

Why Bother with Classical Music?

Andrew Ford

The last couple of minutes of Gustav Mahler's orchestral song-cycle, *The Song of the Earth*, are among the most beautiful two minutes of music I know. I can't think of anything else that is even similar. The contralto voice repeats, over and over, the word "Ewig"—eternally. The music is in C major, and at first, the singer's phrases descend cadentially and stepwise from E to D to the keynote C. But her later repetitions of the word only take her as far as D, the wished-for eternity stretching out before us as the vocal line refuses to resolve. It is not only a poignant moment, but it is also a famous one.

Oddly enough, the first time I heard this passage I was much more impressed by what was happening behind the singer. And to tell the truth it's still the orchestra that I find myself listening to. The accompaniment is highlighted by four instruments—a celesta, a mandolin and two harps—which create little splashes of colour on top of a lush bed of sound from the strings and winds. The sheer sonic allure of the music is ravishing. Even in the context of the piece itself, this coda has a special sound: the music has been playing for an hour, and yet it is only now, in these final two minutes, that we hear the mandolin. But the splashes of colour are more than merely decorative; they also bring a sense of weightlessness to the music. They are off-the-beat, out-of-time, and gradually they eliminate all sense of bar lines. Bit by bit, tempo is vanquished, until the music is left floating. This song—"The Farewell"—has no real end. The singer doesn't *want* to say goodbye. The music could go on for ever—eternally—*ewig*. The celesta and the mandolin and the harps play less frequently, less predictably, their once florid figures reduced, bit by bit, to the odd note here and there. The effect is rather like listening to wind chimes agitated by a gentle breeze that slowly drops and dies; the players might almost be improvising their final desultory contributions. The listener wills the music to continue, but suddenly it's not there any more and a painful silence ensues.

The delicate balance Mahler achieves in the final moments of *The Song of the Earth* had me curious. It might have sounded like improvisation, but it obviously wasn't. So I acquired a copy of the score. As I expected, the music could only have been composed with the help of notation. When you look at the score, it is clear that Mahler has written the music down in such a way as to make sure the four players don't collide. The detail is quite intricate. Those splashes of colour consist of a system of arpeggios of varying speed, outlining the C major chord. The celesta has semi-quaver runs up and down the arpeggio. One of the harps plays a fragmented, half-speed inversion of this, and the first note of each figure is mostly doubled by the mandolin, the harp then dropping down out of the mandolin's range creating the rather striking effect of a bass mandolin. The other harp extends this motif, rocking back and forth on a minor third, as if trying to lull the music to its reluctant close. With notation, Mahler has done more than avoid musical collisions; he makes the instrumental patterns intersect and interlock. Far from being improvisation, this is calculation.

It's a paradox. I am suggesting that music which sounds improvised, unstructured, gently disintegrating before our very ears, is the result of the kind of careful planning that is only possible when something is worked out on paper. It is this paradox that lies behind much of what I want to say to you this afternoon.

Not very long ago, that multi-talented musician Mara Kiek remarked to me that it was odd we should use the word "composer" only about people who write music down. No one, for example, would think of calling Miles Davis a composer. Not unless they were trying to make a point.

I agreed with her that it was odd and probably in some way elitist. But I also got Mara to agree with me, at least for the duration of our conversation, that this use of the word "composer" was potentially helpful. In describing to people the kind of music I create—and for some reason, like others of my profession, I'm always being asked—I continually run up against inadequate terminology, resorting to expressions such as "concert music", "serious music", "art music" and "fine music". I especially dislike that last one. The label that mostly seems to satisfy the curious is "classical music"; although calling myself a "classical" composer makes me feel I should be dead, so I usually say "contemporary classical music". Sometimes, however, I find I can get away with just "composer", which is a relief.

There is something about inventing music on paper (or, these days, often on a computer screen) that distinguishes it from other sorts of musical creativity. It doesn't make it better music or more worthwhile, or even, thanks to a hundred years of sound recordings, longer lasting; but it does make it different. It is that difference that defines the importance of classical music, because it allows it to do things other music can't do. I think this music and the tradition it comes from is possibly of more genuine use to us today than ever before, and so in a way it's odd that its future should be so threatened. I'd like to consider why it is under threat and how this came about, because it will help to explain why a tradition of written-down music is vital to our society's well-being, and why we must protect it.

