

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

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Chapter 4 – What Classical Music Is

(not the final text, but a riff on what this chapter will say)

In this chapter, I'll try to define classical music.

But why? Don't we know what it is?

Yes and no. We're not going to confuse classical music with other kinds of music, with rock, let's say, or jazz. But can we say how we make these distinctions?

You'd think we could. And yet when we look at definitions of classical music—either formal ones, in dictionaries, or informal ones, that we'd deduce by looking around at the classical music world—we run into trouble. As we'll see, these definitions imply that classical music is mostly old music (and, beyond that, old music only of a certain kind). And they're full of unstated assumptions about classical music's value. These assumptions, working in the background of our thoughts, make it hard to understand what classical music really is. We have to fight off ideas about how much better it might be than other kinds of music, ideas which—to people not involved with classical music, the very people we need to recruit for our future audience—can make classical music seem intimidating, pompous, unconvincing.

And so here's a paradox. When we expose these assumptions, when we develop a factual, value-free definition of classical music, only then can we find classical music's real value, and convincingly set out reasons why it should survive.

[2]

Let's start with common-sense definition of classical music, the one we all use, without much thought, when we say we know what classical music is when we hear it.

Classical music, by that definition, would be what we encounter at classical performances—in concert halls and opera houses—and on classical radio. And on classical recordings, wherever we'd find them these days.

So what kind of music would that be? Of course it's music by the great masters, by Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. And, in the opera house, by Verdi and Puccini. Which isn't to say that there isn't music officially classified as classical that sounds very different from all of that, but when most people think of classical music, the familiar masterworks are what they think of.

And all those masterworks—speaking very generally—have a certain sound, epitomized, for me, as I'm writing this, by the start of the Brahms Second Symphony, so warm and noble, comfortable, rocking with a gentle rhythm, glowing with woodwinds, shining with strings, warmed by the quiet radiance of

French horns. Only classical music sounds like that. A Bach piece would sound somewhat different—its rhythm would be more steadily propulsive, its separate strands would stand out more, layered on each other, even tugging at each other, rather than blending—but even so, if on a classical radio station we heard Bach right after Brahms, we wouldn't feel a jolt.

All these pieces live in what we've come to accept as a common world of sound and feeling, a world for which we might use words like sonorous, passionate, dignified, elegant, and of course profound. And also—as many people these days say, when you ask them what they like about classical music—the masterworks might sound comfortable and calm. There's nothing jarring, nothing uncertain. And nothing unpredictable. I've known that Brahms symphony since I was a child. (I can picture my LP recording of it, a Columbia release with Bruno Walter on its cover) I always know what's coming next, just as the musicians who play it do.

[This, in the book, might turn into a short musical interlude, in which I'll evoke a number of classical masterworks, not just Brahms, but Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, maybe some opera.]

So what else do we know, without much thought, about classical music?

That it's played by standard classical instruments, especially strings and woodwinds. There's also brass, but then we'd also hear brass in big band jazz. And there's percussion, but mostly it's discreet. It's not a constant in the music, the way strings are. It's a special sauce. There isn't any constant drumbeat, as there'd be in jazz or pop

We can also say that certain instruments are missing—saxophones, for instance, or electric guitars, or synthesizers, the instruments which of course create the everyday sound of current pop.

Classical singing has a sound of its own, rich and gleaming, sonorous, refined and smooth, never rough. Or never intentionally rough—opera singers do sometimes strain to reach their high notes, which is one reason why classical radio stations think their listeners don't want to hear opera. And of course classical singing is never amplified, never crooned or whispered into a microphone.

[Another musical interlude might come here, about the sound of various kinds of singing, maybe jumping off from the recent [NPR list](#) of the 50 greatest singers of all time, very few of whom were classical.]

But something's clearly missing here. As I've said, there's a lot of music officially defined as classical that doesn't fit our common-sense definition, music that's taught in college courses on classical music history, that's studied by classical music scholars, that's recorded by classical record labels, and that's reviewed by classical critics. Some of this music is old, predating the masterworks, music from the middle ages and the renaissance. And some of it is new. Some of it is being written now.

