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# Classical Music in America

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## **Classical Music in America**

As I collected information to use in this paper I realized there was so much written about the decline of classical music I could not begin to use or acknowledge all of the sources found. The decline of classical music has become big business with volumes of books, magazines, journals and articles written with someone's view of the situation. While there are common threads in the reading of this material, the writers experience on the subject seemed to be from their point of view. Conclusions and theories about the decline were varied depending upon the writer and if they were a classical music lover or reporter writing about a topic of interest. Most would agree, the change has occurred since the 1950's.

The classical music field is in a period of dissolution. Classical music professionals face a shifting and fragmented recording industry, an eroded touring circuit, and a glut of performers. Audiences show diversity in tastes but diminishing musical education abounds across the country. A flood of new technologies for listening and learning is changing the media landscape and helping to sweep away the familiar genre we have come to know. The field constantly plays catch-up with the larger culture, which now moves at a breakneck pace. Not surprisingly, the field often assumes a defensive, even reactionary position within the larger culture. Society assumes the value of

classical music is self-evident. Yet, despite some doomsaying, chamber music, vocal recitals, orchestras and classical music radio continue to draw audiences.

Other art forms are good at building a buzz to create audiences. Movies are hyped in the mass media, and then explode on thousands of screens where they're subjected to intense scrutiny by hundreds of critics. Even if there wasn't much hype, a movie can still attract critics who will promote it. If critics hated it, a buzz can still create interest because of fan loyalty to actors.

In classical music, the most successful new music fails to get attention. To prove this, give yourself a test by answering the following. Can you name one work written in the past decade that's found a wide audience and joined the standard repertoire? You don't see one orchestra premiering a work, then other orchestras clamoring to do it next no matter how good the music is.

I believe the main reason classical music is no longer in the public eye is that somehow it lost the critical appeal to the community that listens, talks and writes about music. How can we build artistic consensus that keeps renewing itself if we lack the voices that have kept the buzz going over the last century? Without that, it will be difficult to argue that classical music deserves a place in our futures society.

### **Were Things Better in the Old Days?**

The numbers tell a very different story from those who predict gloom and doom.

There is immensely more classical music now, both in concerts and on recordings than there was in what nostalgias think of as the golden era of classics in America (D. McLennan, 2003). In the record business, for example, it can be depressing to compare the purely classical output of the major labels now with what the industry made from 1950 to 1975. Focusing on the majors is not the point today because the real action has moved to dozens of smaller companies, ranging from musician-run labels like Cantaloupe, Bridge, Oxingale to ambitious mass marketers like the midprice, repertory spanning Naxos. Similarly, someone shopping anywhere but in huge chains like Tower or Virgin might conclude that classical discs are no longer sold. In reality the business model has changed. Internet catalog shops such as [arkivmusic.com](http://arkivmusic.com) offer virtually any CD in print, something no physical store can do today. The Internet has become a primary resource for classical music and related genres.

A good example is Apple's iTunes, which sold a billion tracks in its first three years, classical music reportedly accounts for 12 percent of sales, four times its share of the CD market. Both Sony-BMG and Universal say that as their download sales have increased, CD sales have remained steady, suggesting that downloaders are a new market, not simply the same consumers switching formats.

In their first six weeks on iTunes, the New York Philharmonic's download-only Mozart concert sold 2,000 complete copies and about 1,000 individual tracks

and the Los Angeles Philharmonic's two Minimalist concerts, combined, sold 900 copies and about 400 individual tracks. Those numbers, though small by pop standards, exceed what might be expected from sales of orchestral music on standard CD's. Other orchestras are catching on: the Milwaukee Symphony and Philharmonia Baroque in San Francisco offer downloads on their own Web sites. In addition, the major labels are planning to sell downloads of archival recordings that will not be reissued on CD.

### **Concert Attendance**

According to Allan Kozinn (A. Kozinn, 2006), season subscriptions have plummeted in favor of last-minute ticket sales in most concert halls. That doesn't mean the business is tanking, however, just that audiences have shifted their habits. As two-income families have grown busier, potential ticket buyers are less inclined to commit to performances months in advance (or as ticket prices climb, to accept predetermined concert packages). But as much as orchestras and concert presenters would prefer to sell their tickets before the season starts, the seats are hardly empty during the regular concert season.

