

Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music

by Greg Sandow

Chapter I – Rebirth and Resistance.

Not the final text, but a riff on what the chapter might say

(and revised from earlier riffs)

Let's look at the rebirth part.

So many changes in classical music, going off like fireworks. And nobody has ever catalogued them (which of course becomes one more reason why I'm writing this book).

All of these changes bring classical music right into the culture shared by the rest of the world. Just imagine what would happen if these changes gathered strength. Classical music could be reborn. It could rejoin the culture around it. Which would mean incisive classical concerts, with lots of new music, and a much younger audience. The musicians might look both sharp and informal. They'd talk to their audience. They'd be empowered – controlling their concerts, playing for people much like themselves, playing the music *they* care about, in ways we can hardly dream of now.

Though if we want any hints, we can look at how freely classical music was performed in past generations. Or at what students at the National Orchestral Institute did when [they took control of one of their concerts](#) this summer. Or at concerts in New York, the kind I like to call alt-classical, concerts where there's a fusion of the styles and ambience of classical music and pop – the orchestra concert, for instance, given by a group called Wordless Music, with two sold-out houses of 1000 people each. Or the Bang on a Can marathon, where composers present new music, playing one year to 1000 people, and the next to 2000.

Some other straws blowing in this strong new wind:

- *Maestro*, classical music reality show on the BBC. Celebrities try to conduct an orchestra. Maybe not the world's most famous celebrities, but the job they had to do was very real. And the judges – who included two top conductors, Sir Roger Norrington and Simone Young – were very serious, though of course fun. You haven't lived till you see a dance DJ told that he hadn't indicated upbeats clearly enough, when he conducted a Mozart opera aria, accompanying a soprano. The payoff from this? The winner got to conduct a piece at a Proms concert, and viewers got to see – and hear – exactly what conductors do. And what happens when they fail.
- A concert I hosted and helped plan, on a Pittsburgh Symphony series called "Symphony With a Splash." We programed the "Bacchanal" from *Samson et Delila*, and – shades of the Biblical Samson – shaved the head of a volunteer from the audience while the music played.

[I can't take credit for this. The idea came from the Symphony's VP of Artistic Planning, Robert Moir.]

- Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, played at Le Poisson Rouge, the club in New York that's becoming a classical music destination. On a bill with two ambient electronic pop musicians. The audience of 275 or so equally split, or so I was told, among fans of all three acts. Which meant most of the crowd had – it seems safe to guess – never heard the Messiaen before, or even heard of it, or heard of Messiaen. The result? A restless crowd for the first five minutes, then silence. And then an ovation.
- Commercials that use classical music. A huge new crop of them. Classical music no longer is used to signify something elite, like Grey Poupon mustard. It's just used for fun, or because it sounds lively. Like the start of the first Bach cello suite, used in a terrific American Express ad, where frowny and smiley faces show up unexpectedly on buildings and in the street, formed by windows and headlights. The message conveyed here, about classical music? That it's part of our lives, both classy and fun.

I could go on. Supply your own examples. We've all seen them, or heard of them. How many classical musicians these days play in clubs? More than anyone has counted. Classical music, meet the outside world.

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So we've had a dose of heady inspiration. Rebirth! What a terrific concept for classical music. Where do we go from here?

Well, it might be time to step back, and ask some questions.

1. *Why is classical music changing?*

For two reasons, I think.

First, there's the crisis in classical music, the fear that classical music is slipping away from the outside world, and that its audience is shrinking. So people in classical music try to reach out, and find new and more enticing ways to present classical performances.

[The real danger of a shrinking audience has lately been acknowledged by a leading mainstream classical music organization, the League of American Orchestras, in response to new data from the National Endowment for the Arts, supplemented by the League's private research. These studies show that the audience will most likely age, shrink, and not be replaced.]

Second – and, I think, more important – there's the simple fact of cultural change, beginning at least in the 1950s, going very deep, and gaining speed every year. Our culture has grown more varied and more informal – more flexible, too – so it's hardly a surprise that classical music has also gotten varied, informal, and flexible.

So now people in the classical music world are trying new things not just because they're afraid of the future, but because – like everyone else -- they think in new ways.

[Or, rather, in ways that are new to classical music, but not new in the culture at large.]

The people trying new things have, in spirit, at least, become a formidable movement, sometimes working individually, sometimes in groups, sometimes independently (and even unaware of others doing similar work), sometimes inspired by each other.

2. *What kind of changes are there?*

First, there are changes made by mainstream classical institutions.

And then there are changes made outside the classical music mainstream, which create a new kind of alternative classical music world, the world I've labeled alt-classical. (Though maybe we could just call it "new classical.")

These alt-classical (or "new classical") changes go a lot further than anything that happens in the mainstream. Here we see classical music starting to be fully reborn. Though of course there are more of the mainstream changes, since there are so many mainstream classical music institutions, and the alternative movement – taking shape outside the standard concert hall – is still something new.

[Later in the book I'll devote a whole chapter to these changes.]

3. *How far have the changes gone?*

From one point of view, they haven't gone very far. We can still go to classical concerts and see more or less what we would have seen five, ten, or twenty years ago. Musicians in formal dress. An older audience. And, on the program, the same old familiar, comfortable classical masterworks.

Which of course still should be played, but when they dominate concert programs, they just don't reflect our own time.

And inside the classical music world, you'd sometimes swear that nothing has changed.

Musicians still learn the old repertoire, still look forward to playing it, and still perform it in standard concert halls for the familiar classical audience. And still, often enough, get well paid for it.

[Though there's general agreement that it's harder now to make a living than it used to be.]

And of course it's also true that even orthodox classical concerts have changed, at least in small ways. Musicians might talk to the audience, something we didn't see in past decades. Program books, at least at a few of the biggest orchestras, might evoke the outside world, because they're designed to look like slick, professional magazines.

