

CLASSICAL MUSIC IN AN AGE OF POP *revised 3/2*

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*[the blog I used to write on the future of classical music](#)*

*[course overview](#)*

*January 24*

*Introduction to this course.*

I'll tell you about myself, and about the course. Then I'll ask you all to tell me about yourselves. And, above all, about why the course interests you. In the past, when I taught this course at Juilliard, I'd sometimes change what I taught, to respond to what students thought was important.

*January 31*

*The crisis in classical music*

Now we get more serious, and look at problems classical music is having.

For at least 30 years, the field has been having a crisis, marked by an aging audience, falling ticket sales, and a financial squeeze.

This week we'll study this, starting with a look at what classical music was like before the crisis started. When the audience was young, if you can believe that, and classical music was a lot more popular than it is now.

*Classical music before the crisis:*

reading:

Greg Sandow, "[Before the crisis](#)" (a post from my blog)

Greg Sandow, "[When opera was popular](#)" (another post from my blog)

To show you how young the audience once was, I've linked this blog post, which tells you what happened when Geraldine Farrar, a glamorous soprano, retired from singing in 1923.

Teenage girls — yes, teenage girls, her biggest fans — filled the Met Opera for her farewell performance, hanging a banner from the opera house balcony, throwing flowers on the stage, and mobbing Farrar in the street afterwards.

*The crisis begins, and grows:*

reading:

Greg Sandow, "[Portrait of a crisis](#)" (blog post)

Optional reading: Greg Sandow, "[Timeline of the crisis](#)" (blog post)

Here you'll see the classical music crisis unfold, step by step, from the late 1960s into the 21st century.

Greg Sandow, “[The orchestra crisis, 2008 to 2021](#)” (prepared for this course)

Here’s where the crisis starts to be very visible. Financial problems swept through major American orchestras, leading to bitter fights between orchestra managements and musicians. When musicians lost these fights, which they did every time, their pay was cut, and they suffered other losses. Orchestras had to cut their expenses, in order to survive.

*In the past few years, the crisis got worse:*

First, the pandemic made everything worse. Orchestras (and of course other classical music institutions) shut down. They stopped performing. Which put them in bad financial trouble. Normally, they make part of their income from ticket sales. Now that was gone. But they still had major expenses, for musicians’ pay and many other things. Orchestras had to pay these expenses, even with a major part of their income gone.

reading:

Julia Jacobs, “[New York Philharmonic Musicians Agree to Years of Pandemic Pay Cuts](#)” (*New York Times*, December 7, 2020)

Javier C. Hernandez, “[Pandemic Woes Lead Met Opera to Tap Endowment and Embrace New Work](#)” (*New York Times*, December 26, 2022)

Javier C. Hernandez, “[Met Opera Taps Its Endowment Again to Weather Downturn](#)” (*New York Times*, January 25, 2024)

*And then, two years ago...what happens when the audience looks like it’s vanishing?*

Orchestras and other classical music institutions were performing again, but for some of them, the audience they had before the pandemic didn’t come back. Some played to halls that were half full, sometimes less than that.

There weren’t news reports about this. And yet it happened, and surfaced sometimes in blog posts, tweets, and in at least one concert review. Then in May of last year there was a *New York Times* story about orchestra ticket sales getting better, and it did acknowledge how bad things were in the fall. Notice, though, that sales were still low, lower than they were before the pandemic. What happens if they stay this low?

reading:

Zachary Woolfe, “[Audiences Are Coming Back to Orchestras After ‘Scary’ Sales Last Fall](#)” (*New York Times*, May 23, 2023)

optional reading, about last fall’s ticket crisis:

Andrew Mellor, “[We Need To Talk About Audiences](#)” (blog post, August 3, 2022)

Mellor is a British journalist and critic. As far as I know, he hasn’t followed up on this blog post. But he was the first person I saw who called attention to the current audience crisis, which as you’ll see extends beyond orchestras, and beyond the U.S.

Greg Sandow, “[Something that seems serious](#)”

This link takes you to an issue of my newsletter. Scroll down, when you get there, to find the section with the “Something that seems serious” title.

Though of course you can read the whole newsletter, if you’d like. I love the photo of my son with a capybara, an adorable South American animal he loves. (He was 11 when he met the capybara. Now he’s 12.)

February 7

*What is classical music? Why should it survive?*

We don't often ask these questions, maybe because the answers seem obvious. Classical music is what we hear at classical music performances. And we take for granted that it has supreme value because of its unique power, both in the old masterpieces and in impressive new works.

But what if other people don't feel this power? Do we dismiss them as uneducated? Or can we find a new way to define classical music — one that shows why it might be unique, why it might do things no other music does?

And how do we talk about what classical music means to each of us personally?

reading:

[Some definitions of classical music, and praise for it, from various sources](#)

My own definition of classical music:

1. The music of the European tradition, with a long history, beginning around 1000 AD and continuing up to today, though with many changes.
2. Music that's planned in advance by a composer, and written down in a score that musicians follow when they play. This allows a composer to create music that unfolds in great detail over time, the way a novel or a film does.

I think the second part of my definition is important. People who don't listen to classical music read novels and watch films, and get caught up in their structure. Which they can talk about. But they don't know that music could engross them the same way. That shows how isolated classical music is in today's world.

Three statements by people in the classical music field, saying in different ways why we need classical music in our culture:

Anne Parsons (former President and CEO of the Detroit Symphony, quoted in a Detroit Symphony press release during the pandemic):

The power of music has served as an enduring beacon of hope and joy through one of the most uncertain eras of our lives. Whether it's helping us escape into the beauty of a performance for a short time or bringing us together in new and unexpected ways for collective appreciation and connection, music has once again proven to be essential. This is why we are so passionate about restoring the presentation of live music for our audiences, whether that's socially-distanced and outdoors or virtually in your living room with DSO Digital Concerts.

The musicians of the Met Opera (from their website):

On March 12, 2020, the Metropolitan Opera House went dark due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In a matter of days, life in New York City was robbed of its heart and soul — the culture that vibrates through the veins of the city and makes it what it is.

