

# WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC AND GENERAL EDUCATION

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Thinking about transforming music, I address issues relating to the role of musicians in higher education and Western classical music in general education. I am concerned about this music because it is marginalized in general education and the civic spaces of public life. Where once it held a privileged place, it seems now to have acquired (in some quarters at least) a negative connotation as a bastion of elitism and privilege. Instead, popular musics (with a nod to musics of other cultures) have pride of place in much elementary and secondary music education and in many university and college offerings designed for students whose principal fields of study lie outside music. An all-too-common musical illiteracy or, at best, elementary level of musical literacy and aurality renders Western classical music inaccessible to the general public just as the pervasiveness of popular music renders it inaudible and invisible. Bridges to past, less accessible, and esoteric traditions are also too few or in disrepair. Julian Johnson laments the diminished stature of Western classical music and argues for its values in today's world.<sup>1</sup>

Music teachers of all stripes urgently need to address this marginalization of Western classical music as a matter of public policy. If caring for and fostering

diversity in the natural world is a good, then it is reasonable to expect that fostering diversity in the cultural world is likewise a good. If preventing the extinction of natural species is a matter of public policy, then surely preventing the extinction of musics among other cultural traditions is at least as important. Social transformation has within it the seeds of conservation, or the preserving of past traditions, just as it also suggests profound and ongoing planned and unintended change. When any music such as Western classical music is sidelined, music education policy makers need to ask, Is this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faceted music important to keep, foster, and change? What does it have to contribute in the present world? Is it being cared for sufficiently? If it needs to change, how ought it be changed? What principles can be helpful to music teachers in caring for, fostering, and changing it? These are compelling public policy questions for our time.

### A QUARREL AND ITS AFTERMATH

In 1963, participants in the Yale Seminar asked some of these very difficult questions of music education policy makers. MENC leaders took exception to the seminar and its conclusions; although some outstanding music teachers were participants, the organization had not been invited and the seminar was not its idea.<sup>2</sup> Instead of addressing directly some of the important criticisms of school music education and music teacher education raised in the seminar, the MENC mounted its own rival Tanglewood Symposium in 1967. Participants in this symposium faulted music in higher education for its failure to admit “talented and capable high school music students [to] the privilege of advanced study,” the “[c]ompartimentalization and lack of communication between various segments of the music field,” its lack of relation to “the musical heritage of American culture,” and its failure to ensure arts courses in general education.<sup>3</sup> The symposium contributed to a populist stance focused on the myriad vernacular traditions of the world, thereby diminishing the role and presence of Western classical music and highlighting popular and vernacular musics at MENC conferences and in the elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Subsequent attempts to renew the Western classical tradition and raise the musical expectations of teachers and their students in the nation’s schools exemplified in the Juilliard Repertory, Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, and Comprehensive Musicianship Program seem not to have made a lasting impact. And the differing criticisms and visions of the Yale Seminar and Tanglewood Symposium have yet to be critically engaged.

Summarizing criticisms made of school music repertoire in the report of the Yale Seminar to the Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Claude Palisca writes:

If the goal of elementary and secondary music education is to awaken, increase, and refine the child's natural musicality, then the repertory used in most school systems in the United States is ill-chosen. It fails for the following reasons:

1. It is of appalling quality, representing little of the heritage of significant music.
2. It is constricted in scope. Even the classics of Western music . . . do not occupy a central place in singing, playing, and listening. Non-Western music, early Western music, and certain forms of jazz, popular, and folk music have been almost altogether neglected.
3. It is rarely sufficiently interesting to enchant or involve a child to whom it is presumed to be accessible. Children's potential is constantly underestimated.
4. It is corrupted by arrangements, touched-up editions, erroneous transcriptions, and tasteless parodies to such an extent that authentic work is rare. A whole range of songbook arrangements, weak derivative semipopular children's pieces, and a variety of "educational" recordings containing music of similar value and type are to be strongly condemned as "pseudomusic." To the extent that artificial music is taught to children, to that extent are they invited to hate it. There is no reason or need to use artificial or pseudomusic in any of its forms.
5. Songs are chosen and graded more on the basis of the limited technical skills of classroom teachers than the needs of children or the ultimate goals of improved hearing and listening skills.
6. A repertory of vocal music is chosen for its appeal to the lowest common denominator and for its capacity to offend the smallest possible number. More attention is often paid to the subject matter of the text, both in the choice and arrangement of material, than to the place of a song as music in the educational scheme. The texts are banal and lacking in regional inflection.
7. A rich treasury of solo piano music and chamber music is altogether neglected.
8. The repertory is not properly coordinated with the development of theoretical and historical insights.
9. No significant amount of music composed by children, particularly the children being taught, is included or treated seriously.<sup>4</sup>

