

## New Directions in Classical Music

Greg Sandow

compiled for my Juilliard course, "[Classical Music in an Age of Pop](#)"

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*This might seem like a long list of innovations that classical music organizations have tried, or at least talked about. But in fact it's a very small sampling, and could easily be much longer. No one has ever catalogued all the innovations of recent years, and the only way to hear about many of them, unfortunately, is by word of mouth.*

*These innovations are very varied, to say the least. Some seem experimental to me, as if someone said, "Maybe this will work." Or, maybe better, "Maybe this will be fun!" Other innovations seem to have zeroed in on music and/or a style of presentation that speaks directly to an audience, sometimes to a new audience, and thus transforms the nature of classical music performance, and gets new people coming. Not that the experimental innovations are in any way bad! They can point in new directions no one ever thought of.*

*The categories I've divided these things into are in some ways arbitrary. Some things could easily go in more than one category.*

### **[New ways to present classical music]**

Simone Young, music director of the Hamburg Philharmoniker, conducted the Brahms Second Symphony from a Hamburg church tower, with the musicians scattered in 50 different locations, including sports stadiums, clubs, corporate offices, and even one of Hamburg's famous sex shops. The musicians watched Young on video, and sound technicians mixed the sound. On [the Philharmoniker's website](#) you used to be able to watch Young, hear the performance, and see all the musicians. If you clicked on any of the musicians, you'd see them in a larger window, while what they're playing stood out from everything else. Very instructive, about how the symphony is orchestrated! This may have been a stunt, but it got major press in Germany, and 10,000 people went to the musicians' sites to see them play live.

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At the University of Maryland, James Ross, who used to head the conducting program and conducted the School of Music orchestra, started a program called New Lights, to change the face of orchestra concerts. Here are some things he and the students have done:

At some performances, the musicians wore black, but not formal black. Just black pants or skirts, and black tops. For each concert, they picked an accent color, suited to the music — blue and green for Mahler's Fourth Symphony, for instance, or red for Bartok's *Miraculous*

*Mandarin*. The students could wear the accent color any way they liked, or could choose not to wear it at all. I've seen women wearing lovely shawls in the accent color, and men wearing colored socks. One bass player, for the Mahler, tied blue and green ribbons to his tuning pegs.

At one performance, baby pictures of the musicians were posted in the lobby of the concert hall, along with personal stories, in which the players told us how they first fell in love with music.

The audience, for many years, filled no more than half the concert hall, and was largely elderly. And very quiet. To find new listeners, students visited rehearsals of other musical groups on campus, including the marching band and the Gamer Symphony (a student-run group that plays videogame music to sold out houses). They invited members of those groups to come to symphony orchestra and wind orchestra concerts, and offered free tickets. They promoted these concerts where they lived, in dorms and fraternities and sororities, and also in their classes. That made the audience a little younger and a little livelier.

But that was only a start. The next year, the students did very serious organizing in their dorms, and the size of the audience literally doubled. I saw this myself, and could barely believe it. Now the hall was full, and the new people were young and excited.

And then of course there were the amazing performances of *Afternoon of a Faun* and *Appalachian Spring*, which the students played (beautifully) from memory, and also danced. I saw both live, and found them both beautiful and inspiring. I'm not alone. The videos ([Faun](#), [Spring](#)) have in a small way gone viral. If classical musicians can give performances like this, what else can they do?

One last thing. Jim also led a performance of *Petrushka*, in which the musicians doubled as actors. This was so successful that the New York Philharmonic adopted Jim's production, and did it themselves, to great acclaim. (Jim and Alan Gilbert, the Philharmonic's music director, are old friends, and have worked together in the conducting program at Juilliard.)

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In 2008., the BBC broadcast a reality show called *Maestro*, in which celebrities competed to be symphony conductors. Some of them — especially a comedian and a dance DJ — showed a lot of talent. The contestants got conducting lessons. The judges included two internationally known conductors, Simone Young and Sir Roger Norrington, and contestants (even though the show was lots of fun) were given serious criticism. In one episode, the dance DJ conducted a Mozart opera aria, and was told that he hadn't indicated upbeats clearly enough. Viewers learned more about conducting from watching this show than they'd learn watching a dozen televised concerts.

