

# Is Classical Music Dead?

*Perhaps not, but its edges may be blurring, writes **Graham Strahle**, in a study of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.*

In recent years, a great deal of questioning has been going on about the future of Classical music. The issues aired may now be familiar: that audiences at orchestral concerts and opera are declining, that record sales have slumped, and that the record industry has dropped contracts with an alarming number of leading conductors and soloists. Less well known is the sheer amount of literature this subject has generated in recent years. There is even a website now that continually updates 50 of the most recent articles on the subject, from English-language newspapers and journals around the world; ominously it carries the title the *Death of Classical Music archive*.<sup>1</sup>

The debate started in earnest with well-known music commentator and writer Norman Lebrecht's book *When the Music Stops: Managers, Maestros and The Corporate Murder of Classical Music*.<sup>2</sup> The title indicates clearly the line he takes, that an invading commercialism has profoundly damaged or even destroyed a great cultural tradition. Lebrecht even traces it back to a single event, the Three Tenors' concert at the 1990 soccer World Cup, which, he believes, bred a new, more avaricious approach to the marketing of Classical music by record companies and spawned today's superclass of celebrity performers, besides dumbing down symphony orchestras and opera companies worldwide.

Clearly from the profusion of literature it has provoked, Lebrecht's analysis has sent shock waves out in many directions. Not all, however, agree with it. Charles Rosen, in *Harper's Magazine* (March 1998), pointed out that warnings about the imminent death of Classical music have been going on for centuries, indeed for as long as Classical music itself. They have erupted, he suggests, whenever any radically new thinking has come in and upset the status quo;

Monteverdi, Beethoven and Stravinsky are just three well-known examples he mentions.

It may be that critically important turning points in music, as in other things, will always be accompanied by voices of protest. Indeed, we might be experiencing another such turning point today: tipped on their head, Lebrecht's symptoms of decline could instead be indicators of a new phase of growth taking place.

The cultural theorist Stephen Turner offers useful insights here. He has examined how traditions are able to increase in size and complexity if ideas or practices external to them can be successfully integrated into their existing structures. What this process of integration depends on, he argues, is the way external elements are interpreted. They can be either seen as alien threats or as new ways of doing things, broadly congruent with existing practices. If it is the latter, absorption will occur, and with it, an increase in size and complexity. So it depends on whether a tradition is able to deduce of 'any innovation or novel thing "noticed" or message received' that it 'is still internal to the system.'<sup>3</sup>

The encroaching alien elements that Lebrecht identifies are mass marketing, the elevating of performers into celebrities, the rise of stadium concerts, and such like. Essentially these are all products of the popular entertainment industry that has grown into a seemingly indomitable position over the last four or so decades; and together they may be viewed either as negatively influencing the centuries old tradition of concert music and opera, or as providing it with a positive stimulus to grow. Opinion seems to be deeply divided on which of these two views is correct.

## Looking for answers

This study focuses on the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and, using data obtained from a series of interviews, seeks some answers to this question. The ASO, like its interstate siblings, occupies a major artistic position in its city and seems an appropriate subject to start exploring the themes being raised. This is especially so given that, beginning around 2001, it has sought to enlarge its place in Adelaide's community life with a 'community ownership' strategy.<sup>4</sup>

What makes the ASO particularly noteworthy, however, is its pro-active response to exactly the type of concerns raised by Lebrecht. This began with its connection with Ernest Fleischmann, a leading commentator on orchestral management and managing director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In 1987, he had warned that if orchestras continued their traditional approach to concert-giving and programming they would face extinction. His solution was a 'community of musicians' concept in which orchestras would take on greatly expanded functions, from serving in the pit (in opera and ballet) to diversifying into chamber, contemporary, jazz and pop music.<sup>5</sup> His model became influential in Australia through the Nugent Report, and many of its aspects were enthusiastically taken up by the ASO under its then managing director, Robert Clarke. Fleischmann was engaged as an adviser in 1999, and his ideas contributed to a raft of early music, new music and contemporary music concerts, notably in its 'Antipodes', later 'Studio', series. A growing process of Americanisation in its programming from that time, especially in its Showtime concerts, may also be seen as a product of Fleischmann's influence.

For this study, three groups of people were surveyed: ASO musicians, members of the Orchestra's regular audience, and a sample of tertiary music students. The first group were full-time players, and they were much more widely spread in age than the other two. The second group were ASO subscribers and members of the Friends of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Made up of mainly retired individuals, few had received musical training, and they were involved in a range of social and support activities including fundraising. The third group were music students aged in their early 20s who were studying VET certificate courses at the Elder Conservatorium of Music.