In view of these shortcomings, Palisca calls for a "wholesale renewal of the repertory of school music, both for performing and listening."<sup>5</sup>

How much progress towards addressing these criticisms has the music education profession made? Arguably, teachers are more attuned to the necessity of fidelity to the various world music traditions than they may have been then. World musics are now incorporated into elementary and junior high school music textbook series. Theoretical and contextual insights are regularly coordinated with

musical materials; sample textbook lesson plans designed to assist teachers in teaching the featured songs typically lay out in detail the theoretical or conceptual objectives for each lesson, step-by-step strategies for working through the material, and assessment rubrics for evaluating student learning. Still, when I ask music teachers whether the Yale Seminar criticisms of school music repertoire still hold true, I am often assured that they do. Such teachers worry that in becoming more inclusive in the sense of being more aware of vernacular and popular musics of one's own and other places, the Western classical tradition has gotten short shrift in the music curriculum. They still see music of "appalling quality, representing little of the heritage of significant music" as the focus of too much school music instruction and performance. Their stories resonate with my own informal observations of the musical achievements of high school graduates and prospective musicians who I interview for admission to the School of Music at Indiana University, too many of whom, after an entire high school course in music, are unable to sing a simple chorale melody at sight, describe its musical form, identify its likely historical context, sing the National Anthem in tune, or improvise a melody on their instruments.

I am not suggesting that the problem of classical music's marginalization in contemporary music culture should be laid solely at the door of music teachers. Aside from copyright laws that make it difficult for composers to quote from popular melodies as they did in the past, the twentieth century marks the emergence of academic composers whose livelihood was assured by the universities in which they worked, some of whom were uninterested in or disdained public acclaim. Such composers were free to write whatever they wished, experiment sonically without recourse to the need to please their patrons. Rather, in the university tradition of peer review, they sought to please each other. As a result, a great amount of music was composed with little reference to what people like or can actually hear irrespective of stylistic familiarity or the number of repeated hearings.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, public interest in contemporary music dwindled. Rose Rosengard Subotnik rightly laments the degree to which classical music was cut off from its popular and vernacular roots and points out the necessity of renewing these interrelationships if it is to flourish again.<sup>7</sup> And the history of twentieth century music reminds us that the public still matters if classical music is to have wide performance and reception.

Culture is contested in the public sphere. Seyla Benhabid eloquently argues that cultural fractures and differences are deep and abiding, and the resulting tensions and dialectics sometimes taut to breaking point.<sup>8</sup> Television images of defiant Pakistani musicians and fundamentalists burning their CDs are fresh as I reflect on how far people will go to destroy another music they see as evil and reshape musical thought and practice in ways they prefer. Also, Canadian policy

mandates that a certain amount of “Canadian content” is to be played in the Canadian media because Canadians do not view their own musical culture as peacefully co-existing with that of their neighbor to the south; such is the flood of United States culture into Canada that they envision its possible obliteration except for public intervention. Given these practical realities, those who value Western classical music (and other traditions both esoteric and out of the lime-light) need to make and defend public policy in defense of these musics, thereby engaging in a contest for the hearts and minds of young and old alike.

### WHY CLASSICAL MUSIC?

Why should Western classical music be advocated by music education policy makers? Among the possible reasons, the term “Western classical music” is a misnomer. It is really a multi-cultural and international tradition forged by musicians around the world who brought their various individual and cultural perspectives to a music that grew up in Europe but that from its infancy drew upon African and Near Eastern roots. Its widespread influence as one of the great musical traditions does not make it necessarily better than others but does make it worthy of study. A music that is known so widely, has captured the interest and participation of so many musicians and their audiences internationally, has such a rich repertoire, and represents so many cultures strikes me as a human endeavor of inherent interest and worth.

Western classical music is also one of the ancient classical traditions in the world. Its long history can constitute a bridge to better understanding the particular contributions and detractions of Western civilization. This music constitutes a rich heritage of instruments, compositions, theories, and performers. It sometimes instances brilliant and deeply moving creations that manifest human genius at work. There is, as Jane Roland Martin puts it, a “stock” of cultural makings and doings<sup>9</sup> that support, enrich, challenge, and defy social and cultural conventions. Musical artifacts include written compositions that are brought to life in performance, archaic instruments that are preserved, copied, restored, and otherwise kept for posterity, and musical rituals that are described, recorded, and recreated in a host of ways. As Neil Postman notes, knowing about the eighteenth century is particularly important at a time when mediated culture focuses on the present.<sup>10</sup> Knowing the past traditions of a particular place enables one to connect with those who have gone before just as one relates to people in other places. Viewed this way, Western classical music is a precious heritage that links Westerners to their past just as it links them to other world cultures.