And yes, some of the newer music does get played at classical concerts, right alongside the masterworks. But it's not the meat and potatoes of classical music. Like percussion, it's a special sauce. The classical audience doesn't much like it, and it's not what most people have in mind when they think

of classical music. Certainly it's not what someone eager to hear her local orchestra would be thinking of, if she texted a friend and said, "Let's go hear some classical music tonight."

So here are some examples of what's missing from the common-sense notion of classical music, things most people wouldn't want or expect to hear at a classical concert, or to come across on classical radio:

- the skirl of medieval music, with angular rhythms, notes clashing together without regard for the rules of refined harmony that emerged later on—and, often enough, with a constant drumbeat
- screams of anguish in expressionist scores from the first part of the 20th century, Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, let's say (that's an opera in which a horrified woman wanders all alone through an unsettling landscape), or the shrieks in Webern's *Six Pieces for Orchestra*
- the skittering oboe in Elliott Carter's "Sandpiper"—from his song cycle *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*—which impersonates a sandpiper on the beach, rushing up to the incoming waves, and then darting away from them
- the pounding dance beat in Todd Levin's *Blur*, an inspired orchestral recreation of music you'd normally hear in a dance club
- the living pulse in Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, sweeping you forward in a busy river of sound, a river full of surprises, surprises that keep changing, even while the flow of the music never stops
- the pulsing resonance of Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*, a piece created by recording someone's speaking voice, and then, in the same room, playing the recording back, and recording the recording. You do that many times, and each time you do it, you reinforce the room's own resonance. Eventually the resonance is all you hear, a shifting sonic glow, moving with the rhythm of the speaking voice, while obscuring everything the voice had said.
- the focused concentration of Tom Johnson's *Nine Bells*, in which (as I wrote many years ago) Tom walked "at a steady rhythmic pace (and, if I remember correctly, for more than an hour), among nine suspended burglar alarm bells, systematically exploring all the possible paths among them. Which, since he strikes each bell as he passes it, are also all the possible melodies their pitches might make. As in many of Tom's works, theory and practice are identical here...You see and hear the structure of the piece. That's not even remotely abstract; instead, it's pure happiness, as the pealing bells seem to ring with Tom's concentration (visible in his face and body, audible in his steady steps), and his joie de vivre."

For those last two items, I've picked classics of what's sometimes called "experimental music," a term I'm not fond of, because the experiments were concluded long ago, and the finished compositions aren't in any way tentative or incomplete. I picked these pieces—pieces I've loved from the moment I first encountered them—to show how wide the boundaries of classical music really are. And also to show—

since *I Am Sitting in a Room* dates from 1969 and *Nine Bells* from 1979—that the boundaries were expanded long ago.

Which then once more demonstrates how limited our everyday idea of classical music is, how it much it restricts what classical music can be, and especially how much it stifles everything that joins classical music to the wider world of contemporary art.

And this constriction even limits Brahms. It gives Brahms no room to breathe, and shrinks his warmth into a kind of nostalgia, losing whatever wider meaning it might have if (hard as this might be to imagine) we heard Brahms right alongside *Nine Bells*. Two composers, two eras, two very different ways of thinking and of hearing, but in both compositions, a mind at work, arranging the elements of music to serve a higher purpose.

When we constrict classical masterworks this way, they lose their appeal to people who want more from music than nostalgic warmth.

[3]

So now let's be more disciplined, and look at dictionary definitions of classical music.

[In the book, though I won't take time for it here, I'll also look at how the term "classical music" evolved. It was never used before the 19th century. That's because, before the 19th century, music from the past was rarely played, and music wasn't considered any kind of high art. As the 19th century unfolded, people started talking about the great masters of the past, Haydn and Mozart, and the term "classical music" started to be used as a label for their work, and also for living composers like Beethoven, and later Mendelssohn and Schumann, who consciously worked in the newly-defined classical tradition. Along with the idea of classical music came, for the first time, the idea of popular music, a term people actually used back then for opera, and for performances by crowd-pleasing virtuosos like Liszt and Paganini.]