## Where are Classical music's boundaries?

The first questions were about lines of differentiation that separate Classical music from other streams or genres of music. Some interesting answers came up. The Friends of the ASO saw it as distinct and separate, to be clearly distinguished from popular and jazz. Uniformly among them, 'Classical' referred to the canon of concert works dating from Bach to Brahms; their view, deeply conservative, was that Dvorak and Puccini are the last truly 'recognised' Classical composers. Mahler, Prokofiev and Stravinsky were familiar to them, but their feeling was that 'the jury is still out' on whether such later figures can truly be counted as 'Classical.' At the same time though, many of the Friends said they were keen on Shostakovich and that they enjoyed music by Philip Glass, Keith Emerson and Graeme Koehne in recent ASO concerts.

Not unexpectedly, the ASO players held a vastly different perspective. They saw no rigid line existing between

'Classical' and 'popular' music and repeatedly stated that the two streams frequently merge imperceptibly into one another. All said they do not regard popular music as posing any threat: rather it simply represents another set of choices that the musically interested public are able to make, albeit one that a vast majority seems to prefer. Describing themselves as custodians of Classical music, they saw it as their duty to make orchestral music as widely known as possible, and to give more people the opportunity of enjoying it.

Many of the players were familiar with the type of the arguments put by Lebrecht, but they did not fully go along with them. They spoke passionately about how society needs to value and foster its orchestras more than it does, but saw the problem as specifically one of government priorities and levels of funding: they believed orchestras simply cannot continue to survive without increased state support, and said governments have grown neglectful in recent years, to the point where all the arts are threatened.

The music students held broadly similar views, although they were not concerned with the political angle. They said that Classical and popular music, while historically set apart as two mainly separate streams, are today experiencing a convergence. They talked at length about many crossover musicians who are working seamlessly across the 'old divide,' including Vanessa Mae, Bond and Amici Forever. One mentioned the music of Koehne in the same context and said she really liked it. However, the students roundly condemned other crossover instances as unartistic and merely driven by marketing interests; for example one described the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's collaboration with rock group Kiss in 2003 as a 'marketing stunt.'

In other respects though, the music students regarded Classical music as very much a separate category of its own. In terms of its social and educational institutions, they felt it was out of touch and remote for younger people of today. They felt no personal sense of ownership towards it and were surprised at the suggestion that their views might be regarded as relevant. This was an alarming discovery because, as Fleischmann and many others have consistently maintained, Classical music's future rests squarely on young people feeling a sense of engagement with it.<sup>6</sup>

#### **What are its defining attributes?**

Does Classical music really possess definable attributes that set it apart from other musical styles or traditions? It was put in the questionnaire that the answer might come down to the people, places, ideas, and values that are involved. Classical music's people, said the respondents, were its composers, performers, listeners, critics, arts administrators, producers, arrangers, broadcasters, teachers and lecturers. One respondent added that any of these may come from Aboriginal or immigrant communities. Many were adamant that Classical music should not be 'owned,' or be seen to be 'owned,' by any particular individuals, groups or sections of society; they felt it belongs to 'anyone who listens to it and gets something out of it.' One commented: 'I would hope social divides do not come into it'; and another proclaimed, 'It belongs to everybody.'

As to the places that might define Classical music, the list furnished was similarly long: concert halls, homes, cinema theatres, schools, wineries, parks and gardens, churches, funeral parlours, restaurants, cars, and even telephones on hold. One respondent perceptively commented that outside the concert hall, it 'filters through as background music in many other places, but it does not achieve its proper communication there.' Two members of the Friends presented a traditionally held view: 'Its place is Europe,' and 'In Europe, there is more of a tradition of Classical music,' they said. Younger respondents believed Classical music is not and should not be defined by any social, cultural or geographic divides.

On whether Classical music can be defined by any particular ideas or values, answers were slower to come forward. Some said the complexity of its formal structures helps define it. Others said its capacity to engage the imagination or subconsciousness and bring about experiences of transcendence make it different to other kinds of music. Others believed that all types of music are governed by essentially the same ideas, and that these relate to life experiences and shared human stories. They said the only difference in Classical music is that these experiences and stories are rooted in the past, in the periods in which the composers lived.

There was less agreement on what values may be intrinsic to Classical music. Few felt it stands for or reflects any particular external values. 'It is a value itself. It doesn't stand for anything else,' said one. Another remarked: 'It may have connotations that imply values, in the context of culture, but I think these are imposed and not inherent. That is, it may be symbolic in some ways.' Others believed that it does not hold any values of its own at all, beyond the personal value which the individual listener or performer attaches to it. Some felt however, that its values must in part be historical, in the sense that that a particular work embodies or expresses the values of the period in which it was composed.