### **Concert Attendance and Music Education**

A vital area of musical education is the regular attendance of concerts. It has been demonstrated that such experience is linked with musical achievement (NCES, 1998). More importantly however, concert attendance can be a

motivating factor in the study of music. When student ensembles are comprised mostly of beginners, a large cause of program attrition is the simple fact that the ensembles do not sound very good (Walker, 1989). Attending a concert by a professional group can serve to reinforce to the student how good an ensemble can sound, and motivate the student to work towards that goal. In many areas, attending concerts is difficult for many individuals, due to cost and lack of transportation. However, some professional ensembles have made tremendous efforts to ensure that quality music performances are available to everyone. One such group is the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's Community Partnership Program.

This program is designed to bring quality musical performances to everyone, particularly those demographic groups under-represented in the typical orchestral audience. The orchestra has offered certain concerts at a reduced rate. Other concerts (over 300 a year) have been moved to venues in the downtown and metropolitan areas of the cities; most successful among these is the weekly "Tunes at Noon" midday concert series (Orch. and Ensembles for Youth, 2006). The St. Louis Symphony is also active in education programs similar to the ones outlined below offered by institutions of higher learning. These programs involve master classes and individual lessons provided by members of the orchestra. The chance for public school students to receive private instruction from professional musicians of such caliber is a monumental learning opportunity, for the same reasons noted for those children learning from university students.

The St. Louis Symphony is not alone in offering such outreach programs designed to make concerts more accessible. In New York City, the Orchestra of St. Luke's offers free concerts in Central Park throughout the spring and summer every year. In addition, in a partnership with the Graduate School of Education of Columbia University, St. Luke's participates in educational activities similar to those offered by the St. Louis Symphony (<http://www.stlukes.cc/index.htm>).

One of the most unique programs of outreach combines the opportunity for education and concert attendance. Offered by the New York Philharmonic, this program is called the Young Composer's Forum. Students are invited to submit a sample of their work or a statement of interest to the Philharmonic's Department of Education. If accepted, the student is offered free tickets to concerts featuring work by contemporary composers. In addition, the student is invited to meet with the composer prior to the concert to discuss the works to be performed on that evening's concerts.

Another comprehensive musical education offered by a symphony orchestra is provided by the New York Philharmonic (<http://www.nyphilharmonic.org/>) School day concerts are offered at reduced rates to entire school classes. Supplementing this is the "Musical Encounters" program - for \$3.50 per student, students attend a forty-five minute workshop on the fundamentals of music, sit in with the orchestra, and then attend a concert. Entire schools can become involved with the Philharmonic through its School Partnership Program, which

includes professional development seminars for teachers, workshops on children's musical development for parents, the presence of a New York Philharmonic teaching artist in the school, visits by New York Philharmonic personnel to the school, multiple concert passes, instruments, and supplementary materials, both print and audio.

Another world renowned orchestra that contributes to educational outreach is The Cleveland Orchestra. Elementary students throughout northeastern Ohio take field trips to Severance Hall to hear concerts provided by the performing arts fund. These concerts have been in place for decades. In his book, *The History of The Cleveland Orchestra*, Don Rosenberg writes, “annual educational performances have been in place since 1923” (Rosenberg, D. ,2000) but he does not mention how many students attend or from which schools because several schools in the Cleveland district have dropped music from the curricula. This book focuses on the success of the Cleveland Orchestra and its activities and not so much on the social and economic decline of classical music being taught in the area. He addresses and shows how the orchestra is reaching out to the community but gives no statistical information as to its effect on music education in the schools. It is the orchestras hope that these children will eventually learn to play music once they are given an instrument in school.

Providing an instrument to the students is also critical. It is the next step to musical achievement as assessed by the National Center for Educational



Statistics (NCES, 1998, *Vol. 3, no. 2.*). This article presents evidence of inequality in music education. The argument that all things are equal in the educational process is not true not just in cases where students live in low income areas. Although children select a myriad of classes before graduating, the author shows that no two children from two different school districts will have the same musical experience or education. This difference comes from an array of varying circumstances involving the lives of each child. Many schools do not have good instruments to learn on or none at all. The NCES does not give solutions to educational problems; they only show us the problem in the system.

### **The Education of Classical Music**

One of the excellent music education programs currently in existence is the Instrumental Connection Program run by students of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut (Yale Un. Banner 2006). This program provides free private lessons to public school students of elementary and middle school ages. Each student receives one half hour lesson every week, in an individual or small group format. The students either use an instrument owned by their school, or, failing that, an instrument is purchased by the instrumental connection program and loaned to the student. This program provides a number of crucial elements to a sound musical education.