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In a New York City Opera production of *Don Giovanni* some years ago, the orchestra was encouraged to improvise, just as an 18th-century orchestra would have done.

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Musicians in Denver, under the name Telling Stories, gave chamber concerts in which they also read writing they've done, fiction, poetry, and nonfiction.

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In a concert series I hosted with the Pittsburgh Symphony, and programmed in collaboration with the Symphony's artistic staff, we shaved the head of a volunteer from the audience, while the orchestra played the "Bacchanal" from the Saint-Saëns opera *Samson et Dalila*. (Samson, of course, was the hero in the Bible whose great strength came from his long hair. An enemy woman named Delilah got him to fall in love with her, and cut off his hair while he slept.)

In Pittsburgh we did some other things that seemed to work very well. A section violinist played the Sarasate *Carmen Fantasy*, and proved to be a fearless virtuoso. He was happy to introduce the piece by showing the audience what the most difficult moments were. We even projected the violin part, for those who could read music. Now the audience could be on the edge of its collective seat, wondering if the violinist would soar through the difficulties. Which he did! But if he hadn't, he would have set the audience up to see that he'd failed. Very brave of him, and very involving for the audience.

An idea of mine was to play the shortest of the Webern *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. Each of them is very short. The shortest of them lasts far less than a minute. What I suggested to the audience was that the pieces were difficult not because they were atonal, but because they end before most people have attuned themselves to listen.

To address that question, I had the orchestra play the piece twice. And, between the two performances, I and the orchestra performed John Cage's *4'33"*, the famous silent piece, in which musicians make no sound at all for four minutes and 33 seconds. The idea is to listen to the sounds that occur in the performing space naturally. I and the orchestra sat in silence, as Cage directs. Though I had another job. Cage's score says that the piece is in three movements, with the length of each left up to the performers. So I had to indicate with some quiet movement where the breaks between the movements came.

*4'33"* let us introduce the audience to Cage and his world. And also, as I suggested, maybe would put the Webern piece in a new light. Would it sound different — maybe more approachable? — if it was heard after a long silence? Maybe if we rested our minds before hearing the piece, we'd listen more vividly.

I found that many people in the audience really liked the Cage, though some didn't. One woman saw me at the airport when I was flying home, and stopped me to say how much she'd liked the Cage. It reminded her, she said, of pages of music paper, filled with nothing but rests.

Finally, at one concert we played the first movement of Mozart's Paris Symphony. Before we played it, I read Mozart's letter to his father about the piece, in which he talks about how he deliberately wrote a particular passage to make the audience applaud, during the music (which was the practice in the 18th century).

I suggested to the Pittsburgh audience that they applaud whenever they heard something they liked. With quite marvelous results! They did applaud, quite a lot, in various places. And the applause varied in character from one place to the next, showing that people were reacting differently to different things in the music. And, an important point for anyone who thinks that applauding during the music means you're not listening — the applause would stop the moment some new idea in the music emerged. People wanted to hear what was coming next. All this showed

me that they were listening very carefully, maybe more carefully than they'd listen if they hadn't been able to applaud whenever they liked. They'd become an empowered audience.

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Bang on a Can, the leading New York new music group, has given free marathon performances at the Winter Garden, a lofty space — tall enough to have real palm trees — along the Hudson River in downtown Manhattan. Thousands of people come to listen, or else come across the marathon while they're shopping or eating in nearby restaurants. Some of the music might seem very difficult, but the audience whoops and shouts.

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The London Symphony presented a festival of music by Steve Reich and composers he influenced. The festival ran all weekend, with several concerts each day, and was a huge success. 5000 people attended.

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The Baltimore Symphony played a four-concert circus festival (made up of one pops concert and three subscription programs), for which their concert hall was transformed into a three-ring circus. The music was chosen to fit the circus theme, as [this concert review](#) shows.

They also set up a partnership with the Parsons design school, working with students there to evolve a new, more contemporary style of concert dress. As far as I know, this experiment was only that — an experiment, that never went further. But still, they did it.

The Symphony has also presented what it calls "Rusty Musicians" events. Amateurs who play orchestral instruments are invited to join the orchestra in a concert. One participant said this was like "jumping inside of a painting or work of art you have admired for years." These concerts were so successful that the Symphony started a summer program in which amateurs work with the Symphony's professionals.