Before that, though, I think we should look at the accumulated misinformation that surrounds classical music. We are forever hearing that classical music needs to make itself “accessible”. I would contend that there is nothing inherently inaccessible about classical music, or any other sort of music. If the inexperienced listener finds the idea of classical music somehow intimidating, it is, I'd like to suggest, because of the vast amount of rubbish talked about the subject.

I have made a list of ten classical music myths, all of which, I imagine, will be familiar to you. Some of them are ostensibly positive, the others are clearly negative, and all of them are untrue. The first two are related, so I'll give you them together.

1. You need a special education to understand classical music.

2. With classical music, you should just lie back and let it wash over you.

Neither of these statements is accurate, and it is hard to know which is more unhelpful to the uninitiated. The response to the first myth is simple: you don't need a special education; anyone at any time can appreciate classical music, just by listening to it. Oddly enough, that is also the response to the second myth: if you want to get anything out of music, there's no point in lying back in the hope that something will happen, you will have to listen to it. As with any worthwhile music, listening is active, not passive. Classical music will not do all the work for you. Because it is generally rather detailed and often involves a musical argument being advanced over a stretch of time longer than that of the average piece of music, classical music only does about half the work. The composer writes the music, often over a period of weeks, months or sometimes years; but the audience brings its ears, its concentration, its imagination and its memory to the piece. The listener enters into a partnership with the music.

3. People who like classical music are snobs

Well now some of them are. There are also folk-music snobs and techno snobs and blues snobs and—God knows!—jazz snobs. It is human nature to believe that the things you like are the best. Why should music be an exception? And yet snobbishness suggests exclusivity, while most music fans are anything but exclusive. They are far more likely to be cultural imperialists, seeking to persuade others of the central importance of Wagner or John Coltrane or, as in the case of one five-year-old of my acquaintance, the Wiggles. Cultural imperialism has had a bad rap over the last century, but even at its subjugating worst it involves an element of generosity. However misguided they might be, imperialists generally feel they are improving the lives of the people they are telling what to do.

4. Classical music, especially Mozart, will make you more intelligent

Apparently, if you play a recording of Mozart's D major sonata for two pianos to lab rats it helps them find their way around a maze. If you play the same piece to students, they concentrate a little better, though the effect seems to wear off. I think it wears off with the rats, too. Presumably the effect is created not only by this piece, which in any case isn't Mozart's very greatest work (or even his greatest sonata). But it prompts a series of questions. Is the perceived rise in powers of concentration and (in the case of the rats) spatial awareness to do with a) Mozart, b) the sound of the piano, or c) the key of D major? What about tempo: is a slow performance better than a fast one? And is one recording more effective than another? I mean do Murray Perahia and Radu Lupu help rats and students more or less than András Schiff and Peter Serkin? And would a live performance be more effective than a CD? And what if that performance contained wrong notes: would 10% wrong notes result in only 90% of the normal increase in spatial awareness? And do you get more from it if you really concentrate as opposed to having the music playing in the background? And are rats really capable of musical appreciation anyway?

5. Listening to classical music will make you a better human being

This is a particularly insidious myth, but fortunately an easy one to dispel. Here's how you do it. Write a list of all those composers from history that were drunks, drug addicts, lechers, liars, debtors, grasping ingrates, appalling paranoid whingers or insufferably arrogant pricks. Now cross their names off the list of all the composers who have ever lived. You will find you are left with the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen and perhaps two or three others. If classical music is composed by reprobates of that order, why should it be morally improving to listen to it? It's just the same with literature and the other arts, and I think maybe it's a Protestant thing. Because *War and Peace* is harder to read than a Jeffrey Archer novel, it is believed by some people to make you a better person. Actually, I suppose it might improve your powers of concentration and your memory, particularly for long Russian names, but it won't do anything for your morals, and neither will a preference for Sibelius over silverchair. On the contrary, if art affected your morals at all it would be far more likely to have a detrimental effect. You go and see *Carmen* and take up smoking. You attend a Goya retrospective and find you want to eat babies. You read Dostoevsky and begin harbouring dark thoughts about the old

lady next door

Art does not affect your morals. Art is art and life is life and if you can't tell the difference, you are to some degree deluded. And of course I include in that category fundamentalist wowsers of every hue.

