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Celebrating High Art in the Postmodern Flatlands

David Acevedo

What is high art, and how do we recognize it? How ought we determine which artists and works are most worthy of praise? Is this even possible, or is all art of equal value? These are the central questions in Daniel Asia's *Observations on Music, Culture, and Politics*, a wide-ranging collection of essays discussing key issues facing modern art, particularly modern music, as well as academia and, ultimately, Western civilization.

Daniel Asia is an acclaimed composer of contemporary classical music and serves as professor of music at the University of Arizona. He also directs two UArizona organizations—the American Culture and Ideas Initiative and the Center for American Culture and Ideas. When he's not busy with those duties, he listens to music—a lot of it—and writes about it in various publications. *Observations* is an edited collection of previously published writings, as well as some new additions, that provides an excellent window into the mind of one of America's most esteemed musicians and music critics.

The collection comprises fifty-eight short essays, each providing valuable insights into the state of modern art and culture. It serves as a valuable guide for those seeking to learn more about contemporary music, particularly when taken as a whole.

The book is split into four parts: "The Idea of High Culture," "Music I (Mostly) Hold Dear," "Criticism and Review," and "Polemics." Parts One, Two, and Four focus primarily on music—though with plenty of broader cultural analysis interspersed—while Part Three is a wide assortment of reviews, analyzing works not only about music but also on politics, higher education, and Judaism. Like every great composer, Asia possesses a robust intellectual curiosity that stretches far beyond his chosen profession.

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Asia begins Part One discussing the condition of Western classical music in the nation and in modern American academia with "Diminuendo: Classical Music and the Academy." The picture he paints is not pretty. Indeed, he writes that "classical music, and particularly new classical music, has been marginalized, if not excised, from the cultural landscape." (2) How this happened is complicated:

- America's embrace of popular music (e.g., pop, rock, jazz, musical theater) at the expense of classical music.
- The resultant shortening of Americans' musical attention span (also caused by the rise of social media and music streaming).
- The American media's shift from publishing reviews of classical music to reviewing popular music and classical music side by side and with the same seriousness.
- The decline in American musical literacy, once acquired through learning to play an instrument and attending live concerts.

Asia argues that this confluence of factors has drastically diminished America's musical appreciation, and thereby American music itself.

> All students today must be taught how to listen. And because they are also easily distracted, they must be taught how to focus and to concentrate as well, and for spans of time to which they are unaccustomed. . . . This generation hardly knows how to think, but it certainly doesn't know how to feel. There is a stark disconnect of the emotional from the intellectual, and today's students have trouble engaging their senses, feelings, and intellect in any unified manner. (6)

This assessment applies to nearly all Americans, including the average college student. Surely music majors keep classical music alive, right? Yes and no, Asia suggests. On the one hand, today's music majors often have great technical capabilities and a thorough knowledge of their instrument's repertoire. On the other hand, "they will have rarely encountered much other musical literature. They will know the names of some of the major composers of the past, and rarely any of the past fifty years or so." (7) Music can only be kept alive if it is performed, and today's young performers have little

interest in contemporary music. They love Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, but modern music's luminaries are already fading into irrelevance within most conservatories and schools of music.

Asia also offers a grim assessment of classical music in America more broadly in "Tarnished Gold: Classical Music in America": "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." (15)

But there is a glimmer of hope. Indeed, if American classical music is "tarnished gold," then it stands to reason that it was once golden. Asia believes that this golden age is mostly behind us, but that it can be recovered. He contrasts this cautiously optimistic view with that of Heather Mac Donald in her essay "Classical Music's New Golden Age,"[1] which he finds to be a naive assessment of classical music in America. Yes, more people have access to classical music than ever before, as Mac Donald points out, but fewer people truly understand it.[2] He also bristles at her dismissal of new classical music, pointing out that he is one of many "very much alive composer[s]" who are still writing music that matters.

