

Where We Stand

The Classical Music World Today (revised, 2010)

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(first published on my [blog](#), and assigned to my Juilliard and Eastman classes on the future of classical music)

How it used to be

Go back to the 1950s or before, and the classical music audience was young, with a median age not much over 30. I've seen this from studies done in Minneapolis in 1955, and in Los Angeles and Grand Rapids, MI in 1937. Plus there's a large 1966 study, which shows an audience with a median age of 38, for all forms of the performing arts, classical music included.

This was a classical music world very different from the one we know. Around 1920, a Metropolitan Opera soprano had a following of young girls, who'd come to her performances and scream. Mystery novels from the 1950s might have detectives who turn on the radio and listen to Brahms. A film about Jascha Heifetz, made in the '50s, shows him playing a surprise concert on a college campus. Students are sitting around on a lawn, and when they heard that Heifetz is playing, they all get up and run inside to hear him.

TV networks broadcast classical music in the '50s. Classical records sold many more copies than they sell now, even with a much smaller population. And in 1962, as you'll see from your reading, the most popular magazine in America commissioned a piano piece from Aaron Copland, and printed it for pianists to play.

Numbers

Starting in the 1960s, the classical music audience started to get older. Studies from the '70s show it aging. In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts began studying the classical music audience, and has shown it aging from then until now.

The classical music mainstream, as we've known it all these years, has been shrinking. There are many fewer classical music radio stations than there used to be, less media coverage of classical music, and many fewer new releases — at least of serious classical music — by major classical record labels. These labels, in fact, have to release crossover records (hybrids of pop and classical) in order to survive. There are many small classical labels (more, in fact, than there were in past decades), but most of these operate as nonprofit entities, and often require the musicians they record to pay the costs of recording.

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Hard data on other things can be hard to find — you have to ask around, assemble sketchy press reports, and nose out things that haven't been publicized (or are quite literally kept secret). And in fact it's a big failing of the classical music business that we don't keep accurate statistics. Or, in some cases, any statistics at all. If you want to know how the American auto industry is doing, you can easily find out how many cars Ford, Chrysler, and GM sell, not just now but year by year, for decades into the past. Information like that just isn't available for classical music, despite all the talk of a crisis (which, from any rational point of view, ought to make people eager to know what the facts really are).

But I hear from managers that there are fewer bookings for classical artists. And ticket sales have been falling, apparently for quite a while. (With a bump upward over the past couple of years; more on that later.)

More than a year ago, the League of American Orchestras (formerly the American Symphony Orchestra League) made public a steady drop in attendance at orchestra events, beginning in the mid-1990s. Private statistics from our largest orchestras show a long-term fall in ticket sales beginning around 1990, a drop so large, cumulatively, that by itself it might account for recent orchestral deficits. It's so large a drop that the uptick in the past two years only begins to reverse it.

For opera companies I don't have comparable data. But Peter Gelb, who took over the Metropolitan Opera a year ago, publicly acknowledged a serious drop in ticket sales before he came on board. And the Chicago Lyric Opera, which used to sell more than 100% of its seats (subscribers would return tickets they couldn't use, and the company would resell them), was down, last I heard, to around 92%. (The Met, which used to sell around 92% of its tickets, fell far below that before Peter Gelb took over.)

Nobody seems to gather overall numbers for chamber music, but in recent years I've heard anecdotal accounts — a couple of dozen by now, I'd guess — from chamber music presenters about their decline. A couple of years ago I got more precise numbers from one of these presenters, located in a large American city (not New York). Each year for a decade, I was told, this group had lost 10 to 20 subscribers. Which doesn't sound like much until you do the math. The group at the time I got this information had around 700 subscribers, so if we assume an average drop each year of 15, that means that in 10 years the subscription sales had fallen 18%, from 850 to 700. That's a big drop, which certainly leaves the group worrying about its future.

But here's the scariest piece of information. This fall, the National Endowment for the Arts released new numbers, showing that the percentage of adult Americans who go to classical music performances has declined nearly 30% since 1982 (the year when the NEA started tracking this data). And that decline now affects all age groups, except people over 65.

The League of American Orchestras then did their own study, and found that the NEA numbers were correct. The League also came to a radical conclusion, which they very bravely stated in public (even though some of their member orchestras — some of the large ones — initially didn't want this to be said). They concluded that the classical music audience now is both aging and shrinking, and that in the future

it won't be replaced. Or, rather, that it won't be replaced unless orchestras make some major changes in the ways that they operate.

The NEA and the League also found that the percentage of people who do all kinds of things has been declining. Fewer people go to the movies, fewer people go to sports events. And the decline in the number of people buying tickets for things in the arts – concerts, plays, museum shows – is actually smaller than some of the declines in popular culture.

Does that mean the arts are still, at least comparatively, in good shape? Not really. If we have declines in participation more or less across the board, in all kinds of activities, that means we're seeing a major cultural change, the emergence of a new world in which there are far more choices than ever before. The major TV networks are threatened. Newspapers might disappear. And since so many things are changing, the decline in classical music attendance isn't likely to be temporary. It's likely to grow, and to keep on growing for quite a while.

