

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

by Greg Sandow

Chapter 3 – The Culture Ran Away From Us

(Not the final text, but a riff on what this chapter will most likely say)

There's an important book for anyone interested in the future of classical music – and it's a book that doesn't mention classical music at all. Except, I guess, in its title, *Pictures at a Revolution*, which of course is a play on the title of a Mussorgsky piece so familiar that even people outside classical music know it.

But the title doesn't matter. This is the story – written by Mark Harris, and published in 2008 to great and well-deserved acclaim – of a 1960s revolution in Hollywood. And the classical music connection is that classical music never had a revolution like that.

The book starts quietly, in New York, in 1963, where we watch a magazine art director heading into a movie theater to see – for what might have been the twelfth time -- Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim*. Which of course is now a classic, but played in those days only to a cult audience.

Over time, though, this cult audience grew. A new generation wanted something the older generation hadn't given it. "The deep chord of longing [these films] sounded," Harris writes, "was understandable. Emotional ambiguity and grown-up sexuality were virtually black-market items in American movies of the time."

Now move ahead a bit. The art director mad about Truffaut wrote the screenplay for one of the breakthrough movies of the '60s, *Bonnie and Clyde* (collaborating with friend who was equally obsessed with European films). In 1967, *Bonnie and Clyde* was released. In 1968 it got a dozen Oscar nominations.

And now there was a revolution. A new breed of moviegoer – young, informal, very '60s – lined up to see *Bonnie and Clyde* (along with other '60s films like *The Graduate*, which reflected the same new culture, and were filmed with the same new verve).

At Hollywood parties, the guests split in two, with older and younger film professionals barely speaking to each other. The *New York Times* fired its film critic, because he didn't understand the new films. And *Time* magazine, which had panned *Bonnie and Clyde*, retracted its review in a 5000-word cover story, declaring that it had not just been wrong, but drastically wrong.

This truly was a revolution, and without it, we wouldn't have any of the emotionally complex films – or at least not in the movie mainstream – that we take for granted today.

So back to the hidden classical music connection. Classical music never had a '60s revolution. We never had the revolution that – widening our focus beyond Mark Harris's book – also happened in pop music,

painting, politics, race relations, and even in everyday life, which changed forever (this is a grand statement, but we all know it's true), becoming freer, more informal, more creative, more spontaneous.

And this is one way (though certainly not the only way) to look at how classical music grew distant from the culture around it. The rest of the world changed, and the classical music world went on playing Bach and Beethoven. Wearing formal dress.

So now let's imagine that things had turned out differently. Suppose the movies hadn't had their revolution. Suppose that when the Oscars came around, the nominees were old-style musicals like *The Sound of Music*, with taut, truthful films like *The Hurt Locker* nowhere to be seen. Maybe then the movie audience would in large part be older people – just like the classical music audience really is right now.

And what if classical music had had a '60s revolution? Would Brahms and Beethoven now share the concert stage – on an equal basis – with lively, sometimes searing, and sometimes wildly popular contemporary works?

And would the classical music audience now be young?

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I'm using the '60s as a kind of test case, the clearest possible demonstration of how classical music hasn't changed when our culture changes. And I'm pointing here at what I think is the most serious problem classical music has, its separation from our wider culture. This separation is the reason, in the end, for the aging audience, and for declines in ticket sales and funding. Classical music just hasn't kept up with the world, and so the world has been leaving it behind.

[Disclaimer! Of course things are changing. Classical music will be reborn. So take what I'm writing here as a description, sometimes a sharp one, of the problems that we'll learn to overcome.]

[Note, too, that some people will think the divorce of classical music from our society is a good thing. Essentially they're saying that our culture, with all of its changes – or perhaps because of them – is rotten. And that classical music serves as a refuge from the rot. If this line of argument is valid, then of course we have worse problems than the fading of classical music. Though I don't think it's valid, and I'll argue with it later in the book. Here's one small part of that argument: Can you think of a time when our culture was better? Think hard, and cast your net wider than classical music. If you've chosen what you think was a better era, what were its politics like? Were there public executions? What wars were fought? What was life like for women and minorities?]

Of course there are many more examples of classical music losing touch with our wider culture, examples far beyond the '60s, and which I'll get to later in this riff. But first I want to qualify a few things that I've said.

First – as I’ll be stressing throughout this book – I don’t mean that we shouldn’t play Bach and Beethoven. It’s how much we play them that I think is a problem. (And maybe how we play them, too – we could use more individuality in our performances – individuality, I could stress, that came into all of our culture in the wake of the ‘60s, though classical music had a lot of it even earlier than that. But this is something I’ll talk about later.)

And second, it would be wrong to say that classical music during the ‘60s didn’t change at all. Some leaders in classical music – briefly, anyway – embraced at least at least one part of the ‘60s revolution. They fell in love with the Beatles. Leonard Bernstein did this, and so did Ned Rorem, noted composer and classical music bad boy (a reputation he carefully cultivated with flamboyantly gay diaries). Note, though, that Bernstein and Rorem didn’t fall in love with rock itself. You didn’t find people in classical music raving about rock beyond the Beatles, about the Rolling Stones, Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Who, or the Band. The Beatles, in fact, were loved inside the classical music world precisely because they weren’t like other rock, because they sounded closer to classical music than other bands did, because they used melody and harmony in ways that classical musicians were used to.

So the people in classical music who praised them definitely *not* embracing ‘60s rock.

[Wilfrid Mellers, a British music scholar, was an exception. He wrote passionate books about the Beatles and Bob Dylan, and at least in the Dylan book, really did seem to be embracing rock itself. He doesn’t quite get the music, from any serious rock point of view, but his love for it is touching.]

And then some new classical trends – new stirrings, new ways of doing things – did in fact appear. The biggest change in classical music, in fact, was very much of its time, though not linked to the peace/love/hippie ‘60s. It was closer to the jet set and glamour side of the ‘60s, which emerged earlier than the hippie ‘60s did, and were exemplified by James Bond novels, the Rat Pack (Frank Sinatra and his Vegas buddies), and, in the US, by the glamorous reign of Jack and Jackie Kennedy.

