

Observations on Music, Culture, and Politics

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By

Daniel Asia

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TO CAROLEE ASIA
FOR HER
LOVE, GOOD SPIRITEDNESS,
AND PATIENCE.

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PREFACE

This book is a bit of a surprise, or at least it is to me. It came about in a rather unintended fashion. I had been giving a talk around the country, “Breath In a Ram’s Horn: The Jewish Spirit in Classical Music.” One of my daughter’s best friends was dating a young editor at the *Huffington Post* (*HP*). He and I met for the fun of it, and he took a liking to the idea of my writing up that presentation as a feature for *HP*, with the subtitle “Why Classical Music is like Jewish Prayer.” I did so, and he published it around the time of the Jewish High Holy Days.

The *HP* editor mentioned to me sometime thereafter that since I had been published I could now post other materials. I did not give it much thought. A few months or so later, I attended a colleague’s concert including Cage’s well-known work *Sonatas and Interludes*. Soon thereafter, I wrote “The Put On of the Century, or the Cage Centenary” and posted it. Little did I know I was whacking a hornets’ nest, as those hornets came after me with a vengeance. This resulted in my continuing to take up my pen (okay, keyboard) to ward off these attacks and to make the case for why the compositional world was not in a good place and needed to re-orient itself.

My succeeding articles were therefore mostly negative, taking various composers or trends to task. A number of years later a close colleague remarked to me “I like your articles, but they are generally negative, and it is pretty easy just bashing people. Why don’t you let people know what you like.” The result was my series of writings with the title “Music I (Mostly) hold Dear.” You might ask why the “Mostly.” Occasionally I allowed myself to still go a bit negative. As a composer, I cannot give any of my contemporaries, predecessors, or even myself a completely free pass. If the insights and viewpoints I have garnered over my long career are to mean anything to anybody, then I need to be completely honest, even when that means being critical.

When giving presentations I sometimes mention my various goals. These include writing the best music I can, which will hopefully bring joy and transcendence into people’s lives; to help American culture and ideas survive; and to help the Jewish people and their mission to thrive. The materials in this book reflect these priorities. Underlying these ambitions—

and the music I have written that effects the opinions I bring to my work—is a dedication to beauty, beautiful ideas, and the elevating affect it can have on the soul.

Other essays are more broadly polemical about the state of classical music, the arts, and culture. These are reflective of how they are now presented in the culture-at-large and in the academy. And finally, I follow-up my very first article with others relating to Jewish concerns.

I am grateful to *Academic Questions*, *The New Criterion*, and the *Huffington Post* for publishing my work and those who made this happen, including Stephen Balch, Peter Wood, Carol Iannone, Roger Kimball, and Joshua Fleet.

I thank my many fine teachers who prepared me for my compositional, conductorial, and intellectual journey. They include: Peter Seibert, Jerome Gray, Randall McClellan, Iva Dee Hiatt, James McElwaine, Ron Perera, Stephen Albert, Valerie Pilcher, Neil Stillings, Jacob Druckman, Arthur Weisberg, Bruce MacCombie, and Richard Siegel.

My parents unwittingly guided me in my endeavors as composer and writer. My father, Benjamin Asia, was a child prodigy on the piano who ended up turning to the law after his father died and the Depression hit. He instilled his joy in music through endless practicing of *Coney Island Washboard*; I played the trombone and he the piano. My mother, Hilda Aronson Asia, was the daughter of Roslyn, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who became—but of course!—an English teacher. As a result, my mother enforced a strict attention to language and grammar which I hope has paid off in my writing. She too was a lawyer, so conversations around the kitchen table with the two of them required well-reasoned and well-spoken arguments.

My wife Carolee Asia—a gifted artist—and I have lived a wonderful life imbued with what we early on designated “creative tension.” This involved our work, the raising of our three children—Shoshana, Reuben, and Eve—and early on at least, the peripatetic existence of a composer that involved various moves almost always with a new child in tow. For her love, good spiritedness, and patience, I am grateful.