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The Atlanta Symphony had a program called Symphony 360°, on which only a single work is played at a concert, with video of the musicians, and also someone going through the audience with a microphone, inviting people to ask questions. They don't seem to be doing it any more, but they've tried many new things at concerts. In the press release announcing one season, they said: "To create a concert experience, various visual elements have been brought into the concert hall. In past seasons this has included film and projected images synchronized with the music, lighting effects, art installations, and semi-staged performances of operas creating a marriage of the auditory and the visual, allowing concertgoers to connect with the music on multiple levels."

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The Brentano Quartet played a concert featuring one of the Mozart quartets, and everything for string quartet that Webern ever wrote. They put the Webern pieces between the movements of the Mozart, and had a poet read poems he'd written, inspired by the Webern works. (I went to this concert. Hearing the movements of the Mozart quartet with something else between them turned

out to work very well. It made me more eager to hear each of the Mozart movements, when it finally was played.)

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A Washington, DC-based early music group, [Hesperus](#), does performances in which it shows a classic silent film like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, accompanying it with music from the era in which the film takes place. Which meant, for instance, [French medieval music](#) for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

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Cameron Carpenter, a virtuoso organist (who took this course), now has a big international career, and a recording contract with Sony Classical. He's had a special digital organ designed for him, so he can perform anywhere. When he played with the National Symphony in Washington, his encore piece was an improvisation that began with a Bach piece, and then ventured into vastly different territory, running through music in many different genres.

I saw him play in New York, before his great international fame. He played a Halloween concert in one of the city's most famous churches, wearing white tie and tails, but with a spectacular twist — the clothes were entirely white. He looked spectacular.

The main event on the concert was Cameron improvising an accompaniment to a classic silent horror film, *Nosferatu*. He planned his improvisation so it started with the *Tristan* Prelude, and ended with the *Liebestod*, played absolutely straight, and somehow seeming to sync perfectly with the film, as well as matching its style and emotion.

When he played an organ concerto with the National Symphony in Washington, his encore was an improvisation.

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Pianist Dan Tepfer released an album called [Goldberg Variations/Variations](#), in which he played the Bach piece, but instead of repeating each variation, as the score directs, he improvised on each of them.

Simone Dinnerstein, a pianist who broke through to a major career with her recording of the Goldbergs, performed them with A Far Cry, the musician-run chamber orchestra from Boston. After she played each variation, the orchestra played an arrangement of the repeat, sometimes improvising.

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The Knights, a musician-run chamber orchestra from Brooklyn that now has a big concert career, has a member who's also a singer-songwriter. I've seen her bring one of their concerts to a festive close by singing in pop style, with the orchestra joining in to accompany her.

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Years ago the Palm Beach Opera held an aria competition in collaboration with, of all things, one of the crazy morning drive-time radio shows. Listeners could call in and sing an opera aria.

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Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise* ("Winter Journey") is about a man, brokenhearted in love, who walks endlessly through a desolate winter landscape. Tenor David Pisaro [performed the piece in 13 places in the UK](#), walking from one venue to another in the dead of winter. He walked from 10 to 20 miles each time. The idea, of course, was to work the experience of walking in winter into the performance of songs that tell a story about walking in winter.

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The Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto ended one recital I heard him give by improvising on Finnish folksongs. He sang, and strummed his violin like a ukulele.

He began another performance with more Finnish folk song improvisations, this time using electronic effects that he controlled with his feet. In the second half of the program, he played the Sibelius concerto, but not in the usual way. He had a pianist instead of an orchestra (no orchestra could have fit in the small theater where the concert took place). And he worked with two dancers, who did a dance based on the concerto.

He moved around the stage with the dancers as he played, all but dancing with them. Toward the end, when the music gets very rhythmic, he started tapping his foot, and moved over to the piano. He and the pianist smiled at each other, and made the end of the concerto sound like folk music, or like something with a strong beat that they'd made up on the spot.

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Many people have combined classical music with food. Here are two examples. In New York, a group called Turtulia presents chamber music in fine restaurants. The performances are jointly produced by the group and the restaurants. Only people who've bought special tickets can come to the performances, so there aren't random diners around, who didn't come to hear music.