It may seem strange, even perverse, to link classical music to James Bond, but the link goes through the jet set. James Bond was, in his way, a jet-setting international superstar. And because of ‘60s prosperity, because of jet travel, and because of international distribution of recordings, classical music also developed jet-setting stars, people like Georg Solti, Herbert von Karajan, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who towered over the classical music scene in a way that no one in past generations ever quite did. [

[The one possible exception was Toscanini, whose fame in the US in the 1950s was titanic, eclipsing – by miles – all other conductors. As I vividly remember from my childhood, Toscanini’s boxed LP set of the Beethoven symphonies was likely to be in any home my family visited. But this might be precursor of what happened in the ‘60s, since Toscanini’s unparalleled fame was media-driven, the result of corporate promotion by the company that owned his record label, RCA, and the NBC network, on whose broadcasts Toscanini conducted an orchestra that had been created especially for him.]

Fischer-Dieskau, one of the most polished artists ever to sing classical music, is a particularly good example, because he eclipsed every other singer in his category. His specialty wasn't what most glamorous singers would sing, namely opera, but instead the much more intimate art song repertoire, especially (since he was German) German lieder. And here he reigned supreme, so much so that many classical music lovers who formed their taste at the time might never hear any other lieder singer.

[I remember this, too, vividly, because I was a singer then, sang lieder, and was eventually surprised to discover that other baritones like Gerard Souzay and Hermann Prey sang the same music. I auditioned for a refined and artistic voice teacher, Martial Singher (who had been one of the leading baritones singing the French repertoire in previous decades), and I remember him saying, in a voice tinged with kindly regret, "You have been listening to Fischer-Dieskau." And, without meaning to, copying his mannerisms.]

But here are some other changes in classical music from that period, some of them clearly linked to other kinds of '60s culture. It's worth looking at them, to see how limited they were. Or at least how limited they'd look to the outside world, even if some of them made a big difference inside the classical music bubble.

Here's a list:

- *The rise of the early music movement.* Which brought new ways of playing some of the music in the classical repertoire, starting with music from the Baroque period and earlier (which means the Renaissance, and medieval music), and later on moving into the later 18th century, the time of Haydn and Mozart. No one can say this didn't have a long-lasting effect on classical performances. By now it's not entirely uncommon – to cite just one lasting change – to hear mainstream orchestras play Bach without vibrato (since early music scholarship has determined that string players didn't vibrate their fingers on the notes they played, which meant that they made a cleaner, less intense and far less lush sound than we're used to hearing from string players today).
- *Civil rights.* Black musicians – in a clear reflection of the civil rights movement – started playing in major orchestras. More of them sang with major opera companies.

[Though even in recent years there's been an issue with male black singers, especially tenors. When I wrote an article in the '90s [about African –Americans in classical music](#), every African-American personage in the business I spoke to felt that black men weren't given leading roles in opera, because the white people who ran opera companies didn't want them doing love scenes onstage with white women. One white director of a major opera company strongly agreed that this was true.]

- *Mahler.* Here we had a composer from the past, someone who bridged the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and who died 50 years before the '60s, in 1911. His music had fallen out of fashion, and when it came back in the '60s, it could almost have been – or

at least it seems this way in retrospect -- a '60s metaphor. That's because Mahler has an almost psychedelic streak, in his wild, uneasy yearning for transcendence.

- *Classical composers.* Some of them wrote pieces that fit right into '60s culture. We'll see that they did this only on the fringes of the classical music world, but some examples are:
 - *George Crumb.* He used unusual instruments, with which he created otherworldly sounds. And he noted his music in unusual ways, which made the written scores of his pieces look like works of art in their own right.
 - *Terry Riley.* As early as 1964 he wrote *In C*, which in true '60s fashion was a communal piece, almost a musical happening, in which musicians – any number, playing any instruments – work their way at their own pace through a series of musical phrases, creating a sound that magically evolves on its own, in almost trance-inducing ways that no one can predict.
 - *Karlheinz Stockhausen*, who bought into the '60s eagerly, writing pieces like *Aus dem sieben tagen*, whose written scores are just a few words of text, for instance:

*wait until it is absolutely still within you
when you have attained this
begin to play
as soon as you start to think, stop
and try to reattain
the state of Non-Thinking
then continue playing*

Musicians were supposed to absorb the meaning of these words, and improvise in their spirit. But maybe Stockhausen's most striking '60s piece is *Stimmung*, premiered in 1969. Six singers for more than an hour, chanting on the notes of a single chord (or, in musicians' language, on the overtones of a single note, B flat, which of course create a single, unchanging chord). Sometimes they intone the magical names of deities. Very '60s, as anyone can see, and quite a gorgeous, absorbing, meditative piece, too, even if the magical names can sometimes sound a little wacky.

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But as I've said, these changes were limited. As ought to be obvious, because if they hadn't been limited, classical music would have had its revolution, and now might look a lot more like the world around us.

Let's measure the limits:

Early music.

Classical music concentrates too much on repertoire from the past, and the early music movement didn't change that. If anything, it focused even more attention on the past.

And if another classical music problem is a top-down approach, a sense that classical music feeds on scholarly considerations far beyond the understanding of normal people, then the early music movement made that even worse, by adding new scholarship that everyone now had to learn about (or feel insufficient for not learning).

Finally, the early music movement didn't, in the '60s, inspire performances that had any kind of '60s style or spirit. There was nothing free about them, nothing spontaneous. To be fair, in our own era some of them have taken off into really wild places, but in the '60s, early music performances – as has often been observed – functioned almost as a kind of modernism. They seemed detached and analytical, focused on stylistic details.

Black musicians, black music.

Yes, barriers fell. Nobody barred black musicians – or at least formally barred them – from singing in opera, or playing in orchestras. But black faces remained uncommon in classical music.

[And one form of apparent discrimination did remain. For decades afterward, African-Americans in classical music believed, and not without justice, that African-American men had trouble getting romantic leading roles in opera, because of fears that a white audience wouldn't want to see them singing love scenes with white women.]

In the wake of the '60s, popular culture and the media started including – even featuring – minorities. Black faces showed up in print advertising, and in TV commercials. And in movies. We all know the stereotype: A judge, in a movie trial scene, is likely to be black, even (or maybe most often) a black woman.

