

The Classical Beat

By STEPHEN DANKNER

HI-DEF OPERA? THAT'S JUST THE BEGINNING...

Have you ever wondered about the future of classical music: where it's going, who will perform it and who will listen to it? It's an *idée fixe* with me – has been for years. And if you've followed this column for a while, you know I like to "talk up" new music, current trends and at the same time complain about the paucity of an audience for it, except among the young, if the music includes references to pop culture, or among the now-numerous university types, who selectively feed off each other's creative efforts.

This week I'd like to change the focus and move into a wildly speculative mode, opining about the distant future, maybe 500 years off. Call it musing about music.

There's all this talk about the classical canon, the three Bs, the spiritual-philosophical role music has played since Gregorian chant started the whole ball rolling 1000 years ago. Then there's the bathetic 19th century, with the religio-musical pageantry of Wagner's music dramas, Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony, and yes, Verdi's greatest opera, the Requiem. Will it last forever?

The mathematician/philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote "All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast heat death of the solar system, and...the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."

I've just read an astounding book that offers hope: "Year Million – Science at the Far Edge of Knowledge" (Damien Broderick, editor, 2008, published by Atlas & Company.) It's a collection of essays by futurists in the sciences – especially computer science – and medicine. The book's challenging precepts force a thoughtful response, and in the opposite direction of the Russell quote, above. Here's some of what you'll find in the book:

We're going to greatly expand human longevity to enable us to live perhaps 1000 years and longer, via "nanobots" (virus-size robots) implanted and swimming in our bloodstream, ferreting out cancer cells, for example, and repairing diseased body parts; we'll harness the power of the "dead planets" Jupiter, Neptune and the rest to redesign the solar system, using the planets' stored gaseous, mineral and energy resources to build "computroniums" – both nascent planet-sized biological DNA and non-living computers. The processes of current theoretical physics will supply vast amounts of cheap power to earth; the planets Venus and Mars will be "seeded" with other, specific life-designing nanobots and will be colonized, "terraforming" them. Countless newly discovered planets within the galaxy would also be made habitable as we move into space. Most radical – even terrifying – is that the "wet meat" that we are, the product of millions of years of evolution, will be "upgraded" as technology and biology merge within us. And there's more, lots more. Read the book.

Is it true, or have these futurists gone off the deep end? And what all does this have to do with classical music? Well, here's a simple scenario – my take on the integration and interaction of technology with music and music lovers some 500 years from now.

It's been a hard day at the "office," where you've doggedly negotiated for hours with the Director of Mining on Jupiter's moons Titan and Europa for methane rights for your company, the energy powerhouse Methadronium, LLP. The liquid methane seas on Jupiter's two Earth-like moons, now being terraformed, present some serious logistical extraction problems. Of course, you didn't actually go to Titan; you faxed a clone of yourself at 0.10 lightspeed to the meeting.

It's later that evening and you want to relax at home. A nice, meditative string quartet would cap this particularly stressful day. You've always liked ancient music; it's been a hobby for years. Though no one plays it anymore, that's not a problem. Turns out in the distant past, holographic performance became the rage and projections of all the great old string quartets are cataloged and available. Not only that – you can interact with them.

You turn on your hologram light projector and insert the disc "Emerson String Quartet – 2015-2021." This was perhaps the most famous quartet at the beginning of the 21st century. The blue-green beam is projected from above within a circular platform in a small space dedicated to chamber

music performance. As the four members of the ensemble materialize, a large sub-menu of composers and works appears on the hologram monitor. Within about a minute, the four players, bathed in a diffuse opalescent aura, confer and turn towards you. “Glad to be with you. What would you like to hear? Beethoven, Brahms, Kurtag, Renknad? “I’d like you to play the Adagio ma non troppo movement from the “Harp” Quartet, Op. 74 by Beethoven. I’m in the mood for something restful and undulating.” “Fine,” says Eugene Drucker, the first violinist. “After that, we can improvise in the style of Beethoven, Dvorak, Mozart – whoever you like.” “I think Dvorak would be nice. Let’s hear something new from him.”

By the year 2200, artificial intelligence and terabyte ROM computer chips operating with 100 gigaflops of RAM had made the real-time composition of music and performance in any known style eminently practical.

After the performance, you thank the players and turn off the hologram projector. You’re fortunate to own a collection of several hundred discs of ensembles spanning five centuries, representing the entire repository of classical music. Since those once-precious 1000-year old Stradivarius and Guarneri violins, violas and cellos disintegrated long ago, it’s much better now: all performances are virtual and give you the intriguing option of requesting new compositions created “in the style of” on the spot. You can even relax and chat with the players before or after in the comfort of your home.

Concert halls? A thing of the past. Large projection amphitheatres do exist, though, for... what were they called... those religious things they called symphonies and opera.

Isn’t modern technology wonderful?

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