Listening to the Now

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Abstract: The future of classical music is almost universally thought bleak. Attendance figures are dropping, and some even question whether it is possible to write new classical music that concertgoers will be able to appreciate. This essay locates the origins of such doomsday prophecy in unquestioned assumptions and seeks to establish just the opposite: that classical music is alive and vibrant, that new creative horizons are constantly opening up, and that audiences will actually enjoy many contemporary classical compositions. The key is to present these unfamiliar works as they are understood by their composers: in a context that allows listeners to make connections between the familiar and unfamiliar, opening their minds to a wealth of new human experience.

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This essay had its genesis in a conversation several years ago during a post-concert dinner, classical music's version of a valedictory celebration. The American composer John Adams spoke of a comment he had come across in Stephen Jay Gould's book *Full House* (published in Britain as *Life's Grandeur*). The book deals with the limits of possibility in biology, abilities in baseball, and near the end, a few asides regarding general performance in athletics, the arts, and creativity. For Gould, there is a point after which one can no longer create classical music in a way that would be intelligible for listeners. He lists a golden era beginning with Bach and ending with Mahler and wonders if, in this area, human creativity has reached a wall beyond which possibilities are no longer available.

For Adams, whose work consists of imagining just such possibilities, this seemed a surprising idea to advance because it shows a misunderstanding of how composers actually work and think. It also indicates acceptance of a progression from simplicity to ever-greater complexity as the narrative for classical music's development over time. Further, it displays a lack of awareness of the place contemporary composition ought to occupy in our concert life. Most of us would agree that, presently, it sits in

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most concert programs as an uninvited guest who didn't get the memo about the dress code.

That post-concert discussion with one of my favorite composers got me thinking about how certain cultural ideas can take root and impede meaningful debate and understanding. We often try to reduce complex ideas into more manageable ones in order to deal with them, even if in the end the subject has lost so many important nuances that any conclusions will be false and unhelpful. What amazed me was that if someone as thoughtful as Stephen Jay Gould was thinking this way, then we really did have a problem.

Gould was writing as someone who deeply loves classical music, particularly a kind of classical music that obtained for close to three hundred years. The music he refers to is largely independent of theater; a repertoire that can be called concert music, both vocal and instrumental, chamber and orchestral. It was conceived and supported in the relatively homogeneous cultural climate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and present-day Germany. While this category is drawn very broadly, it is true that the music of this period shows remarkable richness as demonstrated by its status as the bedrock of most classical programming today. Other strains have been added to this canon according to varying tastes and shifting cultural opinions. We might add to the list Russians and Slavs from the late nineteenth century, or French from the same period and into the early twentieth century. For those with even broader tastes, there are British, Scandinavian, Spanish, Italian, Latin American, and even North American musics that could be included.

The result at this point in the twenty-first century is what is generally regarded as "classical music." I happen to occupy a position professionally – conductor – that arouses suspicion in most people: what does he actually do? Aside from my aerobic duties during a concert performance, in my role as leader I am also frequently responsible for the selection and sequence of pieces that constitute one of classical music's products, the concert program.

You have probably read or heard about the death of classical music; the reports have been around for quite a while now. If this is news to you, just search Google for "death of classical music" and watch with delight as 46,700,000 results return in 0.18 seconds! One of the reasons this discourse is so frequently unproductive is that it is often begun without realizing how many key assumptions are made at the outset. For example, referring to classical music as a "product" already brings in the language and expectations of market economics, skewing any discussion in the direction of music as a commodity to purchase and consume rather than as an activity to experience.

The economic realities involved in making music are certainly a pertinent and valid subject. Questions regarding the finances required to reproduce, at a high level of quality, musical works of the past (especially when the forces required might include more than a hundred instrumentalists, vocal soloists, and a large chorus) are paramount. Further, whom is this form of art/entertainment addressing? Why should we go to all the trouble of playing these works live when there are so many technological options for accessing them? However, these different questions are often discussed simultaneously, resulting in the conclusion that there is no creativity left (or pace Gould, possible) in classical music – that, at best, we are witnessing its painfully slow demise and fossilization.

