

What Happened to Classical Music?

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Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Attending the Chicago Symphony Orchestra made me think of many things, one of these things was genius. For a man to write an entire symphony he has to have quite a high IQ. To write a piece that mends so many instruments together in such beautiful harmony and make such beautiful music really is a talent that I would love to have. I now see why the greats such as Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, etc. are considered full fledged geniuses.

But while I was there I began to ponder some things such as why is this not a sell out crowd? Sure it is a Tuesday night but that never stopped anyone from selling out a performance. What has happened to this beautiful art form, it seems to have gone from the top of the music food chain to somewhere in between.

Many people wonder if Classical music can ever be as huge as it was hundreds of years ago. Can we return to that golden age of classical music? Are we ready to see music videos set to modern classical pieces on MTV in regular rotation? But first we need to finalize something, what exactly is the mainstream audience, and what is modern classical music? There really is no true answer to these questions, which finding a true answer to if the world is ready for a renaissance of classical music quite difficult.

Why Isn't Classical Music popular anymore?

So first I must ask, what is modern classical music exactly? Is modern classical just operas, symphonic poems and ballets that are played at big concert halls by big symphonic orchestras using traditional acoustic instruments and which remind of Beethoven and Mozart? Is it an electronic version of the above, where the composers use, instead of a traditional orchestra, electronic synthesizers to compose and perform their music? Is it the kind of music which, while it has nothing to do with classical music, is considered serious in the sense of complex music as opposed to light, popular music? Is it the experimental electronic music blended with acoustic musical sounds and real-life noise which is accessed through the various modern forms of media like films, television movies and commercials, video and computer games etc.? Is it finally whatever kind of music has no lyrics and is not pop or rock either? And what is pop and rock anyway, ok we won't get into that just yet. All these kinds of music constitute the musical landscape of the twentieth century which is related in one way or another to what we call classical music. A close relationship with traditional classical music cannot be found, in my opinion, except in the movements of the first decades of the century like post-romanticism and neo-classicism. What characterizes music of the greater part of the century, especially the time after World War II, is experimentation and a constant search for new ways of writing music, new forms, new styles. It seems however that the closer to tradition a composer stood, the more acceptable and successful his music was. For example, Puccini's works like the operas *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca* were and still are so popular that there is hardly anyone unfamiliar with these works or who does not like them. Equally popular, and for the same reason, are Strauss's symphonic poems. There is also a big audience for composers like Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich and Bartok who wrote music heavily influenced from past greats

and just invested it with some modern elements. Such elements are, for example, the absence of melody and the rhythms in Stravinsky's ballets, especially in the famous Rite of Spring; also the use of folk songs as a basis for their musical compositions by the so called nationalist composers. An example of popularity based on the combination of classical and popular styles is the American composer Gershwin who, in his operas, used elements of blues, jazz and Latin dance-rhythms that were prevalent in the 30s, that is the period in which he lived. Some songs from these operas became so successful that even today they are sung all over the world in countless versions. However, can we consider a song, like Summertime, classical music?

What is Modern Classical?

Music produced in the last forty years used new and experimental style, but never really got noticed by the main public. Some composers, like Varese, completely rejected traditional melody and harmony, while some people decided to go the electronic music route. For example, the American composer Cage made music by combining musical sounds with taped sounds of the noises of real life. Both Cage and Varese had a huge influence on modern composers, not only of classical music but in other genres too, and the fact they did that without being known by the general public makes it all the more amazing. But what many people don't realize is that because of men like Cage and Varese, the music they listen to in films and other forms of media were influenced by these two men. So basically the effect of their work has hit the general public indirectly. But then another question is raised, when one watches a movie and listens to the score, are they experiencing modern classical music?

What is Mainstream?

An answer to this question would lead us the definition of the term ‘mainstream audience’. If by that we mean only those who go to concerts of modern classical composers, the answer to our topic is simple; no, there is not a mainstream audience for modern classical music. But this definition would also limit the definition of modern classical music to those scholarly composers who write music to be played only at concert halls, because writing for television, for instance, would mean that they are not serious and besides they would be accused of being commercial. In fact, these composers write for acceptance rather than for an audience.

As a result, their audience ranging from very small to non existent mainly consists of fellow scholars and students of music who go to their concerts, supposedly, to learn and be informed on the progress of classical music. It is usually said that music composition is a scientific process, not an aesthetic one. From this belief stems the academic composers’ reluctance to write “commercial” music. It is because of this type of mentality that people have that that music isn’t allowed to evolve as fully as it could. In a way I guess you could say that any music that seems to be “scholarly” can’t be as creative as it wants too. And this does not just apply to only classical music, but to any others as well.

