

Has “classical” music a future?

By
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There have always been those who needed “classical” music for their enjoyment or spiritual nourishment whether by listening or actively singing or playing an instrument. However for most people at whatever level of society it has little or nothing to offer them so is there a connection between this mistaken belief and the possibility that many of today’s symphony orchestras are on the way to extinction?

The history of music provides us with some possible answers. To all intents and purposes, music in the Western world came into being with plainsong and organum (parallel lines in fourths and fifths) and then as the Catholic Church’s influence spread across Europe, cathedrals were erected to the glory of God. These massive edifices demanded musical elaboration and organum gave way to a more complex texture while in the secular world, the courts of the aristocracy employed musicians to entertain them and to enhance their prestige. A contrapuntal style developed which flourished until approximately the death of Bach and then all but disappeared until Mendelssohn discovered the St. Mathew Passion: though Bach has been performed regularly ever since, the contrapuntal style never recovered its former glory.

Even during Bach’s lifetime composers were already beginning to develop a new style derived from the harmonic structure of music and from it, sonata form emerged. This form was then transposed onto chamber instrumental ensembles which in turn created symphony orchestras (small at first): meanwhile the music of the previous era was shelved and forgotten as audiences during what has become known as the classical era were only interested in the latest compositions!

The clarity of this classical music surely stemmed from the new philosophy embodied in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment with its expanding middle class and its intelligentsia while at the other end of the social spectrum, the less affluent masses only had their folk songs and street ballads. At the same time, the slave trade was established and the transported Africans took their music and dance with them that stemmed from their loose limned physique and very supple body rhythms. Over the next century, that music took root in the larger American population and has progressively become the lingua franca of virtually the whole world including Asia and the Far East today.

In Europe during the early years of the nineteenth century meanwhile the symphonic repertoire took on greater social significance at first with Beethoven with his passionate humanism inspired by such subjects as Napoleon, Fate, his feelings on being in the country and the Ninth Symphony's Ode to Joy. The classical era had given way to the Romantic Age and ultimately to Wagner and his zest for what became known as High Art. The romantic hero had arrived and with him, conductors inspired by Wagner's fervour along with his enlarged orchestra and this in turn inspired the next generation of composers to write for even larger forces in their highly complex symphonies and tone poems.

Concurrently with the bad working conditions prevalent in the industrialised nations, trade unionism was born and later adopted by orchestral players partly as a reaction to those autocratic conductors who had the power to sack players without question. By the late 1930's, symphony orchestras began to function on a permanent basis and governed by artistic committees from within the body of players but, after the second World War and due to increased costs, it led to governmental Arts Ministries having an input into orchestral finances. Inevitably, the cost of "classical" music has become astronomical while at the same time, Western governments are now bombarded by requests for financial assistance from equally deserving causes such as hospitals and education. Though "man cannot live by bread alone", Arts Ministers have to justify their subsidisation of "classical" music while the electorate in the main are indifferent so the problem is perpetually unresolved and is a political football.

In America during the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century the music of the African slaves as they sang in the cotton fields of the southern states gradually spread across the continent. Jazz (from the pervasive aroma of jasmine in the cotton fields), Spirituals, Gospel and Blues were then incorporated into America's national culture which, with the advent of cinema, was consolidated by Hollywood and consequently the idiom was heard around the world. Then when America entered the Second World War, Swing coupled with its uninhibited dance rhythms arrived in Europe and the rigid respectability of the younger European generation was slowly tossed aside followed by the next generation that easily accepted the waves of "contemporary" styles that have since crossed the Atlantic.

This has been possible largely due to the current Age of Technology that has changed society in ways that would never have

seemed possible not so long ago. What was accepted as High Art has been discarded in favour of art with a small A and used endlessly in commercial promotion while “contemporary” has become a synonym for pop music rather than for a new work by an Elliot Carter or a Peter Sculthorpe. At times of national and international rejoicing or bereavement, pop “artists” or groups rather than contemporary “classical” composers or symphony orchestras are engaged. Many other examples can be cited but the most extreme case must surely be that “classical music” has been found to be an excellent way of scaring young hooligans from shopping malls!

As the above historical overview indicates, styles in music have changed along with social changes so now that “contemporary music” has become the universal lingua franca that sociological fact has to be accepted whether the thought is comfortable or not. History does sometimes repeat itself and though the current affluence of the Western world may perhaps be leading society towards another Dark Ages, we can hope that perhaps “classical” music will then be treasured in the future equivalent of the old monasteries to await a second Renaissance. If that happens “contemporary” music may discover as deep a vein of spiritual nourishment as experienced with many of the “classical” works of the last three hundred years but for now, as King Canute found to his cost, the tide cannot be stopped!

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