

## What is Classical Music?

(some thoughts and definitions, assembled for

*Classical Music in an Age of Pop*)

### ***Some dictionary definitions, from leading British and American dictionaries:***

*The American Heritage Dictionary:*

Of or relating to music in the educated European tradition, such as symphony or opera, as opposed to popular or folk music.

*The Chambers Dictionary:*

Orchestral and chamber music, etc, as opposed to jazz, folk music, etc.

*Random House Dictionary:*

Music of the European tradition marked by sophistication of structural elements and embracing opera, art song, symphonic and chamber music, and works for solo instrument.

*Oxford English Dictionary, first edition:*

Of music: having permanent interest and value

### ***Some thoughts from various people:***

*Laura Seay, a violist who took this course:*

There are many things in my life that are fulfilling, but while the viola is under my chin and my arms are flapping about, somewhat like a chicken, I am most excited and fulfilled playing steak-and-potatoes music. I also enjoy and sometimes even love playing appetizers, desserts, palate cleansers, but to cut to the chase, I enjoy playing steak-and-potatoes music the most. What does this mean? Brahms sonatas, Beethoven quartets, Bartok quartets, these are pieces that, when I play them, I feel like a tiny part of me has grown, has learned something new and has changed. And this happens every time I play.

*Alex Mansoori, a singer who took this class:*

The joy of being involved with something larger than you are.

*Kim Laskowski, NY Philharmonic bassoonist:*

The best thing about being a musician is carrying around works of art in your head all the time.

*from Scanning the Dial, a blog about public radio by Mike Janssen and Marty Ronish*

It's often been observed that lovers of classical music speak of it as a refuge from the stress of everyday life, a sanctuary of timeless treasures.

*from Robert Paterson's Weblog, a blog that often talks about public radio:*

[Classical radio stations] offer a Refuge. They offer a Refuge in a world that is overwhelming. A world that is usually loud and crass. A world that often isolates us from others and more importantly from our very selves.

#### **Excerpts from two books on the value of classical music:**

*from Lawrence Kramer, Why Classical Music Matters:*

Classical music trains the ear to hear with a peculiar acuity. It wants to be explored, not just heard. It "trains" the ear in the sense of pointing, seeking: it trains both the body's ear and the mind's to hearken, to attend closely, to listen deeply, as one wants to listen to something not to be missed: a secret disclosed, a voice that enchants or warns or soothes or understands, a faint echo of the music traditionally said to hold the world itself together in a kind of harmony....

Such listening is perhaps particularly important at this historical moment, the very moment that seems to be most in danger of losing it. In a world that moves at digital speed, a world increasingly crowded by people, ideas, and agendas, a maelstrom of technological change, ecological danger, and cultural conflicts that are often virulent even when they manage, ever more narrowly, to avoid violence, the ability to listen deeply, to open the labyrinths of the ear and be sounded out by the voices that address us, may be the very ability we want the most.

*from Julian Johnson, Who Needs Classical Music?*

Music as art is, at its best, redemptive: it gives back to us a sense of our absolute value that a relativist society denies....Music-as-art affirms our absolute value not by reflecting our "self" but by involving us in a process by which that self comes to

understand itself more fully as a larger, trans-subjective identity. In this way the value of music-as-art is essentially ethical.

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[Classical music is] distinguished by a self-conscious attention to its own musical language.

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The claim of classical music is that, in order to make musical sense, it requires concentrated attention from start to finish. In some ways it is comparable to a rather involved novel or film; if you skip a few chapters or leave the room for a while, you may well lose the plot or narrative thread. One can put a novel down (literally) and take it up again without losing the narrative sense. Until the availability of sound and video recording in the home, this was not true of music or film. But most of us now possess the technical freedom to do just this. I can pause Beethoven halfway through a symphony, answer the telephone, and return where I left off. In some ways this is like putting the book down and beginning again in the same place; but in other ways, it is like answering the phone in the middle of making love and trying to begin again from where you left off.

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Even the most educated listener is unlikely to follow the elaboration of parts in a six-part fugue or spot the perfection of his inverted and retrograde canons. Perhaps [Bach's] music is like the ornate roof of Milan Cathedral, intended for the pleasure of God alone, and certainly we can take satisfaction from his music even if we understand nothing of these formal complexities. But how do we understand such extraordinary elaboration in a secular world? Today it may well be less meaningful to us that Bach, like Beethoven, Stravinsky, or Messiaen, contented himself that all this was ultimately "to the glory of God." But even in the most secular terms, such works are an invitation to participate in a formal complexity and sense of elaboration that exceeds that of our everyday lives. Sometimes entering a cathedral or coming across a particular landscape offers something similar: the invitation to participate in a larger reality, something that exceeds our own immediate experience and thought.