6. Composers are mysterious and unknowable

Well, yes and no. (For a start, see 5 above.) I strongly believe that we all compose, all the time. I'm not trying to be cute here. A surprising amount of our speech is music. It's how we communicate with each other. Only machines speak on a monotone, at an unvaried tempo and without changes of rhythm and dynamic. The meaning behind human speech is in the music as much as the words. More so, in a way. When we speak, the words can say one thing, the music something else. It is because of the musical aspects of speech that we are often able to tell the real meaning behind phrases such as 'No, of course you're not fat' and 'I mailed that cheque to you last week, haven't you had it yet?' We tend to be unaware of the rising and falling of our voices as we speak, and we do it without thinking. But similarly, most composers are seldom sure where their own music comes from. To that extent, composing is certainly a mystery, but it is a mystery we all share to some extent. And of course the mystery extends to saying what music is about.

7. Symphony concerts are intimidating

It is often maintained that if only orchestral players were cool and wore jeans, people would flock to concerts. Today's orchestras are determined to seem modern and relevant, at all costs. And I do mean all costs: the money spent on image, as opposed to music, would probably astonish most concert-goers. Some orchestras have even hired marketing consultants to tell them that the main problem with their image is the fact that they're called orchestras in the first place. Accordingly, we now have the Melbourne Symphony, the Sydney Symphony and the London Philharmonic. In Western Australia, what was the WASO became the WAS. But how scary can the word "orchestra" be? Scary to marketing consultants, maybe. And, really, how intimidating is it to see ninety or a hundred people on stage dressed in black and white? The rituals associated with orchestral concerts—when to clap, when not to talk—are actually part of the experience. Even the black and white clothes are there to aid the audience's concentration on the music. And if the listener is able to concentrate, and assuming there's money left over from the image makeover to pay for adequate rehearsal time, the music, I need hardly say, is frequently thrilling. The managers of the WAS, incidentally, must have got themselves some new advisers, because I notice they're now the WASO once more. Let's hope the advice didn't cost too much.

8. Opera is highbrow

Now I've always found that going to the opera is a bit like going to the circus, and I'm not just thinking about the fat ladies and elephants (which in any case are only in *Aida*, and not always then). It is probably Wagner's fault that opera has this reputation for being intellectually daunting, but remember even the *Ring* has giants and dwarfs and a big green dragon. And yet very great though Wagner's music might be, he is not the be-all and end-all of opera. He's more of a special case. Opera is frequently extremely silly, and I don't just mean the plots. Far from requiring a higher degree to appreciate it, it benefits from suspension of intellect as well as belief. The idea that opera might be highbrow is nonsense and can only be held by people who have never attended one.

9. Chamber Music is more intimidating than orchestral music and more highbrow than opera

And this is nonsense, too, unless of course it's intimidating or highbrow to concentrate. Concentration is not as easy for people today as it was before television—in other words, when most chamber music was composed. But the concentration required for chamber music is not necessarily just a matter of time—some chamber pieces are quite short—it is an inward sort of concentration. Remember, before the 20th century, chamber music was mostly written for performers, not for audiences, and to appreciate chamber music properly you need to think more like a performer. You might try listening to just one of the instruments in a string quartet. Then imagine *being* that instrument, listening to the other three. Chamber music is classical music at its most intimate and intense. I'm tempted to say, at its most pure.

10. Classical music is better than other music

You do hear this said from time to time. More often, though, it is implied or tacitly believed—even, sometimes, by people who don't listen to classical music at all. They feel they should be listening to it and that what they're listening to instead, is probably not as good. But if classical music is better than other music, what, I wonder, is it better at? It is not better than techno music at keeping people dancing all night long. It is not better than a simple, strophic, modal folk song with countless verses, many repetitions and occasional shifts of melodic emphasis for building the tension in a

murder ballad. As for non-musical uses, Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* isn't going to be much good if you're looking for something to listen to while you do the washing up—at least not if you're hoping to get it over quickly.

