover why people like Celine Dion, to talk to her fans, and try to give himself their ears, and their hearts.

As he ponders a variety of aesthetic, musical, and cultural factors (bringing in more philosophy and cultural theory than we'd normally find in classical music criticism) he starts to wonder whether his own musical taste, which he's proud of—he prefers what he calls "maverick art"—might cut him off from other people, whether it functions (in his words) as "self-servingly segregating and undemocratic."

He quotes Lawrence Levine, whose writing about "sacralized" art—art that serves not just elite purposes, but begins to seem like something untouchable and sacred—is well known:

Art can just as legitimately stand near the center of common experience and give its audiences a sense of recognition and community.

I remember lying on the beach in the summer of 1964, when the Four Seasons' "Rag Doll" was the Number One hit. When it came on the radio—innocent, generous, soaring, irresistible—people all around me turned up their transistor radios, and I felt that I'd joined them, as the song warmed all of us.

Nick Hornby, the British novelist, writes about a moment like that. His best-known books are *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, because both were made into sharp and affectionate movies, but—though I wouldn't call him a populist—he's also written with great verve about soccer and pop music. I wouldn't call him a populist, because he's largely got a rock critic's taste, preferring songs that never make the pop charts.

Still, he had this moment, as he describes in a challenging short essay on Nelly Furtado's hit "I'm Like a Bird," in his book *Songbook*:

I was sitting in a doctor's waiting-room the other day [this was in London], and four little Afro-Caribbean girls, patiently sitting out their mother's appointment, suddenly launched into Nelly Furtado's song. They were word-perfect, and they had a couple of dance moves, and they sang with enormous appetite and glee, and I liked it that we had something in common, temporarily; I felt as though we all lived in the same world, and that doesn't happen so often.

Try having a moment like that with classical music. Yes, it might happen sometimes. But not every day, not in a doctor's office, not with little Caribbean girls.

Which suggests that one answer to the question "Which kind of music is best?" would be "Best for what?"

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But now we can get a little more highbrow, and look for a moment at jazz. Suppose we wanted to prove that jazz is the best kind of music. Or, as would be more likely, given the way people think about these things, suppose we'd completely convinced ourselves that jazz is the best, but now wanted to show why we were right.

Above all, we might want to prove that jazz is better than classical music.

So what would we say makes jazz superior? Almost certainly improvisation.

Improvisation lies at the heart of jazz. It's almost completely absent from classical music. Most classical musicians can't improvise, or think that they can't. Some are afraid even to try.

But improvisation, we might say, if we were fierce jazz partisans, is essential for music. It keeps music honest. It has a moral dimension. It's spontaneous, authentic. When you improvise, you're true to yourself. You commune with other musicians, as all of you improvise together, creating something bigger, better, and deeper than anything any of you could do on your own.

As one of the greatest jazz musicians, Max Roach, once said:

In classical music, only two people are important, the composer and the conductor. Everybody else is a serf. In jazz, a thing of beauty is created collectively with everybody getting to express an idea. And that reflects what democratic society is—or should be.

Which might be offensive to people in classical music. They might shout—and not without truth—that the same democratic participation happens in classical performances, even if musicians are all playing from the same written score, and haven't created their music themselves.

A veteran orchestra player once told me how delighted he'd get, when one of his colleagues—playing a piece that they'd all played together many times—would do something new, inflect a phrase just a little differently, emphasize a note that hadn't been emphasized, surge over a gorgeous melodic arch with just a little more passion than ever before. When this happens in chamber music, where just a few musicians are playing, inspirations like these change a performance, as the other musicians immediately respond. Which means they do what Max Roach described.

(The same thing might also happen in an orchestral performance, but because so many musicians play the same music together—and because they have a conductor, who controls much that goes on—there's less room for it.)

Which doesn't mean Max Roach is wrong, at least not from his point of view. What he's saying, I think, is that he values this instant give and take more than classical musicians do. Classical musicians value it, but typically think that the written music they play—which sets limits to their spontaneous flights—is far more important. It's music, after all, by great composers, music whose value transcends the musicians who play it. Their role, as often they'll say, is to realize the composers' intentions.

Roach would say that this isn't enough.

These debates can turn violent. Pierre Boulez—the composer/conductor who when he was young ferociously slammed anything he thought wasn't modern enough, and now, older and mellowed, is one of classical music's untouchable names—he hates improvisation.

He even wrote this:

Often...improvisations are nothing more than pure, sometimes bizarre samplings of sound that are not at all integrated into the directives of a composition. This results in constant arousal and appeasement, something I find intolerable. . . . [E]verybody arouses everybody else; *it becomes a kind of public onanism*. [My emphasis]

So here we have a paragon of classical music rectitude, foaming at the mouth, just about, over something a paragon of jazz rectitude, someone just as revered, thinks is the key to all music.