Reflecting all of this – but going further, embodying really deep currents of change – the pop world felt an upsurge of black music in the '60s. Bands like the Rolling Stones took inspiration from old blues and R&B songs, Motown (a black-owned record company) put black artists high on the pop charts, and singers like Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin brought a gospel sound into mainstream pop. James Brown went even further, creating a new black style of his own, based heavily on rhythm, and without many chord changes, harking back, consciously or not, to the music of Africa.

Nothing like any of this happened in classical music. We didn't see pieces drawing on black or African musical idioms, and, inside the classical music mainstream, we still don't see much of that today.

Mahler.

Yes, the resurgence of Mahler echoed the '60s, more closely by far than anything that happened in early music, or with minorities. But even so – and in true classical music style – it strengthened the hold of music from the past, by bringing more of it into the classical repertoire. Classical music could, conceivably, have found a genuine '60s sound, but instead it used music from the past as a covert '60s echo.

Which brings us to...

'60s composers.

The new trends in '60s composition lived on the margins of classical music. Where else could they live, in a field that's focused on the past? Stockhausen, in the '60s, was a world-famous figure on the avant-garde. But hardly anybody talks about him today, and you can go to classical concerts all your life and never hear *Stimmung*, or even hear anyone talk about it.

As for George Crumb, he became an honored composer, at least in the new music corner of the classical world, but soon enough the vogue for him passed.

Terry Riley's *In C* became a new music classic, often played on festive occasions. Or, rather, on festive occasions outside the classical mainstream. It never found a mainstream place, even though – or so you might think – it would (just for example) fit wonderfully into orchestral programs, giving orchestra musicians a chance to step out on their own, doing something with no conductor, that they themselves fully control. But then that kind of '60s thinking never made much headway in the classical mainstream.

Terry Riley of course was one of the first minimalists. And when minimalism flowered into fame with Steve Reich and Philip Glass, this also happened outside the classical concert hall. The moral of that story? Even when something new in classical music gets famous in the outside world, it still doesn't get much traction in what ought to be its home.

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And now for some other eras when classical music didn't fully reflect the world around it.

We could start in the 1950s, with the beat generation, which clearly left no mark on classical music. You might ask why that matters, since you also might think the beats didn't leave much mark on mainstream culture, that they didn't change it, the way the '60s changed it.

But I don't think that would quite be right. The beats, first of all, got major notice, even in staid and stately mainstream fortresses like the New York Times, which gave the beats some major space, in a notable magazine section piece, for instance ("This Is The Beat Generation," by John Clellon Holmes, published on November 16, 1952). And also in a rave review of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, in the eyes

of the public back then more or less the founding document of the beat generation, and now an accepted American classic.

[The review, by Gilbert Millstein, appeared in the *Times* on September 5, 1957, and at the very beginning says: “[This book’s] publication is a historic occasion in so far as the exposure of an authentic work of art is of any great moment in an age in which the attention is fragmented and the sensibilities are blunted by the superlatives of fashion (multiplied a millionfold by the speed and pound of communications).” People describe our culture now in almost exactly the same terms. *Plus ça change.*]

Why does the beat generation matter? *On the Road*, writes Michael Greenberg in the *New York Review of Books* (the current issue as I write this, March 25, 2010), has a “relentless ethos of nonconformism.” So did J. D. Salinger, Greenberg says. And in fact conformity was a major issue in the ‘50s, going way beyond the beats, and explored in then-famous books, among them David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (a sociological study of alienation and “other-directedness”), William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (a popular look at corporate conformity), Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (about how advertising entices people to conform), and Sloan Wilson’s novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (whose title speaks for itself).

[I read all these books – I was in high school -- when they came out.]

In this light, Kerouac can be linked to Salinger as protests against conformity, but beyond that, especially with Kerouac, as antidotes to it.

So where was all of this in classical music? Nowhere, at the time. Well, maybe Glenn Gould – a wildly original, reclusive pianist – was a nonconforming figure. But how many others like him were there?

In pop music, conformity also wasn’t treated explicitly. But the very existence of rock & roll – which erupted, seemingly from nowhere, in the ‘50s -- was an anti-conformist surge.

[And was seen, by the established powers of the time, as the end of civilization. If, that is, they didn’t see it as a passing fad, though some might have thought of it, hardly logically, as both at once. The point, though, is that they felt it as a threat.]

[Classical music, in fact, could be seen as a force *for* conformity, in the ‘50s, and even now. Aren’t classical musicians supposed to play classical music the way they’re taught it ought to go? Aren’t audiences told when they should applaud? If we look at the mainstream classical audience – I mean literally; go to a concert and look at them – do they look like people about to burst out of any established bounds?]

And we can go back earlier, too, but before doing that, we might ask why classical music seems to lag behind the culture it’s part of. I can think of two possible reasons, while noting that essentially I’m speculating, that this is a question that (to my knowledge) hasn’t been much discussed, and that the discussion, while fascinating, is, in the end, not crucial for my book, because the fact remains that classical music does stand apart from our culture, whatever the reasons might be.

Though it's good to see, as we shortly will, that classical music doesn't have to stand apart. Because what it faces now, in a quickly changing world, is far more challenging than anything it faced in centuries past.

I can think of two reasons why classical music might lag behind the rest of culture. First, people form a deep emotional bond with music, and thus perhaps are more troubled when they hear music going in a direction they're not used to, than when they see a painting doing that, or read a novel that upsets them. Contradicting this, though, might be a survey done in the 1990s by the American Symphony Orchestra League (now the League of American Orchestras), about what people in the core orchestra audience like about orchestra concerts.

Essentially they find the music uplifting, and even inspiring (which was a relief for the League, which worried that people might go to concerts largely for social reasons, to see and be seen). But along with this came a curious, almost touching discovery, about what people in the orchestral audience think about other arts. Many people in this audience also go to the theater, but a surprising percentage of them get upset when a play deals with unpleasant subjects.

So now we see people tied to classical music who (or so it seems) might like to avoid anything upsetting in the culture around them. We might wonder, then, if – rather than a deep bond with classical music evoking a wish that the music wouldn't change – it's the conservatism of classical music that attracts certain people to it. Or in other words that people who bond with classical music might do it, at least in part, because the music – precisely because it stands apart from our culture – is more or less guaranteed to be comforting.

A second reason for classical music's special status might be its cost. Large classical music events – orchestra concerts, opera performances, choral performances – are expensive to produce. And since, especially in past centuries, it's been the established powers in our society that have the money classical music needs, it's hardly a surprise that classical music has often avoided anything radical.