FOREWORD

WHY HIGH CULTURE MATTERS

JAY NORDLINGER

Daniel Asia is a composer and teacher of classical music. Those are very good things to be. He is also a spokesman for classical music—another very good thing to be. He *defends* music, *champions* music, *evangelizes* for music. All highly important.

“Classical music has taken a big cultural hit in America since the late sixties,” he writes. Yes, it has. Classical musicians used to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, as many of us note. Toscanini appeared on the cover three times! Beecham, Szell, and Solti appeared there as well. So did Flagstad, Tebaldi, and a slew of other opera stars.

Opera stars were seen, and heard, on *The Tonight Show*, too. Johnny Carson was evidently keen on them. He had big names, like Pavarotti. But he also had Judith Blegen and Martina Arroyo. Beverly Sills not only appeared on his show, she guest-hosted for him. Johnny had instrumentalists as guests, too: the violinist Eugene Fodor, for example, and the pianist Byron Janis.

“Now they won’t let us talk,” Renée Fleming said to me, about ten years ago. What did she mean? The great soprano meant that classical musicians—chiefly singers—are still invited to appear on talk shows, occasionally. And they get to sing or play. But not sit down and talk to the host, as before.

The decline and fall of classical music is an old theme, one that I have often made sport of. “The death of classical music,” said Charles Rosen, the late pianist-scholar, “is perhaps the oldest tradition of classical music.” Yet there is legitimate cause for concern.

Research shows that the leading factor in whether a person attends classical concerts or operas is: did the person study an instrument as a child?

Did he actually touch an instrument with his hands? The composer Thea Musgrave pointed out to me that people are able to consume reams of music these days—via YouTube, for example (that gift from heaven). But such consumption is basically a passive activity. There is no substitute for making music yourself.

Music education in America is way, way down, I'm given to understand. Asia has a front-row seat (much as one would want to avert one's eyes). "Students come to university never having heard of Bach or Beethoven," he writes, adding, "I kid you not."

He tells us that "the professional class of previous generations" knew classical music, thanks to "the playing of an instrument." They had musical training—however modest—from grade school through college. They also had exposure to music by attending concerts, and plays that featured music. "Essentially, this has been lost," writes Asia.

Yes, but speaking of Asia: there is a great appetite for classical music in China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and so on. Western conservatories are stuffed with students from East Asia. When I asked Lorin Maazel, the late conductor, about the future of classical music, the first words out of his mouth were, "Thank God for China."

As you may have gathered, I have interviewed a fair amount of musicians over the years, and you'll forgive me if I quote them. In 2002, I spoke with Ned Rorem, the American composer, who was lamenting the status of his class, i.e., contemporary composers of classical music: "We are living in the only period in history in which music of the past is stressed at the expense of music of the present."

Asia has written about the "professional class." How about the intellectuals? Rorem said that they know about visual art, past and present; they know about literature, past and present. But if they know any music at all, it's pop music. "I and my brothers and sisters are not part of their ken," he said.

How about the general public? The public "has no notion of what it is we composers do," said Rorem. Performers are more important than composers—a lot more important—in the eyes of the world. "We're a despised minority," said Rorem. "Actually, we're not even that, because we don't even exist, and to be despised, you have to exist."

I assure the reader that Asia is less gloomy. He is generally a happy warrior, or at least a determined, feisty one. But surely he knows what Rorem is talking about.

Something in this book made me think of my own experience. Asia writes, “Most universities have historically supported great performances of Western art music on campus as part of their educational mission for their students as well as the surrounding community.”

I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the home of the University of Michigan—and a small capital of the arts. This was in the 1970s and ’80s. There were as many concerts as sports events. I thought this was normal. Getting out and about in the world, I saw that this was abnormal—and I knew that I was very lucky.

In his collection, Asia talks of various issues in music, including political correctness. Does PC exist in classical music? Oh, my heavens, yes. Twenty years ago, the late composer Patrick Kavanaugh made an amusing remark to me. It went something like this: “If you want to get attention or funding for your music, just throw in some gamelan.”