In our lives, we do use music, and I see nothing at all wrong in this. Different music is used for different purposes. And this leads me back to the matter of the use of classical music. **What is it for? Why is it different?**

Because classical music is written down, it has a double existence. The great pianist Artur Schnabel once said that there is no performance of a Beethoven sonata as great as the work itself. It's a rather obvious point, but it's germane to this discussion. A Beethoven sonata exists for us when we play it or hear it played, but it also exists on the page. There is hardly any other music in the world that this is true of. You couldn't, for instance, say that there is no performance of "Sophisticated Lady" as great as the song itself, because there really is no "song itself". There is no repository for "Sophisticated Lady", no place where the real thing exists. It exists, of course in the memories of singers and jazz instrumentalists and lovers of jazz, but even when it's written down it is an *ex post facto* record, and will bear the finger prints of a particular arrangement. Of course there are also recordings: there is Ella Fitzgerald's "Sophisticated Lady" and Sarah Vaughan's "Sophisticated Lady" and Mel Tormé's "Sophisticated Lady". Each performance and recording is unique and, in its way, definitive. But a definitive performance of a Beethoven sonata is impossible. The only definitive Beethoven sonata is the one the composer wrote down.

It follows then that, at one level at least, classical music is about failure. It is about the greatest pianists in history playing, shall we say, Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata, and not quite measuring up to the work itself, because how could you? That is one reason they go on playing the piece; and it's one reason we go on listening to them play: not to hear them fail, but to hear them try to make full sense of the score. Each attempt will fail in a slightly different way, and so each hearing will be slightly different. You never finish with the best of classical music. On the contrary, as I said before you establish a partnership with it. You form a relationship, possibly sparked by an initial attraction, later founded on something like love, and you come to know it bit by bit, but never fully. You also know, from the very start, that the music will outlive you.

It's worth pursuing this relationship analogy a little further. As in human relationships, sometimes you never really get started with a piece of music; or you get started, and then the next morning realise you've made a mistake—you can't think what you ever heard in the piece. But with the good experiences, as with all worthwhile relationships, you need to work on them. I think this is the cause of some of those classical music myths. An appreciation of classical music grows the more you listen, the more attention you pay, the more you *try*; most pieces do not give themselves up to instant comprehension. That is to say—and again, it's like relationships—after that initial attraction across a crowded concert hall, the appreciation of a classical piece needs time and effort before it will have much meaning. As far as the mass media are concerned, all this time-and-effort business makes classical music rather unfashionable. The media are really only concerned with what *is* fashionable, and so classical music is relegated to a minor place in the arts pages.

When classical music is discussed in most of the Western print and electronic media, there is a common tendency to have the discussion at the most fundamental level possible. Most writing and broadcasting about classical music is required to assume that the reader or listener knows absolutely nothing. Everything must be addressed to beginners. After all, we don't want to put people off with technical jargon. This is frankly odd, because it doesn't obtain in most other areas of the media. Take economics. I freely admit to knowing very little about this topic. I don't know what the All Ordinaries index is. I have no idea why the value of a barrel of West Texas crude should fascinate economists. And yet not a day goes but I am subjected to reports on the market that employ jargon of this sort. Clearly we're all meant to be interested in economics; that's what the media tell us. But the media also tell us that classical music is for high-brow specialists. I don't think I need to explain to you that this is because the media are run by people who are very interested in money, but whose upbringing, by and large, didn't involve much exposure to the arts. They don't really get classical music, and because, broadly speaking, they run the world, they must be right.

It wasn't always like this. Not so very long ago—in the 1930s, so within living memory—a writer called Donald Tovey published a series of books about music. Tovey's *Essays in Musical Analysis* were written in plain language and illustrated with dozens of musical examples. Whole chunks taken from the scores of the music under consideration were reproduced to aid the reader's understanding of the analytical points Tovey was making about this Bach fugue or that Beethoven sonata. Fair enough, you are possibly thinking, they sound like just the job for a serious student of music. But no, these books were not written for specialists; they were intended for the general public and they were bought by them in large enough numbers for them to have remained in print until a few years ago. A collection of Tovey's writings on chamber music was published as recently as 1989.

