

WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL?

Five brief essays on Classical Music

STEPHEN DANKNER

Prelude

Having attended hundreds of concerts in the course of writing my weekly music column, “*The Classical Beat*,” for *The Advocate* newspaper over the past six years, I’ve had ample opportunity to think about and refine my ideas about classical music. The Berkshires region offers a wide spectrum of performances – from vocal and choral to chamber and orchestral music in a variety of venues, large and small.

From April through October, classical music lovers can hear performers in such series as Close Encounters With Music in Great Barrington, Concerts at Tannery Pond in New Lebanon, New York, of course Tanglewood in Lenox, and South Mountain Concerts in Pittsfield.

Being a composer, I perhaps listen to music a bit differently than performers and music lovers; I tend to focus on the inner workings of the music being performed, rather than on the performers on stage or even the performance itself. In my columns, I’ve defined my role as a commentator on the music, rather than a music critic.

Classical music is unique. It travels a different path than popular music, jazz, rock, the varieties of ethnic and world music, *et al.* Of late, I’ve come to the realization that there is something uniquely new and different about my relationship to this music I’ve known all my life: The great masterworks offer the potential to allow us to think beyond the specific music we hear to acknowledge that it also offers an esthetic analog to poetry, truth, wisdom, architecture, philosophy, argument and reason. Music is a portal, at its most profound level, to the ineffable...

In these brief essays, which began life as ‘*Classical Beat*’ columns, I’ve tried to encapsulate my thoughts about “What Makes it Classical” into five areas of exploration: Musical language, form, creativity, spirituality and where classical music might be going. Verbal sketches, meditations...

I hope that whether or not you see things my way, you'll be intrigued by these conversations with myself on the nature and sublime mystery of the art form we cherish.

Stephen Dankner
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WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL? PART I

Let me tell you a story. Years ago, when I was teaching at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, the “Fame”-like arts high school, I made it part of my mission to introduce students, especially those interested in composition, to the music of those forward-looking 20th century composers, living or dead, whose work is important – people like Edgard Varese, Elliott Carter, Philip Glass and others.

I taught lots of jazz students such as Jason Marsalis, jazz trumpeter Wynton’s youngest brother. Jazz students tend, I found, to be interested and open to experimental trends - maybe because they create music in the moment through improvisation - a form of spontaneous composition. Classical violinists and budding opera singers, say, are by contrast, expected to replicate what’s on the printed page.

So, one jazz student, after hearing a steady diet of John Cage, Carter and Glass for a week, thoughtfully considered what he had heard and asked me “It’s all very interesting, and I like some of it, but it’s not classical music, is it?” I was taken aback. “Why not?” I responded. “Carter writes symphonies and concertos; even Cage has composed ‘Sonatas’.” “Because,” he explained, “this music doesn’t do what the older music you’ve been teaching us – Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler – does.”

I’ve been thoughtfully considering his question over the past sixteen years. “Out of the mouths of babes,” as the saying goes. Do I agree with my student’s assessment? Well, yes, no and maybe.

It took me a while, but I figured out that what Ronald was looking for and couldn’t find in all this modern music was a linear narrative – something that is the hallmark of all the classical masters from Bach to Stravinsky. Music without a narrative doesn’t tell a story or go places you’d expect, with the result that listeners frequently get lost. What was missing? It’s called “form.”

The classical masters, through a process of accretion, perfected various musical forms over many years, and by their use, you are taken on a logical, progressive aural journey every time you hear a Bach fugue, a Beethoven symphony or a Chopin or Brahms piano piece.

Modern composers don't like to use the old, traditional forms. Why? Because they are organically, inseparably connected to the centuries-old scales, chords and keys. As a result, practically every modern composer has had to invent a unique form that fits her/his music, because they have dispensed with those very scales, chords and keys, which to them have become obsolete.

Though composers are through with them, listeners aren't; they still love all those old scales, chords and keys – the grammar and syntax of music – which the old boys employed to create masterpieces.

As a result, there is, after more than a century of antagonism, a great divide between traditional music lovers and composers who steadfastly, in the name of progress and artistic license, refuse to ascribe to these venerable forms and musical rules.

It may simply be a matter of unfamiliarity, composers have repeatedly said. After all, we hear lots more old music than new, so modern music has to be played much more frequently to become memorable, until the ear “gets it.”