The gamelan is a musical tradition from Indonesia. It is a fine tradition, I’m sure. But it was comically trendy in the West for a long while. I’m not sure how it stands today.

Composers, writes Asia, like to “regale us” with messages concerning poverty, sexual liberation, war, the rights of workers, environmentalism, and so on. For a time, I was hearing a lot of “environmental” pieces. A shameless punner, I nicknamed this genre of music “the greenpiece.”

I think of Krzysztof Penderecki, the late Polish composer, who said, “I don’t write political music. Political music is immediately obsolete.”

One of the many things I admire about Asia is that he is not afraid to express an opinion—to plant his flag, whether you or I would plant it there or not. He is not vague. In Dan’s view, Stravinsky and Schoenberg are “certainly the two most important composers of the twentieth century.” *Certainly*. I appreciate this lack of shyness.

He says what a great many people think but fear to say—about Pierre Boulez, for example. That composer was supremely honored in his time. He was no doubt brainy as hell. Will his music be honored by posterity? I would

not bet the ranch, and neither would Asia. Fashions come and go, whether in *couture* or in music.

Asia quotes Boulez as saying that, if you don't compose twelve-tone music, your music is "irrelevant" to the "needs" of your "epoch." You will pardon me if I do some more quoting, from interviews I have conducted.

Lee Hoiby, the late American composer, said, "I felt the hot breath of the composition police on my neck every time I wrote a major third."

Elliott Carter, another American composer, was very, very different from Hoiby: he was an exemplar of modernism. (He was also one of the most intelligent people I have ever been around.) Asked what he thought about the "neo-Romantics" such as Samuel Barber, he said, "Well, some of us felt that the kind of music Sam wrote had already been done, only done better than anybody could do it now. Therefore there was no reason to do it now." With a grin, Carter added, "What Sam did was deplorable," but the music, nevertheless, "is rather good."

I should say. And don't forget the words of Duke Ellington: "If it sounds good, it *is* good."

How about John Cage? A lot of us think he has no clothes, clever as he may be. Asia points to him like the boy pointing to the emperor. There are many, many people who privately agree with Asia—but only privately.

They also agree with him when he writes this: "For the most part, pop music is bad stuff. Its tunes are anodyne, freeze-dried, lacking any substance. Its rhythm is base and never changing. The music starts nowhere and goes nowhere . . ."

Let me not leave the impression that Asia is a mere naysayer or a crab. No, he is a wonderful booster. Reading him, I've been reminded of my old fondness for Robert Beaser, an American composer born in 1954. I intend to listen to him again. Also, Asia sent me off to listen to a violin concerto by Stephen Jaffe, and to the music in general of Stephen Albert. Those are two Stephens with whom I had not been acquainted.

I will return to that crack by Charles Rosen: "The death of classical music is perhaps the oldest tradition of classical music." I believe that classical music will go on and on. I believe that it is unkillable, same as beauty, soul, and intelligence are unkillable. But classical music will always, always be a minority taste.

Permit me to quote a crack of my own: “There’s a reason they call it ‘pop’ music, you know: It’s popular.” Classical music is not *supposed* to be popular.

But it should be loved and nurtured by a minority. Composed, played, sung, conducted, and listened to by a minority. How healthy is that minority? How healthy is it in the United States, which has been a major home to classical music for about a hundred years? The minority needs boosting. And no one can say that Daniel Asia—talented, irrepressible, and invaluable—is not doing his part.

PART ONE

THE IDEA OF HIGH CULTURE

PART ONE: CHAPTER 1

DIMINUENDO: CLASSICAL MUSIC AND THE ACADEMY

How is the tradition of Western classical music faring on our university campuses? Before answering this question, it is necessary to understand what has transpired with classical music in the wider culture, as the relationship between the two is so strong.