Here are some dictionary definitions:

from the *Chambers Dictionary*, highly regarded in Britain:

"orchestral and chamber music, etc, as opposed to jazz, folk music, etc."

from the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

"music in the educated European tradition, such as symphony or opera, as opposed to popular or folk music"

from the *Random House Dictionary*:

"music of the European tradition marked by sophistication of structural elements and embracing opera, art song, symphonic and chamber music, and works for solo instrument"

from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*:

“music of the educated European tradition that includes such forms as art song, chamber music, opera, and symphony as distinguished from folk or popular music or jazz”

from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (one of the most imposing English dictionaries, second only to the multiple-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, or *OED*, of which the *Shorter Oxford* is a two-volume abridgement):

“so-called conventional or serious music as opp. to folk, jazz, pop, rock, etc”

Here are three things I notice, as I read through these definitions.

1. *They're vague.*

Especially Chambers:

“orchestral and chamber music, etc, as opposed to jazz, folk music, etc.”

This just points, a little haplessly, at examples of what classical music is and isn't. Which tells us no more than we knew before we read the definition, and in fact throws us back on the everyday understanding I've just discussed.

The two etceteras are like baffled shrugs. "We don't have to list this stuff! We know what it is!"

This looks especially sad next to the *Chambers* definition of jazz:

“any of various styles of music with a strong rhythm, syncopation, improvisation, etc originating in black American folk music”

That's a little sketchy—and again they fall back on that baffled “etc”—but at least it names things characteristic of jazz, something none of the classical music definitions do for classical music.

Or compare this definition of jazz, from the unabridged *OED*:

“A type of popular music originating (esp. in ragtime and blues) among African Americans in the southern United States, typically performed by ensembles and broadly characterized by regular forceful rhythms, syncopated phrasing, modifications to traditional instrumental tone and pitch (such as the use of blue notes), and improvisatory soloing.”

You can argue with any or all of that, if you like—you might describe jazz differently—but at least someone tried to outline in specific terms what jazz is.

2. *These definitions—just like the common-sense one—leave out medieval music and new music.*

Classical music, if we believe these definitions, is “art song, chamber music, opera, and symphony.” But not, apparently, electronic music, a medieval isorhythmic motet, or minimal music, or music for someone walking three miles, playing music on suspended bells.

And so even in dictionaries classical music turns out to be old music, music in familiar forms, music with no surprises. Maybe we should have expected that, since the word “classical,” taken by itself, has some of those same meanings. Which of course is why the term “classical music” was invented. Here’s how the *Shorter Oxford* dictionary defines “classical”:

“Designating, of, or pertaining to the form or period of an art etc. regarded as representing the height of achievement; in a long-established style of acknowledged excellence”

Which brings us to what might be the most important thing I notice about these dictionary definitions.

3. *Many of them come with value judgments built in just as the definition of “classical” I’ve just quoted does.*

Classical music, thus, is:

“music in the educated European tradition...as opposed to popular or folk music”

[Which, we have to conclude, aren't “educated” musical styles.]

“music of the European tradition marked by sophistication of structural elements”

[Here we praise classical music for its structural complexity, which, as we’ll see in the next chapter, is the main evidence people give when they say that it’s better than music of other kinds.]

“serious music as opp. to folk, jazz, pop, rock, etc.”

[Telling us that folk, jazz, pop, and rock aren't serious.]

Or look at the definition of classical music in the unabridged *OED*. When the “C” volume of the first edition was published in 1893 (the volumes came out separately, over four decades), the word “classical,” in its musical meaning, was defined as “having permanent interest and value.”

Which of course implies that other kinds of music don’t have permanent interest or value, but then all educated people must have thought that in 1893.