But changes like these aren't enough to make concerts feel very different. Suppose a conductor says a few words to the audience. Then he or she turns around – wearing formal dress – and conducts one of the standard masterworks, for (again) the familiar audience.

Or maybe he or she won't be dressed formally. Many conductors, these days, avoid formal dress. But even so, the essential concert ambience hasn't changed.

[Especially when the conductor is wearing something not too formal, and the men in the orchestra are still wearing tails.]

Even new works – classical pieces written this month, or this week – may not make much difference, even if they're performed more often than they used to be. The audience might hate them. And, more crucially, they may taste like they were written for the classical concert hall, without any savor, not even a trace, of the world outside.

All these innovations are first steps down a road of change. But they're only first steps. They don't bring enough fresh air into the concert hall to create something truly new, something that would generate a new kind of buzz, a new excitement, which then could attract a new audience.

As for the new independent classical world, here there's great excitement, often great buzz, and certainly great promise. But there isn't much money.

Which means that there aren't many ways to make a living in the new classical space.

Suppose, for instance, that you play in a string quartet. In the mainstream, life might be hard (I've heard of established quartets, even famous ones, staying in motels when they tour). But at least if you're booked by a mainstream performing arts center, you get a fee. Or if you've got a university residency, you get a salary.

Play in a club, on the other hand, and maybe it's a thrilling gig, with a new young audience right in front of you. But where's the money? The club won't pay you a fee. What will you get? A share of the gate?

So here's a challenge for the future.

How can we develop financial models for the new classical space, so musicians (and everyone else who makes a living from classical music – managers, administrators, publicists, you name it) can make a living in it?

[While the mainstream very likely shrinks.]

One bright spot, I think – one guarantee of future change – is the presence of younger people in the classical music business, music students, young musicians, younger people in classical music management.

These younger people – as I've seen from (among many other things) teaching some of them – live in two worlds at once, the classical music world, and also the wider cultural world they share with everyone else their age.

They watch the same TV shows their friends do, go to the same movies, listen to the same bands.

But their friends, often enough, don't pay attention to classical music at all. So young classical musicians can be a bridge to the outside world.

They can leap the gap, if anyone can. They can find ways to present classical music that can grab the attention of people their own age.

Which is one big reason why I'm hopeful for the future.

And also why I think change is inevitable, why change is the dominant fact about classical music today, more important even than the continued survival of mainstream institutions, or the fear that they won't survive.

And also why I think the movement for change will grow, as the people in it start to know that they're a movement, and start to build connections with each other.

[But if young musicians do remake classical music – if classical music is fully reborn as a contemporary art – then don't think the changes won't be huge. Our rebirth won't be a true rebirth, if it's only a new way of packaging something old.]

[Something I didn't put in here, but which surely belongs. It's the paradox of younger people studying classical music, and making careers in the field, even while others their age rarely go to classical performances. As a result of this, youth orchestras thrive, music schools thrive, and orchestras have seen an influx of expert younger players (which makes them now younger than their audience).

[Why this is has never, to my knowledge, been explained. I've never even seen it asked. But surely there's a reason, and that reason might well be another sign of hope.]

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And now we'd better talk about resistance to classical music change.

Of course there's resistance. There always is, to just about any kind of change.

But in classical music, resistance to change – at least for some people – seems to go very deep.

Maybe that's in part because music touches us so deeply. Some years ago, when the public radio station in New York cut back on classical music broadcasting, some people literally howled with rage.

Two leading musicians wrote an implausible op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, begging for the broadcasts to be restored, but without giving any reason for doing it, apart from their own deep love of classical music.

Another sign of deep distress: At a private conference I attended, a classical music leader – an important person in the orchestra world – privately said he and others might need grief counseling, if classical music as they knew it was going to disappear.

And Pinchas Zukerman, in a wild explosion to a writer for the *Denver Post*, said that if classical music disappeared from our culture, we'd no longer be civilized, and (he really said this) we'd have riots, as we did in the '60s.

[Which is a really crazy notion, I can't resist noting. The '60s riots, as a famous government study – the Kerner Commission report – showed, were caused by racism. And racism isn't a problem that classical music has addressed, in any strong way, and which it certainly can't cure. In the '60s, classical music must have seemed, to the black community, like just another part of the white establishment. Which may be true even now.]

So objections to classical music change often have some exaggeration built in to them.

How then should I treat them in my book? How much space should I give them? What tone should I take about what I think is exaggerated? Anyone reading this – please [tell me what you think!](#)

And of course in the long run, the objections won't matter much. History is moving on, and classical music *is* changing, no matter how much some people wish that it wouldn't. These people are in a minority.

[And they're an even smaller minority, we should note, in the world outside classical music. Which was never clearer than when some of them screamed at those New York public radio cutbacks. Turns out that – no matter how loudly they scream -- classical music fans are only small percentage of public radio listeners. Which of course is why the stations cut back on the broadcasts.]

But people who don't want change – or are wary of it – still have influence inside the classical music world. They can slow the pace of change, or, for a while, in certain places, even block it. Only for a while, it's true, but still, for the moment, effectively.

[I've spent a lot of time, in my work arguing with people who don't like change. (In, to cite just one publicly available example, in the comments section of my blog.) Which tells me that resistance to change is still a significant obstacle. The same arguments go on inside many classical music institutions.]

So I think I should address this.

But I need to be cheerful. And sympathetic. I don't want to slam into anyone, and I have to acknowledge that, much as I long for change, there's also something that will be lost.

And that's the purity – as it seems now in retrospect – of the classical music tradition. Or at least its purity as we felt it in past generations.

This, as I'll note later in the book, is a complex business, because many things about classical music as we know it today – reverent silence in the concert hall, for instance – are relatively new, in the long historical sweep of things.

When Mozart was alive, people talked during performances, applauded the moment they heard music they liked (right in the middle of a piece), and musicians improvised freely. These things, should they come back today, surely wouldn't make our current traditionalists very happy.

