

## CLASSICAL MUSIC IN AN AGE OF POP

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Greg Sandow

*phone: 917 797-4265*

[email me](#)

[my website \(needs updating\)](#)

[my blog on the future of classical music \(not active now\)](#)

[website for this course, with the week to week schedule, and links to all assignments](#)

### Why this course?

In this class we look at the future of classical music.

There are two parts to that. First is the crisis that classical music has been in for many years. How many years? One way to measure the length of the crisis is by the year I first began teaching this course at Juilliard, which was way back in 1997. There was a sense of crisis then, and that's why this course was started.

This is a crisis of an aging audience, falling ticket sales, classical music institutions having financial problems, and a sense many people have that classical music has lost its relevance in our society, because so few people care about it.

In recent years the crisis has gotten worse. In this course we'll read a document I prepared from newspaper reports, showing how many major orchestras have had financial problems so severe that they've cut their musicians' pay.

I want to note that what I've just said — and much of what we do in the course — is about conditions in the U.S., which since I'm American is of course what I know best. Though from what I've seen when I've traveled or worked with people in other countries —largely Europe, Britain, and Australia — and from what I've heard from students from other countries who've taken this course, I think things are pretty similar elsewhere in the world.

But the crisis — serious as it is — is only part of what I see when I look at classical music's future.

The other part is that, for many years, classical music has been changing, and to me the changes seem healthy. Most of us, I'm sure, know about many of them. At least in the U.S., there's a new emphasis on bringing classical music out of the concert hall and the opera house, and into the community. There's a search for a new, younger audience.

And we're accessible, more like what we see in the world outside classical music. Many performances are more informal than performances used to be. We talk to our audience. Some of us perform the great masterworks in new and more personal ways, and find ways to combine classical music with other musical styles.

There's an upsurge of diversity, with an emphasis throughout the field on female and Black composers and conductors (including Black and women composers from the past, who've been forgotten). This makes us look more like the world around us, where Black people and women have important roles. Just look at pop music, where Taylor Swift and Beyoncé are two of the biggest stars and most creative artists.

And there's an emphasis on entrepreneurship in classical music, on musicians making their careers in their own ways. I don't have to explain this in the course, since you have it in the Breakthrough Curriculum. But I'll note that it creates opportunities.

If you want to do something new with your music — even something not taught or done at conservatories — you can do it. You'll find that other musicians may be doing the same thing, and that there's support for all of you. Or you may find that you're the first to do something new and wonderful, and that the classical music world — and also a new audience — is responding to it, paying attention to you, getting excited about what you do.

So, yes, classical music has problems. But problems can create opportunities, and in a changing world, you might have a chance to live your dreams.

## Course outline

Here are the main topics we'll discuss in this course:

**The crisis in classical music:** We'll look at it in some detail. What caused the crisis? How bad is it? Will the audience disappear? Will classical music institutions go out of business? How wide is the gap between classical music and the rest of our culture?

**What classical music is, and why it's valuable:** If we want to save classical music, we need to know why it should be saved. It's not enough just to say that we love it. Why do we love it? What can it contribute to our world? Why should people who don't now listen to classical music give it a chance?

**Classical music in the past:** If you look at how classical music was many decades ago, you'll think you're in another universe. The audience was young. Classical music was an active part of mainstream culture. It was widely broadcast on the radio, and even shown on commercial TV. New operas — not many, but still a few — were produced commercially on Broadway, alongside plays and musicals. Classical music institutions could count on selling tickets without any marketing. Their audience simply came to performances, year after year.

And if you go back to the 18th and 19th centuries, you'll find that classical music wasn't as formal as it later became. Classical musicians improvised. And — to judge from written reports, and from early recordings — they played with winning individuality.

And the audience was lively. In Mozart's time, people applauded — during the music! — whenever they heard something they liked.

What can we learn from all of this? Could classical music again be as free as it was in the past? Would that help us find a new audience? Would we, as musicians, enjoy music more, if we felt freer, more spontaneous when we performed? And if we had a livelier connection with our audience?

**Pop music:** As we all know, pop music is everywhere, in everyone's lives, defining not just what people think music is, but what they think the world is, and who they themselves are.

In my experience — I've worked in the pop music world — pop music can be vastly creative. And it's a huge universe, greatly varied, with many artists who never make the pop charts doing important and influential work.

So what's its relationship to classical music? Is pop music — in all its great variety, all of its genres, all of its many subcultures — only entertainment? Or is it another kind of musical art?

