

## **The Classical Beat**

**By STEPHEN DANKNER**

### **FRENCH MUSIC AND THE REPERTORY**

As connoisseurs of the concert scene well know, the art music tradition, a product of a centuries-old evolving esthetic of high culture, is firmly rooted in Western Europe. For years, historians have concentrated on the German-Viennese locus of musical culture, with Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as the supreme inventors of the classical ethos, now codified as the ‘canon’ of classical music.

But there were other countries that contributed much to the growth of the art form: Italy was the birthplace of opera in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. French culture provided its own unique ingredients. There, sensuous, sonorous beauty ruled, as it does to this day.

If Northern European thinking led to the creation of new forms and ethics of music, then it was the role of Italy and France to complement the task of creating a fully formed musical language by adding expressivity, via the opulent soundscapes of an idealized veneration of both nature and spirit.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward, with composers Machaut, Dufay, Lully, Rameau, Couperin, Berlioz, Massenet, Bizet, Gounod and Saint-Saens through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Faure, Dukas, Debussy, Ravel, Messiaen, Ibert, Milhaud, Poulenc, Dutilleux, Boulez and beyond, French music has embodied this luxuriant temperament. And don’t forget Gallic charm and wit, which, in the guise of both cubist-inspired 1920s-era jazz and serio-comic neoclassicism, informs the work of composers on a traveler’s visa to France: Rieti, Copland, Gershwin and above all, Stravinsky.

If most of the names above are unfamiliar, it’s because the classical music establishment tends to venerate instrumental music above song and opera, to value head over heart, logic over emotion. And, it must be admitted, audiences generally agree with that assessment in their musical preferences – except in the case of opera. Given that predilection, Bach and Beethoven and the Germans in general are consistently performed most often.

**Heard at the Mt. Greylock (North Adams, MA) Animal Hospital:** Two dogs were waiting to see the veterinarian when the receptionist called out “Amadeus and Mozart are here to see Dr. Wolfgang.” You had to be there!



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