

Say You Want a Revolution

What if classical music had a 1960s-style revolution? In an essay based on themes from his forthcoming book, *Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music*, **Greg Sandow** looks at where classical music is now, and proposes some new directions.

Here's a paradox. There's an important book that anyone interested in the evolution of classical music should read—and it doesn't mention classical music at all.

This is *Pictures at a Revolution*, a study by Mark Harris about a 1960s upheaval in Hollywood, published in 2008 to great acclaim. And yes, the title is of course a classical music reference, a play on the Mussorgsky piece all of us know. But any overt mention to classical music stops right there. So what could the classical music connection be? What can Mark Harris teach us about changes—positive changes, changes that might bring us vibrant growth—that we could make in classical music right now?

Harris starts in 1963, with a magazine art director in New York who slips away from his desk and heads off to a movie theater to see (for what might have been the twelfth time) François Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim*. The film is now a classic, but in those days played only to a cult audience.

Now move ahead a bit. The cult audience grows. The art director mad about Truffaut—collaborating with a friend equally obsessed with European films—writes the screenplay for *Bonnie and Clyde*, another movie we might take for granted today, but which when it was released in 1967 was an astonishment, a shock, a surprise—a breakthrough film that brought the emotional ambiguity and grown-up sexuality of European mov-

ies to Hollywood. It gets a dozen Oscar nominations, and a revolution breaks out. Other films influenced by Europe (*The Graduate*, for instance) are released. A new breed of moviegoer—young, informal, very '60s—lines up to see these new films. *The New York Times* fires its film critic, because he doesn't understand the new style.

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Time magazine pans *Bonnie and Clyde*, and then retracts its review, declaring that it had not just been wrong, but drastically wrong.

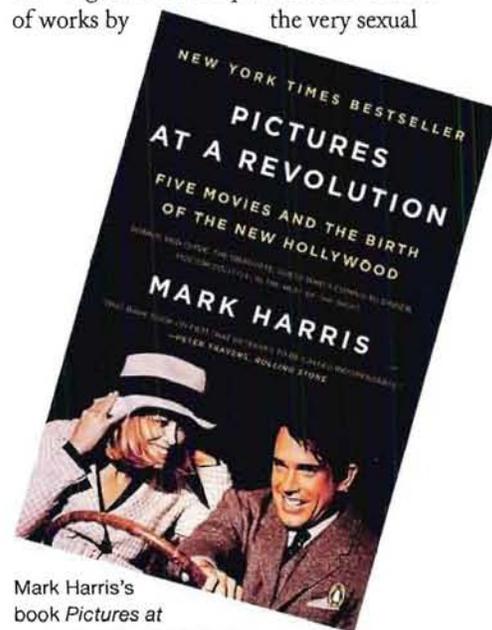
So what's the classical music connection? It's that classical music never had a '60s revolution—the kind that happened not only in the movies but also in pop music, painting, politics, race relations, and endless other areas of life. Our world changed forever, becoming freer, more informal, more creative, more spontaneous. But in classical music we went on playing Bach and Beethoven. And wearing formal dress. You'd think we turned our backs on the rest of the world on purpose.

Of course we changed in some ways. The early-music movement grew, bringing with it changes that might not mean much to the world outside, but mean a lot to specialists. Some mainstream orchestras now play Bach without vibrato. Mahler symphonies joined (or rejoined) the repertoire, maybe echoing the '60s, since

Mahler, with his wild, uneasy yearning for transcendence, is almost psychedelic.

But even these incremental changes kept classical music largely focused on the past, on composers from the past, traditions from the past, and behavior and emotions from the past.

This isn't to say we shouldn't play Brahms and Beethoven, that their music (along with all the great past masterworks) shouldn't be preserved. But look what happened to museums. They preserve the past, but they had a revolution of their own, and joined our changing culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has a costume collection, established, as it happens, before the 1960s. Now it focuses on fashion, and not long ago had a show on the influence of superhero costumes on top designers. This was featured on the Met's website as one of the top three attractions at the museum—right next to Raphael and an exhibit of works by the very sexual



Mark Harris's book *Pictures at a Revolution* examines how Hollywood embraced the cultural revolutions of the 1960s—and revived an industry that seemed out of touch.

contemporary artist Jeff Koons.

