

CLASSICAL MUSIC IN AN AGE OF POP

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[email me](#)

[my website \(needs updating\)](#)

[my blog on the future of classical music \(not active now\)](#)

[website for this course, with the week to week schedule, and links to all assignments](#)

Why this course?

In this course we look at the future of classical music. It's a course I've been teaching for a long time, starting at Juilliard more than 20 years ago, and now teaching it here.

When I think of the future of classical music I think of two things. First, where classical music stands in the world today, and how it fits in our culture. And here there are problems. It's common to say that classical music is having a crisis, and I think that's true. The audience has gotten older, ticket sales have fallen, and classical music institutions are having financial problems, such serious problems, in fact, that many orchestras have cut their musicians' pay.

And beyond that, there's a sense — which I think is correct — that classical music is losing its relevance in our society, because as time goes on, fewer and fewer people care about it.

So what can we do about this? That brings me to my second thought about the future of classical music — that classical music is changing, and the changes are healthy. There's a new emphasis on bringing classical music out of the concert hall and the opera house, and into the community. There's a search for a new, younger audience.

And classical music is more accessible than it used to be, more like what we see in the world outside it. Performances — some of them, anyway — are more informal. Classical musicians talk to their audience. Some perform the great masterworks in new and more personal ways, and combine classical music with other musical styles.

There's an upsurge of diversity, with an emphasis throughout the field on female and Black composers and conductors (including Black and women composers from the past, who've been forgotten). This makes us look more like the world around us, where Black people and women have important roles. Just look at pop music, where Taylor Swift and Beyoncé — both women, one of them Black — are two of the biggest stars and most creative artists.

And there's an emphasis on entrepreneurship in classical music, on musicians making their careers in their own ways. I don't have to explain this in the course, since you have it in the Breakthrough Curriculum. But I'll note that it creates opportunities.

If you want to do something new with your music — even something not taught or done at conservatories — you can do it. You'll find that other musicians may be doing similar things, and that there's support for all of you. Or you may find that you're the first to do something new, and that the classical music world — and also a new audience — is responding to it, paying attention to you, getting excited about what you do.

So, yes, classical music has problems. But problems can create opportunities, and in a changing world, you might have a chance to live your dreams.

One note, an important one. What I've just said — and much of what we do in the course — is about conditions in the U.S., which, since I'm American, is of course what I know best. Though from what I've seen when I've traveled or worked with people from other countries — largely Europe, Britain, and Australia — and from what I've heard from students from other countries who've taken this course, I think things are pretty similar elsewhere in the world.

Course outline

Here are the main topics we'll discuss in this course:

The crisis in classical music: We'll look at it in some detail. What caused the crisis? How bad is it? Is there any chance that the audience will disappear? Will classical music institutions go out of business? How wide is the gap between classical music and the rest of our culture?

What classical music is, and why it's valuable: If we want to save classical music, we need to know why it should be saved. It's not enough just to say that we love it. Why do we love it? What can it contribute to our world? Why should people who don't now listen to classical music give it a chance?

Classical music in the past: If you look at how classical music was many decades ago, you'll think you're in another universe. The audience was young. Classical music was an active part of mainstream culture. It was widely broadcast on the radio, and even shown on commercial TV. New operas — not many, but still a few — were produced commercially on Broadway, alongside plays and musicals. Classical music institutions could count on selling tickets without any marketing. Their audience simply came to performances, year after year.

And if you go back to the 18th and 19th centuries, you'll find that classical music wasn't as formal as it later became. Classical musicians improvised. To judge from written reports, and from early recordings, they played with winning individuality.

And the audience was lively. In Mozart's time, people applauded — during the music! — whenever they heard something they liked.

What can we learn from all of this? Could classical music again be as free as it was in the past? Would that help us find a new audience? Would we, as musicians, enjoy music more, if we felt freer, more spontaneous when we performed? And if we had a livelier connection with our audience?

Pop music: As we all know, pop music is everywhere, in everyone's lives, helping to define not just what people think music is, but what they think the world is, and how they fit in that world.

In my experience — I've worked in the pop music world — pop music can be vastly creative. And it's a huge universe, greatly varied, with many artists who never make the pop charts doing important and influential work.

So what's its relationship to classical music? Is pop music, in all its great variety, only entertainment? Or is it another kind of musical art?