Classical music has taken a big cultural hit in America since the late sixties. In the seventies and eighties serious reviews and articles on classical music still appeared in major mass-market magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Its presence on television, a frequent occurrence in the sixties, was already gone. Today the occasional article on classical music appears in the *New Yorker*, not exactly a mass-market rag. Reviewers in regional newspapers have mostly been let go, or their beat handed over to someone completely without training in classical music, such as the restaurant or country-western music reviewer. Online reviews haven't taken on this terrain much, and the intellectual journals that should cover classical music have, of late, fallen down on the task as well.

Commentary magazine, which has a long and rich history of publishing music reviews, most recently under the formidable Terry Teachout, has retreated to including a general category of culture (whether highbrow, middle, or lowbrow not being particularly clear), with film, for example, apparently being treated on the same level as classical music, as is Broadway, pop, and jazz (please, no gasps—I will explain shortly). *The New Criterion*, with the fine ear and pen of Jay Nordlinger, reviews concerts in New York City, albeit mostly programs of standard repertory music. Occasionally, Nordlinger's reviews also appear in the *National Review*. Book reviews, which by definition examine new books, simply no longer have an analogue in serious music. The result is that classical music, and particularly new classical music, has been marginalized, if not excised, from the cultural landscape.

I have of course left out the paper of record, the *New York Times*. It does indeed continue to review concerts of classical and new classical music. Having said this, it reviews the latest pop, Indie, country-western, and rap concerts as well. Thus, its actual reportage of serious music has been drastically reduced from just twenty-five years ago. This began under the guidance of John Rockwell, whose prevailing doctrine was that high and low no longer exist as useful categories, and therefore all styles of music are essentially equal and should be treated as such. In *All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (Knopf, 1983), Rockwell includes chapters not only on Elliott Carter and Ralph Shapey, but also on such pop luminaries as David Byrne and Laurie Anderson. Now, being a child of the sixties, sure I love the Beatles, Miles, and other pop and jazz greats. But to compare their output, in terms of quantity, quality, and emotional breadth, to the greats of classical music—Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Copland, and Stravinsky, to name just a few—is neither realistic nor intellectually honest.

It is also true that to enjoy classical music requires a modicum of literacy and, as in any area of intellectual endeavor, the more the better. Classical music is, after all, about ideas expressed in sound. The professional class of previous generations knew this music, through the playing of an instrument, with musical training throughout school (from grade school through college), and from the regular attendance of concerts and plays that featured music. Essentially, this has been lost. Attendance at these intellectually vibrant activities has been replaced by attendance at sports events and film, experienced live or more often viewed on television, computer, or iPod. While they are enjoyable and offer the illusion of active participation in a familiar group experience, sports and movies are driven by mass-market considerations—and represent formulaic entertainment for kids, and adults who still wish to be kids. This is lots of fun, but almost never art.

To take a view from the late eighties that applies to the present, consider the section on music in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.

When reading his comments at the time of the book's publication I thought Bloom overstated the case. After a recent rereading, I now fear his comments are a radical understatement.

Bloom suggests that music is now indeed central to the culture of university students, but it is rock, not classical music, that occupies this position. Classical music has become a "special taste," and "no classical

music has been produced that can speak to this generation.”¹ He refers to Plato, for whom “Music is the medium of the *human* soul in its most ecstatic condition of wonder and terror” (italics in original). Music “always involves a delicate balance between passion and reason,” and Bloom suggests that “the history of music is a series of attempts to give form and beauty to the dark, chaotic, premonitory forces in the soul—to make them serve a higher purpose.”

Bloom of course does not find this with rock music, whose themes, he suggests, are “sex, hate, and a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love.” In this Bloom is talking about what he knows best, the lyrics. But his major concern is rock music’s effect on education, where he believes it “ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education.” He concludes: “Rock music encourages passions and provides models that have no relation to any life the young people who go to universities can possibly lead, or to the kinds of admiration encouraged by liberal studies. Without the cooperation of the sentiments, anything other than technical education is a dead letter.” I fear this has become even more descriptive of our situation at the end of the first decade of the new millennium.