[They might even think they'd come across some alt-classical madness.]

But even so, our idea of classical music tradition (however recent it might be, historically) really does exist. And it really does carry a lot of force that isn't purely nostalgic.

I myself grew up, musically, in that tradition. And so I want to take time in the book to describe it, with all the understanding and sympathy that I can find.

I want to talk, for instance, about the discipline involved in playing classical masterworks, about how a great musician works for years, for an entire lifetime, to get the music right. And -- how precisely because the music really does go very deep-- the challenges it offers can never be fully mastered.

To evoke the great classical music tradition, I'll quote from writing by and about great classical musicians, especially those of a generation or two ago, when the tradition still carried all its force. And when classical musicians spoke with an authority – a sense of deep artistic importance – that few have now.

[I'll do this very briefly here, at the start of the book. But I'll treat it at great length, later on, in the chapters about what classical music really is, and how it functions in the modern world.]

In doing all this, I hope I can establish the value of classical music. My book wouldn't make sense if I didn't do that. Why should classical music survive? Why should it be reborn?

My book needs to answer those questions. And I need to say that I myself love classical music, no matter how much I might bang the classical music world around in these riffs, and in the book that's coming out of them.

And so now I come to one way that I'll do these things. I want to insert, throughout the book, a series of musical interludes, digressions in my text (or maybe sidebars to it), in which I'll talk about music itself, describing how it sounds, how it's put together, and how it's performed. I'll describe specific pieces, and specific performances.

A few interludes will be about non-classical music, since another thing I'll do in the book is argue that classical music isn't the only form of musical art.)

And my first interlude, I think, will come right here, in the part of my first chapter where I talk, with great sympathy, about the classical music tradition.

The interlude will be about my own experience. I started in classical music as a singer, and though I never made a professional career, I got into the music very deeply, and loved the great tradition.

Here's a riff on that:

Musical interlude

At one point I performed large chunks of Verdi's opera *Otello* (an Italianized version of the title of the Shakespeare play it's based on, *Othello*). I sang the baritone role of Iago, the twisted, deceptive villain.

In an opera, a composer (as I came to see) plays many roles. (Which I learned much more about, of course, when I began to compose operas myself). He or she is, in effect, a playwright, creating a work for the stage.

But the composer also does more than a playwright. Because music has, in so many ways, so much more power than words, the composer creates not just the play, but the performance of the play. The opera's libretto – its written text – might, for instance, specify that a scene takes place in the top of a mountain. Or in the American gold rush, as in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, or at the bottom of the river Rhine, as in Wagner's *Ring*.

So, having established those things, the composer then writes music to describe them. And so we don't just get any mountain top, but a particular one, the one the composer imagines, working now not just as a playwright, but as, in effect, also the set and lighting designer.

And when it comes to acting – the way the characters speak and move – the composer is even more specific. He or she sets the tone and the pacing. Do you, as the actor, pause before saying a particular line? in a play, that's up to you and the director. In an opera, it's written into the score.

So when I sang Iago, I felt that Verdi had gotten there before me – as of course he should have – and had made choices better than any I'd (at least at first) be likely to make. My first job, then, was to understand the choices he'd made, the tone and mood and flow and emphasis he'd given every moment of my part, to understand what he'd set down for me, and quite honestly to try to be equal to it, before making any creative choices of my own.

To be more precise, the creative choices of course might show up at any moment. The process isn't linear, Verdi first, and then whatever I can bring. I'm interacting with Verdi at every moment I study his score. But he has to come first, not because of any ritualistic respect for a great composer, but because the way he wrote my part shows me, right in my face, how great he was.

And so there were places I pondered, so strongly that I remember them to this day, more than 40 years later. Take the place where Iago, making Otello jealous, talks in the most quiet but

insinuating way – lying, burrowing under Otello's skin – about a handkerchief Otello had given his wife. "That handkerchief," Iago sings, "I saw it in the hands of Cassio!"

Or in other words in the hands of many I want Otello to believe his wife is unfaithful with.

So how should I sing that? When the name "Cassio" shows up Verdi writes two simple notes, nothing dramatic, just the standard way any musical phrase in his music might end. But then he puts accent marks over those notes, indicating that they should be sung with some amount of emphasis.

But how much emphasis? Some baritones don't sing these notes. Instead, they shout out the name, not singing at all, ignoring the written notes, sounding like they're throwing the name right in Otello's face, or maybe even jumping up and knocking him down. They're not just telling a forceful lie. They're dramatizing their point, showing how strong it is, flaunting their triumph.

Is that the right thing to do? It's not always wrong, in opera, to speak or shout instead of singing. There's a famous moment in *Tosca*, when Tosca, having murdered the ghastly police chief Scarpia, stands over his body and says, "And all of Rome used to tremble before him." Puccini directs these words – in Italian, "E avani a lui tremava tutta Roma" – to be intoned on a single note, to be sung, in other words, but in the manner of speech. It's now the custom, though, to speak the words instead of singing them, and – as I saw forcefully demonstrated, when a soprano at the Met actually did sing them – speaking is far more effective, far more truthful dramatically. More stark, more biting, more vulnerable, and more exposed. (But with the danger, if you speak in too stagey a way, of sounding falsely theatrical.)

So if someone wants to speak or shout those last two Iago notes, there's nothing in principle wrong with that. But to me it seems wrong. For one thing, Verdi marks the passage, before those two notes, to be sung very quietly (*pianissimo*), darkly (*cupo*), and slowly (*lento*). He doesn't say to get louder on the last two notes. And while composers can be wrong about such things, or at least not implacably right, beyond any reconsideration, we should take his direction seriously.

And Verdi also once wrote a letter, saying how he thought Iago should speak, not at this moment, but in general. Iago, he said, while manipulating everyone, and spreading horrible lies, should do it all in the most easy, natural, unremarkable tone, so that if anyone objected, he could simply shrug, and in effect reply (like Gilda Radner), "Oh, never mind."