Manfred Honeck (music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony; from their website):

Music provides understanding between humans and can help to foster peace where there is hostility, fear or suspicion. Music serves as a bridge between one person and another. It is through music that we can learn from each other, build connections between people, spread understanding and learn to respect each other's beliefs and values. Not only do we expand our own individual horizons and learn about other faiths and ways of life, but it is also through music that we begin to see what we all have in common.

What would people outside classical music think of these statements? Would they be convincing?

February 14

*Classical music and the rest of our culture (1)*

Beyond everything tangible about the classical music crisis — behind the aging audience, falling ticket sales, and financial troubles — lies something I think is much bigger. It's a gap I see between classical music and the rest of our culture.

In my experience, most people today — and this includes highly cultured and educated people — have very little interest in classical music, and in their daily lives never even think about it.

Why is this? This week, we'll look at the culture outside classical music — and especially the musical culture — to see what makes it different from the culture we have in the classical music field.

*How important is classical music to the rest of the world?*

Here's a graphic showing [many musical genres](#), as their names are displayed on Tidal, the streaming service I use. This is the page you see if you want to listen to music in a particular genre. You click on the genre's name, and you can explore what's available. How important does classical music look here?

And here's a similar display [on Spotify](#), the most popular streaming service, where even more musical categories are shown, 65 in all, so many that I couldn't capture them all in a screenshot. And still you might have to zoom out in your browser, to see everything I *could* capture. How long will it take you to find classical?

*What do people in the regular world think about, in culture and the arts, and in their lives?*

reading:

[“Everything's great when we're downtown.”](#) This is the January 4, 2023 issue of *Seven:Thirty*, a daily email newsletter about life and things to do in DC, where I live. There are three newsletters like this, and they almost never mention classical music. You'll see what they talk about instead.

I'm also going to email this to you, in case you want to follow any of the links. What you'll see online is a PDF I made from the newsletter, and in the PDF the links got messed up.)

[“Music that will be forever in my heart”: readers' best albums of 2022”](#) (*The Guardian*, a leading British newspaper, January 3, 2023)

I don't expect you to read every word of these things. Just skim through, and see what they talk about. In the *Seven:Thirty* newsletter, for instance, look at the “Weekly Scheduler,” listing things to do each day of the week. They recommend — besides serious talks about books, cooking, politics, and history — performances of improvised music, free-style jazz, local rock bands, and music that's meditative. There's not a word about classical music, unless you count “Classical Beyoncé,” a candlelight concert in which a string quartet plays Beyoncé songs.

In the music picks by *Guardian* readers, note first that this isn't simply something written in a newspaper, but something written by its readers. They didn't have to write this. They wrote it because the music they hear means a lot in their lives.

So what music is it? Notice the variety of musical styles, and also how most of the artists aren't very famous. Also look at how old the readers are. You might think pop music fans are mostly young, but a lot of these people are in their 40s and above.

But above all, look at what these people say about the music they like, how serious and personal their descriptions are.

optional reading:

[Your DC-Area Playlist: 17 Local Musicians To Check Out in 2023](#) (from *DCist*, another DC newsletter)

Here you can see how big and encompassing a local pop music scene can be — how many artists there are, how varied their music is, and how much people care about them. Artists like these are what the most active music-lovers in DC are going to see. There are scenes like this in every American city, and in cities around the world.

*What does pop music mean in our culture?*

More about pop music, because if we want to understand where classical music fits in our world, we should look at the music people already listen to.

We'll spend more time on pop music later in this course, learning, among other things, how it's created and how it works musically, We'll ask if it can be art, or if it's just entertainment.

But here we can think about how much it means to people. It's the musical universe that people outside classical music inhabit, helping to shape their views of who they are, and of what's going on in the world around them. Often it inspires people, gives them emotional support, or makes them think more deeply about who they are. Sometimes it challenges them, with new and different ideas.

You may know this, of course, and maybe this is a musical universe you inhabit, too. But in my experience, this is something that not everyone in the classical music world understands. No matter how profound classical music might be, we might ask if it offers the connection to the world that pop music does.

We'll use Taylor Swift as one example. She's not just a big star. She affects peoples' lives.

reading and video:

Suzanne Garfinkle-Crowell, "[Taylor Swift Has Rocked My Psychiatric Practice](#)" (*New York Times*, June 17, 2023)

Paul Slansky, "[Rise of the Senior Swiftie](#)" (*Airmail*, June 10, 2023)

Taylor Swift, [Tiny Desk Concert](#) on NPR (video) Here you can see Swift in an informal setting. How does she seem to you? Like a superstar? Like an expert musician? And also like a regular person, with feelings any of us might have?

**Pop music does this all over the world:**

reading and videos:

Ricci Shryock, "['Rap does not shut up': hip-hop women of Senegal](#)" (*The Guardian*, December 31, 2019). Women in this African country use hiphop to change the way they think of themselves. Instead of reading this, you could just watch a [video](#). only five and a half minutes long, in which one of these Senegalese women says everything written in the reading. The reading is fine, but the video is more fun.

Tengri, "[Heaven](#)" (video)

I'd never heard of this powerful singer, who's much loved in China, until a few years ago, when I taught this course at Juilliard and one of my students, Ziyao Sun, wrote about Tengri for an assignment. With his permission, I'm quoting what he wrote:

The pop song that I want to talk about is "Heaven" by Tengri(腾格尔 in mongol or 腾格尔 in chinese) This is a old song that published in 1997, but even now, it is still popular

in China. Tengri, from Inner Mongolia, is a very famous pop singer in China. Many of his early works were songs about his homeland, depicting the inner Mongolian prairie with music, and the piece “Heaven” is his representative work. The lyrics of the whole song are very few and simple, but it depicts a vivid picture and strong feelings.

Here are the lyrics:

I see a blue sky,  
Over a green lake,  
Vast is the grassland,  
This is my homeland.  
Horses running wild there,  
Sheep as white as snow,  
Girl wait for me,  
Where my heart's at home.  
I love you, my homeland,  
My homeland, my heaven.  
I miss you, my homeland,  
My homeland, my heaven.