This music is an organic, living thing. Although informed and influenced by Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, it is also rooted in the musics of Eastern Orthodoxy and Judaism, and in the secular musics of Middle Eastern and

Northern African countries in which Islam took hold. Its mythos, influenced originally by Greek polytheism, later acquired a monotheistic Judeo-Christian perspective that is now being transformed as the tradition increasingly finds its home in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, affected again by polytheistic and other religious and mythical world views. It has also absorbed a host of other musics that have likewise become classical in their own right. For example, jazz is in the midst of becoming a classical tradition and many of its elements have been included in the Western classical mainstream. Likewise, rock, country, and gospel are acquiring classic properties such as notation, instrumentation, and self-reflexivity, and becoming incorporated into and interconnected with the Western classical tradition.

Musical notation is one of its singular achievements. Literacy provides a way of recording the nuances of performance, intellectualizing music, propagating it widely and disparately in time and space, and quickly learning new pieces of music. Becoming literate in this tradition is essential. Since the music is notated, one can read a score and hear how it should sound and quickly catch on to what is happening even if one is unacquainted with the particular piece. Remaining illiterate in this tradition leaves one deprived of knowledge essential to full participation in a society that regards itself as Western. This deprivation, whether intentional or not, is arguably racist and classist when it fails to ensure that all people irrespective of their background have the opportunity to be musically literate. Recognizing the multiplicity of musical cultures in today's societies suggests expanding literacy beyond the Western classical tradition while also emphasizing aurality/orality—a point that Patricia Shehan Campbell is at pains to make.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of musical orality, failing to develop musical literacy in at least one notated musical tradition makes it difficult to break out of a solely aural/oral tradition into a literate one, something that exponents of aural/oral or little musical traditions may wish to do, sooner or later. And leaving students limited is arguably mis-educative since it stunts and prevents their further development.<sup>12</sup>

This music also expresses the artist's desire to make something exceptional. It goes beyond mere entertainment to be brilliant and significant. It matters to those who make and take it. Johnson wants to dignify the term "artist," and employ a rigorous conception of what it means to be an artist. He wants to rescue "art for art's sake," for the love of the images themselves as for their use value. This human desire for "art for its own sake" has ancient roots. In Jean Auel's pre-historical novel of early Europeans, *The Shelters of Stone*, Jonokol, a painter, paints as much for the love of painting as for its sacred or spiritual purposes.<sup>13</sup> Although the arts may and often do serve useful purposes, artists from time immemorial have cared greatly about what they create and they want others to notice their work. A strong

case may also be made for “art for art’s sake” in today’s world. Technology and commerce are grounded in utilitarian values and yet images and shapes have intrinsic appeal and people value objects and things for reasons quite apart from their function or purpose. Composers of all musical genres likewise write for the love of it. Western classical music especially lends itself to be listened to for its own sake and its composers wish it to be taken seriously. Moving beyond the prosaic, it serves to remind one that life is form as well as function, form accomplishes what function cannot and vice versa.

Western classical music is an intellectual achievement that appeals to the life of mind. In its repertoire are instances of sometimes brilliant and deeply moving creations, works of exceptional talent and human genius. This music values critical and imaginative thinking. Its colors, textures, forms, and styles comprise articulated, significant, and sometimes notated scores and performances viewed as process and product.<sup>14</sup> As such, it invites intellectual contemplation and dispassionate examination as much as emotional response and physical desire since it is also embodied and engaged sometimes intellectually, physically, and emotionally. At a time in which much music is intended to arouse emotion and desire, Western classical music appeals to the human spirit as it cultivates the intellect and invites critical reflection and imagination. Its intellectual appeal is consistent with the capacities required for the conduct of human and civil society. Unlike self-exposure, in which a person simply vents her or his feeling, the artist transforms feeling into something meaningful, evocative of emotion yet more deeply and movingly present to mind.<sup>15</sup> This expressiveness is achieved through the exercise of intellectual engagement, emotional restraint, and personal compassion and integrity. Making and taking this music is human and dignifying even though sometimes unsettling and distressing. Neglecting or destroying cultural treasures or otherwise preventing their making and taking is demeaning and anti-humanistic and reveals a callous anti-intellectualism and fanaticism that runs contrary to the kinds of intellectual engagement and criticism required in humane and free societies.