All this suggests to be that I shouldn't shout the two notes, but instead should deliver them naturally. And not too loudly. And yet with emphasis! So the search for the exactly right amount of emphasis becomes long and consuming, a matter of trial and error, informed, beyond all this, by my knowledge – looking now at more than my own part – that the real blowup comes when Otello, now finally in my power, reacts to what I say, and that my two notes are only one step in ramping toward his explosion.

(The loudness alone, by the way, becomes a problem in itself. What does it mean to sing softly, but with emphasis, and does adding emphasis mean that you have to sing louder? And would the answer be the same for every singer, and in every staging? Maybe, if you're standing

upstage, far from the audience, you might have to sing a little louder, so your point comes across.)

I've used this operatic example – maybe an obvious one – from my own performing experience. People who play Beethoven piano sonatas, or string quartets, or who conduct Beethoven symphonies, have to make these choices at just about every moment, and without words to give them any guidance. But always sensing that Beethoven had something in mind, stronger than most of what we might think of, and that if we go off the track, the entire piece starts sounding wrong.

I love and honor this tradition, and if people think that it – and the reverent silence that surrounds it – is being hurt by the way classical music is changing – I really do sympathize.

[I've gone on longer about this than about other things in the riff, things that – taking the book as a whole – might be more important. This musical interlude, in fact, might (unlike anything else in the riff) approach the length it might have in the finished book. I say this just in case anyone thinks it's too long in proportion to whatever importance it might finally have.]

[4]

Back to resistance to change.

Some of the resistance feels like nostalgia, deep nostalgia. People love classical music. They enter a classical concert hall, and feel like they're coming home. So of course they don't want classical concerts to change. They won't feel at home anymore.

Remember the leading classical music figure who said he and his colleagues might need grief counseling, if classical music collapsed, or greatly changed.

But there can be other reasons for resisting change, which in some ways function as explanations of nostalgia – explanations of what people think they'll be losing – but which people take seriously. I want to take them seriously, too. Here are three of them:

- Change will dumb classical music down.
- There's no need for change, because classical music is doing just fine as it is. There isn't any crisis.
- Any problems that classical music might have can be blamed on our culture. There's nothing wrong with classical music, but our culture is now too dumb to support serious art.

Let's look at these reasons. (And can anyone suggest more?)

1. *Change will dumb classical music down*

What, some people might think, could be better proof of this than *Maestro*, the BBC classical music reality show that I mentioned at the start of these riffs? Because what could be dumber than a reality show? Or take that further. What could be dumber than TV?

But this is an old cultural prejudice.

[It was stronger in the past, for instance in the early 1960s, when CBS (yes, the TV network) commissioned an opera from Stravinsky. Even though they let him write anything he wanted – and even though he gave them an atonal opera (*The Flood*), with not a concession anywhere in it to popular taste – some people thought he'd sold out by having anything at all to do with TV.]

And now this prejudice comes into conflict with (no pun intended) reality. Some reality shows are dumb. But some aren't, and *Maestro* surely wasn't. Yes, it was brash, slick, and breezy, and full of dumb jokes. But the contestants really had to conduct an orchestra, as I've said, and if they conducted badly, we could hear that they were bad.

I've mentioned Goldie, the dance-music DJ, who lived and breathed music, right to his fingertips, but fell down when he couldn't handle the upbeats in a Mozart aria. These upbeats – quick little notes that come before the main beat of a melody – came after a pause, and Goldie couldn't show the orchestra exactly when to play them. So for a moment the music sounded hesitant – thin and tentative. The judges (two of whom were famous conductors) told us what was wrong, talking exactly as classical music professionals would normally talk.

Here's another example.

"The violins come in, in the second quaver in the bar," said one of the judges, Simone Young, music director of the Hamburg Opera, in Germany, pointing out a problem she'd noticed. (She's Australian, and uses a British musical term, "quaver," when we in America would say "quarter note." Though her meaning would be clear in any language. The violins, at this moment in the music, start playing on the second beat.) "And on the second note they play, the brass come in. And you showed me nothing in that bar that would have showed the brass when to play."

Which is exactly how she'd talk in a conducting class she might teach at a top music school.]

You could watch more serious classical music telecasts for years – telecasts of performances by major orchestras or soloists – and never learn half as much (or a tenth as much) about conducting as one *Maestro* episode could teach you.

[Of course in the book I'll run through other ways classical music has changed, and show that they're not all dumb. For instance:

[The Royal Opera, in London, holds a competition for very young composers, asking them to write a fanfare that the company can use, at performances, to signal the end of intermission.

[Jordi Savall, the probing viola da gamba star, conducted Haydn's *Seven Last Words*, a musical meditation from the 18th century on the last words Jesus spoke, as recorded in the

Bible. Except that Savall used new texts, new literary meditations on those final words, written by two important writers, one of them being José Saramago, surely among the most profound literary voices of our time. This doesn't demean Haydn's music. Instead, it gives the music new meaning, and new power. That's especially true because Saramago is an atheist. So now the music doesn't have to have a Christian message. It can take a new place in our world, as part of a deep and thoughtful meditation on what we think Christianity might currently mean.

[An opera company in Europe produces Bartok's short opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, performing it twice in one night, staged in radically different ways, to show how the opera can have many meanings.

[Though of course some new developments really are dumb. Like this deranged PR thrust from the Philadelphia Orchestra, inviting the world to come to a performance on Thanksgiving Day:

[Gobble up the sounds of The Philadelphia Orchestra this Thanksgiving. Don't miss the chance to purchase tickets to this weekend's Mozart and Bruckner concert for only \$30. Log in at www.philorch.org/login with the promotion code TURKEY or call 215.893.1999. Take advantage of this great offer! You will be thankful you did.