A few very simple lyrics, through his artistic and affectionate way of interpretation. Sitting in front of the TV, I was very moved. I think everyone has such a pure and peaceful place in their heart. Home, or far away, or just somewhere you don't want to be disturbed. When I heard this song, I was shocked, and the whole person seemed to follow him with a full smile to the beautiful prairie. Twenty years ago, China was still very poor. Many people left their hometown to live and earn money. This song gives great comfort to the young people who work outside their hometown at that time. I remember when I was child, a lot of people cry when they heard this song. I didn't understand at that time, but now I know, they want home.

Notice how deeply moved the audience is.

*February 21 Auditions. No class.*

*February 28*

*Classical music and the rest of our culture (2)*

This week we'll look more specifically at classical music, and see why outsiders might think it's important, or at least not as important as we think it is.

We'll look at some critiques of classical music, both from people inside the field and people outside it. Does classical music get too much funding? Is it focused too much on the past, and not enough on things people think are important today?

We'll ask ourselves what we think of these critiques, and how we might answer them.

We'll also look at descriptions of classical music, written by people inside the field. What would outsiders think of these?

*Critiques of classical music*

Marcus Westbury, “[Mozart cover bands rake in the moolah](#)” (*Sydney [Australia] Morning Herald*, October 18, 2007)

Carolyn Sampson, “[Why would any self-respecting woman perform Schumann's Frauenliebe und leben?](#)” (*The Guardian*, April 13, 2021)

[Some other critiques](#) (I collected these for this course)

An expert on blues says Mozart is primitive, because his music (as we hear it performed) has limited rhythmic complexity, limited bending of pitches, and limited tone color.

A classical musician with great knowledge of African music finds African music more human and inclusive. And thinks that classical concert halls keep people apart from each other, preventing real communication.

A contemporary cultural critic talks about the classical music department of a major record store (in the days when there were big record stores). He thinks it's sterile and empty, cut off from the rest of life.

How would you respond to all this?

optional listening:

Otis Redding, "[I've Been Loving You Too Long \(To Stop Now\)](#)"

To hear what the blues expert means, here's something to listen to, an R&B classic from the 1960s. Not a blues song, but it demonstrates the variety of tone, the bending of pitch, and (if you listen carefully, and hear where the singer flies free from the beat) the complexity of rhythm that Mozart supposedly doesn't have:

*Descriptions of classical music, compared with descriptions of pop:*

[Read the descriptions](#)

The classical music descriptions all come from press releases that I get in my email. The descriptions of pop music, come from varied sources, not just from press releases, but also from reviews, interviews and other commentary. Compare them to what's said about classical music. What do you think?

And imagine what someone who doesn't listen to classical music might think.

*March 6*

*Classical music in the past (1)*

Now we turn away from today's crisis, to look at what classical music was like in the past, at how it was performed, and how the audience reacted.

What do we get from that?

First, we learn something about how we now do classical music — that it's is pretty much a modern invention. Classical music used to be performed and heard very differently.

And, second, that if classical music has changed from what it was in the past, it can change again, and be different in the future.

This week, we'll look at classical music in the 18th and early 19th centuries, for instance in Mozart's time. Musicians weren't expected to play just the written notes. They improvised. And the audience reacted much more than audiences do now, with people applauding even during the music, whenever they heard something they liked.

What can we learn from this today?

reading:

James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, [excerpt from chapter 1](#), about Baroque opera in Paris, and its noisy audience.

Some [descriptions](#) of performances in past centuries, from various sources. Note, among many other things, how much improvisation and ornamentation there was.

Examples of 18th century ornamentation, from *On Playing the Flute*, a book by Johann Joachim Quantz, published in 1752:

[“Extempore Variations on Simple Intervals”](#) “Extempore” means improvised. Quantz gives 28 examples of what a musician of his time would do, with music that, in a composer’s score, seems very simple. The first passage is simply the same note repeated three times. But, Quantz says, you don’t play what the composer wrote. You improvise something more elaborate, sometimes much more elaborate. These are two of his examples, on two pages of the PDF file.

[“Of the Manner of Playing the Adagio”](#) Here Quantz gives a longer example, of what a musician of his time would do with a complete slow movement. The music, in the composer’s score, is again very simple. But the ornaments that would be improvised aren’t simple at all.

Note that Quantz says that the adagio movement shouldn’t be “overloaded with graces” (“graces” means ornaments). He writes: “When you are playing, it is unlikely that you will, on the spur of the moment” — meaning while you’re improvising — “improve upon the inventions of a composer who may have considered his work at length... The graces should be introduced only when the simple air [meaning the simple melody] renders them necessary, as is the case here.”

And yet the ornaments are extremely rich and complex. All of them, in Quantz’s view, were apparently “necessary.” Which means that 18th century musicians took a very different view of written music than we do.

Examples of ornamentation by 19th century opera singers, from *The Art of Singing*, a book by Manuel Garcia, Jr., a leading 19th century voice teacher, published in 1841:

[An aria from Rossini’s Barber of Seville](#), showing what Rossini wrote, and two ways the aria could be ornamented. Garcia likes the first way better than the second, because, as he says, the ornaments better fit the character in the opera who sings the aria. Note that Garcia’s father sang this role in the opera’s world premiere. I’d guess the first set of ornaments are what his father sang.

A [crazy example](#) of what 19th century musicians called “rubato,” meaning — for them — that the orchestra would keep a steady tempo, while a singer would vary from it. This example also comes from the *Barber of Seville*, and again is very likely what Garcia’s father sang.

A [brief passage from Bellini’s Norma](#), showing what Bellini wrote, and how it was sung by Giuditta Pasta, a great soprano who starred in the opera’s first performance. Notice that she sang quintuplets! I had no idea anyone in the 19th century would use them, especially in any music as popular as opera was then.

[Excerpt from a letter Mozart wrote to his father](#) on July 3, 1778, about the premiere of his Paris Symphony. In which he describes how he wanted the audience to applaud during the music, and composed the piece in a way meant to make sure they did.

optional reading:

E.M Scherer, *Quarter Notes and Bank Notes: The Economics of Music Composition in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, [excerpt from chapter 3](#), about how composers made a living.