I'm not so sure. Ronald was right when he said, “this music doesn't do what the older music...does.”

Music, after all, is a language. Can an individual composer, working alone, create a universal musical language that can replace what we've had, by common agreement, for centuries – a sort of musical Esperanto? That is really the question.

Philip Glass has come close. With his incessant repeated patterns he is the doyen of ‘classical’ minimalism, forged in the 1970s, with works like the 1976 opera “Einstein on the Beach.” Schoenberg’s 12-tone music is also highly structured, but in the opposite way, with its ‘every note is accounted-for’ approach. Clearly, Glass has found his audience; Schoenberg’s music, even at this late date, is more respected than loved, analyzed more than performed.

If you’re a listener of the traditionalist stripe – one who loves Mozart and Brahms and exclaims “I don’t understand it!” when you hear a new modern-sounding piece – now you know why: You’re lost in a sea of irreconcilable personal musical languages that solve the problems the composer has set up in constructing that particular piece of music.

Understanding is a beginning. Like Ronald, you will have taken the first step when you realize that Varese piece you recently heard at the Berkshire Symphony doesn’t attempt to do what Mozart and Brahms did.

Is modern concert music still “classical”? Don’t look to me for an answer - decide for yourself. Yes, no, maybe...

WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL? PART II

Previously, the subject was music as a language – how it developed, over the centuries, by common consensus on the part of the classical composers, across boundaries of era, nationality and style.

The emergence and history of the classical style is a deep and complex subject, more appropriate for a “Music 101” appreciation course than for a brief essay. Still, it can be said that there was a universal musical language employed over the last 400 years that is the foundation of the cherished canon of classical masterworks.

That universal language, which gave us Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Debussy and Stravinsky, *et al*, has become, for contemporary composers, fairly obsolete. Yes, one can go back and borrow from the past, but the trend has been to attempt to break new ground – either to build upon the past’s great legacy or to completely disavow it. That, in essence, is the state of modern music.

Today, there are opposing forces at work that neatly separate old music from the music of the last 100 years. Thinking about “form” – the structure of music – how it’s conceived by the composer and understood by the listener – is one way to compare and contrast the “before” and “after.”

The old forms – fugue, sonata, rondo and variations – were progressive; they transported you on a logical aural journey where predictable hills and valleys of activity and repose were in constant play. Themes were crafted to be memorable, and frequent repetition reinforced their importance. “Aha,” you’d subliminally say to yourself; “I’ve heard that before; it must be the main idea.”

Brahms was one of the first composers to have disdained literal repetition; he preferred “continuous variation,” so when the theme

returned, he'd embellish it by adding complexities of rhythm or harmony that weren't there originally. What was interesting and challenging for Brahms, though, added some bumps in the aural road for listeners, who were used to literal repetition; they had to work a bit harder to recognize that all-important theme. That meant fewer "aha" moments. And that, friends, was the beginning of the problem...

Borrowing broadly from both ancient Greek philosophy and modern physics, we can look at the world, and music, as subscribing to the opposing precepts of Becoming or Being.

Metaphorically, the musical forms mentioned above are all Becoming - constructs to guide the listener, in real time, via a pre-planned sonic pathway, the purpose of which is to synthesize a journey, a logical progression from a starting point to a definitive conclusion. The devices of tension and release, of conflict, resolution and catharsis are all ingrained in these forms, though in different proportions. Of course, as listeners, you are supposed to relish that part that is expected, but also take delight in the infrequent, unpredictable and surprising parts of your excursion. With less literal repetition, though, the road got bumpier. Now, after Schoenberg and Carter (and a whole slew of other composers - all Brahms' heirs,) there are hardly any perceptible "aha" moments to listen for.

As for the Being school of thought - well, this seems to be in great favor with young composers these days. Minimalism - the dominant style within this approach to composition - would be anathema to Brahms and Schoenberg. Unaltered repetition, or repetitive music that varies only subtly over a long period of time, is music that exists in the moment, and is made up of isolated events that are ends in themselves, like sub-atomic particles. You won't find big post-Romantic, Mahlerian climaxes, just an extremely gradual unfolding of textures that seem to float in space, like the ephemeral Higgs-boson. The idea is to experience the journey, since the destination is far off, beyond the horizon, if it exists at all. The music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992.)

accomplishes this aspect of serene timelessness with great power and beauty. And Brian Eno, the Andy Warhol of ambient music, has created purist, minimalist pop in his 1978 opus, “Music for Airports.”