I beg to differ.

For nine years, I was music director of a group whose mission was to play the music

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of our time. The largest proportion of finances for the group came from the French Ministry of Culture. The assumptions about repertoire were clear enough that no one had to specify that we were not to play rock, or hip-hop, or any other form of "popular" music. We were in the cultural business of playing the most contemporary strain of "classical" music. Aesthetic discussions aside, I was privileged in this position to work with and get to know dozens of composers personally, gaining insight into their wide-ranging poetic ideas and inspirations. What I learned from these interactions was an appreciation of the enormous diversity of styles that present-day composers are using. I also realized that none of the composers saw themselves as working apart from pre-established musical traditions. Each had a different position to the past, but they could not ignore it anymore than any of us can.

When a composer imagines a sound and then notates it for someone else there are lots of common beliefs in play. The pitch will probably be standard: it will relate to existing instruments and therefore to habits of tone production and listening that have been established for quite a while. The composer's way of dealing with musical time will be influenced by what has been heard and experienced in previous music, as well as what has had the best success in past practice. The culture informing the society in which the composer grew up also plays an enormous role. And there is consideration of the environment in which the music will be performed: on its own in a concert, as part of a school activity, in connection with dance, or as an accompaniment to visual imagery of some kind.

What interests me is the part these composing musicians bring to the human experience: the wonder. Music is created out of thin air. Where before there was nothing at all, suddenly there is something so enjoyable and delightful, so rich in layers of meaning that we often refer to this something as a work of art. There is invention and surprise, but there are also core beliefs very much held in common. We make music based on these shared ideas about the definition of music and its presentation.

My profession consists of trying to use creatively what already exists (institutions, repertoire, audience curiosity) in order to represent the vast wealth of human expression found in "classical" music, in my case a tradition beginning around the seventeenth century and continuing today. If we play only the music of the past, what meaning does its beauty (or the contrary) have for us today without a musical context that relates it to our present experience? The connection to the human condition that classical music provides is singular. It happens in time and can collapse centuries into a few minutes. We can suddenly inhabit areas of feeling that traverse generations, opening us up to unexpected parts of ourselves. This is not only found in the notion of "a distant mirror," as when we see our own sentiments reflected in, say, a Schubert song; it is also to be discovered in the musical conversation across time. That is when things really get interesting.

When, in 1910, Ralph Vaughn Williams writes a work based on music from the 1500s by Thomas Tallis, he is reaching through time to grasp hold of something ephemeral and fleeting but which lives on in something as ephemeral and fleeting as the human capacity for feeling and empathy. When I put that work on a program with Thomas Adès's 2005 Violin Concerto "Concentric Paths," there is a point in the second movement (itself in the antiquated form of a passacaglia) when everyone in the audience (I believe) has an epiphany that is entirely musical. It is a

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feeling difficult to put into words and one that, most important, cannot be achieved any other way. The elation of this moment is awe-inspiring. Without all three composers' involvement – without the perspectives of all three – we would not have that wondrous musical revelation.

Most composers do not quote other composers consciously. There are indeed works that consist of quotations (Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* or Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Musique pour les soupers de Roi Ubu*), but most composers work at creating "new" music. They are of course aware of a great deal of different music by the time they are writing, and their personal choices reflect the kinds of music that they are drawn to. This tendency gives the programmer an amazing opportunity to have musical dialogue across any given concert. At first glance this might seem a bit illogical. When author David Lodge writes in *Small World* of the influence of T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare, initially we read it as a joke. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that once you have experienced *The Waste Land*, *King Lear* will never be the same. Music is no different. How we receive history is never fixed, and composers are not immune to this situation any more than are listeners. Inevitably, we realize that our appreciation for those two immense columns of sound that are the opening chords of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony has changed after we hear Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Iannis Xenakis's *Jonchaies*, or even the power chords of AC/DC. Indeed, many of Stravinsky's rhythms have been influenced in our mind's ear retroactively by the rhythmic intricacies and drive of funk or techno music. There is no way to get around this, and it might be experienced by many as negative; but I see it as a source of excitement. In this way especially, today's composers are living with us in our time, and their take on our experiences should be, at the very least, interesting to us.