Can we imagine any major orchestra doing the musical equivalent of shows like that?

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 winners were old-style musicals like *The Sound of Music* instead of taut, truthful films like *The Hurt Locker*. Maybe then the movie audience would in large part be older people—just like the classical music audience.

And what if classical music really 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 our audience now be young?

Many of us think that the classical music audience always has been old. And so it may well be a shock to learn that this isn't true. Certainly it was a shock to me. One day some years ago I was browsing in the library at The Juilliard School, where I'm on the Graduate Studies faculty teaching courses about music criticism and about the future of classical music. On one shelf I saw a book entitled *America's Symphony Orchestras and How They Are Supported*. I was fascinated. Here, I thought, would be data on how orchestras functioned many years ago.

The book, written by Margaret Grant and Herman S. Hettinger, was published in 1940, and in it I found the results of a 1937 study of American orchestras. The orchestral audience, Grant and Hettinger explained, hadn't been a focus of that study, but, even so, audience surveys had been conducted at concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Grand Rapids (Michigan) Symphony. The audience in Los Angeles had a median age of 33, while in Grand Rapids the median age was 28.

I was astounded. Like so many others, I'd thought the orchestra audience always was old. Could I trust these surveys? One thing struck me. The authors, recounting their results, didn't seem

surprised. They talked about the young audience calmly, as if this was what they themselves were seeing when they went to concerts.

Later I found other studies saying the same thing. The archivist of the Minnesota Orchestra showed me an unpublished survey done in 1955, when the institution called itself the Minneapolis Symphony. Half the audience back then, the study said, was under 35. And in a pioneering 1966 book by William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, I found data from the 1960s showing that the audience in those years—in every field of the performing arts—had a median age of 38. Baumol and Bowen note, with some interest, that people apparently stopped going to performing arts events as they aged—the opposite of what might be expected now.

You can find links to scans of portions of these studies, on a page on [my blog site](#).

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The truth seems inescapable: the classical music audience used to be quite young. A sociologist friend showed me studies he'd collected from the 1970s, which show the audience growing older. (These studies come from various regions of the U.S., and now are out of print.) And in 1982 the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) began to track all of this, recording the aging of our audience from the '80s to the present day.

Why has our audience aged so greatly?

My Generation

The aging audience reflects a growing gap between classical music and the rest of our culture. Younger people find that classical music doesn't reflect the world they see around them. And I don't mean only the simpler aspects of their world, things like hit TV shows and chart-topping pop music. I mean that it barely reflects current culture at all, including serious current



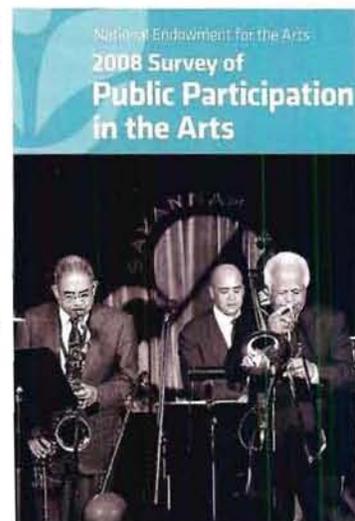
The BBC series *Maestro*, homepage shown here, was a reality show on which celebrities competed to become orchestral conductors. Despite an overexcited tone typical of reality shows, the series made classical music up close and personal for millions of viewers.

art (which includes a lot of serious pop music) and serious current thought.

Here's what I mean. You go to a classical concert, and—if you know the music well, or read the program notes—you find yourself contemplating what Berlioz might have learned from Beethoven. Or, if the *Pastoral* Symphony is being played, how peasants in Beethoven's time were frightened by storms. You sink into the culture of the past. Younger people might not find that gripping. Older people, on the other hand, started coming to classical concerts when Beethoven, Berlioz, and storm-fearing peasants mattered to many more people. They're used to thinking like this.

