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My Australia Talk

An outline of my keynote speech at the Australian classical music summit, which I gave on July 12, 2010. It's a good summary of what I think about classical music's future. I stressed that my thoughts were only about what I've known about in the US, and sometimes elsewhere, in Europe and the UK. I have no authority to diagnose problems in Australia, or to prescribe solutions.

The biggest problem classical music has now is that it hasn't kept up with our culture. Our culture has changed (has been changing for two generations). Classical music hasn't changed nearly as much. Our culture has become more informal, creative, and participatory. Classical music is only starting to move in those directions. It's still largely formal, handed down from above.

Two other cultural changes stand out.

First, popular culture has developed its own serious art. So we no longer can talk about classical music (and the other high arts) standing opposed to cheap mass entertainment. Classical music now coexists with subtle, complex new forms of musical art, which to a contemporary audience may seem more intelligent, and certainly are more deeply tied to contemporary life and thought.

Second, we're seeing the end of white, European hegemony in the world. This is more than a grandly vague, suspiciously PC statement. White, European-based culture really is losing its dominance, and it's natural that music that still largely reflects only white, European-based culture will lose its dominance, too.

And there's something else. Even western culture has now been infused with music that's largely non-European. That began when African slaves were brought to America. They fused their own music with the European music they heard in their new world, and the result was blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, rock -- the whole array of contemporary nonclassical styles, whose partly African origin shows in the largely nonclassical way they use rhythm. So even white people now take for granted a musical culture that now has a largely non-European core. (This is what we really mean, when we say that pop music has a beat.)

Tackling this problem

It's because classical music hasn't changed with our culture that we see all the familiar signs of trouble in the classical music world. Often these signs are discussed as if they themselves were the problem, but to me, bad as they are, they're really symptoms of something different.

It's a familiar list. Because classical music hasn't kept up with our culture, we now see:

- the aging of the audience (which, as I've often said here, has been going on for 50 years; go here for the evidence)
- declines in the number of classical radio stations, declines in media coverage, and in classical recording
- a change in what cities look for, if they want to attract up to date people -- they no longer need an orchestra or an opera company; now they want bike trails, cultural diversity, and a local band scene
- a decline in classical music ticket sales
- the sharp decline, reported by the National Endowment, and confirmed by the League of American Orchestras, in the percentage of adult Americans who go to classical performances
- a decline in funding for classical music, which looks like it will be worse in the future, because (as has been widely reported, most recently on the Crain's New York Business website) younger people with money don't donate to the arts.

Note the difference between my approach, and what I think is the more usual classical music point of view. The more usual view is that classical music is wonderful, and the rest of the culture has somehow lost sight of that. So what we need is classical music education in our schools, and lots of outreach. Once people get to know classical music, as they did in past generations, they'll come to love it.

My view is that classical music is way out of touch, and has to get more like the rest of our culture -- which (to allay a common fear) will make it smarter, not dumber.

Implications of all this

First: If classical music's problems are due to how far it strayed from our culture, then people in the classical music world must learn to understand the culture they're in. We have to learn to see the world as it appears to people who aren't into classical music. I don't think we've done that very well, and that -- to me -- is one of the classical music world's biggest failings.

Second: Music education isn't the answer. We're not going to renew classical music by teaching it in our schools. There are many reasons for this, but the simplest is that it won't work. Kids may learn to like classical music, but they'll also -- as is only natural -- get caught up in the larger culture, in which classical music doesn't have much to offer. Maybe some of them will go to classical performances when they're older, but it's hard to imagine enough of them going to replace the audience we have now. (It's also hard to imagine how, in the US, we'll ever get cities and states to put up the money for classical music education, given that money is short, and -- a rather serious stumbling block! -- people aren't interested in classical music in the first place.)

Third: There's a tendency, in the classical music world, to beat up on the media, to blame it for not covering classical music, and to demand more coverage. This won't work. Of course the media doesn't cover classical music. People aren't interested in it. To go to the media with an aggrieved sense of entitlement won't -- to put it mildly -- be convincing. If we want media coverage, we'll have to do things vivid enough for the media to want to cover, all on their own. (And this, in keeping with what I said in at the end of the last installment, means doing smarter things, not -- as many people fear -- dumber things.)

Fourth: In our current culture, classical music doesn't seem very interesting. It doesn't come across as a contemporary art, doesn't deal with contemporary life, doesn't probe into the contemporary world with powerful artistic impact, the way a profound TV series like *The Wire* does. It doesn't reflect the sound, the feeling, the thoughts, the emotions of our current world.