[The link between turkeys and Bruckner would be...well, what?]

So why would *Maestro* – at least to some people – seem dumb? The problem has to be the TV culture that pervades the show, the chatter, the bad jokes, the breezy soundbites, sometimes coming even from the judges. This isn't an artistic tone of voice, the tone used in the past when people talked about art.

I could say that's a good thing, because it puts classical music into the world that most people live in.

But for some people, tearing classical music out of its refuge would surely be a problem. They won't feel at home anymore. Now it feels cheap. Cheap and dumb.

Which, once more, is a cultural prejudice. Why does intelligence have to be formal, and dignified? Why should it come in only one kind of package?

I do sympathize, of course. As I've said, I grew up in that high-culture world myself. I remember how superior I felt – and also how isolated – even as a kid, because I liked opera. And how insulted I was, way back in sixth grade, when our music teacher had us singing show tunes.

But now I'd want to turn this prejudice around. Could it be that some people who want to keep classical music in its protected place are, in the end, just uncomfortable in our current world? (Exactly as I was, in the sixth grade.) If they feel that way, fine, but why then should they think that people who do feel comfortable – and, maybe, enjoy watching reality shows – have to be dumb? This is so ancient a cultural prejudice that it might as well wear robes and a long, white beard.

[Though I also might wonder how widespread this kind of prejudice is, in our time. I do run into it, now and then. But one European study of cultural taste found that the number of people who

only live in the high culture world – and never enjoy popular culture at all – is so small that it's not statistically significant.]

I don't want to go into this at any great length, here at the start of my book, because there's a more central place for this discussion later on, in the chapters (see my [outline](#)) where I'll ask what classical music is, and explore how it functions in our current world.

Though here's a question I'll ask right now. Why should we think that classical music, in its traditional form, isn't dumb already?

Heresy! The music, of course isn't dumb.

[Though wait!

[We should remember that not all classical music shines with scholarly intelligence. Quite a lot of it was written, back in its day, simply as entertainment. And was, in a sense, the TV of its day. Rossini, just for instance, wrote many operatic comedies, full of silliness. In one of them, *L'Italiana in Algeri* ("The Italian Girl in Algiers," a perfect setup for a sitcom) there's a moment of wild confusion, and everyone onstage sings about the noises they hear in their heads – a bell going "ding, ding, ding," a hammer going "crack, crack, crack," a drum going "boom, boom, boom." While the music sweeps up and down with wild abandon. Somehow, in the classical music world, this now counts as refined high art, when really it might just as well be a skit on *Saturday Night Live*.]

But I'm not talking about the music. I'm talking about how we present it.

I could list some of the obvious ways in which classical music presents a blank, or predictable, or out of touch face to people with contemporary lives:

- Musicians wearing formal dress – with the men looking like butlers in a 1930s movie.
- Music from the distant past dominating concert programs.
- The same familiar pieces, repeated over and over again. (As if a symphony orchestra was Top 40 radio.)
- Institutions – symphony orchestras, for instance – that never talk about what's intended in a performance. That play a Beethoven symphony for the 23d time, or the 123d time, and never say what makes this performance different, or what the musicians are trying to accomplish with the piece.
- Not connecting to present-day culture. And, worse, being visibly unsure about contemporary life.

[Example: A recent Philadelphia Orchestra press release – I guess this is my time to beat up on the Philadelphia Orchestra – which talked about music that was "downloaded."

With the word in quotes, as if downloading was something new, which we're not quite sure of.]

But there are also more subtle dumbnesses, ways in which the classical music world doesn't even make sense taken on its own terms.

For instance:

- Scholarly program notes, printed in concert programs – so scholarly, sometimes, that much of the audience can't understand them.

[And which might also miss the whole point of the enterprise. I'm remembering a program note for a Metropolitan Opera performance of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, which talked at length about details of Rossini's orchestration, which instruments he favored, and how some of what we hear isn't what he actually wrote. Without ever saying that the opera is meant to be funny.]

- New music forced on the mainstream concert audience, which doesn't want to hear it. Where else – in what other sphere of art or entertainment – does anything like that happen? Are moviegoers forced to watch art films before they're allowed to see the latest Hollywood blockbuster? Do people visiting museums have to sit through oddball performance art, before they're let into a big Picasso show?

[And what's most sadly missing here is any attempt to find the audience that might like new classical music. Which again contrasts strangely with what goes on elsewhere. Isn't it standard marketing, to figure out who might like what you're offering, before you put it out in the marketplace?

[Or have I now fallen once more into heresy, for calling classical music a market? Are people going to tell me that classical music is art, and that therefore its audience has to be treated as if it were a serious art audience? Even if, in fact, it isn't any such thing?]

- Disconnects between what's printed in concert program books, and what's seen on the stage. This is very subtle, but I think it's arresting. Because:

If you go to an orchestra concert, very likely the orchestra will print in its program book all the instruments that play in each piece. For a Beethoven symphony, the list might specify two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

What these lists are supposed to tell anyone – apart from specialists – is beyond me. Who in the wider audience cares, if there are two horns, instead of four? Or three horns, as there are in Beethoven's Third Symphony? (Which in fact is very unusual, but hardly anyone reading the program book will know this.)

So shouldn't these lists – if they have to be printed – include a few words about what might be notable about them? (To explain why, for instance, it's odd, even weird, to write for three horns instead of four.)

And here's another problem. What do all these instruments do? If, for instance, you've programmed Beethoven's imposing (and not that frequently performed) *Missa Solemnis*, his solemn mass, why not note that the flute has a lovely moment where it hovers like the Holy Ghost? And that one of the trombones all but derails a fast section by jumping in with a note that sounds wholly unexpected?

Why, in other words, not animate these lists, by using them to give people something in the music to listen for?