[Though there's a naïve leap of faith involved, if we take the definition literally. Because, quite obviously, not all the music we normally call classical is good. There are composers whose music hasn't survived, and so of course doesn't have permanent interest or value. And so classical music turns out to be only the good stuff! Only the masterworks. A sterling demonstration of bias at work, blocking any objective understanding of what classical music really might be.]

So what do we find in the second edition, published in 1989? It's worse. As one of many meanings of "classical," it offers this:

"Of music: (see quot. 1885); spec. opp. JAZZ."

Which needs a bit of explanation. The *OED* famously enhances its definitions with examples, quotations that show how words have been used, throughout the history of English. And here, one of these quotations becomes part of the definition. "quot. 1885" means "quotation 1885," and refers us, in a series of quotations showing how people have used the term "classical music," to one from 1885, from the writing of J. C. Fillmore. (Who turns out to be an American musical educator, director of the Oberlin Conservatory, author of widely used musical textbooks, and a man blessed, or so we read in a 19th century history of music in America, with "the geniality of a sunny disposition.").

In 1885, Fillmore wrote that "'Classic' is used in two senses. In the one it means, having permanent interest and value..."

So that's where the *OED*'s phrase in the first edition came from. It's more specifically cited, in the second edition, as a quotation from published writing, but with an extra twist. Classical music still is music "having permanent interest and value," though now—and this is where the screw gets an extra turn—it's "spec. opp."—specifically opposed—to jazz.

Which the *OED* thus decrees to have no permanence.

[4]

So now it's time for the value-free, purely factual definition of classical music that I said we'd need, a definition more rigorous than anything we've considered so far.

Here's what I'd suggest. Classical music, in my definition, would be defined in two ways.

- First, it's the music, historically, of western culture. (Which gives us all the classical masterworks we hear in our concert halls).

- And, second, classical music is music that's composed before it's performed, or in other words planned out in advance (typically in every detail), which means that it can move forward step by step, evolving over time like a novel or a film.

A couple of caveats:

First, I don't say that classical music is the art music of western culture. That's because not all the music we call classical was intended to be art. Much of it was written to be entertainment, exactly as the 19th century definition of "popular music"—opera, and performances by dazzling virtuosos—would suggest. And before the 19th century, all music (except for church music) might be entertainment. As I've said, music, before the 19th century, wasn't considered a lofty art. Later in the book, in the chapter on classical music in the past, I'll cite writers in 18th century France, who classified music as a kind of spectacle, more or less on the level of fireworks.

And, second, there are of course exceptions to the second part of my definition:

- In past centuries, there was plenty of improvisation in classical music (or, to put it more precisely once more, in the music we now call classical). Entire pieces might be improvised, and many that were written down might well have started as improvisations. (A composer who wrote down a piece might sometimes have been doing mental improvising.)
- Improvisation has flared up in new classical music, over the past 50 years. And—while the vast majority of pieces still are written out in advance—where improvisation does leap up, it's more prominent than it was in past centuries. Entire pieces now might be improvised, or else large sections of a prearranged structure might be left to be improvised, during performances.
- Jazz musicians compose, creating pieces that are planned in some detail in advance, and at least partly written out.
- And pop songs also are in effect composed, because they exist in one permanent form, their recordings, where every detail is fixed in place.

But this doesn't undermine my definition.

It's natural for various ways of making music to bleed into each other. Why wouldn't jazz musicians compose, especially after jazz became a kind of art music? Why wouldn't classical composers put improvisation into their pieces, especially after they'd gotten used to jazz, and world music, and all sorts of things in pop, including long jams by groups like Grateful Dead? The fact remains that the vast majority—the truly vast majority—of classical pieces, both new and old, are written out in advance. Jazz musicians who compose know they're making a classical move.

