

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

THE CONSERVATIVE CLASSICAL MUSICAL CULTURE

I was having a semi-serious conversation with my good buddy Stephen Walt, the principal bassoonist with the Albany Symphony, the other day. We like to hang out at the renowned “Chef’s Hat” restaurant in Williamstown on route 7, just south of the Vermont border. We talk about music all the time – performers, new pieces, favorite concerts we’ve attended – that sort of thing. So, in a moment of reckless stupidity, between bites of bacon and eggs, I posed one of the imponderable questions of music (like asking what’s the weather in the Berkshires going to be like the day after tomorrow): What is this “canon” of classical music; why does it exist and who decides what pieces and which composers are the “accepted” ones. It’s a question that has been on my mind lately; readers of this column might recall my quibbling about the creeping conservatism of Tanglewood programming, and the trend toward performing and recording the complete works of composers such as Beethoven.

So, get ready for a little heresy. These immortals (Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, et al) have been hero-worshipped, ensconced, enshrined, hallowed and adored for generations. Are they about to be thrown off the musical Mt. Olympus, relegated to the dustbin of music history? No way. So, what’s wrong with that? Plenty, in my opinion.

It used to be that music written in its own time was played, pretty much to the exclusion of older music by dead composers. People wanted to hear only new music, much as people today want to see the latest films, go to modern art galleries, read current bestsellers and see the newest shows and plays on Broadway.

So what is it about classical music that makes people want to turn back the clock and re-visit the past? Well, there’s a sense of security that comes with the name “Beethoven”, for example. We know that even if we’ve never heard a particular work on the program, it’s going to be “great”, and that it will move us emotionally; the composer’s reputation has preceded him. Certainly, it’s easier for presenters to sell tickets to concerts if there’s a “name” composer, not to mention a “name” performer. Concert attendance

generally is marginal without VIP performers, yet it's very costly to hire them. Would you guess that certain top classical artists command, and receive performance fees in excess of \$50,000 per concert. Nice work, if you can get it!

But, back to the canon. My point is that the consecrated music of the past is treated as a cultural artifact, not as a living, viable art form. What about the re-creation, via live performance, in the hands of a great performer, you might argue. If we want nothing more than to affirm the verities of the past, then why not learn to speak Latin and Greek, use it conversationally, and "live" there, in that time-honored world? This would be fundamentalism, and pretty strange behavior, to boot.

The dominance of old music over new is just not good for classical music. And it's the only example I can think of where preservation may lead to extinction. It's great that we're living longer, but it's not a healthy sign that the audience for classical music consists mostly of seniors. Re-packaging the classics has not attracted young audiences; only new and vigorously exciting music that takes risks has the potential to do that.

There is no choice but to live in today's world. We are a polyglot society and speak many languages, dialects, colloquialisms, vernacular and slang. Music is a language, too. It has its own vocabulary (notes on a staff), syntax (melody, harmony and rhythm) and grammar (formal structure, dynamics and tempo). And today's classical music, composed by living composers, is a living and vital expression of our time. Our American culture, more than any other, reflects that *mélange*. The trouble is, it has to compete with the venerated past, and that is unfortunate. New works don't compare with past masterpieces, and not because they aren't as good; that has nothing to do with it. It's that language thing, again. It takes time, repeated exposure, receptive, enlightened listeners and (not to be underestimated) really good and committed performances for new pieces to be understood. The classics have been around for so long, they've been digested and "put away" in the back of our minds. "Oh yeah, the Beethoven Quartets – I listen to them all the time, on the radio, driving home from work."

The classics were gradually admitted to the canon by a sort of process of elimination over the span of many years. Musicians and audiences cast their votes, in effect, through performer advocacy, concert attendance and record sales for their favorite works by a select few composers, and so on. It's

always been fairly casual as to which composer is currently “in” or “out”, though big-name and powerful conductors and performers have always exercised a lot of influence with players and the music-loving public. Rarely have living or recently deceased composers of classical music been on the “in” list, but sometimes they’ve made it. John Adams (“Short Ride on a Fast Machine”, “Dr. Atomic”, his brand-new opera) is popular, as is Osvaldo Golijov (“St. Mark Passion”, “Yiddishbuk”), Samuel Barber (“Adagio for Strings”, used in the film “Platoon”), Leonard Bernstein (“West Side Story”, “Candide” overture, “Chichester Psalms”). Aaron Copland is hugely popular, with “Lincoln Portrait”, “Fanfare for the Common Man”, “Appalachian Spring”, “and Hoedown” from “Rodeo” - all justly familiar and well loved by the public.

How many new classical pieces composed within the last fifty years have become canonical? This is the question that gave Stephen and me heartburn at the Chef’s Hat. Think about it; it’s not an easy question to answer, because there aren’t many. See what I mean about the canon? It’s almost as if a piece has to be deleted from the list so another can be admitted to take its place, there being a limit on the number.

We risk stagnation by the incessant clinging to the familiar, like Linus with his beloved blanket. If we love music, we have an obligation to nourish it as a living art form, not to put it under glass, like a fragile hothouse plant. Imagine a future time, on some distant planet in a parallel universe (horror of horrors) where 90 percent of all the “classical” music we’d hear was new music, mostly by composers who were alive. Now and then there’d be a Podcast or XM satellite radiobroadcast of some “ancient” music by a fellow named Mahler, (or a really old geezer, Mozart). Later, when we returned to Earth and popped in one of our old CDs, we’d be bowled over by the strength and durability of this primordial music. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”.

I’ll admit that for more than fifty years “contemporary music” of the abstract, high modernist ilk has turned away many listeners in the name of progress, experimentation, the search for a radical originality, or just plain indifference to the audience for classical music. Can we blame listeners for being gun-shy, after all those years of disdain by composers? But that was then; this is now.

It turns out that there's a lot of extremely good music out there right now – all being composed by inspired composers who deserve our attention, and it really should be heard. This summer, at Tanglewood, the student orchestra tore through Steven Stucky's brilliant and fantastic "Second Concerto for Orchestra" – an incredible piece. Just last week there were important and highly visible premieres of two extraordinary works - Tobias Picker's new grand opera "An American Tragedy", given by the Metropolitan Opera and Peter Lieberson's revelatory "Neruda Songs", composed for his wife, mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and performed by the Boston Symphony, under the direction of James Levine. People are beginning to expect to hear new music now, and not tremble with fear at the thought of a premiere performance.

What's going on here? Is modern music losing its edge, becoming less thorny? The answer, broadly speaking, is "yes". It's a great pleasure to start to see a profusion of accessible new works take center stage, and to find that audiences love them immediately. For my money, I'd admit these two, above, into my personal canon (which, by the way, happens to include the Beethoven string quartets).

The language of new music has matured, to become more inclusive, incorporating elements of the past with the sensibility and immediacy of the present, with all its linguistic diversity. And do you know what? People – large numbers of them – are starting to listen and smile. Are you?