

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

(revised from earlier riffs, and then cut down from the first revised version I circulated)

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. Classical music can now be reborn. It can rejoin the culture around it. 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.

Some other straws blowing in this strong new wind:

- *Maestro*, classical music reality show on the BBC. Celebrities try to conduct an orchestra. 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. 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 programmed 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.
- Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, played at Le Poisson Rouge in New York, 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 surely meant that most of the crowd had never heard the Messiaen before, or even 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. The message conveyed? That it's part of our lives, both classy and fun.

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So we've had a dose of heady inspiration. Rebirth! Where do we go from here?

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

1. *Why is classical music changing?*

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.

Second – and more important – is the simple fact of cultural change. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 works in classical music) can make a living from it?

One guarantee of future change is the presence of younger people in the classical music business.

These younger people live in two worlds at once, the classical music world, and also the wider cultural world they share with everyone else their age.

They can build a bridge to the outside world. They can find ways to present classical music that can grab the attention of people outside the classical bubble.

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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 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.

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.

How should I treat all this in my book? How much space should I give it? What tone should I take about what I think is exaggerated? 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.

But people who don't want change – or are wary of it – still have influence inside the classical music world. So I think I should address them.

But I need to be sympathetic. And I need to acknowledge that, much as I long for change, there's also something that will be lost.

And that's the purity of the classical music tradition.

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.

One way I'll address it will be in a series of musical interludes, sidebars to my text 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, and 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.

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Back to resistance to change.

Some of the resistance feels like 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.

But there can be other reasons for resisting change, reasons I have to take seriously, even if I disagree with them.

Here are three of these reasons:

- 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 thoughts.

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, which now comes into conflict with (no pun intended) reality. Not all reality shows are dumb, and *Maestro* surely wasn't. Yes, it was brash, slick, and breezy, full of silly 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.

Here's another example.

"The violins come in, in the second note 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. "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.

[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.

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

Of course 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 classical music feels cheap. Cheap and dumb.

Which, once more, is a cultural prejudice.

I'd want to turn that 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?

And here's something else. Why should we think that classical music, in its traditional form, isn't dumb already?

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.

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.
- 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?
- 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.

But 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.

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 horn gets a break. There's a colleague on stage to take over for few ensemble passages, sections where all the horns play together, and where no one will notice if the principal horn rests for a while.

The principal trumpet, for the same reason, gets 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.

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. Some people don't believe it's happening

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.”
- 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.

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.

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.

Now 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 reasoning doesn't always make sense.

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

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.

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.

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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*:

“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.

That's 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.

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. And completely lacking in creativity.

Which then – if it were true -- would explain why classical music is in trouble. Our culture wouldn't be smart enough to support serious art.

But you can only come to that conclusion if you don't know popular culture, or if you almost willfully ignore it. For an example of ignoring it, look at 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 values the arts, he says, as our collective family photographs. Or, in other words, the collected memories that tell us who we are.

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?

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.

Here's another example.

In 2007, Dana Gioia, at that time the chairman of the NEA, gave a commencement address at Stanford University (also widely circulated on the Web) in which he 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.

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 a creative, 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.

But nobody ever said, back in the old days, that Merrill was a smart or creative singer. You couldn't get 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.

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.

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 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....

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, 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.

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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