But here's the dumbest thing of all, the one I cited in my bullet point. Sometimes there are more instruments on stage than these lists specify. I've been, for instance, at a Tchaikovsky symphony performance in which the list of instruments specified four horns, two trumpets, and three trombones, while onstage the numbers were five, three, and four.

How could this be?

The answer lies in something that symphony orchestras don't share with their audience, but which the audience would, in my experience, be fascinated to learn.

The principal horn player in a big orchestra is given time off, so to speak, from his or her music. Some solo passages in the principal horn part will be difficult, even hair-raising. And – because the horn isn't an easy instrument to play – even simple music can be treacherous.

So the principal player gets a break. There's a colleague on stage to play a few ensemble passages, sections where all the horns play together, and where no one will notice if the principal horn rests for a while, and a discreet fifth horn plays the first horn part.

The principal trumpet, for the same reason, gets similar moments of rest.

And trombonists have found that they can play their music more effectively – and especially that they can make soft music really soft – if there are, in places, two of them playing the highest trombone part.

These things are ingrained in orchestral life. But since they're never explained, there's a gaping disconnect between what's printed in the program book, and what shows up on stage.

And nobody seems to care. Which is truly dumb.

[Disclaimer. As I've noted, this is a time of change, and some of the things I've listed here are changing, or at least starting to change. But I'm talking about problems classical music has had for many years, in its traditional form, the form that some people don't want to change.]

[5]

2. *There's no need for change, because there isn't any crisis.*

What's remarkable here is that people who take this view don't seem to understand some very basic facts.

Take, for instance, the aging of the audience. Conventional classical music wisdom – repeated quite a lot in the media – says that the classical audience is getting older, which of course leads to the fear that it will someday disappear.

But some people don't believe that. In fact, there's another piece of conventional wisdom that says the audience was always as old as it is now, so its age can't be a problem.

Two examples:

- An essay by Leon Botstein – president of Bard College, and a conductor – that appeared in 2008 in the *Wall Street Journal*. “Classical music has never been the passion of the young,” wrote Botstein. “It is an acquired taste that requires both encouragement and education.”

[Note how special he thinks classical music is. It's so great an art that only mature people can understand it.]

- And a *New York Times* article by Allan Kozinn – one of the paper's classical music critics – splashed a few years ago all over the *Sunday Arts and Leisure* section. Kozinn said both that the audience wasn't getting older, and that studies of the age of the audience were never done in past generations.

But studies of the audience age were in fact done in the past, and they show a younger audience than we have now – dramatically younger, in fact, with a median age in its thirties. There's a raft of anecdotal data that supports these studies.

[So apparently classical music really was, in the past, a passion of the young.]

There's also more recent data, gathered by the National Endowment for the Arts, which shows the classical music audience steadily growing older since 1982.

[Readers of my blog have seen me present all this information, which I've summarized in a blog sidebar on the [age of the audience](#).]

So here we have yet another disconnect. People are making proclamations without knowing any facts. I've even seen one very prominent person in the field say that every study orchestras have done shows

that the audience has always been old. Where are those studies? I asked. Could I see them? This very prominent and otherwise authoritative man couldn't name even one. He thought, in some vague way, that the studies existed, but couldn't tell me where to find them.

People don't even know the NEA data, which for decades has been published and publicized, and now can be downloaded from the NEA's website.

Is what's going on here – at least to some extent – willful self-deception?

But then the classical music world, as I'll show later on, isn't good at keeping track of data. Or even gathering it.

We don't even know – and isn't this just a bit shocking, given all the talk of a crisis? – whether classical music ticket sales have, in recent decades, gone up or down.

So this is yet another way in which the classical music world seems dumb. Even in a time of perceived crisis, it can't (or won't) measure how well – or how badly – it's doing.

But let's return to people who don't believe in the crisis (and who, of course, can be protected from needing to believe, because data is so scarce).

Not only is their data suspect, but their don't always make sense.

For instance, the Botstein essay I quoted from earlier also says:

The classical music world has never been healthier; since the early 1970s the growth has been robust...

The number of concert venues, summer festivals, performing ensembles and overall performances in classical music and opera has increased exponentially over the last four decades. There are currently nearly 400 professional orchestras in America, according to the League of American Orchestras, while 30 years ago there were 203.

But our population has grown! So if we have more orchestras, wouldn't that – in part, at least – be because we have more people?

And in fact if we adjust the growth of orchestras (using the numbers in Botstein's piece) for the growth in population, then that growth looks quite a bit smaller.

US population in 1978 (30 years before the essay was published): 223 million.

Population in 2008: 304 million.

Number of professional orchestras in 1978: 203

Number of professional orchestras in 2008 (approximately): 400

Population grew by 73%.

Orchestras grew by 97%.

So orchestras only increased 24% faster than the growth of population.

And even that increase could be explained by a growth in both prosperity and available arts funding, fueled by the growth in population, increasing productivity, and a growing high-level interest in getting government, corporate, and foundation money to the arts.

So cities that once weren't able to afford an orchestra – because they didn't have enough funding, or a large enough audience – now can build a base for one.

That can be true even if classical music hasn't grown more popular, and even if its popularity might have declined. All you need are enough people who still want an orchestra, and still are willing to support one.

Meanwhile, according to new NEA data, the percentage of adult Americans who go to classical music concerts – even if we have more orchestras – has fallen nearly 30% in the past 30 years. That looks like a sign of serious trouble. Especially since the decline hits all age groups, except (so far) people over 65.

The decline most notably includes people 45 to 64, who've been the core of the classical music audience.

It's this data (and some detailed analysis drawn from it) that led the League of American Orchestras to conclude that the current audience won't be replaced. (You can find their analysis [here](#).)

In my next riff – which will take us into chapter two of my book – I'll use data like this, as well as some history, to show why there really is a crisis.

And in the book, I'll present detailed information, though maybe not too much of it, because (as readers have told me) many people do realize that we're in a crisis, and also because I don't want the book to get mired in statistics.