We can see that happening if we roll back the clock to previous centuries. What we find – if we look at the place music held in the culture of past eras – is something I haven't seen others talking or writing about, though it's hard to believe I'm the only one who's noticed it. If we go back before the 20th century, we *still* see deep disconnects between classical music and the society it functioned in, even though classical music clearly was far more central than it is now, even though it was used for worship and for entertainment, even though you couldn't go to church without hearing it, even though young Victorian women played classical music on the piano in every genteel drawing room, and even though music from Verdi's operas was played (at least in Italy) on barrel organs in the streets.

Despite all that, classical music lived in a conservative space. Go back to the 18th century, and while you'll find writers who were skeptical of both social forms and religion, you won't find classical pieces based on their work. You won't, for instance, find oratorios with skeptical, sardonic texts by Voltaire. Mozart might have written some jokey music, for private use, with sexy texts, but you'll never find a Voltaire line like this one, anywhere in 18th century music: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."

Certainly you won't find a line like that in any large 18th century choral work. The people with money to pay for those pieces – typically monarchs, or princes of the church – were locked into the established world, and weren't about to present anything radical.

[But don't think there weren't freethinking composers.

[Beethoven was one, and so was Brahms. Brahms wasn't necessarily a Christian, and offended some of his friends by choosing Biblical texts for his Requiem that didn't mention Jesus.

[Beethoven definitely wasn't a Christian, in the last part of his life. His religious yearnings, which were very strong, would now most likely be classified as "new age." But he never wrote music that set out his true religious views. Instead, keeping to the practice of his time, he wrote Christian religious works, including two Catholic masses, one of them truly huge, the *Missa Solemnis*, which he poured his heart into. In only one place in that piece did he show his true thoughts. When he came to the line in the mass about acknowledging one holy Roman Catholic church, he evidently disapproved of it, and buried it so deep within the music that the words can barely be heard.]

Moving into the 19th century, we don't see operas that deal with the subjects we find in novels of that time – for instance poverty, so vividly painted in Dickens, or the minutiae of bourgeois life, which we find in Flaubert, or the unruly urban life of Paris, pictured so explosively in Balzac. The rule in 19th century opera was – in an odd prefiguring of classical music today -- to present stories set in the past, typically the middle ages or the renaissance, involving kings and queens, doomed medieval heroes, and doomed heroines.

And again the reason might have been money. Opera was expensive. And though it was often produced as private enterprise – in Italy, for instance, impresarios rented opera houses, and hoped to make a profit selling tickets to the operas they presented – the most crucial ticket-buyers were the aristocracy, and no opera that displeased them was likely to succeed. Opera also might be censored by the government, because opera productions were prominent entertainment, and might seem dangerous if they seemed to call for any kind of social change.

But as time passed – as the industrial revolution made the world more prosperous, as the power of the aristocracy diminished, as democracy spread, as radical ideas caught on, as culture began to change more quickly than it ever had before – then, at least briefly, classical music did catch up with the culture around it. Wagner's operas were a touchstone for radicals in politics and art. And it's no accident, I think, that Wagner – exiled from Germany for taking part in a revolution, and unable to get performances of his new pieces, because they were musically so radical – conquered the music world from the outside, persevering until social forces moved in his favor (and, of course, until he found a patron).

And at the turn of the 20th century, radical music moved into the mainstream. Wagner, by this time, was wildly popular. Richard Strauss could write an opera, *Salome*, full of decadent sexual excess, and

watch it enter the operatic repertoire, even if it was banned in several places, including New York. (An infallible sign, of course, that something important was going on.)

Move ahead two decades, and we get to the jazz age of the 1920s, which might be the time when popular culture as we now know it emerged, taking over the world with unstoppable verve. But there wasn't much thought, at first, that popular culture could threaten the classics. And so classical composers took a delighted interest in the new sound of jazz, putting it into some of their pieces. Which isn't to say that Jazz swept through the classical world, but it did leave its scent in a few repertory works, *Rhapsody in Blue*, to take an obvious example, and of course other Gershwin pieces, but also in music by Ravel, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and many others.

After that, though, classical music pulled back once again, and retreated from our culture. The continued explosion of popular culture into the 1930s and the 1940s – movies, radio, popular songs, Fred Astaire – left little trace in the concert hall. A modern feeling swept through the other arts, and took root, eventually, in the arts mainstream. But not in classical music! I've seen lines around the block for a Jackson Pollock show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But classical music still centers – as we hear it in major concert halls – around romantic emotion, and anything modern is marginalized.

And, as I've said, even when popular forms of new music arose – when the minimalists found a new audience of their own, in the '70s and '80s – the mainstream classical world barely noticed.

There ought to be hope, though. The collision of classical music and surging culture that happened at the turn of the 20th century shows that classical music *can* step out of its conservative space, and fully connect with the world outside. Clearly it needs to do that again, because by now it seems out of step not only with popular culture, but with the other arts. And that's keeping people away from it.

But before we can understand how to fix this problem, we have to look at something really large – how classical music stands apart, not just from changes in art and entertainment, but from changes in everyday life.

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Again I might note that, for some people, moving away from everyday life is a virtue. These people think that everyday life – and the culture around it – has grown sour, which makes classical music a beloved (and, some would say, necessary) refuge.

As I've said, I disagree with this idea, but certainly I respect the deep feeling behind it. And I admire this line of thinking at least for its honesty, because it jibes with mine in one crucial way, in agreeing that classical music really does sit in a world of its own, far away from current culture.

What kind of current culture don't we find in classical music? I'll list a few things that our culture now seems to stress, and that classical music mostly ignores:

First, informality.

Here's one was to approach this. If you look at photos of crowds at baseball games in past generations – before the '60s – you'll see men in suits and ties. And hats! Now, of course, if you go to a game, you see t-shirts. (Plus, of course, a lot of women.) You could say, if you like, that baseball is a sport, not an art, and that by nature it's informal, as classical music might not be. But that wouldn't explain why people used to wear business suits to baseball games, and why they don't know, while the formality of classical concerts until very recently didn't change.

Second: the sound of contemporary life.