Tovey's readership was made up of people with broad, general educations. They were not only interested enough in classical music to have bought or borrowed the book in the first place, but they were also able to prop the book open on the music stand of the piano in their front parlour and make some sense of the examples because piano lessons were a normal part of growing up. Put like that, it already sounds as though I am describing some sort of halcyon past—I don't

know whether it's the word "parlour" or the ineluctable presence of the piano—but as I've said it wasn't so long ago, maybe two generations. It is unthinkable that such a book would be published today except by a specialist academic publisher, because classical music in general, and musical literacy in particular are no longer commonly regarded as core class room activities. The corollary of this is that classical music has also failed to sustain its place at or near the centre of our cultural life. In fact it has become marginalised.

Although it's equally hard to credit, and the days are seemingly more halcyon yet, it was really only one generation ago that politicians thought culture was a good thing. Although, perhaps, a superficial matter, it is worth pointing out that over the past two or three decades there has been a change in the meaning of the word "culture" itself. Now the word most often turns up directly after the adjective "popular". The other context in which it is sometimes used is basically derogatory: I'm thinking of expressions such as Robert Hughes's "the culture of complaint", or indeed that threat to the very fabric our new world order, "the culture of the ABC", which, as we know, must be changed before it's too late.

But it used to be that conservative politicians believed in culture—I suppose these days we'd have to call it "high art", a term almost as derogatory as "culture of the ABC"—and they believed in it because it was thought to represent the best of Western civilisation. It was, in fact, a significant part of what these conservatives were trying to conserve. Small-l liberals, on the other hand, believed you didn't merely conserve culture, you had to subsidise it; you brought it to the masses via public education, public libraries and public broadcasting. And, note, they wanted to bring culture to people. They weren't talking about making art accessible; on the contrary, the idea was to make people accessible to art.

So what has happened here? Why do politicians no longer seem to believe in literature and public libraries, in paintings and art galleries, in classical music and publicly funded orchestras? I think the answer is fairly obvious. Modern politicians are rather disappointing people. Like those who run the mass media, today's Western politicians care mostly about balancing books and they're not always very good at doing that. They have also bought, hook, line and sinker, all of those classical music myths, so that providing vigorous support for orchestras or opera companies would, they believe, be political suicide. It would mean lining up with all those despised elites.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this word. Politicians have been dumping on the elites for a long time, but I am still trying to work out who they are. Obviously when politicians talk about elites they don't mean very rich people, because that would include quite a few of their own number. It must be some other sort of elite. Do they mean people who are well educated? There would certainly be fewer of them in modern politics. But I thought it was generally accepted that the country needed well educated people, so it probably isn't them either. I suspect we might be talking about people who think for themselves and ask difficult questions. These sort of people have never been popular with politicians, and in the age of spin they're a genuine threat to the way modern governments like to conduct business. Anyway, the point is, whoever these elites are, they're very bad people, just a couple of notches below asylum seekers.

Linked to the long running doublespeak about elites, is another bit of nonsense that I particularly enjoy for its twisted logic. It goes like this: the arts—and here classical music is a prime example—are patronised by the elites; why, therefore, should ordinary people—mums and dads—subsidise them? This is the user-pays argument and depending upon whether you believe it or not, it is self-fulfilling or self-defeating. Either way, it relies upon a perfectly circular piece of logic. We shouldn't subsidise the arts because they are for the elites who can well afford to pay; but if we don't subsidise the arts, they will only ever be for the elites. Q.E.D. Modern Western governments like to save money. The arts are an easy target so long as the majority of voters can be persuaded that things such as classical music are only for the kind of people they don't really like.

We will wait a long time before politicians of genuine vision come along. We will wait even longer before we have politicians whose word we can trust. The spinning, I fear, may never stop. You might find it strange, then, that it is partly our present bunch of politicians, so drab and dispiriting, so uninspiring in the roles for which they have been elected, that have inspired in me a new appreciation of classical music and helped me to see, perhaps for the first time in my life, just what that music is for.

