

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

THE ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES OF MUSIC PROGRAMMING

I've just returned from Miami, where my Seventh String Quartet was performed on a program of new music. Composers are always grateful to have their music performed, no matter when or where, so don't take what follows as a complaint. I've been thinking of how music generally and regardless of style, seems to get cordoned off into the artificial boundaries of our imagination.

Is this just a matter of convenience, to help performers and programmers decide what pieces "go" together, as in a dinner menu - main course, side dishes, dessert - or is there some larger issue going on, and is this compartmentalization good for music?

Traditional music can be heard micro- or macrocosmically, with equal profit. An all-French program consisting of Faure, Chausson, Debussy and Messiaen would work well, because the styles are similar, in their individual ways, with each composer representing a next-generation "take" on the pre-existing style. That's the micro approach. Conversely, a macro piano recital of works, say, by Mozart, Schubert, Ravel and Webern could also be effective. In this case, the contrast in styles would inform each piece in turn, highlighting the obvious differences. The knowledgeable listener would be left to infer the not-so-obvious connections, of which there could well be many – the classical/neo-classical parallels, for one.

Go to almost any art museum, and as you amble through the galleries you'll mark a journey through time. First, the oldest art: Classical (Greek, Roman,) advancing to Medieval, Baroque, Romantic, Impressionist, Modern, Contemporary, etc. The last thing you'll see will be the most recently created – some works may even be by living artists. If you have a favorite style or painter, then you can skip all the rest and go directly to, for example, the Pre-Raphaelite galleries and see your beloved Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This again is the microcosmic approach, with each style or movement a world unto itself. The more sophisticated procedure would be to put seemingly unrelated styles together in one gallery, where connections could be made, across the centuries, from one style to another, like my imagined

piano recital, above. The truth is that artists in every field routinely steal from the past and from each other. Maybe a more polite term than “steal” would be to say that they are “influenced.” Read Harold Bloom’s “The Anxiety of Influence,” a really thought-provoking book on this subject.

As you can guess, I’m all for integration, not segregation. I can tell you that five new string quartets on one program lasting two and one-half hours are too much to absorb. And yes, I know that in 1800 the young Beethoven gave a marathon concert – called an “academy” – of some of his newly composed music lasting 4 hours, and that today the Emerson Quartet will play all six of Bartok’s String Quartets in one evening and the Pacifica Quartet will do the same with Elliott Carter’s five.

At least in the case of Bartok and Carter, there is an audible progression of an individual composer’s evolving style over decades. In effect, you are in the “Bartok gallery” in the aural museum. Contrast this approach with programming the Bartok Fourth Quartet or Carter’s Third Quartet with Berg’s Lyric Suite. That, to my way of thinking, would be something really special. You’d hear the influences and get a feel for the style.

In the case of the five string quartets in Miami, the only “glue” holding them together was that they were all – surprise – string quartets by living composers. But since there was no stylistic or musical bond between them, no meaningful connections could be made. This was a gallery without corresponding relationships.

The other big problem is ghetto-izing new music. Why is modern music still, after one hundred years, still fighting the old battle of acceptance into the classical musical culture? If it isn’t as “good” as old music, time will tell, but only if it is mainstreamed into traditional programming. All new-music concerts represent a retreat within a fortress mentality, which in the end only serves to isolate modern music even further from an already-uninterested musical public.

If new music continues to exist on another plane, then it will never integrate within the established musical culture. Not that it’s thriving, by the way, in that alternative “festival” musical sub-culture. Preconceptions and old prejudices die hard. In the visual and plastic arts, we go to a gallery to see what’s new, and to discern current trends. We may even purchase a work by a young, up-and-coming artist. But we can’t “own” a performance of a piece

of music heard in concert. For that, we need to visit the “museum,” which is the concert hall. The situation is that newly created music is still perceived by many to be part of an alternative, experimental cultural milieu, which has only a marginal place, if that, within the “classical” tradition. Do you want proof? The group that performed in the Miami “Festival of New Music” will be performing this summer in an important music festival in the Northeast, and they were explicitly warned not to play any new music on their program. Give even accessible new music a chance? No way.

Will the way we think about pigeonholing new music evolve into acceptance, and are we ever going to put aside this musical discrimination?

If memory serves, in the film “Inherit the Wind,” based on the infamous 1925 Scopes “Monkey Trial,” Clarence Darrow (Spencer Tracy) had something like this bit of repartee with William Jennings Bryan (Fredric March:)

Darrow: “Look at this rock. Scientists from the university here say it’s 50 million years old.”

Bryan: “That’s not so; according to Bishop Ussher, the world was created at 9am, October 3, 4004 B.C. I care more about the ‘Rock of Ages’ than about the age of rocks!”

Darrow: “Never thought about it?”

Bryan: “No.”

Darrow: Do you ever think about the things you DO think about?”