### Fixing the crisis:

**Changes:** As I've said, the classical music world is exploding with change. We'll look at some of the changes, at some of the things that people have done to make classical music new again, to reach out to the community, and to find a new audience.

**Diversity:** In the midst of change, both in classical music and in the wider world, diversity presents a huge challenge. Or at least it does in the U.S. and in Britain, two multicultural societies in which the people involved in classical music (and especially those who run classical music institutions) have been largely white. In the past generation, and even earlier, there have been many Asians coming into the field, which is a definite change. But one thing remains the same. The most important composers we perform are white, European, and male. Does this have to change?

The answer coming from within the classical music field, at least in the U.S., seems like "yes." Classical music groups of all sizes, from the biggest orchestras to the smallest ensembles, are playing more music by women and by Black composers. And they're making plans to bring more people of color into classical music, both onstage and in the audience. We'll look at some of those plans, and try to judge how well they're working.

**Entrepreneurship:** In the midst of crisis and change, what can you do for yourselves, as students and in your professional careers? Can you help find a new audience for yourself, and for classical music?

We'll talk about entrepreneurial ways of doing that. And we'll end with a challenge. Can you imagine finding an audience that's completely your own? An audience completely yours, people who'd come to your performances or stream them, who'd even pay to do that, and who'd buy or stream any recordings you make. Not because they like the chamber music series or orchestra or opera you're part of, but because they like *you*.

I haven't seen this talked about in the classical music field. We talk, admirably, about being a citizen artist, and about bringing our music to a wider community. But could any of us become — even in a small way — a commercial success?

In my view, if classical music is healthy, this could happen. So we'll end the course by imagining how it could happen to us. Which doesn't mean you're required to do it! What you do in your career is completely up to you. But I think this is a useful exercise. Just to imagine how you could find our own audience, a fanbase completely your own.

*Important! You can see that I have ideas, sometimes strong ones, about the things we'll talk about in this course. And I'm sure you have ideas of your own.*

*If your ideas are different from mine, feel free to disagree with me. Nobody knows all the answers. And all of us, in our different ways, are working toward a future in which we hope classical music can thrive.*

#### **Assignments** (*full details will be posted later online, on the course web page, and on Canvas*):

This is a course in questions, not answers, so the most important part of our work will be the discussions we'll have in class.

But of course you'll have things to read, music to listen to, and videos to watch, all related to the topics we'll discuss.

After many of our classes, you'll have a short written assignment, in which I'll ask you to write something about things we discussed in class. I've found that this brings me closer to all of you, giving me a chance to find out what all of you think, and to respond to each of you individually. You'll post these assignments on Canvas.

You'll also have two informal short papers to write. I'll decide on the topics as the course proceeds, when I know you better, and have an idea about what I think you should work on, along with — and this is important! — what interests you.

#### **How you're graded:**

As I've said, the most important part of this course is what happens in class. I often present things there that aren't in your reading assignments. And beyond that, in our class discussions all of us (including me) can work out our thoughts on the issues we'll confront.

To me, this is the most crucial thing we do. So a large part of your grade will be based on class participation, though the papers and short assignments also count. If you feel shy in class, please don't be concerned. You'll find that I care about what you think, and that the other students do, too. After nearly 30 years of teaching, I hope I've learned how to create classes where everyone feels comfortable. I'll give you all the time you need to gather your thoughts, and to find ways to put them in words.

And in your writing assignments, what you say — your thoughts — matters more to me than your writing ability.

I'll break down the grades this way:

- Class discussion 50%
- Short Written assignments 25%
- Papers 25%

About what I'll look for when I grade you. There's knowledge I'll expect you to have, at the end of this course. It's what's in your assignments, and in things I'll tell you in class.

But what's more important is how you think about what we discuss. I don't want you to have my ideas. I want you to have your own. To help you develop your ideas — and to help me, too — I'll ask questions in class, often about things that aren't known yet, and we'll all work together to figure out how to find answers.

Among those questions: What's classical music's future? How can it find a new audience, and regain at least some of the popularity it used to have?

As long as you think seriously about everything we talk about, you can be sure you'll get a good grade.

**One last word:**

I want this course to be fun. I'll try to surprise you with some of assignments, and with music I might play in class. And if my years of teaching this course elsewhere are any guide, our class discussions might surprise all of us. Nothing is off limits, and no opinions are sacred, including my own.