Over the last decade or so, as my disillusionment has grown with the way the modern world is being run, I have to some extent found myself taking refuge in classical music. I have always listened to music a lot—a lot more, I'm well aware, than most other composers—and my listening is very broad. Jazz is a particular passion, and in particular I listen to a lot of modern jazz. I have given up trying to stay fully abreast of rock music, but in addition to classic rock from the last 40 years, and not forgetting figures such as Dylan and Van Morrison who continue to produce new music, my CD collection contains albums by the likes of Radiohead and Eminem. I like country music, especially the classics. Few things move me more than the blues. I have liked Anglo-Celtic folk music since childhood and today I like it more than ever. And so on. My tastes, you see, are catholic. But it's classical music I am drawn to more and more. A quarter of a century after my formal music education, which was exclusively classical, came to an end, I find myself not only listening to more Bach and Beethoven and Mahler than ever, but even buying scores. The more the world of public affairs repels me, the more I am drawn to Haydn and Mozart. You will say, perhaps, that this is escapism, but I don't

think it is that at all.

On the one hand, we have politicians being found out lying to us and then attempting to spin their way out of trouble. They deny everything. In the face of compelling evidence, they get up in their parliament or on our TV screens and say they didn't lie because they thought they were telling the truth. They can't quite remember. Probably they had a bad phone line the day they were passed the advice; they must have misheard. Or perhaps they were given the wrong advice. Or more likely still no one told them anything at all. About anything. Ever. On and on, day after day, week after week, until we are so sick of their lying we just want to forget about it—which is just what they were hoping might happen. And then, on the other hand, there is Brahms.

No, this isn't escapism; it's a form of consolation. A retreat, certainly, but a retreat, I would argue, *into* reality rather than away from it. There is no spin in Brahms.

In September 2001, when the aeroplanes hit the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, we were quickly told that the world had changed for ever. In a way I suppose it did. There have always been terrorists, just as there have always been lying politicians, but the scale of September 11 was new, and so was the real time TV coverage of the atrocity. Like most people, I suppose, I was in shock for a while. One thing I certainly didn't want was music. For a few days, even the greatest music seemed trivial. But, shortly after, I found I had a bigger appetite for it than ever. It was classical music I wanted, and in particular the string quartets of Brahms.

Brahms has always been a favourite composer of mine and I have come to admire his music more the more I have listened to it. Even in the composer's lifetime, his pieces were never very fashionable. He was a conservative figure and he work eschewed flamboyance. Perhaps that was a small part of the attraction for me in the days after September 11. It is hard to put all of this into words, but I'd like to try, because as I said earlier, I feel the disappointments and outrages of our modern world have taught me a great deal about what classical music is for.

When, after September 11, I began to want to hear music again, the first thing I seemed to need was the sound of the string quartet. Part of this was probably the sonic balm that Brahms's string writing creates, that burnished mellowness that no other composer has ever quite matched. Bartók, for example, would have been quite the wrong composer for those particular weeks. But there was also the symbolism inherent in the sound of the string quartet, of the four players blending with each other and yet retaining their independence. On a rather simplistic level, I suppose, the string quartet offers a musical analogy of co-operation and democracy, and that in itself was appealing.

Then there was the matter of duration. It was important that the music I heard lasted long enough for me to, as it were, enter its world. On the one hand, I needed to sit still for a period and concentrate: I guess I'm talking about a need for periods of meditation. I also wanted the time to climb inside these string quartets—not to lose myself, but to explore the musical ideas and arguments. That was another important aspect of the music, that ideas were stated—beautifully, eloquently—and then tossed around by the composer, developed, thought through, talked over, analysed in real time. This was very much in contrast to a lot of the rubbishy rhetoric that came through the media from politicians and pundits on all sides after September 11. Bellicose or gloating, scary or sanctimonious, it was nearly all revolting to hear. The Brahms quartets, though, offered reason and no words at all.