Fixing the crisis:

Changes: As I've said, the classical music world is exploding with change. We'll look at some of the changes, at some of the things that people have done to make classical music new again, to reach out to the community, and to find a new audience.

Diversity: In the midst of change, both in classical music and in the wider world, diversity presents a huge challenge. Or at least it does in the U.S. and in Britain, two multicultural societies in which the people involved in classical music (and especially those who run classical music institutions) have been largely White. In the past generation, and even earlier, there have been many Asians coming into the field, which is a definite change. But one thing remains the same. The most important composers we perform are White, European, and male. Does this have to change?

The answer coming from within the classical music field, at least in the U.S., seems like "yes." Classical music groups of all sizes, from the biggest orchestras to the smallest ensembles, are playing more music by women and by Black composers. And they're making plans to bring more people of color into classical music, both onstage and in the audience. We'll look at some of those plans, and try to judge how well they're working.

Entrepreneurship: In the midst of crisis and change, what can you do for yourselves, as students and in your professional careers? Can you help find a new audience for yourself, and for classical music?

We'll talk about entrepreneurial ways of doing that. And we'll end with a challenge. Can you imagine finding an audience that's completely your own? An audience completely yours, people who'd come to your performances or stream them, who'd even pay to do that, and who'd buy or stream any recordings you make. Not because they like the chamber music series or orchestra or opera you're part of, but because they like *you*.

I haven't seen this talked about in the classical music field. We talk, admirably, about being a citizen artist, and about bringing our music to a wider community. But could any of us become — even in a small way — a commercial success?

In my view, if classical music is healthy, this could happen. So we'll end the course by imagining how it could happen to us. Which doesn't mean you're required to do it! What you do in your career is completely up to you. But I think this is a useful exercise. Just to imagine how you could find our own audience, a fanbase completely your own.

Important! You can see that I have ideas, sometimes strong ones, about the things we'll talk about in this course. And I'm sure you have ideas of your own.

If your ideas are different from mine, feel free to disagree with me. Nobody knows all the answers. And all of us, in our different ways, are working toward a future in which we hope classical music can thrive.

Assignments (full details will be posted later online, on the [course web page](#), and on Canvas):

This is a course in questions, not answers, so the most important part of our work will be the discussions we'll have in class.

But of course you'll have things to read, music to listen to, and videos to watch, all related to the topics we'll discuss.

After many of our classes, you'll have a short written assignment, in which I'll ask you to write something about things we discussed in class. I've found that this brings me closer to all of you, giving me a chance to find out what all of you think, and to respond to each of you individually. You'll post these assignments on Canvas.

You'll also have two informal short papers to write. I'll decide on the topics as the course proceeds, when I know you better, and have an idea about what I think you should work on, along with — and this is important! — what interests you.

How you're graded:

As I've said, the most important part of this course is what happens in class. I often present things there that aren't in your reading assignments. And beyond that, in our class discussions all of us (including me) can work out our thoughts on the issues we'll confront.

To me, this is the most crucial thing we do. So a large part of your grade will be based on class participation, though the papers and short assignments also count. If you feel shy in class, please don't be concerned. You'll find that I care about what you think, and that the other students do, too. After nearly 30 years of teaching, I hope I've learned how to create classes where everyone feels comfortable. I'll give you all the time you need to gather your thoughts, and to find ways to put them in words.

And in your writing assignments, what you say — your thoughts — matters more to me than your writing ability.

I'll break down the grades this way:

- Class discussion 50%
- Short Written assignments 25%
- Papers 25%

About what I'll look for when I grade you. There's knowledge I'll expect you to have, at the end of this course. It's what's in your assignments, and in things I'll tell you in class.

But what's more important is how you think about what we discuss. I don't want you to have my ideas. I want you to have your own. To help you develop your ideas — and to help me, too — I'll ask questions in class, often about things that aren't known yet, and we'll all work together to figure out how to find answers.

Among those questions: What's classical music's future? How can it find a new audience, and regain at least some of the popularity it used to have? How can you have the career that most satisfies you?

As long as you think seriously about everything we talk about, you can be sure you'll get a good grade.

One last word:

I want this course to be fun. I'll try to surprise you with some of assignments, and with music I might play in class.

And if my years of teaching this course elsewhere are any guide, our class discussions might surprise all of us. Nothing is off limits, and no opinions are sacred, including my own.