Food is served between musical selections, so no one is eating while music is played. Because the restaurants are small, the audience is very close to the musicians. When food is served, the musicians sit at tables just as the audience does, so the people in the audience have a chance to talk to them.

Another group mixing music and food has been the Gourmet Symphony in Washington, DC. They've worked with chefs who open their restaurants for special evenings where new small dishes are served, and music is played to go with the food.

At the Gourmet Symphony's first performance, a chamber orchestra played Beethoven's First Symphony with the musicians arranged in a circle around the tables where people were eating. At one point, someone got up from the audience to ask one of the musicians (in a whisper, of course) why he hadn't been playing.

The musician showed the rests in his part, and explained what they meant. And for the rest of the performance, the person from the audience stood next to the musician, watching him play, and asking questions (of course always in whispers).

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Cellist Mike Block — who among other things plays world music with Yo Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble — has a video series he calls Bach in the Bathroom. In these videos, he plays movements from the Bach cello suites in the men's rooms of major concert halls.

This may sound silly, but the results are quite wonderful. These men's rooms are strongly resonant, and each one has a different kind of resonance. So each performance sounds different.

These videos also take classical music away from the formality of the concert hall, and make it more fun. Mike has invented something called the Block Strap, which allows him to strap his cello to his chest, so he can move (or dance!) while playing. He uses it in these videos, which makes them even more fun. (You can Google the Block Strap and the Bach in the Bathroom project to find out more.)

***[New ways to involve an audience, or to get more people to come]***

When Michael Christie began his first season as music director of the Phoenix Symphony, he and all the musicians stood outside the hall before the first concert, to welcome the audience.

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A new music director at the Springfield Symphony in Missouri allowed the audience to request pieces they wanted to hear, and developed many other ways of building the orchestra's relationship with the people who come to its concerts.

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In family concerts, the Philadelphia Orchestra has invited kids in the orchestra to try conducting. This became a competition, and the winner led an entire piece. They've also done this for an adult audience at a popup concert, opening their concert hall at 5 PM on a Tuesday, with free admission, and people welcome to sit wherever they like. The audience has also been welcome to hold up phones during some concerts, to beam the music to their friends, just as people do in pop shows.

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When the St. Louis Symphony played a Steve Reich piece, their music director, David Robertson, asked the musicians to go out into the audience after the performance, to talk to people about the music.

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Maxim Vengerov, playing the Ysaye sonatas in a solo recital at Carnegie Hall, turned to the audience and asked, "Any questions?" A dialogue began, and soon people were shouting questions from the balcony. (Vengerov often talks and jokes with his audience.)

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[Peter Gregson](#), a British cellist, has played solo concerts with a big video screen behind him. People in the audience — or from all over the world, if the concert is streamed — text or tweet comments, which show up on the video screen. I've seen one of these performances, and loved the way a discussion of the concert took shape alongside the concert itself. When people in the audience started saying that the pieces Peter chose (most of them new) sounded too much the same, he responded by acknowledging the problem, and playing something different. (He now has a major recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon, and as you can see on his website, has recomposed the Bach suites, the way Max Richter recomposed Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, turning them into ambient minimal textures.)

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Years ago the New York City Opera did a performance of *Madam Butterfly* with all seats priced at \$25. I was there. They filled the house with people visibly different from their normal audience. (In which, according to one study I saw, the largest occupational category was "retired." The *Butterfly* audience was vastly younger.)

To draw the audience in, the company preceded each act with excellent videos, in which various people involved in the production were interviewed, ranging from the conductor and the singers to people doing backstage jobs like costumes and makeup. The whole thing seemed to be a great success. Though of course it required special funding (the company's budget was based on charging a lot more for its seats), and couldn't be readily repeated.

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The Cleveland Orchestra raised \$20 million to create a [Center for Future Audiences](#), and says it wants to have the youngest audience of any American orchestra. But despite the large funding, the Center's programs seem fairly modest, involving free tickets to special concerts for people under 18, and discounted tickets for students of all ages to the orchestra's regular concerts at Severance Hall. As far as I know, there haven't been any changes in what the orchestra performs, or how concerts are presented.