To understand why this is so from a musical standpoint, let us now consider the different natures of classical, serious, or concert music as opposed to pop, jazz, or even non-Western musical forms. What is it that differentiates these musical forms, and why should anyone be more . . . ahem . . . “privileged” than another? We must begin with the question of history. Western music initiated with the ancient Hebrews, Christians, and Greeks; therefore, the history of Western music reaches back at least a few thousand years. Its history as an art, or an endeavor seeking transcendence in a sophisticated written musical system, goes back about a thousand years. Thus, in the West we are able to trace our historical understanding of sound back a very long time, from monody to organum and through a trajectory of counterpoint and harmony that has no other equivalent in the world’s music. Now, we can add tremendously to the arsenal of Western music through the study and incorporation of aspects of other musical styles, which Western composers have indeed done (as have those in other spheres of inquiry), but the resultant music of the West remains unique in many respects. We

¹Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 69, 70.

dismiss its tremendous depth and rigor at our peril. Even in the work of contemporary luminaries such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass, who are known for incorporating aspects of the music of Africa and India, respectively, the use of harmony and counterpoint is a purely Western phenomenon, and their music could not exist outside of a Western context.

Pop music, from a purely musical standpoint, is too simplistic to be given much intellectual consideration. It traffics in the most banal of ideas. Where Western classical music offers sophistication of architecture, pop gives us the three-minute song and/or endless, mindless repetition, and thus evinces an inability to advance any kind of complex scenario or argument. Like film, pop relies on formula and production values. Its history is just sixty years old, perhaps a little longer if we include certain historical antecedents. Finally, as Bloom mentioned, its emotional depth, in terms of both music and lyrics, rarely rises above the infantile. However, pop music is clearly pervasive and ubiquitous in society; it continues to dominate the scene and the psyche of our students. (At the 2009 Kennedy Center Awards for the Arts, for example, Bruce Springsteen was the major draw for the press, not Dave Brubeck, the token opera singer, or the other celebrities.)

The history of jazz extends back a bit farther, into the latter part of the nineteenth century. But it too travels the realm of relatively simple forms, with the typical statement of the head, or tune, followed by improvisation among the members of the ensemble, and finishing with a restatement of the tune. The architectural range of jazz, therefore, is limited. And its emotional range, while certainly wider than that of pop, doesn't come close to the breadth and depth of classical music.

The serious introduction into the West of world music began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, via the budding field of anthropology, which grew into the discipline of ethnomusicology. In the middle of the twentieth century this primarily included the study of high art music of different cultures—Indonesia, India, and perhaps the court music of Japan being the primary interests of study. These musical traditions have the admirable qualities of longevity, sophistication of form, and theoretical and intellectual depth. At the same time, they have remained relatively static throughout their histories, certainly in comparison with Western art music. They also are, quite obviously, not ours, and thus do not speak to our particular experience of the world.

Ethnomusicology has since branched out to include folk and popular music of all sorts. The power or importance as art of these musical styles is

much less significant than their cultural influence and position, which explains the antipathy between high art Western music practitioners and ethnomusicologists.

Given this cultural backdrop, what can we say about music in the Academy, defined here as institutions of higher learning such as state and private universities and colleges? I will speak of conservatories such as Juilliard, Curtis, and Eastman in a separate context, as their mission is somewhat different. The music major—one who is studying an instrument, musicology, or composition—is of course quite different from the English, math, or history major. So we will look at these different subpopulations for their differences and commonalities.

What do all students share in their experience of music, and of classical Western music in particular? First and foremost is the pervasiveness of popular music. Like almost everyone today, students cannot exist in any environment without encountering popular music. It is piped into all malls, restaurants, coffee houses, doctors' offices, health facilities, office buildings, vehicles, and of course, directly into our heads by iPods. There is hardly a second in the day when students are not hearing some form of music, unless of course, they are texting on their cell phones. Whereas in previous generations students moved from relative quiet into a musical sphere, they now inhabit or are surrounded by music of some sort most of their waking moments. Whereas in previous generations one had to seek out music, by playing an instrument or attending a performance, one now has to seek out, and occasionally demand, silence.

