

The Classical Beat

By STEPHEN DANKNER

BOOMERS AND BEYOND FLOCK TO CLASSICAL CONCERTS

For the past four years, I've attended hundreds of concerts all across our region. I'm primarily a composer, but in my role as Advocate columnist ("The Classical Beat"), I preview upcoming programs, hoping to interest music lovers to go to performances in the Berkshires and southwestern Vermont.

We composers are musical insiders. Writing for "music lovers" – a term I use to describe the non-professional amateur - has been both a challenging, yet rewarding experience. As a creative musician, I paradoxically enjoy getting a feel for what moves the large number of traditional audiences more than the iconoclastic sounds that turn on the comparatively few contemporary music aficionados.

I'm a musical commentator: sensing trends, new paths and surprising digressions that appear, either by design (performers and conductors on a mission) or by chance (the oddball piece by an out-of-fashion composer that gets programmed every so often). I believe that if you have an open, un-jaded mind and listen long enough, you'll find there's always something new and unexpected to pique your interest.

So it is with Boomers and their parents (!), who comprise the greater demographic of concertgoers in the region. Yes, parents of Boomers, people 80 and older, now make up a significant percentage of the concert-going public. Musical tastes seem to have exploded in every direction, so there's something in every style and genre for people of all ages. Judging from the reaction of Boomers and older folks, I sense a willingness to accept whatever is placed before them, so long as it's well performed.

And attend, and listen carefully they do, in great numbers, at seasonal venues such as Tanglewood in Lenox, the Albany Symphony's winter programs in Lenox and Great Barrington and the Berkshire Symphony concerts offered at Williams College throughout the academic year. Chamber music at the Clark Art Institute ("Sights and Sounds" in August), Close Encounters With Music in Great Barrington during the fall and winter

months, South Mountain Concerts in Pittsfield in September/October, and many others also draw significant crowds. Healthy attendance figures at venues across the region prove that there's an audience for all of it. Despite the jeremiads you often hear about the impending death of classical music, in our area it is alive and well.

The trend is clearly visible: People are living longer, and Boomers are working harder to maintain good health to accompany their new senior citizen status. They have more disposable income to afford luxury items such as concert tickets (though for many, classical music is not a frill) and, most important, urgently desire to derive the most out of their listening experiences, which they participate in regularly. To many Boomers and their elders, music is a serious pursuit – it's even an important part of their spiritual lives.

I pursued this idea with Bob Rosenblatt, a wonderful man and an exemplar of exactly the type of "music lover" of which I speak. Bob has been an usher at Tanglewood since 1972 – long enough to have a true feel for the special 'Boomer and beyond' audience. Here's some of what he told me about the people he sees at every Tanglewood concert:

"The people who go for classical music are not interested in instant gratification. Their income and education tend to be above average, but most important: they've learned to develop patience as physical powers give way to the ability to listen and concentrate over long time periods."

I asked Bob how this ability to be more patient translates into listening skills. "Classical music generally takes half an hour, for a symphony, divided into separate, but integrated movements," he said. "Older audiences who attend concerts regularly, over the years, train themselves to become good listeners over long time spans."

Bob is also a great example of the music lover who obtains a spiritual/religious experience from the great masterworks of the classical masters. "Music is a combination of faith and reason," he told me.

"What about young people, shorter attention spans, instant gratification, iPhones, iPods, text messaging, YouTube and all the rest", I asked. "Will there be a latter-day Boomer-type audience generations from now?" "As long as people play Mozart and Beethoven, there will be a devoted audience; this music will never die."

Bob's deeply felt views are not uncommon. Ever since the Transcendentalist

philosopher/musician John Sullivan Dwight (1813-1893) in 1841 proclaimed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to be "the music of the high hour of Human Brotherhood; the triumph of the grand unitary sentiment, into which all the passions and interests of all human hearts are destined finally to blend," acolytes of the unique mystery of the musical experience have sought to find a "harmony of the spheres" in music.

And, if you're going to seek the Deity in music, Beethoven is a good place to look (though personally, I'd begin with Bach).

Another aspect of Bob's devotion to music is the commitment he and so many seniors have to volunteerism. It's a safe bet that Tanglewood and practically every arts organization and community service group would not be able to function effectively without Boomer volunteer support in donations of time, interest and funding. Taking all this into account, it's clear that Boomers and their cohorts, now and into the future, will continue to play a significant – even dominant role; their love of life and service – of "giving back" – is what motivates them in such extraordinary ways. Bob Rosenblatt is an outstanding example of such goodwill.

I imagined, after our in-depth conversation, that Bob was a highly trained musician. "I played the drums as a kid, and we studied famous classical pieces in school, but I never continued with it, though I always loved it. I'll leave you with one final thought that has guided me in my love of music: If you can't teach me to fly, teach me to sing."

These are indeed beautiful and profound words from an articulate man and music lover. Many Boomers and beyond who I've seen listen with rapt attention to the Boston Symphony or Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra would undoubtedly agree.

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