In the '60s, most of our population had

The most recent Survey of Public Participation in the Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts indicates that orchestra audiences are both aging and shrinking as a percentage of the country's population—a decline shared by all the performing arts. The League of American Orchestras' Audiences Demographic Research Review revealed similar findings, employing different research methods.



grown up in the old culture. People of all ages went to classical concerts. Flash forward a decade or two, and many people who are now adults grew up after the '60s, after our culture decisively changed. To these people, the culture of classical music didn't make much sense. And the NEA data reflects this. In the '80s and '90s, people born in the '60s stopped going to classical concerts. Flash forward again, and still more of our population falls into the new camp. And more of the classical audience—since not many new people are now coming into it—is older.

This doesn't bode well for our future, as the latest [NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#) and the League of American Orchestras' [Audience Demographic Research Review](#), both released in 2009, very clearly show. The percentage of adult Americans who go to classical performances has fallen nearly 30 percent since 1982—except, that is, for people 65 and above, who were already in their twenties when the '60s cultural revolution hit. But not just our numbers are threatened. It's not just that our audience very likely will shrink. What's worse is that classical music—as it recedes from our culture—doesn't seem much like art. Art, to quote James Joyce, forges the uncreated conscience of our race. It mirrors, nurtures, and helps to explain the blending—and clashing—of the outside world with all that's within us. It tells us, very deeply, who we are.

But how can it do that if it's cut off from the present day? Yes, there's contemporary classical music, but how large a part does it play in our concert life? Compare serious theater companies, half of whose productions are by living playwrights. Go to the theater and very likely you encounter the world that's around us. Go to a classical concert and—you don't. People outside the classical world can be forgiven for asking themselves if we're offering art or only nostalgia.

So what can we do about this? Music education, which we'd all love to see restored, can't be the answer. Kids will learn about classical music. Maybe they'll play it, maybe some of them will love it. But when they get older, the culture gap will



George Lange

The 2004 documentary film *Music from the Inside Out* reveals the richly varied lives of Philadelphia Orchestra musicians. In the film, violist David Nicastro poses with two favorite possessions: viola bow and motorcycle.

hit, and—no matter how much they loved playing Bach when they were twelve—they'll keep their distance from classical concerts.

And we ought to want more than that. Why should we only initiate people into the classical music world that we know now? Why don't we change the whole

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game? Why not try for a new, up-to-date revival of long-past days when, in the 1920s, teenage girls lined up at the stage door of the Metropolitan Opera to swoon over Geraldine Farrar, a gorgeous soprano and silent-film star? Why not, in some contemporary way, bring back the 1940s, when the NBC network established an orchestra for Toscanini and broadcast its concerts on radio and later on TV? Or the '50s, when college kids, sitting outside in the spring, jumped up and ran to a concert hall when they were told that Jascha Heifetz was going to play? Or we could try to bring back 1962, when *Life*—then the most popular magazine in America—

commissioned Copland to write a piano piece and printed it for pianists to play.

Classical music needs to have its long-delayed '60s revolution, or a contemporary equivalent of it. How could we evolve into a bright new world in which people listen to Mozart as avidly as they read Jane Austen, where Mozart takes his place alongside vibrant, exciting—even popular—contemporary work?

New World Order

The good news is that this revolution has already begun. The classical music world has been changing, faster and more thoroughly than anyone yet has catalogued, though the changes haven't always reached flagship classical music institutions. But I've seen, in New York at least, concerts where thousands of younger people flock to hear new classical music—for instance, the annual Bang on a Can Marathon, which runs all day and sometimes all night, and the Wordless Music series, which typically mixes classical music with indie rock. Younger classical composers write music in which pop and classical blend, mirroring the taste of other people their age who no longer draw a line between high art and popular culture. Nico Muhly is one lively and successful example, with commissions including one from the Metropolitan Opera. The Chicago Symphony Orches-



George Lange

The documentary film *Music from the Inside Out* tracks Philadelphia Orchestra Principal Trombone Nitzan Haroz, who also performs salsa music at a nightclub.

tra recently appointed two artists of this kind, Mason Bates and Anna Clyne, as composers in residence. At the National Orchestral Institute at the University of Maryland, student musicians are put in charge of a summertime concert and—alongside serious contemporary pieces—play rock arrangements and improvisations, things that could easily attract an audience their own age.