One ASO person boldly stated that Classical music stands for 'Order, privilege, "civilisation", [and] superiority.' On this angle, a disparity of views emerged. Some spoke about how in a historical sense the entire Western artistic tradition has been associated with wealth and the social upper class; but they felt this is virtually now no longer the case and is an irrelevancy for concert music. Most, however, agreed that in reality Classical music is not as open to all members of society as many other forms of music, such as pop, rock and contemporary: it takes time and money to develop an interest in it, and the nurturing influence of family and teachers is paramount, they said. So the tag of elitism it has worn for centuries has tended to stick, they believed. This in turn has led to its further perceived diminishment in recent times, some added, because of the new 'politically correct' insistence that no one form of music, art, or cultural expression of any sort, is to be held in higher regard than any other.

#### **Assessing its future**

Classical music is strongly defined by its past: this was the summary view expressed by all individuals, and the reason they gave was simple enough, that the large majority of orchestral, operatic, choral, chamber and recital repertoire dates from decades or centuries ago. But does Classical music relate to the present, and if so, how? One music student put forward a commonly held view: 'Mostly [it] belongs to the past and just survives in the present through orchestras, radio and so on. In the past, it was the "pop music" of the time.' An ASO player echoed this view, adding a despairing note: 'With each passing year, it recedes further into the past.'

Generally though, the ASO players had a more positive view about the relevance of Classical music to today's society. They explained that each time an existing piece of music is performed, no matter how old it may be, it becomes new again because interpretations always bring out something new. One explained that a determined effort has to be made in

performance to bring the music into the present and make it speak to contemporary audiences: 'It has to be presented in a way to get people interested in it.' Others felt though that any music's location in the past is not in itself a problem that has to be 'solved,' and that it can be valued for what it is in any age. One player summed it up: 'Because of its history there is a massive vault of Classical music from the past, which we do treasure. But it is still relevant to the present because it is of timeless value, like a good painting. So it equally belongs to the present.'

Is Classical music a static tradition, or is it undergoing change? Opinion was divided here. The Friends of the ASO believed it is undergoing change because it is being constantly added to, by the contribution of composers working in the present – somewhat contradicting their earlier views about boundaries. They felt that innovations in concert programming also keep it alive and changing. By contrast, the music students tended to see Classical music as a static tradition because, as one put it, 'it's a tradition and cannot change' – which was curiously at variance too with their respective view on boundaries. This generational difference in perspective is interesting: it is the reverse of what perhaps might have been expected.

The ASO players unanimously asserted that Classical music is today undergoing a profound change, one that is in the first place negative. They described it as a process of retreat, from a once healthy vigour to a state of contraction and social marginalisation. Its cause, they said, was the overwhelming domination of mainstream popular culture, in the form of television, the media, sport and so on, all of which has made traditional artistic culture appear elitist and socially irrelevant. Popular music itself is not the cause, they said: rather it is the highly commercialised environment of our society that makes this happen. One explained: 'It [Classical music] has been overwhelmed by popular culture and now survives only as an anachronism.' As a result, orchestras have become 'confused' and 'panicky,' he said, having to run themselves on short-term, commercial decisions and leave behind their artistic priorities. At the same time, he said Classical music has itself to blame: 'We have abetted this process [of its marginalisation] by closing it off from external influence.' In particular, he believed it has failed to respond in positive artistic ways to the ascendant music of today, popular music.

Is Classical music in danger of dying? This question seemed to strike a chord with all respondents, as they seemed to have heard it many times before. But few were able to offer an answer. 'It is already dead!' one volunteered: 'What survives is in part a masquerade, and in part just continues on by goodwill, the remnants of the past, but it has no true importance in real life anymore.'<sup>7</sup> The music students tended towards the same view, predicting that it may disappear in a matter of decades. Others were less pessimistic. It will probably continue to survive, they believed, but in a much contracted state. One said for instance: 'Hopefully there will always be those who love it enough to teach the young and pass it on. There will always be more and more "dumbing down", but I think a small amount of passionate people will keep it alive.'