Many of us may believe — because this is a common belief — that composers in the past were supported in large part by patrons. Sometimes they were, but as the reading shows, they in fact made their living in many ways. Often, they had jobs — Prince Esterhazy was Haydn’s employer, not his patron. And often they engaged in commercial activity, working on their own to earn money, and in fact acting like entrepreneurial businessmen. From which we see that the current emphasis on entrepreneurship, here and at other schools, isn’t entirely new. Handel and Mozart, to name just two examples, wouldn’t be surprised by what we’re talking about now.

listening:

Mozart, *Symphony No. 31, "Paris," first movement* (Academy of Ancient Music, on historical instruments, jointly led by Jaap Schroeder, the concertmaster, and by Christopher Hogwood, who conducts from a harpsichord, playing along with the music as Mozart often did. Though maybe he doesn't play on this recording, because, to judge from the letter about this symphony, Mozart didn't play in the premiere.)

Mozart didn't say exactly where he put the music that was meant to make the audience applaud. Where in this movement do you think it might have been?

Wilhelm Backhaus, a great pianist from the last century, *improvises a prelude* to Schumann's "Das Abend"

When you read the descriptions of performances in past centuries, you'll see that pianists in the 19th century improvised preludes to the pieces they played. Here's a recording of a great 20th century pianist actually doing that. It was made in 1969, at the last recital Backhaus ever played, when he was 85 years old. He was born in 1884, and when he was young, at least some pianists still played preludes.

First you'll hear an announcement from the stage, by a man saying in German that Backhaus isn't well, and won't play the scheduled work, Beethoven's Op. 111 sonata. Instead, he'll play a short Schumann piece, which we then hear, starting with the improvised prelude.

How do you like hearing this piece, with a prelude that Schumann didn't write?

### March 13

*Classical music in the past (2)*

#### ***Paper due, topic to be assigned***

This week we'll move forward to the 20th century, to the age of film and recording.

We'll listen to old recordings, and watch some old films, to see what classical music performances were like from the 1920s to the 1950s. In my view, they were more spontaneous than what we hear now — more free, and more individual. And in some ways much bigger.

Do you agree? Do you like these performances? Could anyone — including you — perform like this today?

listening:

Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *overture* (live 1940 performance by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Ettore Panizza, conductor)

Beethoven, Archduke Trio, *first movement* (Jacques Thibaud, violin, Pablo Casals, cello, Alfred Cortot, piano, recorded in 1928)

Optional: you might also like to hear these musicians play the *first movement* of the Schubert B flat trio. Not as controlled a performance, but maybe freer, and maybe more typical of performances from that era.

Mendelssohn, Violin Concerto, *second movement* (Joseph Szigeti, violin, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Thomas Beecham, conductor, recorded in 1933)

Schubert, "*Serenade*," recorded in 1941, and sung in English (instead of the original German) by Richard Crooks, a Met opera star who had a popular radio show. No serious singer would sing German lieder in English today, or take as much freedom with the tempo as Crooks does. But I think it's beautiful.

videos:

In these videos, I think all the performers have larger than life personalities — rock star personalities, as we might say today. In the past, when classical music was more popular, many classical musicians had rock star personalities. But I think it's less common now.

Puccini, *La bohème*, [end of Act 1](#), sung in 1956 by Jussi Björling and Renata Tebaldi, two of the leading opera stars of that time, with the Showcase Symphony Orchestra, Max Rudolf, conductor. This comes from *Festival of Music*, a classical music show broadcast live on network TV, complete with car commercials. The host of the show, whom you'll see introducing the performance, is Charles Laughton, a leading British actor. He's not the kind of highly polished personality we'd see on TV today, and clearly isn't following a script. He's making it up as he goes along.

Gino Bechi, a top baritone in the 1940s and 1950s, [sings the Toreador Song](#) from *Carmen*, in a 1950 film called *Mad About Opera*. He sings it in Italian, instead of the original French, which no one would do now. Though in past generations most European singers, singing in Europe, sang only in their own languages. The film, originally in black and white, is colorized in this excerpt. And, because of the plot of the movie (which I won't try to describe), some people not in the performance find their way onstage. You can ignore them, and just watch Bechi's superstar performance.

The great pianist Artur Schnabel [plays a Chopin polonaise and DeFalla's "Ritual Fire Dance"](#) (from a 1946 movie called *Carnegie Hall*).

Terrific playing, and terrific theater. Rubinstein, besides being one of the greatest pianists, was also a stage animal. A born performer. I saw him play when I was a teenager, and I'd swear the temperature in the concert hall went up 10 degrees when he came onstage.

And in the DeFalla piece...well, Rubinstein doesn't play exactly what's in the score. This is when — it's unforgettable when you see it — his hands alternate on the keyboard, going high in the air. DeFalla wrote that passage to be played legato and softly. Rubinstein, with permission from no one but himself, makes it supremely big and theatrical.

March 21

*Spring break. No class.*

March 27

**Paper due, on [Canvas](#): I'd like you to write a description of a classical piece, doing something better — more specific, more real — than the empty praise we've seen in what seems to be the standard kind of classical music publicity these days.**

*Pop Music (I)*

After our break, we come back to pop music, examining it as its own kind of musical art. If that is, we can call it art, which is something we'll discuss.

Why are we coming back to it, for two more weeks of our course?

Well, the course is called "Classical Music in an Age of Pop." So we might want to ask what this "age of pop" is. Is it a time, as some people in the classical music field think, when (at least in music) trivial entertainment has taken over from serious art?

Or is pop music more than that?

This week we'll look at something very striking about pop music — how varied it is, how many different styles it encompasses, each with its own sound and its own audience.

Where did these styles come from? How did they develop?

And we'll look at how pop songs are made. They have their own compositional process, very different from what we see in classical music. It's more collaborative, for one thing, and uses much more technology.

*A look at pop music history:*

listening:

Listen to at least a little of these songs, to get an idea of how varied pop music has been over many years, and how it's evolved over time. Of course, if you want to listen to the songs all the way through, feel free.

I've added some questions for you to think about. Don't worry if you don't know the answers. They involve more knowledge of pop music history than most of us have. So just turn the questions around in your mind. And — without worrying whether you're right or wrong — try to feel how big the pop music changes have been, and try to imagine how they might have happened.

Patti Page, "[How Much is That Doggie in the Window?](#)" (1953)

The biggest change in pop music history came in the mid-1950s, when rock & roll emerged. Before that, pop music mostly was light and smooth, and, in its racial component, very white. What developed with rock was a rougher sound, more culturally diverse, and with a bigger beat.