But what about audience curiosity? This may come as a surprise, but reports from the field are not rosy. If one looks at the concert attendance surveys done by reputable firms, it is obvious that the drop-off in audience enjoyment for "modern" music is colossal.

Allow me this experiment: name five visual artists from before the twentieth century that you love; now name five from after 1900. Chances are good that we share some favorites in that list. Now think of five visual artists who you are certain are alive. Usually the non-specialist, like me, can do pretty well with the first ten, but that last group is considerably harder. Obviously, our contemporaries have had less time to become established in common cultural heritage. You will hear this cliché used as a rallying cry in new music circles – something along the lines of, "They complained about Beethoven as well!" While there is a natural process of elimination throughout history, that line of argument is too facile and misses the point.

When a survey asks, how do you like Russian symphonic repertoire, even the casual music lover can think of at least one piece by name (Tchaikovsky anyone?). If you ask the same question about a composer post-1950, our casual music lover will probably think of some horrid experience that she had and hopes never to have again. My hunch has always been that these listeners will not be able to attribute a name to the unpleasant piece (although Schoenberg will probably be invoked as a catchall), but the answer for the survey is the same. So let's imagine a different option. Listeners – all of us – try to understand an unfamiliar work in terms of the repertoire we already know, and this fact needs to be taken into account when

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trying to find the right context for a "new" work. If you were to ask the audience members at a recent concert of mine that began with Dvorak's *Symphony No. 7* and closed with Strauss's *Four Last Songs* how they liked the piece in the middle (George Crumb's *A Haunted Landscape* from 1984, which they were hearing for the first time) the response would probably be very favorable. This is because the Dvorak symphony contains music that sets up the ideas of atmosphere that Crumb is evoking, and the tensions in his musical landscape are beautifully grounded by Strauss's lyricism, both pieces working perfectly as a frame for the new work. My assumption is based on anecdotal evidence garnered from several weeks of conversations with diverse patrons after the concert, and it demonstrates why I do not work for a survey firm.

The problem has to do with generalizations. In an age where iTunes refers to everything – regardless of length, style, or genre – as a "song," I realize that making this point is akin to jousting with windmills. We generalize to simplify discussion and make decisions. We generalize about repertoire, taste, and audiences. We base ideas of success on attendance figures, which contain unnoticed generalizations about the appropriate size of the hall in which the music is presented. It is, however, much harder to generalize about the quality of an individual's personal experience of a program, because that means we are talking about a specific person. So we rarely ask what an individual got out of the experience, because it is simply too difficult to measure. Yet the quality of the individual experience is the reason for the whole thing in the first place!

The fascinating parts of music are the details in a particular work that evoke unique changes in each of us. Our thoughts and feelings interact with music in ways that can indeed be generalized, but they are of interest to us individually for what they bring out in our own experience. I am aware of this every time I finish conducting a piece and turn around, making eye contact with those who have just been sharing the music with me. We can generalize to our heart's content about the public and its tastes, but I look around and see the faces of individual beings all with slightly different expressions – beings who all have just entered into a series of personal connections that only they can know, that only they can have with what was played. Every listener is important, and from their individual points of view, we really only play the concert for them. It is impractical to play one concert two thousand times, so we collect that number of individuals at one event. This is where generalizations make their necessary entrance.