[If I need to, I can always present more detail in an appendix.]

3. *Classical music's problems can be blamed on our culture.*

I said earlier that our culture had gotten more varied, more informal, and more flexible. Here's a quick snapshot of that, from a recent headline in the *New York Times* business section:

“Google Said to Be Near a Yelp Deal.”

We know what Google is, of course. And Yelp is a company that puts reviews of local businesses online. But think about those corporate names. Google? Yelp? Since when did serious business enterprises have names like these?

They didn't have them when I was growing up.

So there you have it – a quick and dirty picture of how our culture has changed, evidence for the growing informality of our world, which classical music so far hasn't done much to reflect.

Related to this is another major change, a huge leap in the role and stature of popular culture.

[Which of course is more informal than high culture, so the two changes are very closely related.]

Popular culture, informal as it is, long ago developed art of its own. For years, now, there's been music nominally called pop, which is too biting, complex, and strange to ever be popular.

So now pop culture occupies some of the intellectual and artistic space that used to be exclusively held by all the old high arts, including classical music.

But not everyone realizes this. And, of course, not everyone likes it. Some people – who may not know popular culture very well – think that everything now is stupid. Shoddy. Shallow. Loud. And completely lacking in creativity.

Which then would explain why classical music is in trouble. Our culture now isn't smart enough to support serious art.

This would also help explain why some people who love classical music might reject the contemporary world. They think the contemporary world is horrible. So they hold on tightly to classical music, as a refuge from contemporary life, and an antidote to it.

I've heard many people talking like this.

I remember, for instance, a keynote speech delivered at an orchestral gathering, by James DePriest, the former music director of the Oregon Symphony, who now teaches conducting at Juilliard. He said that there isn't any quiet in our current culture, or any room for thoughtful reflection.

Which of course means he's missed – among much else -- the growth in meditation, ever since the 1960s, and the surge in quiet acoustic pop music, propelled by a new generation of singer-songwriters.

[Let me say it again: People who think this way often don't know much about the popular culture they so strongly hate.]

These polemics, of course, go far beyond classical music, and involve all the arts. Or, more specifically, all the old formal high arts.

Because the arts as a collective enterprise – spearheaded by vocal arts advocates -- are looking for a stronger toehold in our culture, for more support, and, most of all, for more funding.

And the hole in these arguments for arts support is that they either ignore popular culture, or else assume we all agree that popular culture is horrible.

I've seen, for instance, a speech by Ben Cameron, which circulates widely on the Internet.

Cameron is in charge of arts funding for the Doris Duke Foundation, and he hypes the arts – in a very effective, very homely, but poetic way -- by saying that they're our collective family photographs. Or, in other words, the collected memories that tell us who we are – which, or so you'd gather from Cameron's speech, we have no other way of gathering.

But don't we have memories, imprinted on our cultural DNA, even without the arts?

Cameron (giving examples to show what he means) notes that, among other things, he's a southerner and gay. So his family photographs include William Faulkner and (from the gay side) choreography by Bill T. Jones.

But isn't he forgetting country music, which for so many decades has told so many southerners who they are?

[Or at least white southerners. Black southerners might look towards blues, gospel, and old-time roadhouse R&B (which, come to think of it, would be the some of the family photographs for black people all through the US).]

And don't gay men famously identify with the Village People and (at least back around 1990, when I was in the pop music business) with the Pet Shop Boys? Not to mention Judy Garland.

So this argument for the arts is both unconvincing and incomplete. It's unconvincing, because who's going to believe that we need the arts as family photographs, when even without them we have cultural reference points? (Most of which go deeper, I'd have to say, than Bill T. Jones.)

And it's an incomplete argument because it doesn't say what the arts really might offer. What, for instance, would William Faulkner tell us that country music doesn't?

The answer, I think, is more complex than many people might realize.

[If you read Greil Marcus's evocation of the cultural (and very southern) roots of rock & roll -- in his pioneering study, one of the classics of rock criticism, *Mystery Train* – you'll see that Southern music, has profound cultural roots. And tells a profound cultural story.]

But Cameron doesn't say what the answer might be. He talks as if only high art could tell us who we were. And of course if that were the case, then no further explanation would be necessary.

He does take a moment to tell us how ghastly popular culture is:

"We live, he says, "in an age of demonization and fear of difference.

Our "popular cultural context...often seems to value humiliation over humanity."

Our young people “prioritize the ‘bombardment’ of sensation through violent film and video over the contemplation and deep understanding of experience.”

All of which is in some ways true. Though he also might have said that all these things are addressed, and strongly deplored, inside popular culture itself. Popular culture in fact provides its own critiques of its problems, and offers its own antidotes.

[And even if popular culture really were horrible, are the arts any guarantee of deep humanity? History would seem to say otherwise. Just think of the Nazis, who (let’s never forget) promoted classical music. Or think of the Metropolitan Opera, which desegregated its stage only in 1955, seven years after major league baseball signed its first black player. The first black musician at a major American orchestra was hired only in 1957.]

Here’s another example.

In 2007, Dana Gioia, at that time the chairman of the NEA, gave a commencement address at Stanford University. Like Cameron’s speech, it’s widely circulated on the Internet. And in it Gioia wistfully looks back to the 1950s, when on network TV (as he says) we could hear performances by opera singers like Anna Moffo and Robert Merrill.

Those were the singers he named. His point, of course, was that the absence of opera on network TV shows our culture growing shallow.

But did watching Robert Merrill help make anyone an active citizen?

Well – and speaking now as a lifelong opera fan -- I’ll readily grant that we don’t have baritones these days who sing Merrill’s repertoire (the heavier Verdi roles, for instance) with voices as anywhere near as lush as his.

[That touches on something I’ll go into later in the book, the state of classical music performance today. Classical music, as I’ll show, can learn a lot from its own past.]

