



Front and Center: The Place for Western Classical Music in the Curriculum

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Music in the academy is at risk. The decline in its status, presence, and reach can be traced to the cultural shifts beginning in the 1960s. Western classical music—with its unassailable history of accomplishment and undeniable pedagogical, cultural, and spiritual significance—has fallen prey to the assault on standards and hierarchies embodied by the era’s ethos of: “Hey-hey, ho-ho, Western Civ. has got to go.” The result has been disastrous for educative practice and norms. Indeed, we cannot even talk about music, but are forced in this time to speak about “musics.” The term is redolent with the patina of critical theory. I use it here only to differentiate between Western classical music and all of the rest, including folk music, popular music, electro-acoustic music, music of other cultures, and all hybrids. We must describe and confront the issue of both the hierarchical and the latitudinal in the musical arts. In other words, we must look at music as it is found around what Thomas Friedman calls the “flattened world” of postmodernism, where all music—from low to high, popular to classical, entertainment to art—is placed on the same aesthetic plane. We must articulate this very broad landscape of music and only then can we understand the academy’s response to the present situation.

A discussion of music in the academy must first start with a definition of “music” itself. But as we are now in a postmodern age, music as we knew it and defined it previously may no longer obtain. To those in the academy, or those

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recently trained within it, the old meanings and materials often no longer apply. This is similar to the problem with the term “art.” Only 150 years ago both terms had commonly understood meanings which required no discussion. The situation changed with the advent of modernism, then postmodernism, and with the parabolic rate of change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It was not always this complicated. Before the 1960s, in various sectors—certainly in academia, but also in the press and among the elites—there was a certain unanimity about what was of cultural value. In the American academy, classical music, which meant music in the tradition of European extraction or provenance, was favored. At the same time, it lived amid American folk music and music found in churches and synagogues. The arrival of various immigrant groups brought their popular and artistic cultures to these shores. Nonetheless, there was an agreed upon center.

Until the advent and cultural dislocations of the 1960s and 70s, music education in universities meant a study and performance of Western music. There were courses in theory, history, and music appreciation. Students played in bands, orchestras, and chamber music. Musical experiences were either hands-on or ears-on and were of a straightforward sort. In the 1940s and 1950s, with the return of GIs from the wars and their entrance into higher education, virtually every music department in every state university transformed into a School of Music. Institutions that formerly only gave Ph.Ds in musicology, music history and theory, were suddenly awarding the new D.M.A. (Doctor of Musical Arts) in abundance. For example, the cadre of composers with whom I studied composition had a mixture of degrees, Ph.D., M.M., and the two most famous only had B.M. degrees. Many of the greatest composers had no degrees at all yet managed well in their chosen profession.

The reasons for this central place of classical music in the academy are numerous. Music had been identified by the Greeks as one the most important means of understanding ourselves and our relationship to the universe. Along with Astronomy, Arithmetic, and Geometry, Music formed the Quadrivium, that second level of intellectual inquiry that came after the Trivium (which included Logic, Rhetoric, and Grammar). In medieval times, when the West recaptured the art of learning, music was considered at the center of the educational enterprise, as it demonstrated the development of mankind’s deepest imaginative possibilities. As notation became ever clearer, and in association with the technological developments of instruments, music became both more individual and more sophisticated, developing from the monophonic to the crowning achievement of Western Music: polyphony and harmony. Music became more sophisticated as a language, able to engender increasingly richer

and more personal statements, to inspire and reveal genius. It is no exaggeration to say that each composer, knowingly or not, stood on the shoulders of previous generations. The increasingly complex notation reflected the ethos of the West, the increasing importance placed on the individual and his personal autonomy, resulting in a continual change of the language. With this, and an increasing awareness of history, a canon comprised of the best composers and their best pieces developed. The “three Bs”—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—are sometimes referenced as such in a discussion of our greatest composers, not because it was an early form of the rock group the Bee Gees, but because they really are superlative composers whose highly individual music has stood the test of time.