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Popular culture's refusal of art comes close to an affirmation of the everyday as a closed universe, a confirmation of things as they are, an ideological capitulation to immediacy. A rejection of art's difference from the everyday is thus a rejection of the central claim of an enlightened humanism: that the condition of our lives and our being is held in tension with a sense of a greater condition and a greater being.

### ***Critiques of classical music:***

*from Robert Palmer, an important pop music critic:*

My feeling is that if you want to listen to something primitive, you should listen to Mozart. Because if you hear Mozart, there's almost no rhythmic variation in it, it's 1-2-3-4 forever. No cross-rhythms or polyrhythms to speak of. The way that music's interpreted, all of the tonal qualities of the instruments tend to be very clean and pristine. There's no kind of textural variety like you would get in the blues, in terms of roughening the texture out on certain words, playing around with the pitch on certain words. Nothing like that in Mozart.

*about African music, from Christopher Small's book Music of the Common Tongue:*

In the first place, [African] music is not set apart in any way from everyday life but is an essential and integral part of it, and plays an important role in all aspects of social interaction and individual self-realization....

Secondly, rhythm is to the African musician what harmony is to the European – the central organizing principle of the art. In practically all African music making there is a rhythmic polyphony, with at least two different rhythms proceeding in counterpoint with each other, held together only by the existence of a common beat; even the downbeats will quite likely not coincide in different parts. This emphasis on rhythm implies also the existence among Africans of what has been termed a 'metronome sense' – an ability to hear the music in terms of that common beat even when it is not explicitly sounded. It is assumed that musicians, dancers and listeners alike are able to supply it for themselves, making it possible to create rhythmic structures of a complexity and sophistication unknown in European music....

Thirdly, it is assumed that everyone is musical, that all are capable of taking part in some capacity in the communal work of music making....

Fourthly, improvisation is widespread and richly developed.

*Christopher Small on classical music:*

*from Music of the Common Tongue:*

The kind of performance in which preformed elements are at a maximum and spontaneity at a minimum is probably a professional symphony concert as it takes place in a great concert hall in a western city. The building itself is interesting, since it will have been built, and be maintained, at considerable

expense, a showpiece set aside entirely for the performance of music, as nearly soundproof as possible and visually isolated from the outside world; its very nature tells that what is to take place there is an occasion set aside from everyday life. Leaving the foyer, where socialization can take place, we enter the performance space itself, which also, before a note has been played, tells us much about the nature of the event which is about to take place. The seats, in their orderly rows, do not facilitate socializing; this is clearly not a place for conversation, or for communication between members of the audience. The rows are curved and the floor raked to center the lines of sight on the middle of the performers' platform, to which we, the audience, have no access; the social barrier which separates us from the musicians is more insurmountable than the actual physical barrier which is formed by the edge of that platform. As we wait for the appointed hour (classical concerts start dead on time, latecomers being excluded until an interval) the musicians come on to the platform, having entered the hall by a separate entrance and having remained out of our sight up to this point. They are dressed in uniform style, which reduces their individuality, and they ignore the audience, taking their seats casually and tuning their instruments without so much as a gesture to acknowledge our presence. On the conductor's entrance they come to attention, and from then onwards there is no mistaking that he is in charge of the proceedings; as long as he is on the podium no further direct communication takes place between players....

*from Musicking:*

The participants in a symphony concert are bringing into existence, for the duration of the performance, an ideal industrial society, in which each individual is solitary and autonomous, tidy, disciplined and stable, punctual and reliable, the division of labor is clear, the relationships are impersonal and functional, and the whole is under the control of a charismatic figure armed with clearly defined authority. The music played is drawn from a repertory which, like the ideal industrial culture, is standardized the whole world over and played in a standard manner....Above all, it is a society in which producers and consumers of the commodity, music, fulfill clearly defined and separate roles. In the ceremony called a symphony concert, which brings this ideal society into existence, the values of performers and listeners, and their sense of who they are, are explored, affirmed and celebrated. It need hardly be said that, for those who do not share these values, neither the concert-hall ritual nor the symphonic drama are likely to be of much interest.