One telling generalization about human nature and music comes from a wonderful essay in scientist Robert Sapolsky's book *Monkeyluv*. He talks about the way Homo sapiens' minds seem to close to new musical stimuli around the time we reach 25 years of age. In other words, if you have been exposed to the rock band Radiohead by age 25, you're in luck; if not, then it is probably off-limits to you. While this is largely true, particularly in popular music, Sapolsky nonetheless joyously discovers some music that he finds wonderful. In the essay, he writes about the huge social cachet involved, the way music is often used to define a group, so he keeps the name of his newfound music to himself in order not to drag down its "hip" quality among younger members of his research lab. ("Doo-wop and total serialism are sooo '50s, dude!") Part of my challenge as a concert programmer is to figure out the best way to free up listening habits for many individuals simultaneously because today's composers

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cannot hope to have their music heard by ten year olds; they must hope that, like Sapolsky, many old dogs can be taught new tricks, or at least new listening habits. As a programmer, I have to hope that as well.

Perhaps nowadays we should look at the combination of works on a program as a "playlist." People like to share playlists, which can be listened to over and over in various contexts: jogging, shopping, riding the bus, playing in the background when friends come to visit, or while surfing the Web. The essential difference behind our classical music concert playlist is that we are dealing with a one-time, unrepeatable event. It is a unique form of human communication. It expects a focus on the music at the exclusion of everything else. ("Please turn off all cell phones, watch alarms, and other electronic devices.") Given our current electronic interconnectedness, this is already a tall order. So when I consider the public concert, I see it as a forum where we all accept as our goal the idea of contemplating and enjoying musical sound. My one-time-only playlist has to be chosen and performed with great care. To balance the familiar with the unfamiliar, many questions need to be asked at the outset. What else is on the program; what is its duration; will we have enough time to prepare it properly; where does it come in the program; is there a soloist? How often does the audience get to experience music related to the unfamiliar item? What time of day will the concert take place, and where? Once you have found a proper musical context for the new work, ideally with the right combination of pieces, are there any supports before or during the concert that can give listeners an extra frame of reference to hold onto, something that helps inform their listening to make it as active as possible?

I am not alone in thinking this way. Composers themselves also ask these questions. Despite polemics to the contrary, I have rarely encountered composers who do not care if you listen. What they are interested in are sounds – their combinations, the meanings and emotions they convey. The variety that composers represent as a group is staggering in its diversity, but luckily has its parallel in the different possible audience members. It is a challenge for composer and listener alike that there is not one accepted style they can all be certain of from the beginning. Composers enter into a pact of trust with listeners. They will attempt to make you aware of the kind of language they will be working with from the start. They will have to articulate some sort of form for their sounds. They will adopt various propositions regarding the aesthetics and will work with those ideas consistently. They are aware that, unlike visual art, they bear the responsibility for how much time you spend contemplating their work. They only hope you will listen with an open mind. And there's the rub!

So why am I so worry-free despite constant reports of gloom from the classical music world? Because the DNA all music shares allows listeners to make connections between familiar and unfamiliar works, opening their minds to a powerful and joyous part of the human experience: simply put, our universal, innate ability for surprise. How lucky we are that this quality is a foundation of being alive! The world of music, even just the small category of classical music, is so huge that we can never know all of it. It tells us things we cannot imagine before we hear it, and after we have listened to it we cannot imagine our lives, ourselves, without it. It is a fundamental part of the ever-becoming you. Try thinking of who you would be without knowing one of your favorite songs, and you begin to see the shaping power of music.

I have been fortunate to meet many people whose reaction to something new is

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not rejection but a sense of wonder and surprise. The gratitude they express would be reason enough to continue. I have seen these expressions all around the globe. These individuals are frequently the ones who fly in the face of generalizations about age, ethnic background, education, and taste in classical music. For them the world continually opens up in an unexpected way through musical magic. They discover something to love, admire, and cherish that did not exist for them before we played it. It is a miracle. It's no wonder that we wonder. It's no wonder that musicians were born to share.

Perhaps many of the new pieces I play will have a tough time being immediately embraced by a large number of people. Classical music's richness is deep, and listeners may feel that their personal musical world is established, replete without the need for anything new. People resist change; old habits die hard; generalizations abide. And yet, if we face the world with an open mind, we cannot escape our own capacity for surprise, sometimes when we least expect it: in the beauty of a sunrise, in a child's sudden smile, in an as yet unheard musical phrase.

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