This song was a big pop hit, before rock & roll. It's very sweet and innocent.

Little Richard, "[Long Tall Sally](#)" (1956)

A classic, by one of the pioneers of rock & roll. When he died two years ago, he was hailed as a beloved and important American artist. I've given you a 1950s video of him doing one of his most famous songs, so you can see how wild he was, especially to white people in that era. They might never have seen or heard anything like him.

Questions to think about. Where did rock & roll come from? How did people start making music like Little Richard, and how did it come into the pop music mainstream?

Led Zeppelin, "[Whole Lotta Love](#)" (1969)

Another classic, by the first great hard rock band. How did simpler rock & roll — by people like Little Richard — develop into what Led Zeppelin did?

Joni Mitchell, "[All I Want](#)" (1971)

This was never a pop hit, but people now would say that Joni Mitchell is one of the most profound and original artists in pop music history. Notice that the song has very light instrumentation, and no drums. Where do you think this style could have come from? And how could it exist at the same time as Led Zeppelin?

Lil Louis, "[French Kiss](#)" (1989)

A classic from a dance music style that arose in Chicago, called house music. How do you think music like this evolved? How did people start making long dance music songs (this one is almost nine and a half minutes long), with a steady 4/4 beat, and often no singing?

Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, "[The Message](#)" (1982)

The first hip-hop song ever played on pop radio. It was astonishing to hear. So raw, so honest. And pop listeners hadn't heard a song spoken over music, at least not with this much rhythmic insistence. So again the same question — where did this new style come from? How did people start speaking rhymes (often improvised, often with complex rhythms), over a beat?

*How pop music is made:*

reading and videos:

Peter Guralnick, [excerpt](#) from his book *Sweet Soul Music* (about Aretha Franklin recording “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You),” her first big hit; this will show you one way that pop records have been produced)

This excerpt comes from a very long and detailed book, about the history of Black music in the 1960s. It starts in the middle of Aretha Franklin’s story. So you may be confused at first about what’s going on.

Here’s what you need to know. Aretha Franklin was a gospel singer from Detroit. Her father was pastor of a large and important church in Detroit’s black community, at a time when Detroit was a thriving city, not the troubled (but recovering) place it is today.

Aretha was an amazing talent, as recordings of her singing gospel when she was a teenager show. (She was such a titanic force in pop music that people always call her by her first name, whether they knew her or not.) But when she started her pop music career in the early 1960s, record companies didn’t think her gospel sound — the sound of the Black church — would sell many records. So they toned her down. They recorded her singing pop and jazz songs. These recordings are good, but don’t remotely show what Aretha could do.

By the late 1960s, the climate had changed, and the mainstream white world was ready for a gospel vocal sound. There were a few mainstream record producers who knew how to record gospel music, and one of them was Jerry Wexler, now a pop music legend. Wexler signed Aretha to a recording contract, and brought her to a recording studio in the American south, where musicians understood the gospel style, which had now developed into something called soul music.

Wexler hired musicians — guitar, piano, drum, bass, horns (a pop music term meaning saxophones and brass instruments) — to record with Aretha.

The recording session began when Aretha sat at the piano, and sang and played a song she wanted to record. That’s how it normally works in pop music. Rarely does anyone write the music down. Instead, someone demonstrates how a song goes, and the musicians work out for themselves what to do with it.

But Aretha provided more than a demonstration. From the first chord she played on the piano, she was so impressive that the piano player hired for the recording session said that she should play the piano, not him.

And things went on from there, with the horn players so inspired that they quickly went to another room to work out what they would play. So what you hear on the record is a cooperative enterprise, worked out by all the musicians together. With the producer providing guidance, if any was needed. (For this song, Wexler thought the music needed some vocal harmony, so he had Aretha provide some, in a New York studio. What she sang there was overdubbed onto the recording.)

If you listen to the song, listen (among much else) for the entrance of the horns. Can you believe that these musicians, all on their own, planned something so perfectly right (at least in my opinion), and which — when they start playing offbeats — can get so dramatic?

optional: [listen to the song](#)

Joe Coscarelli, “[‘Slow Burn’: Watch Kacey Musgraves Turn Country Music Psychedelic](#)” (*New York Times*, October 24, 2018).

Please read the short article, and watch the video embedded in it. Note that there are drug references in the video. If these might trouble you in any way, you can skip this part of the assignment. In defense of including them, I’d say they must have seemed both common and pretty much harmless, if a major newspaper like the *Times* put them online.)

optional: [listen to the song](#) (with video)

Joe Coscarelli, “[A Staple Gun. A Dental Drill. See How Billie Eilish Made a Haunted Pop Hit.](#)” (*New York Times*, April 1, 2019; please read the short article, and watch the video embedded in it)

optional:

[listen to the song](#) (audio only)

[watch the video](#) (some of the images may be disturbing; don't feel you need to watch this if the images might trouble you)

“[Hounds of Love](#),” by Mat Snow (from *MOJO* magazine, special issue on Kate Bush, October 2022; about the how Kate Bush's most famous album got made, in a family atmosphere, with Bush producing, and everyone joyful)

optional:

[listen to the best known song on the album, "Running Up That Hill \(A Deal With God\)"](#)

[read in detail about how it was made](#) (from *MOJO* magazine, special issue on Kate Bush)

[watch the video](#)

From the Wikipedia entry on Public Enemy's song “Fight the Power,” showing how a hip-hop song can be built from many short samples of other music. You can skim this, without trying to grasp every detail. I just want you to see how much detailed work can go into providing music for a hip-hop song (though, to be fair, Public Enemy's music was more complex than most).

"Fight the Power" begins with a vocal sample of civil rights attorney and activist Thomas "TNT" Todd, speechifying in a resonant, agitated voice, "Yet our best trained, best educated, best equipped, best prepared troops refuse to fight. Matter of fact, it's safe to say that they would rather switch than fight". This 16-second passage is the longest of the numerous samples incorporated to the track. It is followed by a brief three-measure section (0:17–0:24) that is carried by the dotted rhythm of a vocal sample repeated six times; the line "pump me up" from Trouble Funk's 1982 song of the same name played backwards indistinctly. The rhythmic measure-section also features a melodic line, Branford Marsalis' saxophone playing in triplets that is buried in the mix, eight snare drum hits in the second measure, and vocal exclamations in the third measure. One of the exclamations, a nonsemantic "chuck chuck" taken from the 1972 song "Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get" by the Dramatics, serves as a reference to Chuck D. The "let me hear you say" exclamation originates from "Sing a Simple Song" by Sly and the Family Stone.