First, it has been demonstrated that musical achievement is directly linked to private musical instruction (NCES, 1998). This instruction would likely

not be available to these students otherwise. For most families involved in the program, such lessons would be prohibitively expensive. In addition, there is no way in which a single music teacher hired by the school could provide private lessons to so many students. In addition, for an as of yet undiscovered reason, teachers of music seem to make particularly identifiable role models (Hamann & Walker, 1993). Secondly, the quality of music education offered to these students by their teachers is nothing short of superb. With one in three Yale students having studied an instrument for ten or more years, these students bring a level of expertise to their instruction that benefits and inspires their students (<http://www.yale.edu/banner>).

### **What Do We Know About the Musical Arts?**

I found that the government does not keep statistics on most arts activities. Since 1970, hundreds of communities that had concert halls, art venues or theaters have demolished or transformed these venues into other businesses due to the folding of community bands/orchestras or professional music organizations. There are no statistics on how many facilities have been saved or constructed nor how many organizations have come and gone.

Today we have organizations like VH 1 whose sole purpose is to expose young people to music through performance. There are many music clubs such as the Ohio Federation of Music Clubs that give children and adults an opportunity to participate in a variety of musical events.

According to The Congressional Record, (The Congressional Record, 1993),

“...government believes that Federal support for the arts is not necessary because they are thriving” but in the past 5 years, two dozen national music theaters of acclaim have permanently closed because of financial dept including the New Brooklyn, St. Paul and Theater of Atlanta. More than six professional orchestras have folded in the past 5 years. Cleveland lost the Ohio Chamber Orchestra when the ballet folded in 2002 and a recent report on December 7, 2002 by Beatrice Black of NPR’s Market Place stated that orchestras across the US are in economic trouble and many will fold unless something changes soon. She reported The Chicago Symphony expects to have a deficit for the first time in 15 years, and the Florida Philharmonic, San Jose Symphony, Colorado Symphony and many others are in trouble as well. Musicians in some groups are working for as many as four weeks without pay so the ensemble can make ends meet. In a nutshell, if the government and/or society are not attentive to supporting the arts, what are they supporting?

Part of the answer to this question can be found in “Business Week” NY, Nov. 20, 2000. Sports stadiums and arenas generate money and social interest like nothing else in a short period of time. Since 1990, \$16 billion has been spent on stadiums and arenas in the US. That compares with just \$3 billion spent in the 1970’s and 80’s. Amusement Business Magazine, (ABM 2000), reported that \$6 billion is planned for new sports construction through 2006.

I could not find data on how much is being spent to improve or promote any of

the arts or I would have included it. I did find several public schools systems in California that have dropped music-teaching programs in art and music to hire technology coordinators and have turned the band room into a computer lab. One obvious item I noticed was when a community planner wanted a new stadium; the taxpayer usually paid for it. There were no figures on how many concert halls the taxpayers have built.

### **Change and Opportunity**

Change offers the opportunity to retreat, or to advance. The Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP, August, 2005) assembled a cross-section of classical music professionals to brainstorm on the theme of change and opportunity. Think Tank participants gathered in San Francisco May 19-21, 2005, to wonder aloud with each other and discuss the following questions:

- Who are the existing audiences for classical music?
- Who are untapped or potential audiences?
- What do they need to feel welcome?
- How can we deepen their appreciation?
- How can our beloved art form flourish in an increasingly crowded cultural arena?

The intent of the Think Tank was not merely to air frustrations, or to raise more questions, but to capture some real answers that might provoke changes in programming, audience development, and community engagement.

## **Global Issues Through the Lens of Local Circumstances**

During this discussion session, each participant briefly introduced a topic important to them. A number of troubling conclusions and changes were identified.

The first concern on everyone's mind was the decline of music education Among K-12 students and the larger public across the country. Most professionals in the music industry attribute the decline to financial cuts at the local and federal levels which show the lack of interest in music education.

Secondly, the slow-moving, conservative, even "fundamentalist" outlook within parts of the classical music industry establishment is still operating with the 19<sup>th</sup> century business plan. This is evident from the public's view of classical music. An overall cultural devaluation of the fine art and artists in society is not positive. The term "classical music" is dated and people who play it are out of touch. If Beethoven and Mozart are considered classical music, what is the music of John Williams, Steve Reich, John Adams and Philip Glass?

The other side of this devaluation is the emergence of the "star system," wherein big name performers (and the competition to become one) out shadow other selling points of the field. With the rise in demand for non-Western and contemporary music forces some presenters and artist managers outside their areas of comfort or expertise so they do not promote classical genres to the public. The bigger reason a presenter today shies away from classical performers is uncertainty about finding audiences who will buy tickets. In the end,

the source of funding from sponsors and related institutions, government funding etc. has dwindled or dried up.