And in Britain, two years ago, the BBC launched *Maestro*, a much talked-about reality show on which celebrities competed to become conductors. Yes, it was full of dumb jokes, but it radiated love for classical music, and the judges—including two famous conductors, Sir Roger Norrington and Simone Young—were serious people. From their critiques of the contestants, even people new to classical music could learn more about conducting than they ever would from more formal symphonic telecasts.

In localities seemingly everywhere—London, Boston, Austin, you name it—classical musicians are playing in clubs, often in new and intensely personal ways. In Denver, for instance, a group called Telling Stories mixes chamber music with literary readings of stories and poems

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written by the musicians themselves.

So how can orchestras be part of this? Simply, I think, by joining in. If one legacy of the '60s revolution was to tear down walls, then why not invite amateur musicians to sit in with your orchestra, as the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra did this past February, with spectacular success? Why not invite members of the audience to sit onstage with the musicians, as the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra has done in Houston?

The principal trombonist of the Philadelphia Orchestra—as we know from *Music from the Inside Out*, the 2004 documentary film about the orchestra's musicians—plays in a salsa band. Why not invite his band to open for the orchestra at a subscription concert in Verizon Hall? Same with the University of Maryland violist I know, whose band plays mash-ups of Vivaldi and hip-hop. Why shouldn't she open for the orchestra at her school?

Why not commission a composer to create a piece like Britten's *Noye's Fludde*, an opera he wrote for an entire town to perform? Britten included parts for a handbell choir and for beginning violinists, who play only on open strings. Today, I think, we'd include those violinists, but also local cabaret singers, heavy-metal bands, early-music groups, and kids doing wonders with laptops and iPods, creating electronic sounds.

When we play Brahms, why not bring his symphonies alive by having orchestra musicians tell the world—in personal, even intimate terms—what those symphonies mean to them? In my Juilliard course on the future of classical music, I ask students to do this with pieces they're playing. One violist gave us all goose bumps when—in a heartfelt voice—she told us how the beauty of the slow

movement of Beethoven's Op. 74 String Quartet had brought together warring members of a quartet that she played in.

Or conductors might speak; some already do. A world-famous conductor once told me backstage how hard he'd tried to perfect his performance of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Finally, on that very night, everything had worked. Suppose he shared that with his audience—and even, again in the spirit of breaking down walls, announced in advance which passages were hardest for him to perfect. If he'd done that, everyone at his concerts might sit on the edge of their seats, eager to hear if those passages came out right.

We can bring our audience into the artistic conversation. We can invite them to react, to debate our performances right on our websites. We might even dare to try something shocking, though it wouldn't be shocking in many other fields. Let people—again on our websites—remix classical pieces, forge creative or even outlandish mash-ups of orchestral performances, including maybe those your orchestra gave just last week. (Put aside, for the moment, questions of rights.) Then play the mash-ups right alongside the originals!

Would these things rob classical music of all its dignity? Instead we should ask what our idea of dignity means. Does it serve, in the world we have now, to magnify our music? Or does it keep people away, setting up barriers between the world outside and the deepest meaning of the art that we love? **S**

GREG SANDOW is a composer, writer, and consultant who works on projects about the future of classical music. He's a member of the Graduate Studies faculty at Juilliard, and is artist in residence at the University of Maryland, where he's helping music students develop concerts that will reach audiences their own age.

Got an opinion? Join the discussion!

Should orchestras shift and change to stay in tune with the times? Or should they stick with the tried and true? Click the Discussions tab at [SymphonyOnline](#) to comment.