Everyone makes assumptions, even Pierre Boulez. Even Max Roach. Everyone has biases. And they play a huge part whenever we try to say what kind of music is best.

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But maybe some biases are better than others. Maybe Boulez is right. Or maybe Max Roach is right. Surely all music isn't equal. Surely, even within each musical discipline, whichever one you endorse, some music is better. Beethoven is a deeper composer than Massenet, Thelonious Monk a more profound musical thinker than Buddy Rich.

Nobody says that preferences like these aren't valid. So maybe the same kind of thinking, taken further, could show us that classical music really was better than jazz. And certainly better than mainstream pop.

But—without denying the possibility, at least in theory, that these arguments might be made—I want to point out a problem with actually making them.

And that's that the musical choices we're making have cultural meaning. Any set of beliefs belongs to a culture. So if you think your beliefs are the best ones, you're also saying—or coming close to saying—that your culture is best.

Which then takes you into shark-infested waters, the sharks in this case bearing names like cultural imperialism. Or, shudder, even racism.

Or also political correctness, if you're skeptical (as surely we should be) of any facile declaration that all cultures are equal.

But even if we don't swim with sharks—or don't choose to talk about doing it—there's also a simpler problem. How do we know that our music really is best? Do we know enough about other musics, and especially those we reject, to be sure that we can back up our argument?

Often we don't.

Suppose someone says that western classical music is better than classical Indian music. It seems uncomfortable just to write that. What a huge assumption, what an awkward stretch from apples to oranges!

But suppose people really did say this. It would be fair then to ask them how much they know about Indian music. Can they hear what's going on in it? Can they hear what people in India hear?

I'd be skeptical.

Indian music, to start with, uses many different scales, called ragas, each of which, in Indian culture, has its own emotional temperature, and thus feels different from other ragas (much as, in the west, major and minor keys feel different).

So can people who think western music is better really tell one raga from another? Can they feel the emotional differences?

Can they follow the rhythms of Indian music, which in many ways are more complex than the rhythms that westerners know?

And can they—moving now beyond Indian music—hear the complex rhythms in African drumming? Can they feel the long rhythmic cycles on which Tunisian music is built, made up of patterns lasting more than 100 beats? Can they hear the microtones that help to define the many Tunisian scales?

And if they can't do these things, how can they know that western music is superior? They may believe in its superiority, but they can't have experienced it, because they haven't experienced whatever quality non-western musics have.

Now, someone will tell me I'm tilting at windmills, that no one these days would dare argue that western music is best.

And maybe that's true. But people do insist that (western) classical music is better than pop. They carry on, as I've heard and read them do, very often, about how pop is manufactured music, created only to sell. Or about how it's primitive, using only three chords.

But do the people saying these things know anything about pop? Very often not, as we'll see. Many pop musicians make music that never gets on the pop charts, and isn't meant to. They create it as art.

And many pop songs use more than three chords. Many that use just three chords (a lot of blues-based rock, for instance) use them in unpredictable ways. And pop music, in the rock era, doesn't root itself on musical structures build from sophisticated harmony, the way that classical music does. Other things are going on.

Many people in classical music don't know these things. They don't know there's a vast literature—popular, critical, and scholarly—about pop music. A man I know, at one time a highly distinguished classical music critic (he's since moved on to other things), once told me that pop musicians "take no care with what they do." (This common belief—another way to say that pop music is bad—sits curiously with the idea that it's manufactured for commercial success. Surely, to make the music good enough, on its own terms, to succeed, someone needs to take care with it.)

I told this critic that he'd never say such a thing, if he read the writing about pop music published in the very large newspaper he wrote for. Because any profile of any good pop musician will detail how much care they take with their work.

His answer? Said in a sheepish tone: "The pop writers here all tell me that, too."

People who say classical music is better than pop music—and that pop music is truly bad—may be more politically correct than people who say that western music is better than music from India, or Africa, or China, or Japan. But they can be just as irresponsible.

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Other Rebirth reading (also linked from [here](#)):

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

Riffs on chapters in the book:

Chapter One: Rebirth and Resistance.

[A riff on chapter one](#). 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: Dire Data (in which I document the quantifiable part of the classical music crisis.

[Riff on chapter two](#),

[shorter version](#)

Chapter Three: The Culture Ran Away From US

[Riff on the first part of chapter three:](#)

[Riff on the second part](#)

[Riff on the complete chapter](#)

Chapter Four: What Classical Music Is

[Riff on chapter four](#)

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