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In Britain, there was a composition competition called the Masterprize. Professional judges (composers and musicians) picked three finalists for the prize, and their works were played on a concert. The people in the audience could then vote on which piece they wanted to win. The Pittsburgh Symphony picked up on this idea, and featured the three finalists on a concert program. Since they were short pieces, they could all be played before intermission. During intermission, people in the audience could vote on which piece should win, and the winning piece was played again on the second half of the program. I was working with the orchestra when this happened; I was leading conversations with audience members after concerts were over. This concert made the audience more excited than any other. The people in my discussions had listened to the music carefully, debated the pieces with real enthusiasm, and remembered many musical details from all of them — something I never saw happen at any other performance I worked with.

The Pittsburgh Symphony also — before a concert where a new piece would be played — put musicians in various rooms and lobbies in the concert hall an hour before the performance, so that audience members could talk to them, and hear them play excerpts from the new piece. The



audience liked this so much that the symphony management wished they'd planned to have the musicians return to the various places in the hall after the concert, to talk to the audience again.

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In a DC dance club, a large orchestra played the *Rite of Spring*, while dancers danced. The audience was also invited to dance..

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A chorus in Berlin did a project called the "Human Requiem." They sang the Brahms Requiem with piano accompaniment in a large open space. While they sang, they moved around the space, each singer moving independently. The audience was invited to move freely through the space while listening.

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There have been classical music flash mobs — performances that take place unannounced, with the musicians simply appearing in an open space outdoors to play. The [most famous](#) might be the flash mob in the Spanish city of Som Sabadell, where an orchestra and chorus suddenly appeared in a public place to play an excerpt from Beethoven's Ninth. You can see the reaction from people who happened to be there, and heard the performance. They loved it.

And here are some other things that have been tried (mostly by orchestras), or proposed:

- Having musicians dress less formally
- Having a band play in the lobby before concerts
- Selling food and drinks in the lobby before concerts
- Making the program book very lively, like a well-edited magazine
- Making concerts shorter
- Starting concerts earlier or later than the usual 8:00 PM starting time — 6 PM, maybe, or 9 PM
- Doing more new music (to attract a younger audience)
- Streaming performances live, either on a website, or in movie theaters, as the Metropolitan Opera does. (Though these movie theater showings were very expensive for the Met at first, requiring quite a large initial investment. And despite their great success with the existing opera audience, they haven't attracted many new people. Almost everyone who goes has already seen opera live on stage, and many are elderly.)
- Inviting the audience to text comments on the music. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra in Houston invited their audience to text comments right after the premiere of a piece they'd commissioned. And I've heard of an opera company (don't know which one, because I found out on Twitter) that's invited the audience to text which characters in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*

they think should get married at the end. (For those who don't know the opera, the plot is a little tangled, and no one's really sure how two sets of lovers pair off in the finale.)

- Inviting the audience to react to premieres by taking sides in the lobby at intermission — everyone who liked the piece would gather on the left, and everyone who hated it would gather on the right. (Proposed at one of the largest US orchestras, but never actually done.)
- Inviting the audience (and anybody else) to debate performances and discuss anything about the orchestra, on a message board on the orchestra's website.
- Setting up a booth in the lobby where people who don't usually go to concerts can ask questions
- Inviting the audience (and anybody else) to debate performances and discuss anything about the orchestra, on a message board on the orchestra's website

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*[Combining classical music and pop]*

The Wordless Music series in New York once put classical pieces on concert programs with leading New York indie rock bands. I went to some of these events. Most of the audience came for the bands, but cheered for the classical music. The first year these concerts were done, there were four of them, in a 400-seat space, and every concert sold out. The second year, there were 10 concerts in an 800-seat space, and all of them sold out. During the second year, the series also put on two orchestra concerts, featuring classical pieces by living composers, and each one sold out a 1000-seat space. The attraction for this was a piece by Jonny Greenwood, the Radiohead guitarist. But it wasn't a rock piece. It was thoroughly classical — contemporary classical — using atonal textures something in the manner of Penderecki. Greenwood also has legit composing credentials, having been composer in residence for the BBC, and having scored films, including one major hit, *There Will Be Blood*.