#### **Positives among the negatives**

A general negativity about the future of orchestras, said several respondents, has masked some recent positives that have taken place, such as the increased community reach that popular-type orchestral concerts now seem to be enjoying. Certainly, the ASO's orchestral pops and outdoor concerts are strongly attended and appear to attract a greater age diversity than its subscription concerts. Positive too has been the ASO's overall box office performance. CEO Rainer Jozeps reports that 2003 was a high point for attendances, but that since then, total ticket sales have strongly and consistently increased, from 48,000 in 2004 (*The Ring*, staged in that year, inevitably reduced the result), to 52,000 in 2005, to a projected 60,000 in 2006. That increase has been consistent across all its concert series but most pronounced in its more popular-orientated concerts.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed the alleged general decline in audiences for orchestral concerts may have been grossly exaggerated. Fleischmann believes this is the case. Looking at attendances in Los Angeles over the last three years, he concludes 'there has been a marked increase.' He explains: 'In fact, in the three years since the Walt Disney Concert Hall opened, ticket sales have averaged around 93% – for symphony, chamber music, new music, jazz, world music concerts and recitals.

Classical music on the west coast of the USA (including San Francisco) is certainly very much alive.'<sup>9</sup>

The question is whether such successes are localised and due to the enlightened music direction and management of particular orchestras. The truth may be that for many others the outlook continues to be bleak. Lebrecht still believes that attendances worldwide are declining. 'Having recently addressed orchestral associations in Scandinavia and Holland,' he writes, 'I am acutely aware of the difference that population diffusion in one and compression in the other can make.

However, the overriding momentum of decline is universal and the solutions, likewise, are global.'<sup>10</sup>

While audience figures at Classical concerts continues to be a critically important issue, some have argued that in Australia attendance numbers may not have changed much at all over the last five or so decades. Andrew Ford and Mary Jo Capps have both put this view at recent MCA assemblies.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the question of audience numbers though, it is a matter of looking at systemic issues that determine the health of an artform. The concerning issue for Classical music is that the social structure upon which it is historically based – wealthy patrons who paid for it and an intellectual culture that sustained it – is almost entirely thing of the distant past. Like an orphan, it has had to go searching for a new home, and with it a new identity.

From the responses gathered in this study, it appears that the boundaries that formerly existed between Classical and popular or contemporary music, at least as they existed with the emergence of a concert culture and canon of 'great works' two centuries ago, are gradually dissolving. Classical music is moving towards a centre ground, and this is perhaps what has prompted most alarm bell ringing: recognisable boundaries have become less recognisable, and there are many more unknowns. Yet with this same process have come signs of a new vigour and creativity, in the hands of those composers who have positively embraced it. Graeme Koehne and Matthew Hindson are two figures who were repeatedly mentioned in this context, and whether one views them as Classical music's protectors or its pirates ultimately depends on whether one's point of view is primarily about 'saving' Classical music or permitting it to grow in different and unpredictable ways. The danger might in fact be that the current debate has obscured a more central, and very much older debate: conservatism versus innovation.

The views of our young people could hardly be more relevant here, because they are our future listeners, performers and composers. Again, the most lamentable discovery in this study was to find that young people feel that they have no

part in the subject, and no ownership in the debate. Orchestras and opera companies in search of a sustainable future would do well to open their ears to what they say. After all, it is just possible that, as one of the students remarked, 'Classical music is a tradition for us today as pop music will be a tradition for this generation in 100 years.'

*This is a shortened, updated version of a paper presented at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society, Monash University (session 'Traditional Music and Other Traditions'), 13 July 2004, and the author's Gordon Anderson Memorial Lecture, Armidale, 2 September 2004.*

#### **Notes**

1. [www.artsjournal.com/issues/deathofclassical.htm](http://www.artsjournal.com/issues/deathofclassical.htm)
2. (Simon & Schuster, 1996); republished as *Who Killed Classical Music?* (Birch Lane Press, 1997).
3. *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994), p. 89.
4. Stephen Boyle, 'Adelaide Symphony Orchestra: the new score. A descriptive case study', in *The New Wave: Entrepreneurship & the Arts*, Melbourne, 5-6 April 2002.
5. Ernest Fleischmann's address, 'The Orchestra Is Dead. Long Live the Community of Musicians,' delivered at the Cleveland Institute of Music, 16 May 1987; see also his exchange with Samuel Lipman, 'Is the symphony orchestra dead?' in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 6 (December 1988).
6. For example Stephen Johnson, 'Larger than live', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2001.
7. Julian Johnson presents a similar view in *Who Needs Classical Music? – Cultural Choice And Musical Value* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. Personal communication, 21 June 2006.
9. Personal communication, 21 April 2006.
10. Personal communication, 6 April 2006.
11. Andrew Ford, 'Why Bother With Classical Music?,' MCA Annual Address, 2003; Mary Jo Capps, 'The situation of chamber music in Australia,' MCA 2004 Assembly.