

The Crisis in Modern Classical Music

When told of the fact that classical music is in jeopardy, most Americans would find the idea incredulous. This is, however, the truth, and more serious than most who even recognize the fact realize. Those who do recognize the facts and are working to counteract the present problems, generally acknowledge a few common things as causes. Modern musical technology and financial shortages both have negatively affected the attendance at orchestra concerts. However there are issues from the inside of classical music as well. New, fresh music is not being regularly introduced into the mainstream of classical music. Instead, it relies on the same music that was created long ago. The world's symphony orchestra's are facing a severe crisis that is threatening the very existence of classical music.

The time period's in which the majority of our modern classical repertoire is from are the Romantic and Classical periods. These stretched between the mid- to late Classical period, about 1790, to the late Romantic period, about 1900 which yields a time period of approximately one hundred years. Famous composers from this time include Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, and many others.

In order to understand the literature of the crises at hand, one must be familiar with the classical music system when much of the repertoire was composed. Composers wrote music for a living, meaning that whatever income they earned was based on their output of music. This explains why the list of compositions for many artists is extremely high. Amongst the symphonies, the opera's, the songs, the masses, and the chamber music, the output for the common successful composer numbered well into the hundreds. A perfect example of this

phenomenon is Robert Schumann, a Romantic composer who wrote well over three hundred songs during his lifetime.

There is, also, another reason for high musical output. Composers wrote pieces for only a limited number of performances, maybe about ten. This is because, like today in all other forms of music, new work was embraced and requested regularly. The general public did not want to listen to the same work repeated over and over, especially because their only form of entertainment came live. People had no way of deciding that instead of listening to Beethoven's *Fifth* being performed again at the symphony hall, they would home and listen to something else of their chose. This is where technology has had both positive and negative consequences towards classical music.

While technology is the mark of a thriving civilization, some of its products have had some extremely serious consequences to modern classical music. Most noteworthy of these technological advances have been the ability to record and replay music at will, with devises like compact discs and cassettes. Even more recently, the birth of the Internet and its music sharing capabilities has come into view. When one can purchase a CD for unlimited, nearly perfect performances of their favorite works, or obtain a free copy online, the need to attend a concert is nearly eliminated and the main source of income for an orchestra is diminished.

The advent of playback devices, most especially the compact disc, or CD, classical listeners have the ability to enjoy an entire symphony or orchestral work from the comfort of their home. This has severely cut into the attendance of concerts given by symphonies. The only advantage to a classical music lover of hearing a live performance is the distinct environment of a symphony hall filled with fellow music lovers and connoisseurs. However, this can be easily

outweighed by the simplicity of popping in a CD and having the sounds instantly emerge from your home speakers.

In addition, there is a gap between the quality of a live concert and that of a CD. When an orchestra records a work, it has as many attempts as necessary to produce the highest quality result. When performed live, while still high quality, mistakes can, and do occur and these can be a deterrent from a concert. In the minds of many people, it is more logical to purchase a fifteen dollar CD and hear a near perfect rendition of a piece than to go out and spend the evening at the symphony and possibly hear something performed differently than what they are accustomed to.

One unexpected use of the Internet that has prompted heated debate is file sharing, especially of music files called MP3's. People can use music sharing programs like the late, and controversial, Napster, Morpheus, and Kazaa to easily find the songs that they want and download them right onto their computer. While the recipient of this free music is satisfied, record companies and artists are not receiving a dime for their work.. Now, not only are people not going to hear concerts, they are not even paying for the music to begin with. This presents a double financial burden to orchestra's.

Even with the crisis outlined above concerning technological pressures, symphony orchestra's could probably still rally back and survive financially without excessive effect. It is in this next topic that the real danger to a symphony is found. In its most general terms, people are not buying season ticket subscriptions to orchestra's in the same number that they used to. Consumers are reluctant to lock themselves into attending certain concerts and performances months, if not a year in advance which might eventually conflict with a later event that might prevent them from attending. Another major source of funds for orchestras', donations from supporters, is not as substantial as in years past. But with the economic slowdown and a shaky

financial for many Americans, the funds to give just are not available. Uncertain income and empty seats have orchestras extremely nervous about the future.

Up to this point, all issues dealing with the crisis in classical music have been external, namely financial. However, probably the most severe and dangerous comes from classical music itself: the musicians, the critics, the music directors, and the listeners themselves. Classical music is faced with stagnation; the standard repertoire of music has changed very little over the years, despite new works being written. In addition, the reliable symphony goers are getting older; without appealing to a new generation of listeners classical music will be dead in the water.

The standard circle of music played in classical music is practically the same as it was nearly a hundred years ago. To quote Michael Walsh,

Although the fringes of the repertoire have been gingerly pushed back beyond Bach and extended on the other end to early Stravinsky, its [classical music's] core has remained relatively stable; with only minor changes, the very first program performed by the New York Philharmonic in the mid-nineteenth century could be played at Avery Fischer Hall next week and no one would think the choice of music odd, old-fashioned or in any way unusual.

This practically sums up the crisis at hand. Classical music is the only form of music in which the list of most commonly performed pieces has not changed since the works were composed. This is in many cases well over a hundred years ago. If applied to any other genre of music, or walk of life, the idea would seem nonsensical. Yet in classical music it is taken for granted. How can an art form retain its vibrance if new works are not constantly being introduced into its mainstream?

Many people are at fault when it comes to this predicament. Music directors have less control over the selection of music their group plays, and are instead under the control of a board

of directors. In turn, this board of directors is influenced by the general public, and that is where the crux of the issue appears. The audience attending concerts, the *listeners themselves*, are at the root of the problem. People will buy season tickets to the orchestra, providing that every year the symphony performs common works like Beethoven's *Fifth*, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, or Ravel's *Bolero*. Additionally, conductors are under the spotlight to keep the music similar sounding each year.

Conductors in the past had great control of every part of the music making process. The tempo, the style, and shape of music were guided by the personal musical beliefs of the conductor. But today's concert goers are not as lenient about how their music is performed. The general consensus from the public, concerning music, is to keep it the same. This is stagnation in its most obvious form.

Besides the problem with the music selection itself, orchestra's have another issue to contend with. The people that are regularly attending concerts are slowly aging. A study by the National Endowment for the Arts reported that "attendance at classical music performances is highest among those born between 1936- 45 and lowest in the oldest and youngest (age groups). What this means is that most attendees are into their retirement ages. Unless new younger audiences can be attracted in enough numbers to offset, and hopefully overtake the numbers that will be lost, orchestras will be in desperate search of paying customers.

Classical music, one of the oldest and most cherished forms of musical art, is in danger. No longer are the days where concert halls are filled to overflowing every weekend matinee, but times are now when orchestras are faced with low attendance and heavy financial debts. The spectrum of music played is dwindling; new, exotic music is scorned and forbidden by the general public. But there is hope. Just as minimalistic and impressionistic art are slowly

becoming accepted in art galleries and city parks, maybe the acceptance will move to classical music. If it does, we can expect to keep classical music from being reduced to a mere stack of CDs to a once again thriving and flourishing cultural idiom.