Why don't people notice?

Why don't more people notice what I've just recounted? Partly because the data is hard to uncover. Some of it is kept private, because large institutions don't want to frighten their donors. The press, meanwhile, doesn't ask tough enough questions. If an institution reports a rise in ticket sales, classical music writers don't normally ask which concerts the data is for, or how it compares with data for the past decade. Are we seeing a continued rise in sales over many years, or what might be a temporary blip, a brief upturn in the midst of a decline?

It's also hard to measure a long-term decline simply by going to concerts and looking to see how many seats are empty. "I go to the X Symphony a lot," a student said to me last year, naming one of America's foremost orchestras. "And the houses look full to me."

But "full" is a relative term. If the X Symphony sold 95% of its tickets 15 years ago and sells 85% now, of course they're feeling that decline on their bottom line. But someone looking around a concert hall that's 85% full can honestly say that they don't see many empty seats.

As for the NEA data – corroborated by the League – the percentage decline in classical music attendance is balanced by a growth in population. A smaller percentage of people go to classical performances, but there are more people, so the percentage decline doesn't translate into a decline in absolute numbers. Almost the same number of people go to concerts now as went in 1982.

That's why we don't – yet – see concert halls with gaping ranks of empty seats.

But this isn't good news. What we *should* be seeing, given the rise in population since 1982, is a large rise in attendance.

There has in fact been a small rise in ticket sales, over the past three or four years, at least at some major orchestras. That happened in large part because the orchestras started to get scared, because of

declines in ticket sales, and started marketing their concerts more aggressively. The marketing worked. More people came.

It's clear, though, that these increased ticket sales came largely from the existing audience. And the League – when it corroborated the NEA data – found that fewer people were buying concert tickets. So the increase in sales came from people who already were going, but who now could be persuaded to go more often than before.

That's good news in the long run, because the numbers go up a bit. But it's bad in the long run, because the old audience is shrinking, and the boost from some people in it going more often will soon enough be wiped out by continued shrinkage.

Final note: On top of all this comes the recession. Ticket sales, at the start of this season, were looking fairly bad. And economic problems of course make everything we talk about here look even worse.

Funding

This can be a long discussion, and I won't try to go into much detail here. But classical music institutions have — in recent years — often run deficits. Some of these are persistent. (They vary, of course, from institution to institution.) One reason for the deficits might be the decline in ticket sales. But another is ongoing trouble raising funds. People simply aren't as interested in classical music as they used to be.) Foundations, in particular, from everything I've heard, are losing interest in classical music. One prominent person in the orchestra field said outright, in a conversation I was part of, that at a gathering of foundations hardly anyone would even attend a meeting on why orchestras should be funded.

Lately we've seen some very large gifts from private donors. An orchestra or opera company might be having bad financial trouble, and someone will give millions of dollars to make things better. Is this good news? Maybe not! A healthy institution doesn't need to be bailed out with a large gift.

And these gifts -- by their very nature -- won't easily be repeated. There are only so many donors who can afford to give huge amounts, and those who can aren't likely to do it more than once. What happens, then, if financial troubles continue? Who's going to bail the Metropolitan Opera out two years from now?

Changes

Of course the classical music world doesn't sit quietly, watching itself die. There's activity, sometimes almost wild activity, as people try to make changes. These changes take two forms, which I'll call conservative and radical, though I don't mean to dismiss the conservative ones.

Conservative changes preserve the classical repertoire, as we've known it for so many years, and also at least the broad outlines of the performance styles we're all familiar with. But musicians now might talk to the audience. The stage might be lit in more or less dramatic ways, to reinforce the mood of the music. Musicians might dress less formally. Musicians might be available before or after a concert to talk

to members of the audience. The audience might be given chances to participate — to vote, for instance, on which of three new pieces they like best.

Radical changes go further. String quartets might play in clubs. A new music festival (I'm thinking of the annual Bang on a Can marathon in New York) might happen in a large public space, with free admission, and the audience welcome to come and go as it pleased. Composers (Steve Reich and Philip Glass started this in the 1970s) might form their own ensembles, and find their own audience, outside the classical music world. New music might start sounding like pop music, with electronic instruments and a beat. Classical musicians turn into entrepreneurs, looking for any audience they can find, especially on the Internet. Classical music is combined on concerts with dance music and alternative rock. Performance styles, even for standard repertoire, become freer, more personal, and more informal.

The radical changes seem, at least to me, the most important. They make classical music look, feel, and even sound like what goes on in the rest of the world. And what's most impressive is — as we'll see, later in the course -- that they really do attract a new, young audience.

The big problem, though — as I've already said about the surge in new music events outside the classical mainstream — is that these new-style concerts (which I like to call "alternative classical") don't make much money. So they're not ready, yet, to replace the classical music mainstream. How can we maintain classical music on the scale at which it currently operates, if concerts get smaller, and attract a younger audience which won't have the money for large-scale donations that the current, older audience has? I'm not saying that a new financial model won't evolve, but we haven't seen it yet.

Culture

Here comes the real wild card in the present situation — the evolution of our wider culture, which doesn't favor mainstream classical music at all.