The language of music, like any living tongue, is constantly evolving, never static. This can be a problem for music lovers who exclusively venerate the classical masters and are attuned only to the musical gestalt of Becoming. Last week, when I put forth the question, “Is modern concert music ‘classical,’” I advised that you, the reader and listener, should decide for yourself.

With the perception, though, of the musical language of Being comes the potential for recognition and acceptance of an alternative. That “aha” moment is still possible, if you can learn how to listen “in the moment.”

WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL? PART III

In the two previous essays in this series I addressed the issues of music as a language and how the use of codified, universal forms served both composers and listeners, making certain that language communicated effectively. The combined genius of the classical masters throughout Europe and elsewhere over the last 400 years, in their mastery of these skills and principles has bequeathed us a musical legacy unmatched in the world for its diversity and breadth of expression that continues to move us today.

How can this seemingly boundless torrent of expressive energy be explained and understood, and what has driven it and continues to promulgate it today? The answer, in a word, is ‘creativity.’

As I see it, the components of creativity are these: a need to “say” something – to express in music feelings and concepts – both obvious and abstract; the desire to communicate. Underpinning that must be the knowledge, or craft, the composer needs to express these vague musical impulses by being a master of the language of music. Then, the sorting out process begins: what will be the nature of the piece and who will perform it? Can the idea be best expressed through the medium of a solo piano, a string quartet, or is an orchestra required to give voice to the full instrumental palette? Today a composer could just as easily consider a combination of live plus electronic sounds. The possibilities for the most effective realization of the composer’s ideas are endless. Stravinsky said that he initially “felt terror when I realized everything was permitted me.” Only when he imposed limitations on his creativity – the choices he made - was he able to alleviate that paralyzing fear of having too much freedom. Imposing limitations, as it happens, is a necessary part of the creative process.

Over the last two centuries, much attention – I think too much - has been paid to composers’ styles of music and their conservative or progressive tendencies. Most of the resulting value judgments are based on the surface layer of the music. Bach, Mozart, Brahms and

others have been seen as upholding tradition, while Haydn, Beethoven, Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner brought music to new modes of expression.

True enough, but is it fair to say Brahms was less creative than Mahler, or that the genius of Mozart is less incandescent than the fiery outbursts of Beethoven? Creativity is uniquely embodied in each composer, according to his/her gifts – a variant of the ‘nature vs. nurture’ theory. How a composer lives and hopes to thrive as an artist is as much a part of the decisions that determine compositional style as is personality. Composers often go against type and can be Janus-like at different times and in different works, composing some pieces that look backward, some that look forward.

Paradoxically, by looking to the past, Brahms turned to the old Baroque form of the passacaglia to create one of the most spectacular finale movements in the entire Romantic repertoire in his Symphony No. 4. In 1936, Bartok composed a fugue for the first movement of “Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,” a radical return to an obsolete Bachian technique within the context of a very modern-sounding piece. In the 1940s, Conlon Nancarrow, an American ex-jazz musician-turned experimental composer, secluded himself in Mexico City where he composed almost exclusively for his battered antique player pianos, creating the perforated music rolls himself. There, he invented rhythms so complex and tempos so fast they could only be “performed” on these artifacts of 1900s-era parlor entertainment.

If musicians – composers and performers, as well as traditional music lovers could get beyond the artificially created boundaries of style, when all the polemical smoke has cleared, then perhaps the creativity unique to every composer could be apprehended. “A symphony is a world,” said Mahler. Yes, and so too is a Faure piano nocturne, a Cage “Sonata & Interlude,” the Walter Piston Fourth Symphony and “Circles” by Luciano Berio. Some composers look to the cherished past, others forge ahead into the unknown. All their works are ignited by the creative impulse – the

thrill of discovery when the spark of a potent idea is hammered on the anvil of possibility.

Language and form hold out the potential for creation, as the alphabet and grammar are essential if one wishes to write a novel. But creativity – the germ of an idea - is what gives it hope for life, be it “Call me Ishmael” or the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL? PART IV

Charles Ives (1874-1954,) the iconoclastic American composer was fond of aphorisms that baffled and outraged listeners. “What has sound got to do with music,” he infamously wrote in “Essays Before a Sonata.” Ives, though, was onto something: Music is more than sound, as we’ll discover.