The musical sound, I mean. Contemporary music, outside the classical world, has a beat. Classical music doesn't. You might say that of course it doesn't, because so much of it was written long ago, before the beat of rock and jazz had evolved. But that only underlines the point I'm making, that classical music doesn't sound like contemporary life.

And what about new classical pieces? Why don't they have a beat? Well, some of them do, written by younger composers, very likely working outside the classical mainstream. But most new pieces that you'll encounter at classical concerts don't have a beat, and thus – by this simple, gut-feeling measure – don't truly sound contemporary.

Of course, you could say that classical music should be free to go its own way (as of course it should), or that the beat of rock and jazz is superficial, that it batters away all rhythmic subtlety (a contention I most definitely don't accept, and which I'll look at in the chapter on the supposed superiority of classical music).

But if classical music goes its own way and ignores the beat, what message does that send? The beat of current nonclassical idioms comes from their partly African origins, and represents – in an unspoken, but profound way – a larger evolution of world culture, away from western hegemony. So by not having a beat, is classical music resisting this evolution, and dreaming that the west should still rule?

That might be an extreme judgment, but – if you put classical music in any larger context – you can't blame someone for making it. And the simple fact remains that – whatever the reason, and whatever conclusion anyone draws from this -- classical music just doesn't carry the sound of contemporary life.

[Which, let's note, we now find in other arts. We can see serious modern dance, set to music with a beat. Broadway musicals might have a beat. Of course music in the movies has one. We see music with a beat referred to in novels and poetry, and in serious plays. In past eras, classical music sounded like the other music in the culture around it, and in fact borrowed from that music. Why not now?]

Third (and this joins with what I've just said): classical music doesn't reflect the content of everyday life.

Current everyday life, I mean. And of course that's partly because the music played at classical performances so largely comes from the past. But even new classical pieces may not bring in everyday life. Many of them live in a world of their own, not the world the classical audience inhabits, but not the world anyone outside classical music lives in, either. (This is changing, happily.)

And the old classical pieces did bring in the life of their time. Maybe in idealized form – happy peasants, reacting to weather, or to the seasons, terrified by storms – but still a version of the life of the time. (Even if, as we've seen, much was left out.)

And other arts, in our time, have caught up. We think, sometimes, that classical music can function as a museum, exhibiting works from the past. But museums now stress contemporary work, and much of it touches on everyday life – shows, for example, of contemporary photographs. Plays, poetry, novels, and obviously pop music – they all show the life of our time. So why not classical music?

Fourth: alternative art and lifestyles.

The word "lifestyle," hackneyed as it is, reflects an important truth – that we acknowledge many ways of living. But classical music doesn't show us this.

You could say that it doesn't have to, that our taste in music (as tastes in pop music clearly show) is itself a reflection of the life we live. And so a love for classical music would itself be a lifestyle choice. Why then should it open us to other ways of living?

But are we saying now that classical music closes us off from the world? And the relation of music and lifestyle is really much more complex. Suppose the music that you love – that you identify with – is some kind of pop. (Which is almost like saying, "Suppose you're a citizen of our current world.") Fine. You have your taste, which both reflects and reinforces the way that you live. But you also very likely like other kinds of pop, too, as the rich diversity of pop music unfolds before you. And you're aware of many kinds of pop that you might not listen to. If you're not Hispanic, just for instance, you most likely never listen to Latin music.

And now someone might say that classical music works in similar ways, that you might love early music but not romantic symphonies, or you might love chamber music and not care for opera. But you're still not much like a pop listener, because it's not clear, whatever kind of classical music you might love, that people who love another kind are very different from you. You just don't share their taste.

In pop, by contrast, you'd know that people with different taste don't share your lifestyle. There might be overlaps, but still – people with different taste might not be

fully like you. I'd notice this when I was a pop music critic. I'd go to concerts of different kinds of music, and notice different kinds of people. The most obvious difference was racial. No white people (except me) would go to a Luther Vandross show, and there'd be hardly anyone black in the audience for Bruce Springsteen. (Both blacks and whites showing up for Prince, which was truly exceptional.)

And there were many smaller distinctions, very fine demographic slices, somehow evoked by the varied music of many different bands.

As a pop listener, you're most definitely aware of this. You know there's music that you hate – heavy metal, maybe, if you're not a disaffected younger guy. (Or at least that was who went to metal shows when I was a pop critic.) But you know these styles exist, along with the people who love them. You know that Latin music's out there, even if you don't listen to it. Which is another way of saying that you know you share the world with many different kinds of people – or, more grandly, that all of us share a larger world – something not evident inside the classical concert hall.

And you know – since the larger world is hardly static – that musical styles combine, that the crunchy optimistic sound of folk music, for instance, can meld with the savage shock of punk, or that all-white sound of metal can find common ground with hip-hop. Which again tells us that we live in a world with many kinds of people, but now with a delighted hope that we all might find some common ground.

Which – to state the obvious – we don't learn from classical music, no matter how loudly people say that classical music is somehow universal. People in the classical music world, in fact, might feel that they were separated from other people, from people who don't listen to classical music. A younger classical musician might – like one I know – happily fuse hip-hop and Vivaldi, but she'll do that in clubs, far from the classical mainstream, where stylistic fusion mostly shows up – here we go again – in discussions of the past.

[Berlioz, for instance, was one of the great intellectuals of 19th century music, and for that reason (among many others) he stood apart from – or, as some would have said, far above -- the popular strands of music in his time, especially what then was the most popular of musical styles, Italian opera. And yet his works are suffused with Italian opera. The "Romeo Alone" movement, from his sprawling symphonic landscape, *Roméo et Juliet*, is a symphonic translation of an Italian opera scene, complete with an orchestral version of a fast, showpiece aria, to bring the scene to an end.]

And here's something else. When we look at mainstream classical music culture, we're cut off from any feeling for alternative art, or even from an understanding that alternative art exists.

But we see alternative art everywhere else. In pop music, alternative bands – in what might seem like a paradox – are even part of the mainstream. They got their name because they were far from the pop charts, and had a sound and aesthetic that weren't remotely popular. But now alternative music is a style (or collection of styles) like any other. Half the bands we see on *Saturday Night Live* are alternative.