Asia does agree with Mac Donald, though, that much of modern music is worthy of our harsh critique, and even our dismissal. This is an extremely unpopular position in today's academy, which is too thoroughly submerged in postmodern relativism to admit that some composers and pieces are simply *better* than others. Asia's judgments have gotten him into some trouble over the years—a bit more on that later.

In discussing modern music's flaws, Asia draws upon the great composer, conductor, and horn player Gunther Schuller:

> For Schuller it all comes down to a matter of *freedom without control*. He says that there were more losses than gains [in modern classical music], that even the gains weren't under control or mastery, and that they were more technical than substantive. Composers were seduced into notions of complexity and intellectualism

1 Heather Mac Donald, "Classical Music's New Golden Age," *City Journal* (Summer 2010).

2 It should probably be noted that more recently, in 2021, Mac Donald has put out a clarion call that the classical music industry is on the verge of destroying itself, atoning for its alleged "racial sins." See Mac Donald, "Classical Music's Suicide Pact," *City Journal* (Summer 2021).

> for their own sake, and were taught that writing music is a technical matter, not an emotional, spiritual, or cultural one. (20)

This obsession with the intellectual and the technical, largely propelled by the composers of the Second Viennese School, is the soundtrack of a region that was on the losing end of two world wars: dark, detached, and, perhaps worst of all, largely void of the artistic *telos* of ages past. "Repetition wasn't allowed and, most grievous, neither was recognizable form . . . No mixing of tonality and atonality was allowed; exceptions became the norm; and immediacy, accessibility, memorability, directness, and simplicity were all considered banal, and thus unusable." (20) These composers flipped Western music on its head for the sake of a new artistic order. The results, while often interesting, leave the soul starved for the musical nourishment it once received.

Thankfully, Asia doesn't end the book here. Yes, he takes issue with much that modern composers have given us, but he is decidedly *not* your stereotypical conservative curmudgeon who believes that all music written after 1900 belongs on the ash heap of history. He proves this in Part Two: "Music I (Mostly) Hold Dear." This section presents a small but mighty compendium of modern composers that are well worth our time and attention. There are indeed many diamonds in the contemporary rough, if we are willing to keep an open ear. Asia's analyses are written in non-technical language, and are therefore profitable for both trained musicians and interested laymen.

Featured in this section are the "Big Three" of the American minimalist movement: Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams. It's no surprise that these composers make the list, given that they represent a direct reaction to the aforementioned dark, detached, and directionless music of their European contemporaries. As Reich himself famously said,

> Stockhausen, Berio and Boulez [descendants of the Second Viennese School] were portraying in very honest terms what it was like to pick up the pieces of a bombed-out continent after World War II. But for some Americans in 1948 or 1958 or 1968—in the real context of tailfins, Chuck Berry and millions of burgers sold—to pretend that instead we're really going to have

> the dark-brown angst of Vienna
> is a lie, a musical lie.[3]

Rather than tell this lie, the minimalists told the American truth, and the results are strikingly beautiful. Really?

Asia does include among his cherished modernists some composers who either embraced European modernism or experimented with aleatoricism (music based on chance)—György Ligeti, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman. But most dear to his heart, I suspect, are the American classical composers he features, including John Corigliano, David Del Tredici, Robert Beaser, and Fred Lerdahl, among others. These men also responded to European modernism, but in a much different way than the minimalists. That is, they sought to make their music a true extension of the Western classical tradition, not totally shunning twentieth century developments such as atonality and extended technique, but also freely breaking the totalitarian rules enumerated above: they employ repetition; they write within recognizable forms; they mix tonality and atonality; and they actually care about communicating something accessible to the audience. This is the tradition within which Asia himself works, and he seems to have a particular fondness for his rebellious, semi-traditional peers.

What do all of these composers have in common? Three things: they 1) are true artistic individuals; 2) deal in concrete musical ideas; and 3) have the skill to turn these ideas into music that is transcendent. As Asia writes, "The greatest of music provides musical experiences in the deepest and richest way possible, that provides a sense of transcendence." (206)

Asia likes this word "transcendence" a lot. Another one is "ineffable." This is fitting, as all great music allows the listener to temporarily transcend his normal existence and catch a glimpse of the ineffable. The book's cover alludes to this, depicting a staircase climbing into an increasingly dark space—that is, into the unknown and yet unbearably enticing realm of the transcendent.

