

# Who Is Our Competition?

*This article was adapted from a talk given by composer and thought leader on the future of classical music Greg Sandow at last summer's Savvy Musician in Action workshop at the University of South Carolina. Knowing who your competition is—whether it's other musicians, concerts, or non-musical events, activities, or even brands—is essential to creating and maintaining a successful career, in whichever genre you specialize.*

There's been a huge change in classical music. Once we had a guaranteed audience, one we knew would be there year after year. Now we don't have that. So we have to find new people—new people to come to our concerts, to buy our recordings, and to support us in every other way. And when we do that, we of course have competition. The people we want to reach already have full and busy lives. They're giving their time and their dollars to things that aren't classical music.

How do we change that? It's possible to do, but, as we'll see, doing it may well take us far outside our classical music comfort zone.

To understand why we have to leave our comfort zone, we should turn the clock back, and look at how things used to be. Years ago—and it's hard to pinpoint exactly how far back, because the change has been gradual—if you were a string quartet, or a wind quintet, or any other kind of chamber group, your main competition would have been other groups like yours.

You'd compete with them for management, and for bookings, which your management would get for you. Maybe also you'd compete for residencies, for grants, and for first prize in competitions. But, and this is the crucial point, you would not be competing for your audience. Your audience was out there. It wasn't your concern. The people who booked you would take care of it. They had an audience, and this audience, years ago, was dependable. If your bookers presented you in concert, an audience would come.

Which of course had advantages for you. With no need to think about your audience, you could focus on your music. (And, of course, on keeping your contacts strong within your field—a given, in any area of life and in any era.)

But now—as a first step, perhaps, in feeling good about how things have changed—let's look at some disadvantages the old arrangement had. To start with, your audience was not your own. You mostly didn't know the people in it. So you couldn't go to them for funding, for communal warmth, for feedback, or for word-of-mouth promotion. You couldn't sell recordings to them or mugs and t-shirts with your group's name and logo on them, thus boosting your income and your visibility. You couldn't blaze a new artistic trail, or at least you couldn't do it easily. You had to play the music that your bookers thought their audience would like. You couldn't go out on your own, to find the people who'd want to hear what you liked.

And if you couldn't get management or couldn't get booked, you were stuck. On your own, there wasn't much you could do to make your career happen. You didn't control your own destiny. You didn't need control, back then, you could say. But wouldn't you have been empowered if you had it?

Which brings us to the present day. The old audience is fading. It's not as if the people who go to classical concerts will vanish overnight. But still there are fewer of them than there used to be.

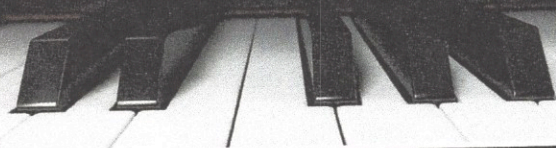


“UNLIKE  
ANY  
FESTIVAL  
THE WORLD  
HAS EVER  
SEEN  
OR HEARD”

DownBeat magazine

GILMORE  
KEYBOARD  
FESTIVAL

APRIL 29 TO MAY 14, 2016  
THEGILMORE.ORG



“The people in our hoped-for audience already have art in their lives. Because art, these days, doesn’t only live inside the arts.”

And they’re older. Studies from past generations show a much younger classical audience, one where up to half the people in it might be under thirty. But that was long ago. In 2008, the National Endowment for the Arts released a scary statistic. Its studies found, in that year, that only one age group went to classical performances as often as similar age groups did in the past. And that was people sixty-five and over.

To get the younger people back, we need a new audience. We should look at it as a great opportunity. Our new audience can truly be our own, will support and promote us, will buy our recordings and our merchandise, and, best of all, will follow us down new artistic paths. We’ll be in charge of our careers. We’ll control our destiny.

But now we have to leave our comfort zone. Because, as I’ve said, the things our new people care about are very far from classical music, things like sports, fashion, pop music, films, and hot locavore restaurants. And of course great new shows on TV, which are especially hot competition for us, because, as has been widely noted, TV is in a new golden age.

