

## 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.

### ***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.