The three-measure section crescendos into the following section (0:24–0:44), which leads to the entrance of the rappers and features more complex production. In the first four seconds of the section, no less than 10 distinct samples are looped into a whole texture, which is then repeated four more times as a meta-loop. The whole section contains samples of guitar, synthesizer, bass, including that of James Brown's 1971 recording "Hot Pants", four fragmented vocal samples, including those of Brown's famous grunts in his recordings, and various percussion samples. Although it is obscured by the other samples, Clyde Stubblefield's drum break from James Brown's 1970 song "Funky Drummer", one of the most frequently sampled rhythmic breaks in hip hop, makes an appearance, with only the break's first two eighth notes in the bass drum and the snare hit in clarity. This section has a sharp, funky guitar riff playing over staccato rhythms, as a course voice exhorts the line "Come on, get down". Other samples include "I Know You Got Soul", "Planet Rock" and "Teddy's Jam."

optional (for this week; next week the song will be part of your assignment):

[listen to the song](#)

[watch the video](#)

[read the full Wikipedia entry](#)

optional: Dr. Mix, “[The Bass Line of ‘I Feel Love’ on a TB-303](#)”

This shows you how professionals use one kind of synthesizer — one that only creates bass lines, and was heavily used in 1980s dance music. You’ll hear the sounds it makes, and hear how they can change. And that’s only the start! In just four minutes, you’ll learn more about how current pop songs are made — well, the technology in them, anyway — than I could teach you in half an hour.

*April 3*

*Pop Music (2)*

Now we’ll look at one more aspect of pop music’s cultural influence — its relation to Black people’s view of themselves.

Then we’ll study some pop songs — analyze them, if you like — and ask some questions. What’s going on in them musically? What, in their purely musical content, sets them apart from classical music?

And anyone calls them art, would they be right?

*Black awareness in pop music:*

listening and video:

Chuck Berry, “[Brown-Eyed Handsome Man](#)” (1957)

James Brown, “[Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud](#)” (1968)

[read the lyrics](#)

from a comment on YouTube:

“Remember many of us kids singing this at every opportunity in elementary school. It gave us dignity and a feeling of empowerment. And a lot of kids were encouraged to embrace their heritage.”

Sam Cooke, “[A Change is Gonna Come](#)” (1964)

Public Enemy, “[Fight the Power](#)” (1989; video)

*The cultural impact of Clarence Clemons, a Black musician in Bruce Springsteen’s band:*

[Springsteen introduces Clemons at a show](#)

[Clemons tells how he met Springsteen \(with thunder and lightning behind him\)](#)

[What Clemons means to Cory Booker](#), a U.S. senator from New Jersey (who, like Clemons, is Black)

*Some songs to watch and listen to:*

We all agree that classical music is art. But what is pop music? Listen to these songs, and think about how you’d classify them. Clearly they’re not classical music, but why? What are the differences? What — purely in musical terms — makes them pop, and not classical?

And could they be art? If not, why not? As you think about this, ask yourself what’s happening in the music in each song, just as you’d ask about a classical piece. In each song, is the music simple? Is it complex? Can it be analyzed by looking for the things that happen in classical pieces — you might especially ask this about the James Brown song — or is something else going on?

If these songs are art, they pose a serious challenge to classical music. People in our culture listen to pop music. If it’s giving them art, why do they need the art that we’re offering them?

We’ll talk about all this in class.

Frank Sinatra, “[I’ve Got You Under My Skin](#)” (from his 1956 album *Songs for Swingin’ Lovers*)

Lucinda Williams, “[Ventura](#)” (from *World Without Tears*, 2003)

James Brown, “[Get Up \(I Feel Like Being a\) Sex Machine](#)” (this is a single from 1970; a single, in pop music terminology, is a song released on its own, apart from any album; in this case, the song doesn’t come from any album)

Eric B. & Rakim, “[Follow the Leader](#)” (from *Follow the Leader*, 1988)

Björk, “[An Echo, A Stain](#)” (from *Vespertine*, 2002)

Taylor Swift, “[All Too Well \(10 Minute Version\) \(Taylor’s Version\)](#)” (from *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, 2021)

Swift originally recorded this in 2013, in a shorter version, for her album *Red*. She rerecorded it in 2021, again in the shorter version, for *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, as part of her project to rerecord all her albums, so she could take control of her music away from the record company she’d signed with. The longer version was made from this rerecording, and went to No. 1 on the pop charts.

*April 10*

*Fixing the crisis: Some ideas for the future, and some new things that people have suggested, or done*

How can we solve classical music’s problems?

That’s a big question. But one place to start is with ideas for how things could change. I have some of my own. Maybe you have some, and if you do, I’d love to hear them.

And then we can look at how classical music already *has* changed. We’ll look at some of the changes, including new ways of playing the great classical masterworks.

Do we like these changes? Can they help to give classical music a new and bright future?

video:

Greg Sandow, [keynote talk](#) at the 21CMPosium, the 2016 conference at the DePauw School of Music that Mike Block spoke at. In my talk, I tried to lay out the current condition of classical music, and what needs to change. The situation has changed, of course, since I gave this talk, but much that I said is still valid.

reading:

Greg Sandow, “[Four Keys to the Future](#)”

[A long list of new things](#) that classical musicians and classical music institutions have tried, assembled from various sources (including my own experience)

Ivan Trevino, “[My Pretend Music School](#)” (blog post by a percussionist)

Greg Sandow, “[A Stunning Manifesto](#)” (blog post about new ideas some years ago at the University of Maryland School of Music)

Greg Sandow, “[Path-breaking piano curriculum](#)” (blog post about what Canadian piano students have done at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario; they improvise, and play music in many genres)

*New kinds of performances, new kinds of music:*

Dan Tepfer, [The Goldberg Variations Variations, excerpt](#). (Jazz pianist Dan Tepfer plays the *Goldberg Variations*, and instead of repeating the aria and each variation, as the score indicates, he plays improvisations on them. This recording was made some years ago. Later I heard Tepfer play this live, and his Bach performance had grown greatly.)