The result is that the ability to register and engage with musical ideas has been reduced. All students today must be taught how to listen. And because they are also easily distracted, they must be taught how to focus and to concentrate as well, and for spans of time to which they are unaccustomed.

Since they are most familiar with pop songs of a very short duration, anything much longer tends to create confusion, discomfort, and eventually outright fatigue. But we also encounter that Bloomian problem of actual emotional and spiritual engagement. This generation hardly knows how to think, but it certainly doesn't know how to feel. There is a stark disconnect of the emotional from the intellectual, and today's students have trouble engaging their senses, feelings, and intellect in any unified manner. They literally don't know what or how to feel, and have trouble distinguishing the real from the counterfeit in this regard.

Music majors will know some of the music of their own instrument, but they will have rarely encountered much other musical literature. They will know the names of some of the major composers of the past, and rarely any of the past fifty years or so. It is highly unlikely that non-music majors will have ever heard a Bach partita, a Beethoven symphony, or a Stravinsky ballet. If asked to name a living composer, or even one from the past hundred years, these students will most likely mention John Williams rather than Aaron Copland or Charles Ives or John Adams. Non-music majors share an acquaintance with the towering figures of film music in common with many budding composition majors, who have an interest in and a desire to make a career in film music, but know little of the classical musical tradition, particularly that of the recent past.

The distinction between music written for the business sphere and art music is not really something they fathom. John Williams is a talented man, but his primary skills lie in writing music quickly, music that is a pastiche of other composers' styles, is catchy, and is emotively appropriate for the image it accompanies. It lacks the one and most important quality of art music— that of a singular voice of moment and urgency with something important to say. Again, this generation has real trouble differentiating the real from the market image, technical skill from content, and thus surface from true and deep meaning.

This is to say that the general level of ignorance of all students today is rather deep. The situation may be slightly different at top-tier private institutions as opposed to public ones, but the pervasive cultural stew makes for a greater similarity than difference. Music majors will eventually fill the largest gaps in their knowledge while taking the usual required music history and theory courses. They will do this in a rather desultory fashion, as they are not usually as truly interested in becoming more well-rounded musicians as they are in honing their technical capabilities on their instrument of choice. They wish to become adept specialists, which is something the university, and their teachers, encourage. The active engagement and expansion of the mind is less sought after than the athletic aspects of musical virtuosity. That most of these students will never achieve virtuoso status, or be professionally employed for that matter, is rarely spoken of, since it involves real introspection that would pose too much of a threat to the prevailing system. The music major will take a course in the business of music as well, a somewhat new arrival in the last decade and a half or so. This course covers such tasks as marketing, grant writing, advertising and promotion, letter writing, and creation of curricula vitae. It has little to do with music, and is suspect in that it takes away time that

students could actually be spending learning more about the richness of the music they are studying.

The non-music major is now presented with a cornucopia of possibilities. Along with the traditional music appreciation offerings, courses on the history of rock and roll and of jazz are ubiquitous and well subscribed. Ensemble experiences have expanded from choir, jazz, band, and orchestra to include steel band and any number of world music ensembles, including Mariachi, Ghanese drumming, Gamelan, etc. All of these options are presented in a value-free framework, of course. Thus, it is now quite possible, and in fact more than likely, that the typical non-major will never experience the legacy of Western music during college, let alone be taught how to absorb its complexities and transcendent mysteries.

Another aspect of musical life in the Academy that has changed dramatically for the worse is in the realm of artistic presentation. Most universities have historically supported great performances of Western art music on campus as part of their educational mission for their students as well as the surrounding community. This usually meant that under the guidance of faculty and other interested parties, the best in the realms of solo, song, chamber, and orchestra were hired to perform for a concert series on campus. The expectation was that these performances would be enriching, providing pedagogic value to the student and a rich artistic experience for all. It is now commonplace for such a series to be run by an “artistic administrator” who is advised by a community board. Offerings include only a very small representation of Western classical music, and almost no new serious music. And now because it is the bottom line that truly matters, and because these organizations are stand-alone and thus supposedly fiscally autonomous, Broadway shows, pop acts, and whatever is culturally or ethnically “hot,” such as world music performances of music or dance, often fill dates of a campus concert series. In this sphere the boundary between art and entertainment has been completely eroded.

