

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR THE CLASSICAL CANON?

Recently, I had some strong things to say about the conventions of music programming and performance that led to the creation of the so-called “canon” of classical music - that acknowledged body of works, beloved by performers and audiences, which receive performances time and again.

Don't get me wrong; I love these masterworks, too. The reason certain pieces are accorded such status is because they have something powerful and timeless to communicate, and listeners, over generations, have continually found meaning in them. Really, there aren't that many. Maybe there are 500 pieces at most – the greatest of the great - if you count all the chamber music, concerti, symphonies, operas, oratorios, sonatas, songs and solo piano music by the major composers – my number is a guesstimate – I haven't done any hard research. And that number is probably too high.

When you do a geographical survey and timeline, a couple of interesting facts come to light. This classical canon consists of mostly German/Austrian composers, with a few French and Italians thrown in; there's a smattering of Eastern Europeans, Slavs (Russians, in particular) and a few English. Maybe a few Americans. The preponderance of these pieces was composed in a span of about 200 years - roughly from 1700 to 1900. I go back that far to include Bach, who is the earliest composer encountered with any frequency at concerts these days.

Boiling it down even further, there's just over a century of music you're likely to hear in concert – most of it composed from about 1780 – 1900. “Mittleuropa”, with Vienna as its musical capitol, is where classical music flourished.

It's easy to understand why music composed before Bach doesn't generally get performed, except by “early music” specialists. For one thing, much of it is vocal or choral music – not the most beloved of genres by today's concert-going public. Opera, though, is different; people will go to that in droves. Why? Costumes, acting (sort of), theatricality, the human elements of drama and comedy. Opera is life lived large, and people love it – always have.

Don't we say that we're going to "see", not "hear" an opera? The visual aspects just take over. Early instrumental music, excepting keyboard works (Domenico Scarlatti – beloved of Vladimir Horowitz), tends not to do well in the concert hall; the largish spaces of most venues simply overwhelms this music, which was meant to be heard in intimate settings.

What about the twentieth century? There are so many trends, -isms, national schools, conservative vs. radical and experimental styles, that it's an immense task to take it all in, much less to make sense of it. There are too many conflicting short-term musical directions, all zigzagging in confusing disarray. Listeners feel secure with long-lasting, purposeful styles to hold onto, such as Classicism: (Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven;) Romanticism: (Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky et al). Does it really matter any more when we say that Stravinsky, Prokofiev and others are neo-classical, or that Schoenberg and Boulez are 12-tone (not a style, but a method of composing?) No, the time has past where any of that seems to have meaning, except to music historians.

Schoenberg used to complain that people wouldn't (or couldn't) whistle his melodies. Did he really not know why that was so? Roger Sessions said that his music was "born difficult". He wasn't talking about it being hard to perform (which it is), but hard to apprehend – to hear, to make sense of. 1900-2000 might be dubbed another "Hundred Years' War," in music, between composers and their hoped-for audience. It seems that modern mid-century music was "born difficult." Ned Rorem called it "composing in the genius style." Why does abstraction work so well in visual art (Gorky, Kline, Pollock, Hoffmann, de Kooning) and not in music? Seeing is believing; hearing is perplexing.

So now we have this gap, these hundred years. Have composers "painted themselves into a corner?" Will performers and listeners return to this music? Will they care? Bartok, Stravinsky, Copland, Ravel, Gershwin and others will live; that's for sure. (It's interesting, by the way, that each of these composers was inspired by jazz in many of its styles at various times in their creative lives.)

File away this column and return to it in fifty years; by then we'll have learned if Carter, Boulez, Ferneyhough, Nancarrow and Wuorinen will have found their audience, and their music entered into the canon. Or, maybe the complexity of our times, reflected in music by these leading practitioners of

“advanced” or “progressive” music, will be seen as self-indulgent. Time will tell.

The dominating cultural influence in music today clearly is American, in all its forms; new music is not nearly as Eurocentric as it once was. Our universities, colleges of music and conservatories are fully the equal of their time-honored counterparts in London, Paris, Moscow and Vienna. Composers at home aren't interested in emulating the European musical models anymore, and are looking to American source material for inspiration. This is not really a new trend - Copland, Gershwin, Bernstein, Morton Gould and many others used native materials back in the 1940's - Ives' use of Americana dates back to the early 1900s. Today, though, it's different. Composers are more interested in working with pop, rock, hip-hop and other ephemeral styles of music, trying to infuse a sense of “now” into their work.

This pop material is not built to last. It will be a neat trick if composers can turn dross into gold; you've got to hand it to them for trying. Pop materials are being grafted onto the old classical forms of symphony, sonata, concerto and opera. Like Pop Art, music has turned outward, after all those years of self-absorbed expressionistic angst. There's an opera by a composer I know that's based on the life of Liberace - another on a series of Jerry Springer TV episodes. There's the “Metropolis” Symphony, derived from the “Superman” comic book character, by composer Michael Daugherty, tango chamber music by the Argentine master of the bandoneon (folk accordion) Astor Piazzolla, Jewish/Yiddish orchestral and vocal “frailachs” by Osvaldo Golijov and by your selfsame Advocate columnist, as well as many other pop crossover styles and hybrids. Surely, some enterprising composer is writing a Martha Stewart opera right now.

I like Roy Lichtenstein's work; I enjoy his faux comic book clichés, masked behind the blown-up, pixilated surface. The same goes for Frank Stella. Decorative though their art may be, it catches the eye. In a similar way, composers of the pop-amalgam stripe hope to catch your ear. There's meaning, and commentary in the fusion of “high” and “low” art; it can work as well for music, I'm convinced. What composers are after, to a degree, is putting fun, entertainment (curse the thought) and yes, danger back into music.

And why not? Turkish music was “in” when Mozart composed “The Abduction from the Seraglio” in 1782 and the “Turkish” Rondo in his Piano Sonata, K. 331. Bach’s keyboard, violin and cello suites are based on popular dances of the day such as the minuet, gigue (jig), courante and sarabande; Chopin’s waltzes are, and have always been, among his most universally loved sets of works. Since music was first invented, or discovered, it has been based on song and dance – all of it springing from the fount of popular culture. Its original purpose was to celebrate life and living, to denote ritual, to enhance religious observances and to bring spontaneity and joy into people’s lives. When music became “classical,” it abstracted all that, and forfeited some immediacy in the process. The pendulum may be moving back, once again, to a more spontaneous, euphoric kind of music making.