

## Tarnished Gold: Classical Music in America

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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*.<sup>1</sup> These articles appeared around the time of my Summer 2010 *Academic Questions* piece, “Diminuendo: Classical Music and the Academy,” 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

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<sup>1</sup>Heather Mac Donald, “Classical Music’s New Golden Age,” *City Journal* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2010), [http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20\\_3\\_urb-classical-music.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20_3_urb-classical-music.html). Terry Teachout, “The Decline of the Audience,” *Commentary* 129, no. 4 (April 2010), 39–41. All quotations from the Mac Donald can be found within the piece as posted online. All further references to the Teachout will be cited within the text.

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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 “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” (39). 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” (39).

So we have a certain anomaly. That is, while music is certainly more abundantly available, fewer people are actually going to hear it. Perhaps more folks are listening to recorded music either on CD or through downloads. The question we must pose about this other form of music delivery is, therefore, does the form of delivery matter? In my *AQ* article I argue that it does. Rarely does a recorded experience provide the transcendence of a live performance. Listening to a recording can prepare one for such an experience; it can allow for study and for a greatly deepened understanding of a work. But for a real artistic encounter with the ineffable, don't count on a recording.

Mac Donald also claims that “never before has so much great music been performed at levels of such artistry, and... students flock to conservatories and graduate with skills once possessed only by a few virtuosi.” I can't quibble with this statement. What I do state in my *AQ* article is that technique is far superior now to what it was in the past, but that the heart, and thus empathy, is missing in both the performer and the listener, and thus the true nature of the musical experience matters much less. Everything is there except real communication and experience. If this doesn't transpire, the essence of musical experience doesn't either. There is quite frequently no “there” there.

Mac Donald states: “More people listen to classical music today, and more money gets spent on producing and disseminating it, than ever before.” *Hmm*. This is undoubtedly true, as there are more people alive now than ever before, and classical music is available worldwide as never before, because the world has become smaller and more interconnected through the magic of technology. I am delighted that the classical music audience is growing exponentially in Asia (and hope that those selling my CDs are working those countries diligently!), but I must admit that I am most concerned about the state of affairs in the ol' US of A.

Teachout mentions that “[a]nyone who goes to the theater or to classical-music performances has long been accustomed to sitting among a sea of bald and gray heads. Even such technologically up-to-date enterprises as the closed-circuit opera telecasts transmitted from New York’s Metropolitan Opera House to movie theaters across America draw crowds consisting mainly of senior citizens” (39). In other words, the audience is aging pretty drastically. This experience is replicated in my home city of Tucson, Arizona, where at the tender age of 57 I seemingly represent youth when attending local symphony or chamber music society performances. And it isn’t for lack of trying to reach out to a younger audience on the part of such organizations. As Teachout and I allude to in our pieces, whereas in our 1950s and 1960s upbringing high art was part of the general cultural conversation as expressed “on commercial TV and network radio...[and] in *Time*, *Life*, and other mass-circulation magazines” (Teachout, 40), now high art is simply not part of the conversation, public or private.

Mac Donald 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.” Of course, this is where I must, as a very much alive composer, take greatest umbrage with her argument. About twenty years ago I remember sitting in on lecture discussion with a great jazz legend who said, “Of course, jazz is really America’s classical music.” I immediately bristled—and still do. Why did he deem it necessary to displace Copland, Ives, Bernstein, and a host of others, including me, to elevate jazz? And why usurp a term that at that time, if not now, had a pretty clear meaning? So why does Mac Donald usurp the term “new music” to define new recordings of standard repertoire music (e.g. Mozart, Beethoven, etc.) played with either more or less vibrato, more or less in tune, a little faster or slower, and with slightly more or fewer players? And as for all that “newly discovered old music,” most of it is second- or third-rate, and deservedly left to oblivion—or to those completists who have a lot of time on their hands.

Of course, the primary problem is that Mac Donald isn’t aware of the myriad great works of the twentieth century, and the fact that the teleological issue in music isn’t resolved as she suggests, namely that the game is over, we don’t always get better, we don’t have anything fresh to say, and the only thing left to do is continuously regurgitate past masterworks and burrow into history’s delightful pockets of previously unheard junk. While there *is* great

music from the past still to be heard, and there is always the possibility of uncovering new treasures that will speak to us in a unique and vibrant way, there is also great music of the present to be experienced.

Mac Donald notes that “recording technology has changed the way we hear music, not to mention its abundant availability.” She views this as an extreme positive, while Teachout is much more guarded or pessimistic in his understanding of the influence of technology. To quote him at length:

Live music was the first of the fine arts to be threatened by the rise of mechanical reproduction...by making it possible for the owner of a phonograph to listen to recordings of the standard classical repertoire by the greatest orchestras and soloists of the day, the musicians who made those recordings also unwittingly undermined the institution of the public concert. It took the better part of a century for the effects of this development to become manifest, but today they are self-evident to everyone in the shaky business of giving or presenting classical-music concerts....Today most Americans under the age of 30 are habituated to experiencing art not in the communal setting of a public performance but wherever and whenever they may wish to experience it, be it at home, in a plane, or on the beach. For them, live performance is not the normal condition of art but a tiresomely inconvenient alternative to consuming art on demand. (40–41)

It is here I picked up this thread in my article, for most college students are under thirty, or are being catered to by individuals who are older and know that this is in fact their state of functioning and state of mind. And of course, there is a problem for performers if they are not actually performing on a regular basis. This explains the consternation in the performance world and the attempts being made to find methodologies that will bring audiences back to live performance venues. As Dr. Brown said to Marty in *Back to the Future*, “It’s not you that’s the problem, it’s your kids!”

As already noted, Mac Donald ends positively: “[T]he present-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.” As previously stated, I am less impressed by those newly rediscovered works of questionable quality and thousands of recordings, most with little new to say and sterile to boot. As for the legion of fans, they simply aren’t replicating in America. But we can address the real

question, which concerns “human feeling.” Teachout ends his article by commenting that

it is hard to imagine what the fine arts might be like if eager men and women no longer gathered in groups to experience their life-transforming power....[A] world without audiences would be a world denuded of one of the things that makes art an act of self-transcendence, a way of embracing the world and its myriad possibilities....[T]he experience of art has always been a fundamentally *social* phenomenon, one that brings human beings together and encourages them to submerge their differences in the shared pursuit of joy and understanding. Therein lies an essential part of the meaning of art—a part that is now at risk. (41)

In an America that is placing ever greater attention on the individual self, a self that has lost its ability to process its own emotions and make sense of its interiority, and in an age in which the very notion of transcendence brings a snicker, the fate of classical music is in jeopardy.