Finally, I needed the string quartets of Brahms at that point in history and at that point in my life, because for more than a century they had been performed and listened to and studied, thought about by players and audiences and musicologists. One of the great joys of classical music (and I guess this goes for all great art of a certain age) is that you can discover works for the first time, knowing, in a sense, that you can trust them, because they have been valued by earlier generations. Up until this moment, I did not know the Brahms string quartets. I already knew and loved the quintets and the sextets. And ever since my teenage years I had known the piano quintet and the clarinet quintet. It seemed likely that the string quartets, which had evaded my attention for 44 years, would not disappoint me. Even if they turned out not to be among the composer's greatest masterpieces—and I think it's true to say they are not—I knew they would give me what I needed. They would provide me with reassurance. Earlier, I used that word consolation, and I used it very deliberately. The Brahms string quartets made me feel there was goodness in the world. The essentially pointless business of creativity, made me feel there was a point to life. The fact that the quartets were composed at all, back in the 19th century; the fact that they have been played and listened to with attention ever since; the fact that they are still played and listened to: it was all reassuring.

W. H. Auden wrote a poem called “The Composer” in which he compares Brahms's job to that of other artists. It begins: “All the others translate . . .”; and goes on: “only your notes are pure contraption.” In other words, music—pure music—is not about anything, it *is* something. There's nothing to interpret—nothing to “translate”—music is the thing itself. And *that's* reassuring, too.

What I'm saying probably sounds a bit naïve, as though I am suggesting that Brahms can cure the ills of the modern

world. I wish he could. I wish his music could convince terrorists of the wrongness of what they do. I wish it could function as a truth drug for politicians. Of course that is not what I am claiming. But I am claiming that music has a vital role to play if we are to keep going. When we listen to the music, we plug ourselves in to something positive. I don't think you can compose a negative string quartet. Auden's poem says that only music is "unable to say an existence is wrong". We have heard a lot of that, lately. There have been a lot of people, politicians and terrorists, saying that other people should not exist.

Classical music reaffirms creativity because it has survived. It connects us to civilisation at a time when we find little civilisation in our own world. This probably sounds vaguely nostalgic, but that isn't the attraction of classical music any more than it's the attraction of Shakespeare. When we listen to Brahms or Mahler or Wagner or Bach, we are directly connected to a creative mind—directly ("All the others translate . . . only your notes are pure contraption")—and that is why classical music has survived and why people still need it. That is also why those of us who love classical music need to fight for it. We need to dispel those myths. Classical music is not for elites—whoever they are. It is for anyone who will take the time to listen. It is not "difficult"; it is just that it won't give up all its secrets in one go. And it will never surrender itself to market forces. Very often when we read about classical music today, it is some gloomy story about the bottom dropping out of the CD market. Apparently nobody buys classical CDs any more. Of course this is not true. They're just not selling in the kind of numbers the big record companies would like. It's an economic crisis, not musical one, but to hear the executives of some of the major record company talk, you'd think it was Mozart's fault their profits are down. The truth is that after those executives and their companies have gone to the wall, Mozart will still be around, reliable as ever.

Perhaps, listening to this, you have been wondering why, as a 21st-century composer, I have been standing here telling you that you should be embracing music written down in previous centuries, trying to persuade you that Brahms is good for you. I didn't want to talk about my own music on this occasion, because I wanted to cast the net a lot wider, but I will finish with a few words about being a composer today.

For most of 2001, I was composing a long song cycle, a setting of poems from across the ages, mostly by women. After September 11, I stopped for a time. Just as I didn't want to listen to music, I also didn't want to compose it. Even when I felt like composing again, it seemed to me that setting to music little poems by Emily Dickinson and Sappho and Christina Rossetti was perhaps no longer the most relevant activity.

Like a lot of artists, I imagine, I cast around for something to say about what had happened in New York and Washington. I wanted to say something profound. I wanted to say something helpful, something useful. Nothing came. And then it struck me that the most useful thing I could do—and perhaps even the most profound—was to continue as before; to go on imagining sounds, jotting them down, moving them around on the page, trying to get them to come out right; to continue a tradition that has gone on for centuries. We need that tradition now more than ever, and so we need to protect it. The only way to protect a tradition is to continue it.

That's one reason I find the closing moments of Mahler's *Song of the Earth* so moving and so important. It is the sound of a composer not wanting to let go (Mahler was ill, and in fact was dead by the time the piece was performed). It is the sound of a piece not wanting to end ("ewig, ewig"). It is the sound of a tradition of artistic endeavour that will continue to sustain us, even when the rest of our world so badly lets us down.

Auden's poem ends like this:

You alone, alone, imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.