And there's something brain-dead about the way classical music presents itself. My favorite example: the instrumentation of orchestral works, as dutifully listed in orchestra concert programs. ("Three flutes, one doubling piccolo, three oboes, one doubling English horn, three clarinets, one doubling E flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet...") At least in our big orchestras, these lists don't correspond with what the audience sees on stage. The composer wrote the piece for four horns, two trumpets, and three trombones, but what's on stage are five horns, three trumpets, and four trombones.

Why? Because the principal horn and trumpet have the royal privilege of not playing some of the ensemble passages in their parts, so they can save themselves for their solos. An extra player sits on stage to play those passages. The top trombone part will sound better, in soft music, with two players on it instead of two.

These are fascinating details of orchestral life. But they're never explained to the audience. And meanwhile the instrumentation lists -- night after night, week after week, year after year -- don't correspond to what the whole world can see on stage, and nobody seems to care. If that doesn't show a disconnect between classical music and the world -- even with its own world! -- I don't know what does. We've ossified. We've forgotten that we're a group of people, doing things for other people, who may have thoughts about what we do, and may notice discrepancies in what we present.

The future

Classical music isn't going to die. It's going to be reborn, which I why I'm calling my book on the future of classical music *Rebirth*. Though the rebirth might in some ways be painful, because it'll involve some profound change.

The good news, though, is that the process already has started. Classical music has been changing on its own, becoming more like the rest of our culture. We see this in big organizations, smaller ones, and, sometimes explosively, from individuals. Performing musicians, for instance, or composers.

And this means classical music is getting smarter. It's getting more alert, more lively, more thoughtful, less ritualized, less ossified, more in tune with the other arts -- painting, theater, dance, poetry (not to mention more popular arts like film, fashion, and graphic design) -- and more in tune with our current lives.

It's becoming -- at last reflecting changes that started to happen in our culture long ago -- more informal, more transparent, more individual, and more creative.

In the future, I can imagine a classical music world in which at least half of all performances are of contemporary music, music by living composers. A classical music world in which the old masterworks find their place -- and, more important, their meaning -- by constantly being heard in the context of the music of our own time.

I can imagine new classical music that sounds like the music elsewhere in our culture -- classical music that often has a beat (as the works by many young composers already have), that reflects trends in jazz, pop, and world music, just as classical music reflected the vernacular music of past centuries. (Except a lot of what happens in jazz and pop and world music today isn't only vernacular -- it's art.)

I can imagine a classical music world in which people in the audience know what performers are trying to do -- in which conductors and soloists and chamber groups would explain their goals in a performance, state the difficulties each piece gives them, and lets the audience follow their success -- or failure -- in meeting those difficulties.

I can imagine a classical music world that reflects things in contemporary life, a classical music world in which (just for example) competitions take on some aspects of reality shows, because judges would state in public what they thought of everyone's playing, and in which musicians in the competition wouldn't simply play, but would be given challenges -- to play a piece twice, for instance, in two entirely different ways, or to play a new work they'd never seen before, in which the composer hasn't indicated tempo, dynamics, or articulation. We'd then see how much musical imagination the musicians had, not just how well they'd learned to play the music they've practiced.

I can imagine a classical music world that reaches beyond classical music and its standard audience, as my cellist friend Peter Gregson does in London, where he's resident artist at a members-only club whose members are rising, upscale, powerful people in media, exactly the kind of people we don't see going to classical concerts, or funding them. Peter also has released his first album, not on a classical label, but on a series Peter Gabriel curates for the high-end loudspeaker company Bowers & Wilkins. Peter Gregson, in other words, is going outside classical music, to reach an audience attracted by the wide-ranging taste of one of the most artistic musicians in pop music. In the future, I can imagine a classical music world in which everyone reached audiences of that kind -- in which those audiences would be the classical music audience.

And I can imagine a classical music world in which the playing of classical music is reinvigorated and transformed. A classical music world in which musicians discuss performance enhancements -- mood lighting, talking to the audience, projecting thoughts about the music on screens during performances, showing videos. And then decide not to add any of those things, but instead to play the music so vividly that no enhancement is necessary. For the old masterworks, especially, this would be a revelation. To rise to the occasion, to make everything in these pieces so clear, so

contrasted, and so dramatic -- or else so quiet, so probing, so rapt -- that nobody needed any education or explanation to follow what's going on, and so that even people (like me) who know many of those pieces by heart would sit up, open our eyes and ears, and hear the music as if we'd never heard it before.

That, to me, would be a profound kind of rebirth, and I'm looking forward to it with the greatest excitement.

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