Here's one way to look at it. Find a photo of the crowd at a baseball game in the 1940s. You'll see men in suits and ties, wearing hats. Now go to a game today. You'll see men and women, people of all ages, dressed (to put it mildly) informally. I'm not going to say that classical concerts haven't gotten more informal — certainly you see more people dressed casually in the audience — but orchestra musicians still wear formal dress, and the formal atmosphere of performances (the entrance of the concertmaster, followed a little later by the conductor) has barely changed. The rest of the world has evolved; classical music has only just started to. Younger people, for this reason, as time goes on, will find classical concerts less and less plausible. They just don't look or feel like the rest of the world.

To some people, that's of course a virtue — classical music can seem like a refuge to everything unpleasant about modern life. But in practical terms, it's a disaster. And even artistically it's questionable. If classical music is cut off from bad things in modern life, it's also cut off from good things, and loses whatever roots it ever had in the vitality of our evolving culture. In past centuries, it was a contemporary art, reflecting whatever was going on in the world. It can't pretend to be that now.

Another change, of course, is the rise of popular culture, and especially — at least to me — the rise of new forms of art, inside the pop music world. When I was growing up, in the 1950s, most people believed that classical music was the only legitimate art music. Even then, that idea was dubious. It left out jazz, which (with the rise of bebop, in the 1940s, with musicians like Charlie Parker) had moved far beyond mass entertainment (though even before bebop, musicians like Duke Ellington had every right to be ranked as serious artists).

But by the '60s, with people like Bob Dylan emerging, pop music changed. New styles emerged that weren't even popular. Classical music now had competition, and the competition was more lively, more vital, more about the present day, and more rooted in modern life than classical music knew how to be.

I'm not going to outline every major aspect of this change, whose effects — even though we take them very much for granted today — are profound. Suddenly classical music, along with all the other formal high arts (and in fact the very notion of "the arts"), starts to look old-fashioned. People today don't want to sit passively while they're fed art that they're told is superior. They want to participate. They want to make their own art, and in the wide and increasingly serious world of popular culture, they can do exactly that. Classical music — with all its rules, and all its assumptions of superiority, plus all the traditional idea that people need special education to appreciate it — seems stuffy, out of date, and even pointless. People don't mind the music (in fact, they're downloading it quite a bit), but the structure and ambience of the classical concert world now seems a little pointless.

I'll end with just one large consequence that might follow from all of this. And when I say large, I think I mean gigantic. It's all about funding. Classical music costs a lot of money. Major orchestras, for instance, have budgets ranging from \$30 million to \$60 million a year, and even higher. They can't earn that much money from ticket sales, so somebody has to give it to them. Up to now, that money has been available, from private donors, from corporations, from foundations, and from government agencies, even if the audience for these orchestras — the people who go regularly — make up only a tiny fraction of their cities' population.

How long can this continue? Once we understand that classical music isn't the only music that we can call art, how can we justify spending so much money to — just for instance — keep major orchestras functioning 52 weeks every year? Obviously, they ought to get *some* money; they keep alive a form of musical art that can't earn its keep in the marketplace. But should they get as much as they're getting? As time goes on, it might be harder and harder to argue that they should.

And I see signs that this is more than a theoretical discussion. The current level of funding for classical music — extravagant funding, some would say — has in fact been challenged, in newspaper essays and most notably in San Francisco, where a city official said publicly that he'd cut funding for the San Francisco Symphony because they paid their music director, Michael Tilson Thomas, very lavishly.

And a front-page story in the *New York Times* discussed a new consciousness in charitable giving. An economist has theorized that tax breaks for those who donate money may promote inequality. Why? Because studies show that only 10% of charitable donations go to causes that actually improve how

people live. The other 90% goes to things that rich people enjoy, and which are part of rich peoples' culture — new buildings for elite universities, and the arts. This doesn't mean that the benefits of these things don't spread beyond the rich; obviously they do, at least to some extent. But donations go to them primarily because the rich enjoy them, not because they're seen as any route to social betterment. And it turns out, according to the *Times*, that at least some wealthy donors are starting to see that this is true, and aim their giving away from classical music and other elite, expensive forms of art.

Second, and maybe even more important (as a symptom of a larger cultural change), is an evolution in the social structure of New York. For years the richest zip codes in New York were on the Upper East Side, where the old social, financial, and political elites were found. These were the people who, among many other things, supported the arts.

But now the money — along with political and social power — has moved. The richest, and most powerful zip codes are now downtown, in Tribeca. Does Tribeca support the traditional arts? Apparently not. The people who live there have much more modern taste, and they certainly don't appear to care about classical music. I asked around, and learned that at least one of New York's big classical music institutions has hardly any ticket-buyers from Tribeca. Which zipcode buys the most tickets (for this, and, I've found, other classical music institutions)? You guessed it — the Upper East Side.

So here we have what seems to be a tangible — quantifiable — emergence of the cultural change I've been outlining. The new generation of wealthy, powerful people in New York (and I'm sure this is echoed in other cities) don't support classical music the way the older generation did.

And if this is really true, where will classical music get its money, when the cultural transformation is complete?