*an excerpt from John Seabrook's Nobrow:*

As a kid I thought that becoming an adult would mean putting away pop music and moving on to classical, or at least intelligent jazz. The taste hierarchy was the ladder you climbed toward a grown-up identity. The day you found yourself putting on black tie and going to enjoy the opening night of *Aida* as a subscriber to the Metropolitan Opera was the day you crossed an invisible threshold into adulthood. But for the last five years, pop music had provided me with peaks of lyrical and musical transcendence that I long ago stopped feeling at the opera and the symphony, those moments when the music, the meaning, and the moment all flowed together and filled you with the "oceanic feeling" that Freud said characterizes powerful aesthetic experience.

A month earlier I had had an oceanic experience at a Chemical Brothers' show that my friend had taken me to hear at the Roxy. The Chemical Brothers were two young musician/programmers from the dance/Ecstasy subculture of Manchester, England, who had begun by deejaying in the clubs that flourished in the dark satanic mills left over from the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, and that were now dark satanic malls of late-twentieth-century street style.

We waited in a long line outside the Roxy for an hour, freezing, while scalpers in big down parkas cruised by murmuring "whosellingticketswhosellingticketswhoselling-tickets." As usual when we went gigging, we were just about the oldest people there. Going out to hear hot new pop acts was one of the greatest cultural pleasures of our grown-up lives. These intense moments of ecstatic communion with youth stood out from our otherwise predictable diet of respectable culture—interesting plays, the Rothko show, the opera, and, sometimes, downtown happenings at the Kitchen or the Knitting Factory. Afterward, we would go home to our wives and kids and our tasteful diet of highbrow and middlebrow and lowbrow culture, each in its proper place, but here in the uncategorizable present of pop music, we felt alive in a way we never felt when experiencing elite culture.

Finally we got inside and worked our way down into the crush of kids on the dance floor. Most were trying to figure out the optimum time to drop the drugs they had brought along, so that they could peak when the music peaked. After a long time somebody walked out onto the darkened stage and a buzz rippled through the crowd. An evil-sounding pulse started to beat, pumping a black squishy liquid out of a computer and swirling it around the room. Then came a sampled sentence from a Blake Baxter song, repeated four times: dabrothersgonnaworkitout. With each set of four beats a new computer-modulated drum sound entered the mix, and on the last set a distorted-sounding guitar made an appearance. Because the music was made on synthesizers it had the geometric regularity of code, and this made it possible to feel intuitively where the lines of sound were headed and when they would converge. It was like reading a sonnet: you anticipated the shape of the form before the content arrived. Such a sonic convergence was coming up. All the rhythmic variations and distortions that had

previously been at counterpoint with one another were about to come together into what promised to be an amazing blast of unified sound.

My friend turned to me and yelled, "It's about to get REALLY loud . . . !" ...

Then—THHHHRRRRLIUUNKKK—enlightenment struck in the form of a solid cleaver chop of sound to the breastbone—from their hoooooouuuuusse to our house—that knocked us backward like bowling pins....

Then another flash—POP!—revealing a new kind of icon: the information artist at his console, reeling with sounds, styles, light and insight, the jittery agonized struggle of the cerebral cortex trying to absorb the digital information pouring into it. The heat in the club, the frenzy of the crowd, the potency of the joint my friend and I were now passing, all produced an intense cultural experience, a Nobrow moment—neither high nor low and not in the middle, a moment that existed outside the old taste hierarchy altogether. That moment was still fresh in my mind as I rode the [Virgin Megastore] escalator down to Level B1, gently sinking into the bath of Buzz, heading for the Imports section, where I hoped to find a compilation CD of the legendary Chemical Brothers shows at the Heavenly Social in London.

The megastore's Classical Music section was also down here, to the right of the escalator. Encased inside thick glass walls to keep out the raucous sounds of the World Music section, just outside, where salsa, Afro-Gallic drumming, reggae, and Portuguese fado mingled in a One World jambalaya, the Classical Music section was an underground bunker of the old elite culture, its last refuge here in Times Square. There were a few discreet videos, usually showing James Levine conducting or Vladimir Horowitz at the piano. Inside these thick glass walls of silence you could feel the sterility of the academy to which the modernists had condemned classical music, by coming to believe that popularity and commercial success meant compromise. All the most original innovations of the modernists, the electronics and the atonal variations and the abrupt yaws in pitch had long ago been spirited away from this room and found popular expression in the jazz and Techno sections in other parts of the store. Meanwhile, by continuing to put out, year after year, recordings of the world's great orchestras performing the standards—in spite of the fact that the difference in performances was only interesting or even discernible to a very few people—the classical music industry had all but destroyed itself, imprisoning what might be a vibrant genre in the forbidding confines of a room like this. The classical music room in the megastore was almost always empty: a good place, I'd discovered, to ring up purchases of pop music when there was a line upstairs.