The three previous essays in this series have explored musical forms, the language of music and creativity. Continuing the discussion, I’d like to investigate its most intangible attribute – spirituality.

What is spirituality in music? It lies at the nexus of religion and philosophy, and is therefore neither overtly worshipful nor about finding the path to living a fulfilling life, though it can be redemptive. Spirituality in classical music follows this middle road, seeking communion, from the source – the composer, via the performer to the listener. Music’s unique power to transcend meaning and reality enables us to potentially perceive the ineffable.

Somehow, especially when listening to purely instrumental music, where there is no text to guide us, we intuitively sense that we are privy to a great truth, a transcendent awareness that the composer has captured, and that is being shared with us, in the moment, as we listen.

What exactly is this “great truth”? Look at a Bach or Mozart manuscript; it isn’t notated on the page and cannot be found in the performance directions in the published score. We know it from its effects, not from what we can see or deduce. I compare it to the “dark matter” that makes up most of the cosmos, yet is invisible and, so far, undetectable to physicists. Look for musical “dark matter” in the late string quartets and Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, the slow movements of Mozart’s piano concertos, the opening fugue in Bela Bartok’s “Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta” and “On the Transmigration of Souls” by John Adams, to

name but a few examples. This music transports us to a higher plane.

Am I conflating spirituality with the unseen forces of nature? Yes, for I think this comparison illuminates my thesis that the greatest part of music – its true, underlying essence, is that which is invisible - beyond our left-brain powers to comprehend. Einstein famously said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science.” So it is, I believe, with music in particular – that most mysterious, and intangible of the arts. I feel certain that Ives would agree with Einstein.

I will go further: There is something of spirituality that is in the DNA of classical music, from its very beginnings as a self-aware art form. For 1000 years, composers have recognized that qualities such as nobility, generosity, exaltation, love, tenderness, dignity, honor and seriousness of purpose can be captured and infused, via the creative process into music. If you look for it, you’ll find it everywhere, wherever classical music is studied, composed, performed and heard.

If we fast-forward to relatively recent times, we find that the fruits of the spiritual in classical music, sadly, appear to have withered beginning with the end of the 19th century. As music veered away from the positive attributes above, it forswore the spiritual impulse. Music got slower, through the accretion of detail – “too many ‘inner voices’” – said Leonard Bernstein in his Norton Lectures at Harvard – and traversed the shadowy road from the pensive and ruminative to the depressed, morbid, cloying and finally, with Mahler and Tchaikovsky in their last completed symphonies, to resignation and inconsolable despair.

Classical music composition today has largely abandoned, either due to embarrassment or fear, the innocence, simplicity and optimism necessary to drive the spiritual impulse. As always, I look to Franz Schubert, my musical spiritual true compass, to re-discover what has been lost. In the song “An die Musik,” (“To

Music”) he sets this poetry by Franz von Schober: “Oh lovely Art, in how many grey hours, when life's fierce orbit ensnared me, have you kindled my heart to warm love and carried me away into a better world!”

“A better world.” That is what we apprehend in classical music – what the Masters have bequeathed us. Is it possible that we can, in these latter days, recapture the spiritual essence of their music?

Listen to Ives’ “The Unanswered Question.” Though it was composed in 1906, it still resonates, and is a defining moment of contemplative spirituality in music. As Bernstein so aptly put it in his final Norton lecture, “We may not know what the question is, but we do know the answer: The answer is ‘YES!’”

WHAT MAKES IT CLASSICAL? PART V

Classical music. What is it? What makes it ‘classical’? And where is it going? Defining questions, these. Music had been around for countless millennia in undocumented form, but it was the advent of a new breed of performing musician - composers - and the resultant invention of musical notation about 1000 years ago that allowed for the preservation of their works for posterity. Music notation gave rise to the transformation of solo and communal song as well as religious ritual and instrumental performance into lasting form – in other words, works of art; *viz.* proto-classical music.

The attributes, according to Webster, of anything ‘classic’ are: “serving as a standard of excellence; of the first order of importance.” Insofar as classical music is concerned, Webster continues: “Music in the learned traditions, *e.g.* art song, chamber music, opera, symphony...”

Why define what seems obvious? Two reasons: it’s important, summing up, to return to first principles, and also because it may be that my central concerns in these “What Makes it Classical?” columns when thinking about new music will not be relevant looking towards the future. The game has changed, but have the rules? Read on.