And arthouse films might be called alternative movies. They might be not on everyone's film diet, but we all know about them. And here's a sharp and not entirely lovely irony. Classical music, as everybody knows, lives in an upscale, educated world. So you might expect people in the classical music demographic to go to art films. But if they do, their musical taste isn't remotely related to what they like in movies.

This becomes a serious problem, when we look at the younger segment of the classical music demographic. These younger people just about define themselves by their taste for alternative art. Or at least for alternative pop music (which, as we'll see in the chapter on pop, often functions as art).

So what can classical music offer them? Yes, there's alternative classical music, as I've very often said. But it's largely found outside the classical mainstream. So if we want younger people to come to mainstream classical concerts – Brahms at the Philadelphia Orchestra, Berlioz or Pierre Boulez in Cleveland – they very likely won't. These concerts offer nothing alternative (Boulez's music might not have much place in the classical mainstream, but it hardly echoes anything in the current alternative world), and thus present a deeply traditional view of both culture and life.

(In a moment we'll see what the content of this is – what, quite specifically, life now offers that classical music can't touch.)

Fifth: some specific examples of what I mean:

Participation:

[I've mentioned this also in my [chapter one riff](#), and it might also belong in my later chapter on popular culture. See the [Rebirth outline](#). I'll have to decide, later on, exactly how much emphasis to give this subject here and in the other two places.]

We're a participatory society these days, something else that I think flows – at least in the long run – from the '60s, with all the talk back then of participatory democracy, and all the excitement from people doing new things.

But by now, participation really is what people – especially younger people – have come to expect. You go to a website, and you want to be able to comment on what you see. You want to read comments from others. If the website is selling anything, you want to read what others think about what's being sold.

Music videos, these days, are made by fans of bands, and not so often by the bands themselves. They're available on YouTube, not on MTV. Corporations invite their customers to make commercials for the corporation's products. They might show the customer commercials on their websites, and – as happened in at least one famous case – they might include commercials that deride the product.

We all know about the *Brokeback Mountain* mashups, the videos so many people made, discovering or inventing gay subtexts for TV and movie scenes that nobody had seen as gay before. There's a website where [Star Wars is being remade](#), one small segment at a time. People choose their segment, refilm it in their own way – using pets, friends, children, animation, themselves, whatever – and upload it to the site. Someday soon we'll be able to watch the entire movie, remade this way.

This all is part of an explosion of creativity in our society (as I've said before), creativity which – somewhat, I think, to the dismay or else the noncomprehension of people involved in established art worlds – takes place outside the official spheres of art. The bottom line is that people want to create things for themselves, and when they get involved in something already created, they want to get hands-on with it.

Classical music, meanwhile, remains a top-down affair. One sign of that: the belief that you have to be specially educated to enjoy classical music, even to listen to it passively. When classical music institutions share this belief, and act on it – by making educational materials (like videos) prominently available – they might discourage active participation, by implicitly suggesting that even the existing, loyal audience – the audience that gives them money -- had better keep its thoughts to itself. Is there any sign that these institutions care what their audiences think?

A changed sense of beauty:

I single this out – among many traits of current culture – because it differs so much from what we find in classical music.

I've written a great deal of marketing copy for classical music institutions. Always I've found myself stressing the beauty of the famous masterworks, their passion, their emotional force. Because that's what's normally emphasized about these pieces. It's what the audience responds to.

But in the wider culture, or at least in anything touched by alternative art, beauty isn't a simple concept. Being beautiful, by itself, doesn't mean anything. What kind of beauty do we mean? Mindless beauty, beauty with an edge, evil

beauty, seductive beauty, misleading beauty, beauty that's one step away from ugliness, deep and peaceful beauty, beauty that's a trap?

Here's part of a Bjork lyric, from her song "Jóga" (on her 1997 album *Homogenic*):

*Emotional landscapes,
They puzzle me,
Then the riddle gets solved,
And you push me up to this
State of emergency,
How beautiful to be,
State of emergency,
Is where I want to be.*

Bjork wants to be in a place where beauty meets danger, while intricate music for strings weaves around her voice. We might find weaving strings in classical music, but where would we find a thought like this one?

We could also talk about any number of current indie bands, which sing lush songs with rich, simple harmony, overlaid with noise – as if beauty, without some textured non-beauty nearby (as we'd find it in the real world), just can't be trusted.

Richard Florida:

In the courses I teach on the future of classical music, I assign a passage from Richard Florida's famous book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. The creative class, Florida says, is a population of smart, youngish, creative people, whose presence in a city correlates with economic growth. That belief is controversial, and I'm going to sidestep the disputes about it. For my purposes, it doesn't matter whether Florida is right or wrong, whether cities really need to attract the creative class if they want to foster economic health.

What matters instead to me – and seems to fit with what I've seen on my own, and what others I know have seen – is Florida's description of creative class culture. Here are excerpts:

For more than a century, the mark of a cultured city in the United States has been to have a major art museum plus an "SOB"—the high-art triumvirate of a symphony orchestra, an opera company and a ballet company.

Meanwhile [while the SOB is beginning to fail], the Creative Class is drawn to more organic and indigenous street-level culture.

Much of it is native and of-the-moment, rather than art imported from another century for audiences imported from the suburbs. You may not paint, write or play music, yet if you are at an art-show opening or in a nightspot where you can mingle and talk with artists and aficionados, you might be more creatively stimulated than if you merely walked into a museum or concert hall, were handed a program, and proceeded to spectate.

The street scene is eclectic. Consider that eclecticism is also a strong theme within many of today's art form.

Places are also valued for authenticity and uniqueness, as I have heard many times in my studies.

Music is a key part of what makes a place authentic, in effect providing a sound or "audio identity." Audio identity refers to the identifiable musical genre or sound associated with local bands, clubs and so on that make up a city's music scene: blues in Chicago, Motown in Detroit, grunge in Seattle, Austin's Sixth Street. This is what many people know about these cities and the terms in which they think of them; it is also the way these cities promote themselves.

Can classical music provide anything like this, anything indigenous, authentic, and eclectic, in all the ways that Florida describes? (And if you read the entire passage, which I've had to shorten here, you'll find much more detailed examples of what he means.) Of course it can't, and for one further explanation of why that's so – an explanation that collides with any belief that classical music offers artistic purity -- look at Florida when he says what's *not* authentic, namely "chain stores, chain restaurants and nightclubs."