So really we’re competing with everything in today’s culture, which means we even compete with big national brands, with Coca-Cola, Apple, or the Toyota Prius. All these things claim time and attention from the people we want to reach. And here’s where things might really get difficult, because we might believe—or some of us might—that we have an advantage in this competition. A Prius, after all, is only a Prius. But we’re bringing people art.

There’s only one problem with that. The people in our hoped-for audience already have art in their lives. Because art, these days, doesn’t only live inside the arts. Long ago—starting at least in the 1960s—it started migrating outside the arts, and now it’s found throughout our culture, in all the things our new audience already cares about: fashion, films, pop music, TV, plus graphic design, children’s books, and so much more. So when we offer people art, we compete with art outside the arts.

Now, very likely, I’ll get some pushback from people who’ll say that art in popular culture can’t be deep and powerful, as classical. And that can be a loud debate. But, I’d think, somewhat an obsolete one, because studies long have shown that most of us are omnivores, engaged both with high and popular culture. And younger people may not draw a line between the two.



## CARNEGIE HALL

Weill Music Institute

April 9–15, 2016

# Kronos Quartet

## Workshop for String Quartets

Application Deadline: November 17, 2015

Four young string quartets will be chosen to participate in a weeklong workshop led by Kronos Quartet, which will explore new works commissioned as part of *Fifty for the Future: The Kronos Learning Repertoire*.

Apply now to participate in this **tuition-free** workshop for musicians ages 18–35.

Visit [carnegiehall.org/workshops](http://carnegiehall.org/workshops) or call **212-903-9741** to apply or for more information.

Workshops and master classes are made possible, in part, by Mr. and Mrs. Nicola Bulgari and The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation.



But let me suggest another way to look at this. How do we approach the people we want to meet? Are we courteous to them? Are we generous? Do we care about the lives they lead? Do we think they're decent, caring people, with brains and curiosity, who might just know things that we don't know?

I'd hope our answer to those questions would be yes. Which means we shouldn't talk as if our taste in art is better than anybody else's. Instead we should acknowledge that people have fulfilling art experiences without us.

Our job then is to show that our art can be fulfilling, too. How we do that is, of course, a giant project. We have to learn to live in the space where other people are, to thrive in it, to bring our art to it. And in fact we're learning how to do it. To cite just one example, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment—one of the world's leading period instrument ensembles, based in London—has for years rebranded itself as "The Night Shift," and plays late-night shows for excited crowds of younger people.

So this giant project—recreating classical music for a new era—can be triumphant. But as I close, let me offer what I hope will be a helpful thought. As we move into the wider world, we need to pay attention to design. We haven't always done that. Classical CD covers, just for instance, can be terrible—drab and ugly.

But now we're competing with Apple, *Game of Thrones*, and also, very crucially, with all kinds of indie art, which always looks like it belongs in the world we're trying to reach. So we need to meet those standards. We need to look like players in the bigger world. Everything we put out—websites, flyers, posters, even the ambience of our performances spaces—has to look like it belongs with everything our new audience sees in everything that now interests them.

Which doesn't mean we have to be slick. Or that we have to spend a ton of money. Good design comes in many forms, and we can look rough, down home, alternative—whatever best conveys what we are in our hearts and what we want the world to think of us. And designers, too, come in many flavors. Some of them are young, just starting out. Some good ones still are students, but are vastly talented. If we really want good design, if we're determined that we'll have it, then we'll find it at whatever price we're able to pay.

With this, I'll end. But let me offer one last thought. This time of change, as I've said, is a time of tremendous opportunity. So we should aim high. We should set our sights on big success, on the most authentic art, the art that we most care about, and on the biggest audience.

And then we should go and get it.

*Greg Sandow is a consultant and writer who specializes in the future of classical music. He teaches at Juilliard, and will re-emerge as a composer with a concert of his music in the spring.*