As for pop that's composed, the compositional process is very different from the process in classical music. Pop songs are typically put together collaboratively, by decisions made collectively, by musicians and a producer, in the recording studio. An important detail here is that pop songs are composed—their details are fixed—while they're being performed. Classical pieces are composed in advance of any performance. And of course the decisions are made by a single composer. These distinctions make a

difference. Pop songs are less likely to sound like they're working out their progress from beginning to end, the way classical pieces do, and more likely to seem like they're living in the moment, even if their moments have been signed, sealed, and delivered, and recorded in final form, to stay that way for all time.

And then improvised classical music still sounds classical. Now we get into a subjective area, but then that's what the first part of my definition is about. Classical music, my definition wants to say, is a body of musical literature, part of a long tradition that starts in 1000 AD, approximately, and extends into the present day, developing and changing as it continues. One constant, or near-constant, throughout these thousand years, is the practice of composing the music before it's performed. In recent decades, some of the music that's evolved from this tradition has been improvised rather than composed, but from its sound and from other things about how it's created, it falls within the classical tradition.

And here one picture, so to speak, is worth more than a thousand words. When you know these improvised pieces—when you hear them, and learn how they're created—it's transparently clear that they're classical. Take, for instance, Stockhausen's *Aus dem sieben tagen*, which I mentioned in my chapter three riff. The musicians aren't given any notes to play—they improvise their music—but they're given verbal directions, to guide their improvising. Stockhausen still is acting like a classical composer.

Or consider a series of pieces by John Zorn, dating from the 1980s, and named after games or sports (*Archery*, for instance). No music is written out in advance. The musicians playing these pieces improvise. But they improvise according to complex rules. So in that way the piece is composed. When you understand the rules, and listen to the ways in which they affect the sound—creating, for instance, sudden stops and starts, which improvised music normally doesn't have—you can hear the composer's mind at work.

Or think of a Pauline Oliveros piece, whose name, for the moment, I can't remember, in which (as in so many of her pieces) the sounds are made by the audience. Everyone sings. Oliveros asks you, as you sing, to obey three rules. First, to hum or sing long notes, softly. Second, to sometimes find a note that someone else is singing, and to sing that note. Second, to sometimes sing a note that no one else is singing. The result is a piece whose details Oliveros can't foresee, but whose sonic contours always are more or less the same. A mass of people sing or hum long notes. Often you hear many of them settle on a single pitch. Often you hear new pitches emerge. Oliveros, in her role as an evolved species of classical composer, shaped that sound, which without her wouldn't have existed.

Or else Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*, which I discussed earlier in this riff. Here the composer sets a process in motion, and the process creates the piece. That's what happens in all the examples I've just given, even in the Stockhausen piece, where the process plays no audible role in shaping the piece, and exists only in the minds of the performers. And this is really what happens in most improvised new classical pieces. They're about a process, in whose creation a composer plays a version of the traditional composer's role.

So now consider the benefits of my definition. It points directly to reasons why classical music ought to be preserved.

First, we care about other art from the past. So why not music? Why, in our culture, should so many people easily read Jane Austen and Tolstoy, but not feel easy listening to Beethoven? Why do people go to art museums to look at Picasso, but don't listen to Stravinsky? Why do so many of us admire James Joyce—and promise ourselves to read him someday—but not make the same promise about music by John Cage or Pierre Boulez?

And why should people in our culture absorb themselves in novels and films, but lose contact even with the idea that music can also unfold over time, with equal force?

And there's one further value that classical music might have. It offers, to both musicians and listeners, the profound and rewarding discipline of getting inside a great composer's work, and learning to rise to its level. The study and practice of this is one of the deeply beautiful—and even ennobling—things in the classical music tradition, and gives us one more reason to respect and preserve classical music, in any way we can.

[Musical interlude. I'll finish this chapter by looking in detail at a classical piece, or maybe more than one, showing how the history, the structural unfolding, and the discipline involved in the music make it so supremely valuable.]

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Other Rebirth reading:

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

Riffs on chapters in the book:

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](#)

Chapter three:

[Riff on the first part of chapter three](#)

[Riff on the second part](#)

[Riff on the complete chapter](#)

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www.artsjournal.com/sadow/2007/01/rebirth.html*