The situation at our leading conservatories is somewhat different. Students attending these institutions aspire to solo careers or seats in our very best orchestras. Students may have the talent to accomplish these goals, but of course, most don't. Their time is mostly spent in practice, and academic courses of any kind, music or general, are regarded as more of a nuisance than something important. Their job prospects are tough. Orchestra positions are few and far between, because musicians play until they drop, and orchestras are increasingly retrenching as their audiences decline. This is partly due to the overexpansion of orchestras in the sixties

and the availability of the entire repertoire on CD or online services. Solo careers are also languishing as concert series simply cease to exist—piano and song concerts, once a rich part of the cultural scene, are pretty much a thing of the past.

What role does classical music play in the general university environment today? A marginal one. While in the past a decent minority of the faculty, administration, and even a president or two knew and enjoyed parts of the classical repertoire, this now hardly exists. These parties may appreciate a little jazz and love classic rock (the music they made out and got stoned to as adolescents), but Western classical music in no way engages them. Today's music faculty pretty much go about their business, but there is a sense of ennui in the air. Talented and competent, most actually love what they do, but they know that what they teach matters as little to the general university culture as it does to the larger culture.

Certainly, what the music faculty and students have to offer is no longer considered of much value on campus. They feel, and are, marginalized. A few may try to be hip, but it is a hollow game. Coaches are paid millions, athletes coddled, and concerts need to be scheduled around basketball and football games. On the academic side, scientists bring in the big money through private and public research grants. The schools of business and law, of public health and medicine are endowed by their successful graduates and major community philanthropists. The arts and the humanities, which only provide reasons for life and attempt to talk about why it's worth living, are the abandoned stepchildren who take the backseat—or bench—to all the rest.

The music community understands its perceived value, which is slight, and knows that there is not much it can do to change this perception. Simply put, music generally has little educational, financial, or communal clout on campus. So while schools of music, and even conservatories, are putting up the good fight for the tradition of Western classical music, they are beset by forces within their own spheres, the culture within the university, and the culture at large that makes this increasingly difficult to sustain.

Postscript: A Brief Modern Classical Music Reading and Listening List

A fine text for an overview of Western Music is the *Vintage Guide to Classical Music* by Jan Swafford (Vintage Books, 1992). Swafford is a true Renaissance musician who received his DMA in composition from the Yale

School of Music and has made his career writing music, biographies of composers (Ives, Brahms, and soon one of Beethoven), and teaching writing, film music, and composition. Readers of this book will encounter the lucidity and insights of a fine composer, the ability to communicate to the non-musician, and the wordsmithing of a felicitous writer.

And if you are looking for a few compositions that will really blow you away (particularly if you belong to the pop music-loving crowd), let me make the following recommendations.

If you don't know Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, start here. This is a shattering introduction to the twentieth century in all of its grandeur, rhythmic vivaciousness, overwhelmingly beautiful orchestration, and sophisticated primitivism. Then give Varèse a whirl with *Octandre* and *Intégrale*. Varèse helped bring percussion into the limelight and was a favorite of that mother of invention, Frank Zappa (father of Moon Unit). Then hit *Song of the Youths* by that very weird German, Stockhausen, who influenced the Beatles, particularly with respect to "Revolution 9," a tune that contains the famous loop of a man repeating the words "number 9, number 9, number 9." Okay, enough with the Europeans. For some very hip American music check out John Adams's *Shaker Loops*, one of the great works in the minimalist mode. Also try Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, another great work in the genre and still one of his best pieces. As long as we are in this camp, there's Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, still his most important piece. Christopher Rouse has written music influenced by rockers so try his *Gorgon and Violin Concerto*. For sheer beauty and, yes, the influence of jazz and pop, listen to Stephen Albert's *Symphony No. 1* and Robert Beaser's *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Lastly, check out my *Gateways*, *Symphony No. 3*, and *Piano Concerto*, with the incomparable pianist Andre-Michel Schub in the starring role.