Although not always held in the highest of regard at its time of composition, the music of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms forms the very core of the Western musical tradition. As Charles Murray notes in his book *Human Accomplishment* (2004), “the expert opinion that lies behind the inventories [his word for canonical materials] does indeed represent the view of the late 20C, and it will not be immutable, but there is no reason to think that fashion has deformed the broad patterns that form the basis for discussion.” Of course, many besides the three Bs came before and after them, defining their eras and becoming part of the canon. Mozart and Haydn, in addition to Beethoven, defined the Classical period; Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner along with Brahms were the major figures of the Romantic period, as Mahler, Stravinsky, and Debussy were of the early Modernist period. As the noted biographer and composer Jan Swafford mentions in his *Language of the Spirit* (2017), common wisdom concerning what comprises a canonical work is just that—common wisdom. Namely, a canonical work is deemed such because it has been acclaimed over a long period of time by experts and the general population. This does not mean that the common wisdom regarding the canon cannot be altered, but that it must be acknowledged and reckoned with forthrightly.

A change in the definition of music, and our understanding of the very stuff that makes music, began with Varèse, a French then American composer of the early half of the twentieth century, who preferred to call music “organized sound.” This came at the time of the advent of electro-acoustic music that was either made of recorded sounds or electronic sources. The rules then changed with John Cage’s “realization” that music is really all about things happening in time, and music is just that: anything—a sound, a gesture, an action—that occurs in time. Thus, his famous piece “4’ 33’” consists of a pianist sitting at a piano but playing nothing for that duration. However, as Roger Scruton has written, this Duchampian joke works only once, and it has turned out to be thin gruel for

the human spirit. While many composers find this “music” inherently boring, they nonetheless remain fascinated by the “idea,” and find a certain liberation from the actual sound of a work in favor of the concept behind it. Conceptualism presented a similar experience in the art world of the 1960s and 70s, when texts replaced objects. The result in the musical domain has been the flattening of aesthetic judgment, the injection of politics into music by its creators and practitioners, and a general confusion about what makes great music.

Another important change came with the advent of the field of Ethnomusicology, which found its way into the European educational system in the nineteenth century and into the American educational landscape during the twentieth. This field, a “science” founded in Germany, is Western to its core, as no other culture so assiduously explores in a systematic manner the music of cultures other than its own. Moreover, Western classical music has always drawn from other cultures. The influence of Turkish music is found in that of Mozart and Beethoven. Closer to our time, one can mention the influence of: the gamelan on the music of Debussy, who heard this Indonesian ensemble at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition; Hungarian folk music on Bartok and Kodaly; American folk music on Copland; the Jewish cantorial tradition on Bernstein; or the influence of African drumming on the music of Steve Reich and Indian music on that of Philip Glass. However, a principal value of ethnomusicology is that no music is better than any other, as each expresses an important cultural value, and fills an important role in any and every culture. Its essential problem is that it is unwilling to judge any culture’s music relative value qua music. It used to focus on the study of the high art music of other cultures, but it is now the home of all other “musics” whether folk, popular, or music indigenous to various regions or minorities (e.g. Appalachian, Blue Grass, Hip-hop, Klezmer, etc.)

As cultural critic Terry Teachout of the *Wall Street Journal* has noted, America is now, and maybe always was, a place primarily of popular culture. From Tin Pan Alley to Hollywood, radio to television, popular culture has been at the center of America’s self-understanding and identity. But high art music has always held a revered place in America’s heart and mind. The history of classical music in the nineteenth century was mostly centered in the east coast cities (many cities in the west were just developing), and it was mostly supported and enjoyed by those of the financial and intellectual elite (see Douglas Shadle’s 2015 book on *Orchestrating the Nation* for a revealing history of this period). But there were also concerts for the masses, as exemplified by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who from its beginnings included room for the *hoi polloi* to attend concerts at the cost of a pittance. But it is fair to say that in the main classical music was somewhat exclusive. This was altered in the early part of the

