

Say You Want a Revolution

by Greg Sandow

(from an essay published in the May-June 2010 issue of Symphony magazine)

Here's a paradox. There's an important book that anyone interested in the evolution of classical music should read — and it doesn't mention classical music at all. This is *Pictures at a Revolution*, a study by Mark Harris about a 1960s upheaval in Hollywood, published in 2008 to great acclaim. And yes, the title is of course a classical music reference, a play on the Mussorgsky piece all of us know. But any overt mention to classical music stops right there. So what could the classical music connection be? What can Mark Harris teach us about changes-positive changes, changes that might bring us vibrant growth-that we could make in classical music right now?

Harris starts in 1963, with a magazine art director in New York who slips away from his desk and heads off to a movie theater to see (for what might have been the twelfth time) François Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim*. The film is now a classic, but in those days played only to a cult audience.

Now move ahead a bit. The cult audience grows. The art director mad about Truffaut — collaborating with a friend equally obsessed with European films — writes the screenplay for *Bonnie and Clyde*, another movie we might take for granted today, but which when it was released in 1967 was an astonishment, a shock, a surprise — a breakthrough film that brought the emotional ambiguity and grown-up sexuality of European movies to Hollywood. It gets a dozen Oscar nominations, and a revolution breaks out. Other films influenced by Europe (*The Graduate*, for instance) are released. A new breed of moviegoer — young, informal, very '60s — lines up to see these new films. *The New York Times* fires its film critic, because he doesn't understand the new style. *Time* magazine pans *Bonnie and Clyde*, and then retracts its review, declaring that it had not just been wrong, but drastically wrong.

So what's the classical music connection? It's that classical music never had a '60s revolution — the kind that happened not only in the movies but also in pop music, painting, politics, race relations, and endless other areas of life. Our world changed forever, becoming freer, more informal, more creative, more spontaneous. But in classical music we went on playing Bach and Beethoven. And wearing formal dress. You'd think we turned our backs on the rest of the world on purpose.

Of course we changed in some ways. The early music movement grew, bringing with it changes that might not mean much to the world outside, but mean a lot to specialists. Some mainstream orchestras now play Bach without vibrato. Mahler symphonies joined (or rejoined) the repertoire, maybe echoing the '60s, since Mahler, with his wild, uneasy yearning for transcendence, is almost psychedelic.

But even these incremental changes kept classical music largely focused on the past, on composers from the past, traditions from the past, and behavior and emotions from the past. This isn't to say we shouldn't play Brahms and Beethoven, that their music (along with all the

great past masterworks) shouldn't be preserved. But look what happened to museums. They preserve the past, but they had a revolution of their own, and joined our changing culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has a costume collection, established, as it happens, before the 1960s. Now it focuses on fashion, and in recent years had a show (to give just one example of the things it does) about the influence of superhero costumes on top fashion designers. This was featured on the Met's website as one of the top three attractions at the museum — right to Raphael and an exhibit of works by the very sexual contemporary artist Jeff Koons. Can we imagine any major orchestra doing (on three successive weekends, let's say) the musical equivalent of shows like these?

Now let's imagine that things had turned out differently. Suppose the movies hadn't had their revolution. Suppose that when the Oscars came around, the winners were old-style musicals like *The Sound of Music* instead of taut, truthful films like *The Hurt Locker*. (To cite the Oscar winner the year I wrote this.) Maybe then the movie audience would in large part be older people — just like the classical music audience.

And what if classical music really had a '60s revolution? Would Brahms and Beethoven now share the concert stage — on an equal basis — with lively, sometimes searing, and sometimes wildly popular contemporary works?

And would our audience now be young?