While Parts One and Two are the most consequential parts of the book, Parts Three and Four are certainly worth a few observations.

To call Part Three, "Criticism and Review," expansive would be an understatement. The works Asia reviews include Herb London's analysis of the 2000s, *The Transformation Decade* (2012); composer Aaron

3 Edward Strickland, *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 46.

Copland's musings on the creative process, *Music and Imagination* (1980); Professor Barry Holtz's *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (2017); Antonin Scalia's *Scalia Speaks* (2017); Arthur Brooks's *Love Your Enemies* (2019); and more. Asia's lucid prose highlights the best of these works and will be of interest both to those familiar with the material and those new to it. The individual chapters are not unrelated to each other but also stand alone perfectly well, making them an ideal resource for those seeking new perspectives in these topics.

In Part Four, "Polemics," we finally get a taste of Asia's cultural and intellectual battles. The first essay, "The Put on of the Century, or The Cage Centenary," takes to task one of the most celebrated figures in twentieth century music: John Cage. Cage's output includes what we may call big-M Music—that is, music made up of pitches, rhythms, and harmonies—as well as other, more avant-garde experiments, including aleatoricism and, most memorably, silence. If you know Cage, you know of his famous "piece" *4'33"*, in which a pianist opens the piano, and with a timer measures out exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds of complete silence before closing the piano and walking off stage. It is these sorts of absurdist experiments for which Cage is most famous (or infamous), earning him a loyal following within the new music community. Asia sees this "music" for what it is, though—absurd, self-absorbed nonsense—and dismisses it. He pulls no punches:

> So why is Cage lauded? I think his transgressive, stick-it-in your face approach finds resonance with those who think they hate the Western musical tradition, for its supposed patriarchal and masterwork approach. I think his oceanic view of rationality versus chance finds acceptance in a time which is profoundly anti-rational, and therefore unwilling to make serious artistic judgements regarding real quality . . . (208)

Here Asia takes a stand against a composer, and by extension an entire movement of twentieth century music, in a way that goes beyond personal preference. Asia doesn't simply dislike Cage's music—he actually thinks Cage was *wrong*. This is a cardinal sin in today's music scene and predictably earned Asia the scorn of his peers. They would rather live in the postmodern flatlands, where all music is of equal value and the best a piece can be is "interesting"—certainly not "transcendent." Someone has to state

the obvious, though: Sitting at a piano in silence is not music. Anyone who believes that ought to seriously reconsider his purpose for creating music in the first place. Asia is that brave someone, much to his credit.

The remainder of Part Four includes a critique of "The Politics of New Music" (take a wild guess at what those might be); a sharp takedown of "ultra-modernist" composer Elliott Carter, aptly titled "Carter is Dead"; and an open letter to the president of UArizona, along with a couple of shorter essays. Asia's polemics are as sharp as they are tactful, and he's not afraid to give a composer credit for what he does well amid heavy criticism. As in the rest of the book, Asia is concerned with discerning and celebrating the good, true, and beautiful in modern music, not with dunking on his ideological opponents.

Observations is a wonderful collection of insightful essays for musicians and laymen alike. There's something for everyone here, whether you're seeking discussions of high art on the macro level, analyses of specific composers and pieces on the micro level, miscellaneous musings on culture and politics, or all of the above. Asia's prose is clear, witty, and engaging, an increasingly rare quality in today's academy. He's not afraid to take a stand for what he believes, even if it will cost him professional clout. And, most importantly, he encourages the reader to do the most important work of all, that which the book alone cannot accomplish: go forth and *listen* to music. Taste and see the profound beauty it has to offer. There is truly no substitute for this experience, though *Observations* will serve as a handy guide for those who are willing to take the journey.