twentieth century with the increase in the number of orchestras and the increased pace of development of an American classical music, exemplified in the two streams of musical composition: the Dvorak/Ives path, using indigenous music as source materials mostly within classical forms and shapes, or the Copland/Bernstein path of Americanizing the European tradition within clearly narrative and pre-existent structures. There was a middle-brow moment in the 1950s when it seemed that high culture and classical music might find a home in mainstream America. This was after all the time of the NBC orchestra and Leonard Bernstein's Omnibus series on the then incipient medium of television. Before that, on radio, renowned maestro Arturo Toscanini conducted his famed Symphony of the Air. University students had recordings of the pianist Glenn Gould, the *Bach Goldberg Variations* being a particular favorite. In other words, art music was taken seriously and was part of the broader cultural conversation. American culture's ambition to aim higher than popular music was recognized for its merit. It involved a recognition that those works which we call masterpieces are called that because, as Teachout says, "they really are better." A masterpiece is also the best of a particular composer. Whereas there are extraordinarily gifted performers in many high cultures, and ones who improvise at an incredibly high level, there are almost no composers of other cultures who stand out as individuals as in the West.

The flattening of the musical landscape—that is, the desire to put all music on the same plane in terms of quality and significance—can also be found with the breakout of popular music, most notably jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues, into the mainstream of popular culture in the 1950s and 60s. It then continued with the world music of Africa and reggae, which arrived in the 1970s. The musical polymath Gunther Schuller stated, "I don't care what category music belongs to; I only care whether it is good or bad." Leonard Bernstein is reported to have said the same. They held that a creative artist must call on all those musical experiences in his life that have true meaning and that they all must come to play in his musical creation. Schuller also maintained that all classical and vernacular traditions are worthy of our support and interest: "All musics are created equal," and it "is a global concept which allows the world's musics . . . to come together, to learn from one another, to reflect human diversity and pluralism." What he does not explain is how one can learn about or master all of these different musical genres, or whether any one should be held above others. It is precisely differences of style and quality in particular composers that produce those great works, or masterpieces. Maybe I am misreading Schuller, and he assumes that the great artist absorbs various materials from all musical styles and then forges his own individual identity. However, Schuller's own

Third Stream music, which was meant to bring together his two great loves, jazz and classical music, was a failure, as the two genres seem to be antithetical in nature, perhaps with the sole exception of the oeuvre of George Gershwin, who brought jazz elements into the narrative nature of classical music. In the latter part of his life, Schuller found Minimal Music as exemplified by Steve Reich and Philip Glass so pernicious that he refused to program it at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's famed Tanglewood New Music Festival, of which he was the director. It is therefore clear that at some point he concluded all music is not equal. Indeed, all music is *not* "equal," inasmuch as only Western music partakes of harmony and polyphony.

Western music developed differently from most other cultures in a number of astonishing ways. First came the creation of a sophisticated notation that allowed the writing down of musical ideas. In most cultures music is passed down orally from master to apprentice. Second is what Charles Murray calls a meta-invention, an idea which extends the intellectual landscape in a manner that provides for new vistas of discovery and creativity. This is the idea of polyphony, that one can have two lines sounding simultaneously but that work together. This then leads to the creation of harmony, or the organized sounding of pitches at the same time. These phenomena are found almost exclusively in Western music and allow for an unparalleled range of emotional breadth. Also mentioned by Charles Murray is the prizing of the individual personality and artistic voice. This set the stage for the creation of works of the deepest emotional content, and for what we have called in our culture "masterpieces."

What has all of this meant for music in the academy? With the decimation of the core curriculum, students *en masse* are no longer asked, or even encouraged, to experience the great creations of the Western world. Non-music majors have rarely heard the names of Beethoven or Bernstein and it is probable that they have not ever heard a piece of music by these composers. It is now unlikely that they will ever experience the music of the canon or even that around its edges, and they will never engage the new and exciting music of living composers that will speak directly to them. Why is this so?