PART ONE: CHAPTER 2

TARNISHED GOLD: CLASSICAL MUSIC IN AMERICA

A few articles have appeared recently regarding the subject of the health of classical music (or more broadly, the fine arts) in America. These include “Classical Music’s New Golden Age,” by Heather Mac Donald, in the *City Journal* and “The Decline of the Audience,” by Terry Teachout, in *Commentary*.¹ These articles appeared around the time of my Summer 2010 *Academic Questions* piece, “Diminuendo: Classical Music and the Academy,” (see chapter 1) in which I discussed the problematic position of classical music in the Academy.

In my article, I felt it necessary to place the position of music in the Academy in relationship to that of music in society-at-large. As these other articles also discuss the nature of music in larger society, it seems appropriate to respond to the positions expressed, to explain and try to understand their differences or commonality with my opinions, and then, of course, to explain why I and those who agree with my position are correct. In “Classical Music’s New Golden Age,” Mac Donald takes a highly optimistic view of the relative strength and vitality of classical music in America, and/or in the world at large. She says, “[N]ever before has so much great music been available to so many people, performed at levels of artistry that would have astounded Berlioz and his peers. Students flock to conservatories and graduate with skills once possessed only by a few virtuosi. More people listen to classical music today, and more money gets spent on producing and disseminating it, than ever before.” She notes that recording technology has changed the way we hear music, not least by making it widely available. She then goes on to state: “True, the tidal wave of creation that generated the masterpieces we so magnificently perform is spent; we’re left to scavenge the marvels that it cast up.” She then lauds the

¹ Heather Mac Donald, “Classical Music’s New Golden Age,” *City Journal* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2010); Terry Teachout, “The Decline of the Audience,” *Commentary* 129, no. 4 (April 2010), 39–41.

“early music” movement for opening the doors to the music of the past in ways previously inconceivable, and thus providing not only an enlarged repertoire of accessible music, but, through rigorous attention to past historical practice, a completely new way of hearing music. In fact, she decries contemporary classical works and says that the real “new music” is “the standard repertoire, such as Mozart’s symphonies, performed in entirely new ways; and unknown repertoire from the pre-Classical period.”

Mac Donald does acknowledge that classical musical education in America is at an abysmally low level, but stresses that Asians are in love with Western classical music and are filling our conservatories here in the States. Also on the negative side, she quotes Leon Botstein, president of Bard College and conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra, about support of classical music: “What is different today is that the nation’s elite, the very rich, don’t care about classical music. The patron class is philistine; instead of Andrew Carnegie, we have Donald Trump. Some rich guy with a hedge fund wants to be photographed with Angelina Jolie, not support the Cleveland Orchestra.”

Still, Mac Donald ends with the following glowing comments: “[P]resent-day abundance of classical music—of newly rediscovered works, consummate performances, thousands of recordings, and legions of fans—is a testament to its deep roots in human feeling. And it is a cause for celebration that so many people still feel drawn into its web of lethal beauty, in a world so far from the one that gave it birth.”

Let’s go through Ms. Mac Donald’s positions one-by-one with commentary. “Never before has so much great music been [and I would certainly add, abundantly] available.” Mac Donald is referring to the profusion of live performances of orchestral and chamber music, and the presence of a multitude of recordings. As Teachout notes in “The Decline of the Audience”: “The latest Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the fourth such survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts since 1982, reveals an across-the-board decline in public attendance at fine-arts events of all kinds,” specifically “a smaller segment of the adult population either attended arts performances or visited arts museums or galleries than in any prior survey.” And the statement perhaps most germane to our discussion: “Between 1982 and 2008, the percentage of adult Americans who attended at least one classical-music performance in the preceding year plummeted from 13 percent to 9.3 percent.”