Now, of course people in love with classical music will say, perhaps with triumph, that classical music couldn't be less like these horrors, and in fact that it offers a deep, enriching antidote to everything that's inauthentic in our culture.

But wait. Florida goes on to say, about his inauthentic chain stores, that "Not only do these venues look pretty much the same everywhere, they offer the same experience you could have anywhere." And doesn't that describe classical concerts, especially those produced by major classical music institutions? Doesn't one orchestra offer pretty much same thing that other orchestras do – the same masterworks, in pretty much the same kind of concert hall – as other orchestras do? Can you go to the New York Philharmonic and immediately know that you're in New York, or to the Pittsburgh Symphony, and breathe the air of Pittsburgh?

Of course you can't. So the authenticity of classical music would seem to be hothouse growth, untouched by the outside world, and not related to whatever authenticity so many people look for in more familiar cultural pursuits. In fact, it might not even register. One classical concert might seem pretty much like another one, and therefore – by the standards Richard Florida sets out – inauthentic.

[Now, you may say you don't like all this non-classical culture. You may say it might not be high quality. You might say you'd rather listen to Beethoven, and read John Milton. Which of course you have every right to do. But when an entire field seems to have lost touch with contemporary culture, then, at the very least, it's losing ground. How surprising can it be that people aren't going to as many classical concerts as they used to? They're now looking for things that classical music can't supply. And how surprising can it be that classical music itself is changing?]

John Seabrook:

A writer for the *New Yorker*, whose book *Nobrow* got some attention – despairing attention, I think – in the classical music world, because it so strongly shows why nonclassical culture so appeals to people in Seabrook's generation, while classical music is nowhere. And it gets worse. Seabrook grew up with classical music, and always assumed that it would be at the center of his cultural world. And then gave up on it.

[Which suggests that restoring music education won't produce a new classical music audience, as so many people hope it will. Kids will learn about classical music, and maybe even like it, but then the larger culture – and classical music's distance from it – will take its toll.]

Here's a passage from the book (which, along with the excerpt from *The Rise of the Creative Class*, I often assign to my students):

As a kid I thought that becoming an adult would mean putting away pop music and moving on to classical, or at least intelligent jazz. The taste hierarchy was the ladder you climbed toward a grown-up identity. The day you found yourself putting on black tie and going to enjoy the opening night of *Aida* as a subscriber to the Metropolitan Opera was the day you crossed an invisible threshold into adulthood. But for the last five years, pop music had provided me with peaks of lyrical and musical transcendence that I long ago stopped feeling at the opera...

...I had had an oceanic experience at a Chemical Brothers' show that my friend had taken me to hear at the Roxy. The Chemical Brothers were two young musician/programmers from the dance/Ecstasy subculture of Manchester, England, who had begun by deejaying in the clubs that flourished in the dark satanic mills left over from the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, and that were now dark satanic malls of late twentieth-century street style.

We waited in a long line outside the Roxy for an hour, freezing, while scalpers in big down parkas cruised by murmuring "whosellingtickets-whosellingticketswhosellingtickets." As usual when we went gigging, we were just about the oldest people there. Going out to hear hot new pop acts was one of the greatest cultural pleasures of our grown-up lives. These intense moments of ecstatic communion with youth stood out from our otherwise predictable diet of respectable culture – interesting plays, the Rothko show, the opera, and, sometimes, downtown happenings at the Kitchen or the Knitting Factory. Afterward, we would go home to our wives and kids and our tasteful diet of highbrow and middlebrow and lowbrow culture, each in its proper place, but here in the uncategorizable present of pop music, we felt alive in a way we never felt when experiencing elite culture.

Finally we got inside and worked our way down into the crush of kids on the dance floor. Most were trying to figure out the optimum time to drop the drugs they had brought along, so that they could peak when the music peaked. After a long time somebody walked out onto the darkened stage and a buzz rippled through the crowd. An evil-sounding pulse started to beat, pumping a black squishy liquid out of a computer and swirling it around the room. Then came a sampled sentence from a Blake Baxter song, repeated four times: dabrothersgonnaworkitout. With each set of four heats a new computer-modulated drum sound entered the mix, and on the last set a distorted-sounding guitar made an appearance. Because the music was made on synthesizers it had the geometric regularity of code, and this made it possible to feel intuitively where the lines of sound were headed and when they would converge. It was like reading a sonnet: you anticipated the shape of the form before the content arrived. Such a sonic convergence was coming up. All the rhythmic variations and distortions that had previously been at counterpoint with one another were about to come together into what promised to be an amazing blast of unified sound.

My friend turned to me and yelled, "It's about to get REALLY loud . . . !"...

Then another flash — POP! — revealing a new kind of icon: the information artist at his console, reeling with sounds, styles, light and insight, the jittery agonized struggle of the cerebral cortex trying to absorb the digital information pouring into it. The heat in the club, the frenzy of the crowd, the potency of the joint my friend and I were now passing, all produced an intense cultural experience, a Nobrow moment — neither high nor low and not in the middle, a moment that existed outside the old taste hierarchy altogether. That moment was still fresh in my mind as I rode the [Virgin Megastore] escalator down to Level B1, gently sinking into the bath of Buzz, heading for the Imports section, where I hoped to find a compilation CD of the legendary Chemical Brothers shows at the Heavenly Social in London.

The megastore's Classical Music section was also down here, to the right of the escalator. Encased inside thick glass walls to keep out the raucous sounds of the World Music section, just outside, where salsa, Afro-Gallic drumming, reggae, and Portuguese fado mingled in a One World jambalaya, the Classical Music section was an underground bunker of the old elite culture, its last refuge here in Times Square. There were a few discreet videos, usually showing James Levine conducting or Vladimir Horowitz at the piano. Inside these thick glass walls of silence you could feel the sterility of the academy to which the modernists had condemned classical music, by coming to believe that popularity and commercial success meant compromise. All the most original innovations of the modernists, the electronics and the atonal variations and the abrupt yaws in pitch had long ago been spirited away from this room and found popular expression in the jazz and Techno sections in other parts of the store. Meanwhile, by continuing to put out, year after year, recordings of the world's great orchestras performing the standards—in spite of the fact that the difference in performances was only interesting or even discernible to a very few people—the classical music industry had all but destroyed itself, imprisoning what might be a vibrant genre in the forbidding confines of a room like this. The classical music room in the megastore was almost always empty: a good place, I'd discovered, to ring up purchases of pop music when there was a line upstairs.