A panoply of music courses is now offered for "general education" credit, which is a set of distributional guidelines and courses which have replaced what used to be the core curriculum. Students are offered courses such as: Rock and American Popular Music, Jazz History, Music in World Cultures, Survey of Mexican Folk Music, Arab and Asian Music. In this mix, a course in the introduction to Western music is offered as well. What is the result? Most students will take the course in rock, as that is what they have imbibed from childhood, as background music for cartoons to the finest shows on television, to

soundtracks for most movies, to what is presented in the mall and in most university bookstore environs, and in almost every restaurant. A generation ago faculty were conversant with the string quartets of Beethoven; now those who teach our students know only about the latest and newest “band.” Students who take a History of Rock course will be presented a music that has a history of no more than 75 years, a little more if you include its antecedents. Its musical content is mostly trivial since its materials are always of the most basic, and formally or architecturally simplistic, as the most prominent form is a simple ABA song form. Although rock may be fleetingly emotionally engaging, it does not achieve deep artistic meaning for the mature mind. It is performance driven and generally lacks composers of sophistication. It provides no change in how one perceives it over the years. Almost universally, the lyrics that accompany it, that are central to what it is, are in the end banal. This is music that makes its strongest impact in the gland-driven years of adolescence. It used to be something outgrown when individuals became adults; now it is the “soundtrack of our lives.” Since rock music is so intellectually barren and technically thin, it is by default taught from an ethnomusicological or anthropological perspective. This course, and others like it, has no place in a college curriculum.

Jazz has a history of about 150 years and is certainly more sophisticated than most rock. Its primary practitioners are composer/performers and improvisation is central to its being. I grew up playing and studying jazz as well as classical music, and loved its spirit, energy, and sense of immediacy. I still think some of the work of Dizzy, Miles, Trane, Bird, Monk, Armstrong and others is wonderful. But as I grew older I became disenchanted. Why? The greatest of improvisers will often go dry. An improvisation is just that, something thought up on the spot. If you could improvise as Bach wrote, which is to say from beginning to end, seemingly without stopping, then the improvisor’s” result could be as good as Bach’s. If one can channel or hook up to that divine spirit in either mode, then the result could be equally wonderful. And sometimes, but very, very rarely, it is. The problem as I see it is that much improvisation has become terribly cliché-ridden.

Architecture is another issue. Jazz form is to play the head (the opening tune), improvise, and finish with the head. It is another form of ABA structure, and it almost never deviates from this, and thus true development is almost impossible; it is structurally inert and thus tedious. It is about creating in the moment, finding the idea, or riffing off the idea. A work is in the perpetual present, rarely able to link to the past or future. It is about the process of creation and not the formation of something significant after that creation has occurred. It is always concerned with process and less about the finished product. It uses the unconscious but rarely the conscious. There is no opportunity to edit out the tediousness that

appears when creating on the fly. Having said this, jazz uses the materials of Western classical music in combination with materials found in the Black American tradition, whose musical soul was simultaneously formed of both the African legacy and the American experience. It is not to be ignored. Nevertheless, its study should come only after that of the classical tradition, as it is very much an off-shoot thereof.

The Western/American classical music tradition is approximately 2000 years old. It has developed, altered, changed, and most importantly progressed, in a significant manner over that time. Like all of the Western arts, it presents a historical picture of our civilization's development and change. It has produced styles that are numerous and quite different from each other. They reflect the changing understanding of ourselves. The development of its language allowed ever greater individual expression, and for the emergence of those greatest of composers whose masterpieces signify the highest in human achievement. Their labors reach to the beyond, the infinite, the ineffable, and should not be ignored or missed by any sentient person.

So herein lies the rub. If most in the academy believe or function as if the world were purely material, or as if the human mind and spirit can seek only the mundane and trivial, then there is no reason to search for what is best in man, and we will find ourselves where we currently are: all "musics" are of equal value, meaning, and depth, and we do not even try to suggest otherwise. When the student brazenly asks, "You like Beethoven and I like Lady Gaga. So what's the problem?" and the professorial answer is, "Of course you are right, darling, and please pardon me for suggesting otherwise," you have a good idea of just how far we have sunk into the mire and how far we have to go to raise ourselves out of it. Our job in academia is to remind the student and the wider culture that one of the pinnacles of human achievement is the Western classical music tradition. Its riches are unmatched. Its current practitioners speak to our deepest selves.

Roger Scruton argues that music is a metaphor for our human lives: both have a beginning, a middle, and an end. All great pieces remind us of this. Their *ideas* present the listener with a complete sonic and emotional journey expressed with an internal logic and an external aural intelligibility. The music of the Western/American tradition must be at the center of every college's curriculum and every student should confront its beauty and bear witness to its magnificence.