A performance of Sergei Eisenstein’s 1938 film, *Alexander Nevsky*, with William Brohn’s reconstruction of Sergei Prokofiev’s film score at the Indiana University School of Music Summer Festival 2003 is a case in point. Here, Russian passions about war and peace, national identity, and religious complicities in war (so relevant to present international conflicts) are presented for contemplation as well as felt response. Although quaint cinematically, the visual images with accompanying orchestral, choral, and solo performances nevertheless can be received, enjoyed, and pondered over by an audience remote in time and place from the film and score’s creation. Eisenstein and Prokofiev have moved beyond mere self-exposure to express a human condition and its presentation to the mind’s eye and ear can be compelling even if archaic in its reach across time and space.

Such thinking is particularly important if all the citizens of a democracy are to participate actively in an informed way. Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey, and Maxine Greene are among the American writers to focus on the centrality of intellectual and artistic development in fostering and ensuring a free society.<sup>16</sup> Their arguments suggest that ways of making and taking music employed in general education need to be consistent with and enhance intellectual development. And since Western classical music appeals to and fosters these intellectual powers, it needs to have an important place in publicly supported education.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Given the contributions that Western classical music can make to general education, how can college and university musicians foster its study at all levels of general education? Among the possibilities, regarding music education as a right positions it as an educational necessity rather than a frill and frames the debate persuasively.<sup>17</sup> Asserting that all students have the right to know their culture, grasp Western classical music's history and place among the other world musics, read and talk about it musically, listen to it intelligently, participate in its making and taking, and see music among the arts and humanities requires that college and university musicians and their elementary and secondary school colleagues insist and ensure that this right is met through concerted educational, political, and legal action. As a first step, the nation's leading schools of music might host a symposium of all the stakeholders in music education to turn the public spotlight onto the importance of classical and vernacular musics in culture, facilitate a conversation among music teachers at all levels and in all specialties, propose a plan for achieving musical literacy and orality on the part of every elementary, secondary, college, and university student, and spearhead this plan into action. Political and legal action may also be necessary in insisting that these musical and cultural rights are met.

Music departments and schools also need to be strong advocates and agents for music education in higher education. This necessitates developing an array of musically and intellectually challenging courses that also bring the best of Western classical music to students who are majoring in fields other than music. College and university students can be interested in esoteric things and intrigued by classical music because it is so different from today's popular music. They may be fascinated by seeing and hearing an ancient instrument played, awed by visiting an opera house, enthusiastic in talking with the people preparing a production about what is going on musically and what the performers are attempting to create, captivated by attending a live performance, eager to reflect on it afterward, and willing to plan a program of musical pieces expressive of particular personal experiences or social events. Much depends on instructors' enthusiasm for the course material and their imagination in developing alternative ways of teaching



Western classical music with reference to what is seen as well as heard, live as well as recorded. I see enormous potential, for example, in approaching such courses thematically in terms of topics related to music's relationship to ancient and contemporary myths or to political, social, and religious issues, comparatively across musics and genres, and ethnologically with reference to human culture. Whatever the chosen strategies, college and university departments and schools of music need to think pro-actively about developing courses designed to enrich the intellectual and spiritual lives of students throughout the academy, feature imaginative approaches to classical Western music among other musics, and incorporate cross-disciplinary approaches to music.

In all of these efforts, it is important to integrate theoretical and practical elements in forging holistic approaches to musical education. Too often, college and university music education, as with music education at the elementary and secondary levels, is pervasively instrumental, focused on the acquisition of techniques without the opportunity to integrate and generalize the skills learned. Unless one generalizes what has been learned instrumentally and technically, and makes it one's own, one has gone only part way toward becoming a musician. Musicians need to be reflective about their practice as they also think practically about music's theoretical aspects. One of the challenges of our time is to integrate musical study so that the knowledge gained is vital and practical just as it is informed and theoretical. The future of Western classical music depends on preparing musicians who are reflective practitioners of their art, faithful to their tradition, and eager to renew it. To this end, projects that foster holistic musical experiences need to be plentiful at every level of instruction.