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The Nonclassical record label in London — that's really its name — records new classical pieces, and also has held monthly club nights, where new classical pieces are played, and DJs play club-style remixes of them. The CD releases also include remixes of the music.

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The Ebène Quartet, from France, has played pop music and jazz as well as classical pieces. Here's a [New York Times review](#) of one of their concerts.

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One recent Christmas, a coalition of British pop musicians recorded a version of John Cage's famous silent piece, *4'33"*. Or, more precisely, many pop musicians recorded it individually, and a mashup of all their recordings was made, and released as a single. Then the musicians launched a campaign to make the recording No. 1 on the British pop charts. The reason for this: many musicians were angry at Simon Callow (the pop producer and *American Idol* judge), because, they felt, he'd gotten too

many of his pop acts to No. 1. Twice before, the coalition of anti-Callow musicians had succeeded in campaigns like this, driving unlikely pop songs to No. 1. They didn't succeed with Cage, but the record did do fairly well — or astonishingly well, given what it was -- going up to something like No. 20. One thing this shows is that many pop musicians feel closer to John Cage than most classical musicians do.

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The Brooklyn Philharmonic went out of business some years ago, but did adventurous things in its final seasons, including playing two concerts with the Brooklyn indie rock band Grizzly Bear. At one concert, Grizzly Bear played some of its songs, and the Philharmonic played standard orchestra music. And the second concert, the orchestra and band played the band's songs together, using orchestra charts written by one of the most famous young American composers, Nico Muhly. Both concerts were packed. The audience (no surprise) was young and lively.

Later on, they worked closely people in the Russian community in Brighton Beach, and in the black community in Bed-Stuy. The idea wasn't only to bring classical masterworks to these communities. It was to develop programming that the community would help invent. They ended up playing a concert of Soviet-era cartoon scores in Brighton Beach. This was music the people there — most of them had left Russia during the Soviet era — were nostalgic for. The scores included one by Shostakovich. The cartoons were shown, of course, and the orchestra commissioned a new cartoon, with a score by a young Russian-American composer, Lev Zhurbin.

In Bed-Stuy, the Philharmonic worked with Mos Def, a hiphop star who grew up in that community. He did some of his hits, with terrific orchestral arrangements by Derek Bermel, a composer who's both an expert at writing for orchestra and a serious hiphop fan. Mos Def also performed *Coming Together*, a piece by Frederic Rzewski, in which a narrator reads an important text from recent black history.

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In Pittsburgh, the [Eclectic Laboratory Chamber Orchestra](#) mixes classical music and pop on its programs. One concert explored the early days of minimalism, and included arrangements of new wave pop songs from the era, which the group felt shared a similar aesthetic.

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Christopher O'Riley, a noted classical pianist (and host of *From the Top*, a radio program that features young classical musicians) is a Radiohead fan, and plays complex transcriptions of their very complicated songs, drawing both Radiohead fans and his usual classical audience. (At one concert I went to, he alternated Radiohead transcriptions with Shostakovich preludes and fugues. Which led to special moments when one kind of music segued into the other, and for a brief, magical moment you didn't know which side of the fence you were on.)

Chris also joined with cellist Matt Haimovitz to perform and record a concert program called "Shuffle.Play.Listen" in which the music ranged from standard cello/piano pieces to arrangements of film scores and pop songs. All the arrangements were so skillfully written for cello and piano that they sounded like new pieces in the repertoire. There was no printed program at the concerts. The

audience only found out what the pieces were after they'd been played, when Chris or Matt announced them from the stage.

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Taylor Swift, the top-selling pop star, gave \$50,000 to the Seattle Symphony because she liked their recording of a piece by John Luther Adams, *Become Ocean*.

Kanye West heard a performance by the new music vocal group Roomful of Teeth. He so much liked a piece they sang by the composer Caroline Shaw that he asked her to make a record with him. It's called "Say You Will," and you can hear it [here](#). (This version, available on Soundcloud, is different from the version you'll hear on major streaming services. That version doesn't feature Caroline Shaw.)

What these two things show is that the separation between classical music and pop can be bridged from both sides. Pop music people — including a mass-market pop star like Taylor Swift — can hear classical music (including new classical music) and be so excited by what they hear that they want to take part.