### **A Place in Today's World**

Composers have no significant place in our musical life today, led as it is (and must be) by performers, media interests and commerce. These interests force music into a state of mediocrity. Not even the major patrons of today, the film, television and advertising industries, require from their musicians and composers the same standards once expected by discerning patrons who, in years past, gained as much from who they chose to patronize as from their wealth, their estates and the company that they kept. An historical example: When King Louis XIV brought Jean-Baptiste Lully into his service, the Esterházy family engaged Haydn and Count Waldstein gave shelter and financial support to Beethoven. These families reinforced what was quite evidently work of great value and influence. Patrons in the early twentieth century like Princess Polignac in France (Poulenc, Satie, Stravinsky) and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge in Washington DC (Schoenberg, Copland, Hindemith, Bartók) gave invaluable support to the emerging new and vital voices of composers whose work was valued more for its aesthetic than its marketable value.

One could argue the point we are now more culturally excited by the dexterity of young performers playing virtuoso old masterpieces they can hardly understand as well emotionally as they do technically? Or maybe we are enthralled by a conductor or internationally acclaimed orchestra playing Tchaikovsky or Brahms

or Mahler yet again. Or perhaps we see an academic interest in a newly discovered piece of Corelli, Haydn quartet, Wagner piano trio, etc.

Anything goes, it seems, to avoid supporting a real orchestra, musician or composer who may not be inclined to perform indifferent scores, sell their work and soul to the industry. Society has not the patience any more to listen to music unless it is familiar, entertaining and exciting. The record stores might stock fifty copies of a new film score, but will show no enthusiasm for ordering in a new symphony from a living American composer. The judgment being that composers are not rated (popular) unless they are attached to something much bigger than they are. In the end, they have little control over their music so why would they want to write music?

### **How to Locate Today's Audience**

The Think Tank (APAP, August, 2005) discussion embraced new ideas to approach the classical audience.

- The internet (and related technologies such as the iPod and podcasting) offers a versatile, global tool for distribution, marketing and outreach to new and existing audiences.
- A larger and enthusiastic audience could be cultivated if presenters adopt a more catholic concept of "audience," to include musically curious young people (whose broad enthusiasms are apparent from iPod culture) and amateur musicians.
- This may necessitate a redefinition of the art form: an abandonment of complacency, entitlement, propaganda and unhelpful jargon; plus an embrace of contemporary artists and those changing the field from the side lines.

- Because public school systems have phased out music curricula, some ensembles have found an unexpected welcome from school administrators. (Though such access is threatened by certain provisions of Federal 'No Child Left Behind' school reform.)
- Several advocated competitive approaches to ticket pricing, including pay-what-you-can performances.
- Other opportunities might include: teaching musicians about the needs and expectations of presenters; self-producing recordings; working with radio in new ways; and convening more "think tanks" outside the booking conference setting.

### **Surveying the Ecological Change of Classical Music**

Astounding changes have swept the field over the last half-century. The recording industry is undergoing a dramatic change, away from major labels toward DIY (Do-It-Yourself) recordings, niche marketing, and online or regional distribution. The touring opportunities for major orchestras and young classical musicians are fewer. And of the once-hermetic classical genre increasingly incorporates jazz, world music, rock and electronics for their audiences. How can the classical field seize or incorporate this excitement?

### **Future Opportunities**

We need to ask ourselves how we can engage with our audiences, each other, new media, schools and the community? They are tied together through education. Without music education there would be no music ensembles or orchestras to perform in nor orchestras to listen to. As this music that springs



from the classical tradition moves into the 21st century, we all face a host of constraints. Happily, however, there is no evident lack of passion among classical music lovers or musicians. To this end, the industry needs to work with orchestras and orchestras should know and work with their communities, schools and governmental funding programs. Redefining music in today's world will take new approaches that include new technologies and devices utilized by those in the mass media. There is no shame in modernizing the presentation of classical literature performances as well as our music educational system to reach a wider audience. Many believe the mass pop machine is nearing its own end with little to offer its young audiences in the way of aesthetics or music that will be a part of their lives as they get older. They will have little enjoyment in their musical future because the pop machine must continue to turn leaving them empty at middle age as it caters to the young. Classical music has an opportunity to redefine itself as the pendulum swings back but we must see the opportunity and take it and not watch it pass. The future of music making is at stake and everyone involved needs to work as never before to hold on for all its worth.

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