Raising the musical expectations of students at all levels of instruction necessitates preparing music teachers who are first and foremost musicians as they are also skilled teachers, able and willing to cultivate a musical knowledge in the young and lift the musical expectations of their students. Music education needs to be a central mission of college and university music programs because it constitutes the future of classical music. Too often, teacher education programs are cluttered with requirements that are mandated by state jurisdictions and certification agencies, and music courses may be given short shrift or musical expectations lowered in order to accommodate the press of other things. Musicians in the academy need to assert the primacy of music instruction in all music teacher education programs so that future teachers have solid preparation as musicians; they need to insist that all music teachers possess musical skills and knowledge sufficient to enable their students to become musically literate and able to hear and make music in various ways. Alternative teacher certification procedures for musicians may also need to be considered, lobbied for, and secured in order to attract practicing musicians to elementary and secondary education. Since music

is a practical art that needs to be brought alive in the phenomenal world, music learning is complex; learning how to go on in music is often more difficult and time-consuming than learning about music. College and university musicians need to be alert to these challenges in designing teacher education programs that enable music teachers to competently do and know about the Western classical tradition among the musics they teach in their classrooms, studios, and rehearsal spaces.

One of the challenges for an ancient tradition such as Western classical music is what and how to change. Thinking philosophically and reflectively about this tradition is bound to engender criticism of what now exists and a desire to change this world. Austin Caswell makes the important point that studying music ethnologically as well as curatorially enables students to see and hear it contextually as well as critically, from perspectives within and without the tradition.<sup>18</sup> The prospect of this critical engagement suggests that it will necessarily change; to prevent change would effectively fossilize an otherwise living tradition. For example, Christopher Small and Bruno Nettl criticize the concert hall experience and the Midwestern conservatory respectively and de-construct the taken-for-granted in asking how things might be different.<sup>19</sup> Their criticisms are important because decisions as to what to keep and what to jettison are crucial to music's future. It is also heartening to see classical musicians experimenting with alternative costumes, programs, venues, and times, trying new ways to bring Western classical music to the fore of the musical world, broadening the repertoire by introducing new music and pieces that might not otherwise be considered as "classical," and finding ways to connect this music with people's lives.

In sum, college and university musicians and their professional colleagues need to shape public policy about music and the other arts. Such policy needs to ensure that classical traditions thrive, that esoteric musics out of the popular mainstream are valued, and that the beliefs and practices underlying musical study foster a human and free society. Culture is a precious human undertaking, and the host of musics, arts, languages, religions, myths, and rituals that comprise it need to be carefully transmitted to the young and transformed in the process.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>Michael L. Mark, "MENC: From Tanglewood to the Present," in *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education*, ed., Clifford K. Madsen (Reston, VA: MENC—The National Association for Music Education, 2000), 5–22.

<sup>3</sup>Robert A. Choate, ed., *Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium* (Washington, DC: Music Educators National Conference, 1968), 139, 134.

<sup>4</sup>*Music In Our Schools: A Search for Improvement*. Report of the Yale Seminar on Music Education, Prepared by Claude V. Palisca (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 11, 12.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup>Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 68, points to a “rather glaring disparity between the way in which the arbiters of musical taste approach musical structure and the way in which listeners generally respond to it.” His analysis sheds doubt that listeners can hear what and how composers assume they do.

<sup>7</sup>Rose Rosengard Subotnik, “The Challenge of Contemporary Music,” in *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*, ed., Philip Alperson ([1987]; repr., University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 359–367.

<sup>8</sup>Seyla Benhabid, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup>Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Lessons from the World: A Cross-Cultural Guide to Music Teaching and Learning* (Toronto: Schirmer Books, 1991).

<sup>12</sup>John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938).

<sup>13</sup>Jean Auel, *The Shelters of Stone* (New York: Crown, 2002).

<sup>14</sup>Percy A. Scholes, *Music, the Child and the Masterpiece: A Comprehensive Handbook of Aims and Methods in All That Is Usually Called ‘Musical Appreciation’* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 81, 82 uses this classification as a basis for his approach to music appreciation.

<sup>15</sup>John Dewey, *Art as Experience* ([1934]; repr., New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 61.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on Virginia and Other Writings,” in Robert Ulich, *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom: Selections from Great Documents* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 463–479; John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* ([1916]; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1944); Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>The notion of music education as a right is explored by Marja Heimonen in her doctoral thesis, *Music Education and Law: Regulation as an Instrument*, *Studia Musica* 17 (Helsinki: Sibelius Academy, 2002). An abbreviated version of her argument appears in this issue of *Philosophy of Music Education Review*.

<sup>18</sup>Austin B. Caswell, “Canonicity in Academia: A Music Historian’s View,” in *Philosopher, Teacher, Musician: Perspectives on Music Education*, ed., Estelle R. Jorgensen (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 129–145.

<sup>19</sup>Christopher Small, *The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).