Mozart, Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K. 216, [last movement cadenza](#) (Gilles Apap, violin and conductor, Sinfonia Varsovia)

Tchaikovsky, Violin Concerto, [third movement](#) (Patricia Kopatchinskaya, violin, Musicaeterna, Teodor Currentzis, conductor)

Caroline Shaw, *Partita for Eight Voices*, first movement, “[Allemande](#)”

The Pulitzer Prize is America’s highest honor in composition, and in 2013 Caroline Shaw became the youngest composer to win it. She won it for the *Partita*, which she wrote for [Roomful of Teeth](#), a vocal ensemble she sang in. This is a live performance at the Music on Main series in Vancouver. The video I’ve linked to is of the entire piece. Your assignment is only to watch the first movement, which ends at 5:45. Of course you can watch the rest if you want to.

This is an example of a style of composition very common among young American composers. Very free, very relaxed, very informal, using any kind of harmony — and, in fact, any kind of sound — the composer likes.

Fifth House and Henhouse Prowlers, [Ain’t It a Shame](#)

[Fifth House](#) is an imaginative and strongly entrepreneurial chamber ensemble, based in Chicago. Here they collaborate with a bluegrass band (bluegrass is a kind of country music). Although the bluegrass group takes the lead, the performance is a true collaboration, featuring what might be the first bluegrass solos ever played on French horn and bassoon.

Debussy, *Afternoon of a Faun*, University of Maryland Symphony Orchestra.

As played in 2012 from memory, without a conductor — and *danced* by the student musicians. A video that just about went viral in the classical music world. Liz Lerman, a very original choreographer, designed the dancing, building it around movement the musicians were comfortable doing. James Ross, who at the time was the much-loved conducting teacher and orchestra director at the school, conceived the project and led the music rehearsals. You’ll notice that there’s a conductor onstage (a student), dancing along with everyone else, leading the music when he’s needed.

April 17

*Fixing the crisis: More changes, real or suggested*

reading:

Jasper Parrott, “[Classical music must play its part in tackling the climate crisis](#)” (*The Guardian*, December 20, 2019)

Parrott is an artist manager in Britain, and isn’t the first to notice that when classical musicians go on tour, there’s a bad impact on climate. We fly to our destinations, and there’s growing awareness that planes release great amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, thus contributing to global heating. This is especially bad when orchestras tour, because they charter private planes that otherwise might not be flying. Parrott says we should take this seriously, and either tour less, or travel by train. Do you agree?

Alecia Lawyer, founder, director, and principal oboe of ROCO, formerly River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, an entrepreneurial group in Houston, now in its 18th season:

Greg Sandow, “[“We personalize what music is”](#)” (blog post, in which Alecia talks about the group.

Andrew Dansby, “[At 15, Alecia Lawyer’s ROCO continues to drill for new energy](#)” (*Houston Chronicle*, September 24, 2019)

video:

Ravel (with some improvised additions), "[Bolero](#)"

This is an online Juilliard performance, released just after the pandemic began, featuring Juilliard classical musicians, jazz musicians, and dancers. You'll hear that the piece was changed in a few places, for instance so it could begin with pianist playing some jazz. He's in fact very famous — Jon Batiste, a Juilliard graduate who works in many genres. He's the leader of the band on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, and among many other things, wrote the score for the Pixar animated film *Soul*, for which he won an Oscar and many other awards. He's a delight in this performance, though for me the whole performance is delightful, some of the most joyful music-making I heard during the pandemic.

Joshua Barone, "[Think Outside the Opera House, and Inside the Parking Garage](#)" (*New York Times*, October 21, 2020)

David Wallace, "[Becoming Village People](#)"

Video of a talk at the 21CMPosium at DePauw. David is the chair of the string department at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Berklee normally teaches pop music and jazz, but expanded its strings department when classical string players wanted to go there, so they could also play music in other genres. In this Berklee program, as you'll see, every student can and does study with every teacher, learning to play in many musical styles.

*Moves toward diversity:*

Fred Bronstein, "[Diversity critical to survival of classical music field](#)" (*Baltimore Sun*, March 1, 2019; our dean writes in the *Baltimore Sun* that classical music can't survive without diversity).

Anne Midgette, "[A tenor looks beyond opera and explores being a black man in America](#)" (*Washington Post*, April 5, 2019)

The next two items make an interesting pair. The League of American Orchestras and the English National Opera both launch diversity initiatives. Each takes a different approach. How would you describe the difference?

["League of American Orchestras Launches The Catalyst Fund Advancing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Orchestras"](#) (press release from the League, January 9, 2019)

Mark Brown, "["Preserved in aspic": opera embarks on diversity drive](#)" (*The Guardian*, January 28, 2019)

*Messiah/Complex*, a film of Handel's *Messiah*, performed by the Toronto Symphony, and staged and filmed by Against the Grain Theatre, involving many aspects of Canadian life, and performers from all over Canada, representing many Canadian ethnic groups. It was streamed, without charge, for a short time last January, though viewers had to sign up for tickets. The run had to be extended, because so many people wanted to see the performance, and the film was brought back this year.

Don Bilefsky, "["A 'Messiah' for the Multitudes, Freed From History's Bonds](#)" (*New York Times*, December 21, 2020)

**Artist Spotlight: Diyet.** Diyet is a member of the Kluane First Nation in the Yukon, who sings "O Thou Who Tellest Good Tidings to Zion" in her native Southern Tutchone language. She hadn't sung classical music in 20 years, and with this project, she could reconcile Handel with her native culture.

video:

*Messiah/Complex*, from the beginning to 26:55, the end of "O Thou Who Tellest Good Tidings to Zion." Or, in Southern Tutchone, "Utawkwadjche yesi ch'e yan nañ käy."

Because this is no longer being streamed to the public, the video is now private. Against the Grain Theatre has graciously allowed us to watch it. Out of respect for their control of their project, I'm not putting the link on this schedule, where many people might see it. I'll email it to you privately.