Just about everyone young I know — and many people who aren't young — don't draw what we might call class distinctions between high and low culture.

But that this doesn't mean abandoning any judgment of quality. It's just that quality judgments — and interest judgments, and judgments of something's

importance – don't follow the old cultural boundaries, which for many younger people no longer exist.

Or, as Seabrook seems to say, if those boundaries do exist, it's because classical music and other old high-culture worlds insist on maintaining them. So if classical music now is excluded from our larger culture, it's the fault of the classical music world. I often ask my students to imagine how classical music could enter the street culture that Richard Florida evokes, and the answers are easy. Just join in. Take your string quartet into a bar, and – while you play Beethoven – act the way everyone else is acting. If there's something rapt and serious about either the music, or the way that you play it, that will come through, without special rules, without any need for music education, without any program notes. If what you do is worthwhile – as worthwhile, let's say, as an 18th century play, or historic photographs (both of which Florida cites as possible attractions, along the streets he describes), then people will notice.

It's really as simple as that.

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Other Rebirth reading:

[Outline of the book](#). Brief but thorough. Newly revised, and subject to ongoing changes.

Chapter one:

[A riff on chapter one](#). "Rebirth and Resistance." What the first chapter of the book is likely to say. Fairly long. Brings together, in revised form, the four riffs on chapter one that I put on my blog. (See below.)

[Riff on chapter one -- shorter](#). For those who want a shorter read. Many details, subtleties missing. But also some small revisions, maybe making a few things clearer.

Chapter two:

[Riff on chapter two](#), "Dire Data," in which I document the quantifiable part of the classical music crisis.

[shorter version](#)

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purpose. And you must give me credit, which means naming me as the author, and providing a link to a sidebar on my blog, where further links to the book may be found. The blog link is: www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2007/01/rebirth.html

*

Addenda (things that may find their way into the chapter, but seemed like a digression from the riff):

Classical music vs. the other arts:

Another subject worth discussing is why all of this happened to music, why classical music moved away from our wider culture, and other arts didn't. This isn't easy to address. Is it because music creates a deeper, more personal, more deeply emotional bond? Or because music – so much of it having no words to fix any meaning – can be considered ineffable, touching deep feelings that can't be explained?

Or is it because music – the most expensive of the performing arts – became (especially in the US) a preserve for the rich, something held out as proof of their cultural superiority? Whatever the cause, somehow classical music got “sacralized” (to use a term that others have used). It became, somehow, an almost sacred rite, set apart from everyday life, establishing communion, or so people thought, with something vastly important, something that lies beyond words.

Stravinsky:

If I have room in the book, I'd love to treat this in some detail. One way to measure the retreat of classical music would be to trace Stravinsky's career. He's perhaps the 20th century's greatest composer, and in his early years he was a vast success, connecting both with advanced artists and with the public.

Even if the connection was at one famous point explosive, when – famously -- there nearly were riots at the 1913 premiere of his best-known piece, *Le sacre du printemps*. The upset came largely from protests against the ballet the piece was written for, but still they showed where the music stood aesthetically, and conservatives in that period hated the work.

Much of the music he wrote at that time, even the modern stuff, thrives in the classical repertoire. But later – in what's come to be called his neoclassic period, when with exuberant inner exploration but not much public flair he returned to classic models – he began writing pieces that (as far as I'm able to determine) were hardly ever played, except when he himself made guest appearances as a conductor.

His fame, perhaps, has stopped us from seeing this, but he began, bit by bit, to hold a position in which his prestige loomed larger than the music he wrote. Paradoxically, he also tried to have pop success, doing his best, on a couple of occasions, to write music that might succeed with pop or jazz fans. But he didn't get very far with that.

And at the end of his life, he moved very far from the classical mainstream, writing pieces in what then was the most highly advanced -- but also, from a mainstream point of view, the most obscure -- musical idiom available, which was 12-tone music. These pieces were treated with respect (every one of them was recorded by a major record label), but they had no life at all in mainstream concert halls. By this time, Stravinsky wasn't doing much conducting, so he wasn't going to show up as the conductor of a mainstream concert, and program one of his 12-tone works.

Stravinsky then began to mirror the position in the world that -- in a larger arena -- classical music itself held. His prestige was immense -- there's a wonderful story about Frank Sinatra seeing him in a restaurant, and paying homage -- but hardly anyone heard or even cared to hear his new work.

Or maybe this Stravinsky discussion belongs in a later chapter, where I'll talk about the role of new music in the classical world. [Let me know](#), if you have any thoughts on this.

If I do treat Stravinsky in this chapter, I could add another musical interlude, about his neoclassical and 12-tone works. I like them quite a bit, and could evoke them as yet another road that the classical mainstream never took.

Classical music and conformity:

For an example of how classical music education looked to someone in the early '60s, here's an excerpt from *The Second Beatles Album*, a 2007 book by Dave Marsh, a leading and famously outspoken rock critic. This is about his junior high school music teacher:

His name I mercifully do not recall, probably because he never smacked me around. He looked like somebody who'd have worked as an under-assistant to Willy Loman, rotund, white shirt, black tie, a nebbish, cocksure only in his ability to hector teenagers about the errors of their ears. He made making music seem about as appealing as having your eardrums pierced; he made listening to it a chore duller than conjugating Latin verbs. He seemed to subscribe to the worst fallacy in education, the idea that knowledge of a particular set of rules gave him the privilege of ignoring or making sport of all that lay outside them. He made little effort to communicate what was important about the kind of music he liked -- he presented the rules and some assertions, that was all.

We had music class a couple of days a week. I'd say about every third class, before and during (there is no after) the Beatlemania spasm, The Music Teacher would rise up in

dudgeon amidst the 20 or so newly minted teenagers under his gaze to harangue us with epithets about Beatlism, Motown, and this rock'n'roll stuff in general. It was like an obsession with him, although I suspect it was also school policy, or maybe the quintessence of current educational theory in the field: Batter the little asswipes until they surrender.

I knew of no administrator, colleague, or parent who'd have disagreed with The Music Teacher's values and methodology. At least no one who'd demur in public.