Then there is the theory that modernism and moving away from tradition is the reason for empty concert halls because many people won’t want to accept that the way a contemporary composer does his music is modern classical. But once again, indirectly those who did mess around with different forms of music with their compositions, these people may have started a bit of the techno revolution as well. The public did not accept it at first, but in these days nobody gets surprised when they here a remix of a song, with vocals, and some instruments that are

enhanced in the studio, with some added electronic beats and loops to it. It is a very mainstream trend with such artists as Paul Oakenfold to Ja Rule remixing many songs for artists. Then when somebody hears a remix they are interested in hearing the original version, and they will either try to find it, or recognize it in a film, tv show, or even a commercial. An excellent example of this is a remix of Beethoven's 5th that has been floating around the internet for a while, it sounds excellent, and a lot like the original but with all the beats and loops and beeps, etc added to it.

Then there is the matter of when a piece of music is acceptable to a mass audience. This has to do with the context within the music. If it is set to a movie it is immediately given a context in the sense. The composer may not have wanted people to only find meaning in his song when accompanied by visual aid but the music is meaningful to most audience members, presenting slow music when sad, fast thumping music when the action starts, this helps the director project his vision even more. Which presents another reason why the modern symphony isn't getting the recognition it deserves. These days people need visuals. Ballets and operas continue to sell out around the world; but because of the visual accompany to the music that helps enhance both the performance of the dancers/singers and the instrumentalists. Some might come up with the argument of Techno, House, Drum & Bass, etc. but who are main people who go listen to this type of music? Club goers, they like to dance to the music. And because of the age of MTV people expect so much more visual accompany to a video. So if a film score is classical music, does that make the audience fans of classical music? The question is still debatable.

Modern media help the promotion of classical music in other ways, too. Internet, for instance, has numerous sites related to classical music, where everyone can have access to

whatever relevant information and even listen to the works of both established composers and unknown ones who otherwise would never have the chance to be promoted by record labels. In this way, a market for classical music has been established on the Internet. Of course, it is not possible to measure the size of this market but the great number of related sites is an indication that there is a substantial audience for this kind of music, providing however that we do not limit the definition of classical music to one.

My Proposal Pt. I

The way that I would propose to help this out would be to have someone mainstream performing with the symphony orchestra. If you needed a rock band, you would get someone like U2 to perform with them, the rap fans? How about Jay-z, he did MTV unplugged, so I think he can pull off playing with a symphony. Country fans, they could accompany a symphony orchestra also. Now then I realize that this won't get people to like classical music on its own in its purest form on its own. But that is why I say there should be one or two intermission in during the duration of the show, and the audience members would have to stay seated otherwise. During these times when they are pretty much under house arrest, I would like to have to symphony play some pieces on their own, complete without any vocals. This might get people interested that even without U2, Jay-z, or Tim McGraw this symphony can still sound "cool."

Michael Jackson

My second choice would make me a bit of a hypocrite. Because I remember when Michael Jackson's new album came out, I wouldn't buy it because I didn't like how he was trying to make himself more up to date, by enlisting many top producers to produce his album.

These included the top hip-hop producers, and even a rap from beyond the grave from Biggie Smalls. I have discussed with many people why they would not buy the latest venture from the self-proclaimed “King of Pop.” Some people said that he has just “weirded them out to much lately.” So they don’t really count. But the most frequent reply that I received was that main reason they would not buy it was because he is trying to update himself. A lot of people want the old Jacko back. Trying to update his image, in my opinion, is the reason why his album hasn’t been doing as well. But for one second I would like to go to the comments about how he “weirds” people out of buying his album. When he debuted his new face, I was quite scared of how he looked, but not as scared as I was sad when I thought of the little boy from the Jackson 5. A lot of people were too shallow to give him a chance because of his appearance.

My Proposal Pt. II

So though I hate people changing themselves like that, I feel that if classical music wanted to come back on top maybe it would up its image a tad. Now I am not saying that I don’t like the tuxedos and black gowns that the performers wear. I believe that when I go to the Concert Hall they should always wear that, because it appears a lot more professional to many. What if they joined a high profile tour such as Moby’s Area:One, Ozzy Osbourne’s OzzFest. This may appear to be quite a ludicrous idea right now, but it might work. Sure many people may look at, say, the Boston Pops Orchestra’s set as a reason to go to the bathroom and check out the gift shop. But many people might be interested and get swept up in the music like their ancestor’s did hundreds of years ago.

If this could get pulled off then I truly believe that it would be one of the greatest feats in music history. Bringing back music of the past is nothing new. Remember the Swing boom a

few years back? And this was traditional swing and the occasional pieces of music that had some modernism to it. If one could have swing come back, and even a latin boom, then why not classical? A young child who watches Star Wars, and he wants to buy the soundtrack so he can be Luke Skywalker to it. But what about the meaning behind many classical pieces? Pieces that composers wrote about sorrow, heroism, happiness, and love. If a child knew the story behind a song would he not love it more? Explore the meaning, and explore classical music, it can be done.

Works Cited

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