I find this film extraordinary. You'll make up your own minds, of course. One question is raised for me is what outreach, diversity, and inclusion really are. We talk about bringing classical music to people who don't now listen to it, and we realize — more and more now — that many of these people are different from us.

So do we simply bring people what we do, hoping they'll want to take part in it, more or less passively, just as watchers and listeners? Or do we include them in what we're doing, as active participants, as happens in this film?

To me — and again, you'll decide for yourselves what you think — the second way is more powerful, more respectful, and more genuinely inclusive. What's immediately striking in *Messiah/Complex* of course is the inclusion of singers from indigenous groups. But as I watch the film again, I'm struck by how it includes all Canadians, using singers from all parts of Canada, and then filming them in many Canadian locations. In that way, Handel's *Messiah* comes to represent all of Canada. I find that very moving.

April 24

#### *What YOU can do (1)*

A time of trouble for classical music is also a time of opportunity. If the old ways don't work as well as they used to, we can do new things.

In this class and the next, we'll look at new things you could do. You're not required to do them, and you might never want to. This is just an exercise in thinking about them.

This week, you'll think of something that — at least in theory — you might want to do. Something you've never done before, that would take you to some new place artistically, or bring you a bigger audience. Or both!

We'll talk about what these things might be, and start — again, just as an exercise — to flesh them out. How could you really do what you've thought of? What steps would you have to take?

reading:

[“Rachel Barton Pine To Perform 24 Violin Concertos In 24 Weeks”](#) (press release)

Fiona Maddocks, [“Igor Levit: ‘These concerts were life-saving for me’”](#) (*The Observer*, May 24, 2020)

Anne Midgette, [“Fleeing the Gilded Cage: The COVID shutdown stalled careers. For some opera singers, it also opened doors”](#) (from the National Public Radio website)

videos:

Ryan McKinny, [“Battle of the Bass Baritones”](#)

Sarah Robinson, [“How I Stopped Asking Permission to Have a Career in Music”](#)

Sarah is a flute player and career coach in Los Angeles, who among many other things has written a terrific book about how to play classical music in clubs. She and her husband have an ensemble that plays in clubs with great success, sometimes getting the crowd to dance, and often playing music by Los Angeles film and TV composers.

But before she did any of this, she wanted to be an orchestral flutist. In this video, she tells the powerful story about how orchestral auditions almost destroyed her, and how she decided, with great joy, to make music in other ways.

Maya Beiser, "[Kashmir](#)"

A cellist plays an arrangement of a famous rock song, by Led Zeppelin. The arrangement is for solo cello, multitracked accompanying cellos, and recorded drums. The song was originally released on Beiser's 2010 album *Provenance*, on which — apart from this track — she plays new music inspired by her multicultural childhood in Israel, where she heard traditional Jewish and Arab music, all of it with a Middle Eastern sound. Though even "Kashmir" fits with this concept, because the song has a Middle Eastern vibe, and because Beiser loved it as a teenager. This video shows a live performance, done for a radio show in New York.

Optional listening, if you're curious: the [original Led Zeppelin song](#), from their 1975 album *Physical Graffiti*.

May 1

*What YOU can do (2)*

This week we'll take one further step, and think about something that — at least in my experience — isn't much talked about in the classical music field.

How could you find your own audience? An audience completely your own, that would come to your performances or stream them, listen to your recordings (and maybe even buy them). And, if you developed your career enough, would buy any merchandise you sold. The way people buy t-shirts, for instance, from pop music artists they love.

As I said, I don't think we talk about this in classical music. We talk about going into the community, playing, for instance, in assisted living homes, or in prisons. And when we develop our careers, we look for managers who'll get us booked for performances where we don't find the audience, so it isn't really ours.

Pop music artists, on the other hand, begin by finding their audience. They play in small clubs, and, if people like them, their audience gets bigger. Then they can play in larger clubs, and — if they're wildly successful — in theaters, arenas, and even (when you're a huge star) in stadiums.

I'm not saying you need to do this, or that, if you do, you should dream of being a superstar. Though if that's your dream, go for it!

I just want you think about what this would be like. How you might start to find your own audience, your own fan base. What it would feel like to have one. And how you could make it bigger.

You can start small, of course, as everyone does. When you perform now, or, if you're a composer, when your music is played, someone comes. Maybe just friends, family, and colleagues, but someone is there. Starting right where you are now, how could you encourage the audience you already have to hear you more? And how could you get more people to come?

reading:

Seth Godin, [Tribes](#) (excerpt)

Greg Sandow, "[How to do it](#)" (blog post)

Clive Thompson, "[Sex, Drugs, and Updating Your Blog](#)," from the *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2007 (about how to promote a pop music career all by yourself, on the web)

Jade Simmons, "[Are You a Victim of Artistic Identity Theft?](#)" (a post from the "Emerge Already" blog she used to have)

Greg Sandow, "[Sell What You Are](#)" (blog post)

Lara Downes:

["Walking the Walk"](#) (how an entrepreneurial pianist in San Francisco got an audience for a concert series she created)

["Success and Surprises"](#) (more on her concert series: how she drew a large audience to a performance by pianist Christopher O'Riley)

How composer Cristina Spinei [promoted a recording](#)

[Cristina](#) took one of my Juilliard courses years ago, and, as a composer, made a big career choice. She moved from New York to Nashville, where you might think there's a much smaller new music scene, and thus less opportunity for her. But in fact she developed an active entrepreneurial career, which included having her music played by the Nashville Symphony.

In an email to me, she described her plan — very imaginative, very enterprising — to market a recording of piano music she wrote. Her plan was to get as many people as possible playing the music on the recording and listening to it, especially people outside the normal classical music audience.

What she described takes a lot of work. Not all of us would be so determined. But here ideas weren't what everyone thinks of, and it's good to know what they were.

*May 8*

*Final discussion.*

***Paper due, topic to be assigned***

Among other things, in this last class we can see if your ideas about classical music have changed. And if you have new thoughts about how to play it, or about what to do in your careers. Not that these new thoughts are required. You may feel you're fine with the thoughts you had when you started this course. But if you do have new ideas, I'd be happy to hear them.