When we identify a musical work as “great” or a “masterpiece,” such as a Beethoven symphony or even something relatively recent, like Benjamin Britten’s “War Requiem,” composed in 1962, we subconsciously categorize it as having ‘classic’ status. Taken together, the vast body of these works comprises the so-called ‘canon’ of classical music. To be deemed worthy of belonging to this exalted elite, there must necessarily be agreement from both the music-loving public and professional musicians that the composition in question is indeed worthy; it must be a true “work of the first order...”

How many masterpieces are there? The answer is that it's within the value system of the listener - the ear of the beholder, in effect. Certainly there exist potentially thousands of compositions, in all genres, composed over the centuries, extending into the dim, far reaches of the past that quality as "great."

You may have noticed that we've been looking exclusively into history. Well, it does take time for a composer to get "elected" into the canon. Sometimes it happens fairly quickly, as in the case of the "War Requiem"; more often, it takes longer – often a lot longer; Berlioz is a good example. Composers need champions to take up their cause: Bach's music was unknown to the general public when Mendelssohn, in 1829, resurrected it, conducting the "St. Matthew Passion" in Berlin, 102 years after it was composed; Leonard Bernstein dusted off the Mahler symphonies after 50 years of relative neglect. As a result, Mahler now is deemed a venerated master and is perhaps the most popular symphonist, after Beethoven.

All well and good, now those terms have been defined and composers and their works have been codified. Where does that leave us looking ahead? Is the past a prologue to the future? Here's where it gets tricky.

The spiritual impulse is not today what it once was in classical music's golden age, from 1600-1900. Throughout its early history, up until and including Monteverdi, around 1600, 'classical' music was mostly choral music that accompanied religious observance to glorify God. After Bach, the secularization of music detached its spiritual underpinnings as a pathway to the higher realms of experience and became dormant, in order to serve the mundane functions of the nobility, and later, the concert-going public. Music became grounded in the classic forms of sonata, concerto, symphony, et al - forms beloved, by the way, of composers, performers and audiences.

To access the latent spirituality of instrumental music, we have to intuit the "dark matter" of spirituality that is imbedded in the

works of the masters. We need gifted performers and equally gifted listeners for this esthetic awareness to become palpable.

Ask yourself: Does the concert music being composed today have what it takes to forge the next link in the Great Chain of Being, to ascend to the higher realms? If not, then it has broken the chain – that connection with the immemorial musical past, and new music has, as a result, veered onto a tangential course, doing something else, fulfilling other needs.

If some of today's music does, however possess those time-honored esthetic sparks capable of inspiring listeners: conceived by composers, interpreted *via* gifted performers and transmitted to perceptive listeners, then we may hope to experience spiritual wonderment worthy of the works composed by the great masters of the past. That is the stuff of what will, over time, make it "classical."

Postlude

This little book is dedicated to Ronald Markham, my music student at The New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, who in 1994 asked me a question.

Here, sixteen years later, is my answer. I'm sorry, Ronald, that it took me so long to answer your deceptively simple but profound question.

Stephen Dankner



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Stephen Dankner received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Composition from the Juilliard School in 1971. A list of works since 1990 includes nine symphonies, eleven string quartets, six concerti (two for piano, one for violin, two for cello and alto saxophone); three major song cycles; sonatas for violin (2), piano, alto saxophone, cello; three piano trios; a piano quartet and five orchestral tone poems.

The National Symphony Orchestra, Albany Symphony Orchestra, Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Nashville Symphony, Kansas City Symphony, Nürnberg Symphoniker, Portland Youth Philharmonic and others have given performances of commissioned works. The Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra has given premiere performances of six of his nine symphonies.

The composer has twice been a recipient of a State of Louisiana Division of the Arts Fellowship in Music Composition (1986, 1998) and the State of Louisiana Division of the Arts Mini-Grants (4 - 1998-2004). Winner, William Lincer International Composition Award for Piano Quartet (2001). Fellowship residencies at Yaddo, Virginia Center for Creative Arts, A Studio In The Woods and The Millay Colony. Dankner was a recipient of a Surdna Arts Teacher's Fellowship to compose his Eighth Symphony (2004-'05).

The composer is music columnist for *The Advocate* weekly newspaper serving Berkshire County in western Massachusetts and southwestern Vermont.

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