But nobody ever said, back in the old days, that Merrill was a smart or creative singer. You couldn’t become smarter because you heard him. If anything, you might get more passive, because you were told that you were hearing art, when in fact his singing didn’t go to any depth at all.

[The problem here, I think, is that many of us still assume that classical music is by its very nature art. Without asking whether every instance of it really is artistic.]

So what music do we see on TV now?

We might see Bruce Springsteen, who – by any honest definition of art – truly is an artist.

He writes his own music. He writes his lyrics. He does those things with great power and sensitivity. He thinks about where we are and where we’re going. He inspires millions of us. And for many people, his inspiration goes very deep.

[One of our leading psychiatrists and social philosophers, Robert Coles, even wrote a book about what Springsteen means to people, how deep his importance is for many of us, how he raises questions that lie buried in our hearts. The book, published in 2004, is called [Bruce Springsteen's America: The People Listening, A Poet Singing.](#)]

David Brooks, the *New York Times* columnist (and a conservative, no less, not the kind of thinker who'd usually write in praise of rock stars) wrote about Springsteen, just a few days before I wrote the first version of this riff.

I'll quote him here, not because he said anything new, but to show how easy it is to find evocative writing on Springsteen. And to show how powerful that writing can be.

Which of course doesn't prove that Springsteen himself is powerful. But just look at what Brooks wrote:

Springsteen's manager, Jon Landau, says that each style of music elicits its own set of responses. Rock, when done right, is jolting and exhilarating.

Once I got a taste of that emotional uplift, I was hooked....

I followed Springsteen into his world. Once again, it wasn't the explicit characters that mattered most. Springsteen sings about teenage couples out on a desperate lark, workers struggling as the mills close down, and drifters on the wrong side of the law....

What mattered most, as with any artist, were the assumptions behind the stories. His tales take place in a distinct universe, a distinct map of reality. In Springsteen's universe, life's "losers" always retain their dignity. Their choices have immense moral consequences, and are seen on an epic and anthemic scale.

There are certain prominent neighborhoods on his map — one called defeat, another called exaltation, another called nostalgia. Certain emotional chords — stoicism, for one — are common, while others are absent. "There is no sarcasm in his writing," Landau says, "and not a lot of irony."

Then there is the man himself. Like other parts of the emotional education, it is hard to bring the knowledge to consciousness, but I do think important lessons are communicated by that embarrassed half-giggle he falls into when talking about himself. I do think a message is conveyed in the way he continually situates himself within a tradition — de-emphasizing his own individual contributions, stressing instead the R&B groups, the gospel and folk singers whose work comes out through him.

So by putting Springsteen on TV instead of Robert Merrill, have we gained or lost?

I'd say we've gained a lot. We have a star who creates his own art, who says something of his own, who helps to show us who we are.

And we also have a working-class guy from New Jersey, who reflects his roots, not someone trained to lose himself in an elite form of art.

Which, among much else, shows us how art and creativity have spread through our society, and aren't just limited to those trained in the art forms sanctioned by our elites.

If this isn't progress, I don't know what is.

[Of course there are more examples that I'll give, to show how creativity has suffused our society, in a way we've never seen before.

[People, in fact, demand participation in their culture now. So we have companies inviting ordinary people to make commercials for them. People, all on their own, making endless video mashups, taking off from *Brokeback Mountain*, finding unexpected gay subtexts in old movies and TV shows. People knitting outrageous clothes to put on stuffed animals, imitating *Project Runway*. People starting rock bands, which do things never heard in music before.

[But of course the problem, for those who aren't sure about popular culture, is that much of this new expression doesn't happen in "the arts," or more precisely in the areas we're used to calling art. Can clothes knitted for a stuffed animal be as artistic – as valuable to all of us – as a poem printed in *The New Yorker*?

[That question (and, even more, the reasons people might give for their answers) could almost serve as a Rorschach test for attitudes toward art.

[I wouldn't even try to answer it, though – for me – if endless numbers of people are doing creative things with knitting (and sharing it all online), then we don't have the kind of "conformist" society that cultured people feared so strongly in the 1950s.

[And if, for you, *New Yorker* poetry is more important than anything anybody knits, then would you deny that a society with an explosion of creative knitting might not – as another flower from a growing tree of creativity – produce more poets (even good ones) than a society where people largely do what they're told?

[Of course I'll have to defend Springsteen as an artist and a musician, from anyone who says that his character and his influence might be stellar, but that his music is trivial. And that something might erode in us, if we hold Springsteen up as any kind of musical model.

[Here's one example of Springsteen as a musical artist, from a film about the making of his album *Born to Run* (included in the boxed set celebrating the 30th anniversary of that album). His sax player, Clarence Clemons, talks about recording a solo in one of the *Born to Run* songs. He laid down many versions of it. And then he kept on playing, while Springsteen, sitting at the mixing board, cut between the recorded versions (which he knew by heart), showing Clemons exactly which spots he'd liked the best. Clemons said – with the greatest admiration – that this was the most rigorous artistic leadership he'd ever encountered.

[Note that this is a way of putting music together that's very different from what we find in classical music. In classical music, a composer plans it all beforehand, and writes it

down in a musical score. If *Born to Run* had been a classical piece, Clemons would simply have played what Springsteen wrote. But pop music is far more collaborative, and may take its final form after many decisions made while it's being recorded.

[Of course I'll have to say at least a little about Springsteen's songs, and how I think they stand up in a musical universe that also includes classical music.

[A later chapter in the book will be all about popular culture and pop music, and will demonstrate in full detail how – in our era, if not necessarily in the past – pop songs can be serious music.]

Though – returning now to classical music – there might be one more question to ask, before this chapter ends. It's a teaser for something else I'll talk about in much more detail later in the book. Many people in the classical music business think we need change. So – as one of my friends asked this week in an e-mail – “Given all this, why don't we do it? Why is it so hard? What's keeping us from doing what we know we have to do?”

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