



Life After Brahms

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE “CLASSICAL MUSIC” OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Joseph Sowa

For many people, the history of classical music ends with World War I. After Brahms, a few great composers such as Stravinsky and Mahler wrote some swan songs for the genre while composers such as Schoenberg and Varèse turned classical music into a dissonant and confusing mess and put the nails in its coffin. After that time, jazz and popular music took over, leaving classical music a relic of the past.

The “history” that most people know of classical music is wrong. Even as Benny Goodman ignited the Swing craze in Los Angeles’ Palomar Ballroom, “classical” music continued. It kept going while Elvis Presley and later the Beatles revolutionized rock. Over the last forty years, it has inspired

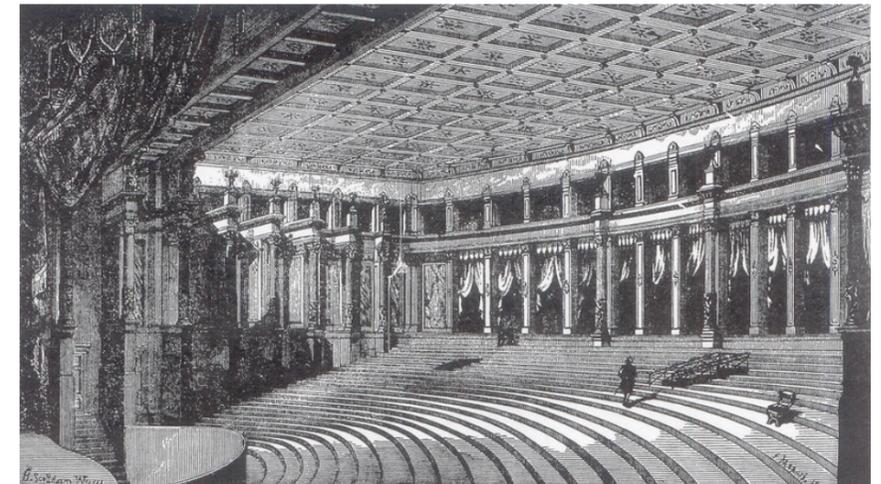
such diverse acts as the Modern Jazz Quartet and Radiohead. And even today the so-called “classical” tradition remains as contemporary as next week’s episode of *American Idol*. Despite its pervasiveness and longevity, few people know that this tradition still exists or, if they do, they don’t know how to deal with it.

“We live in a time . . . not of mainstream but of many streams or even, if you insist on a ‘river’ of time, that we have come to delta, maybe even beyond delta to an ocean, which is going back to the skies.”

— John Cage, Interview on KPFA, 1992

What is this music? There isn’t really a good name for it. Although much of this music descends from the European musical tradition, it rarely resembles the music from Bach to Brahms. Thus, “classical” isn’t really a good name. “Art music,” “concert music,” and “serious music” don’t fit either, not only because some of it is quite funny but also because some music from other traditions is just as rigorous and is also meant to be listened to rather than be used as aural wallpaper. The best name for the music that came to be after Brahms is simply “new music.” It’s “new” not necessarily in the sense that it’s current, but in the sense that it seeks to explore the boundaries of what music can be.

“New music” encompasses all those composers who explore new sounds and new methods of organization. The impetus behind these explorations came from none other than such European masters as Beethoven, Liszt, and Wagner. Unlike his immediate predecessors Haydn and Mozart, who primarily wrote to please their patrons, Beethoven wrote music to fulfill his artistic vision. As he grew older, he cared increasingly less whether his contemporaries understood the music he wrote. Though today we regard works such as his “Ninth Symphony” or his “Hammerklavier Sonata” as masterpieces, these pieces



confused many of Beethoven’s contemporaries.

As the nineteenth century continued, Liszt and Wagner embraced this ideal of composer as visionary. Liszt claimed that every new piece should contain at least one new chord, and Wagner, in addition to revolutionizing the operatic experience with his notion of *gesamtkunstwerk*, stretched European ideas of music through his use of the orchestra and his increasingly chromatic musical language. By the end of the nineteenth century, even seemingly conservative composers such as Brahms actively sought to emphasize their musical individuality and to “progress” the art of music.

These attitudes laid the foundation for the explorations of the twentieth century. On this founda-

tion, twentieth-century composers have sought to emancipate both consonance and dissonance, noise and silence. They have worked with traditional narrative structures or transcended them, writing music that is, at its extremes, either static or frenetically nonlinear. Their music reflects their awareness of the modern and more recently the postmodern world, on the one hand seeking to sound like no music that has ever been written and on the other assimilating musics of the past or of other cultures. Their music also considers the way recorded sound has changed listener perceptions.

Although this body of music is united by exploration, be it conservative or radical, on a strictly aural level, the variety of sounds composers have created

In addition to stretching musical boundaries, Wagner innovated performing spaces, creating one of the first theaters with stadium seating.

“Uncle Milty’s secret formula for the composition of new music: take jazz chords, make strange.”

— Bathroom graffiti from the Princeton music building, as recounted by composer David Rakowski. (The “Uncle Milty” in question is Milton Babbitt.)

is staggering. John Cage, one of America’s most prominent new music composers, aptly summarized the situation when he said that the frontiers of new music have expanded like a delta.

Such “progress” came at a cost. Of the relatively few people who know this music exists, some wish that it didn’t and decry this music as unpredictable, harsh, ugly, or inharmonious. The most strident of these voices would convict new music composers of charlatanism. The more moderate of these people would claim that composers have alienated audiences. Though alienation was usually not the composers’ intent, the ignorance and befuddlement with which many listeners respond to this music demonstrates that it was at least the result of the avenues that composers explored.

And yet, for every initially daunting piece by composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen or Iannis Xenakis, there are immediately

inviting pieces by composers such as Benjamin Britten or Arvo Pärt. Some composers, such as Aaron Copland, have written both kinds of pieces and everything in between. Thus, to pigeonhole new music as harsh and unlistenable is misleading.

Likewise, despite the marginalization of this music, it has contributed much to the popular culture. Compositions such as Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* and “O Fortuna” from Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* have been used frequently in film and television. Karlheinz Stockhausen’s electronic music inspired the sound collages in the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *White Album*. (In fact, his face appears on the cover of the former album.) Stanley Kubrick stole two pieces by Györgi Ligeti to use in his film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (for which unauthorized use Ligeti later sued and won). A few years ago, *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening identified Jennifer Higdon’s *Concerto for Orchestra* as one of his top ten favorite CDs of 2004. In a similar fashion, popular culture has influenced new music, with composers such as Michael Daugherty writing pieces inspired by Superman and Elvis Presley. The list of influences both ways could go on for pages.

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Despite knowing this historical background, entering the world of new music can still be a daunting

experience. Many people are used to dancing to music or attending concerts as a social event, but few people are used to listening to music on its own terms. Even many people who visit modern art galleries and read contemporary literature are ignorant of the corresponding works of music.

This should come as a surprise to no one. Of all the arts, music is the most abstract, particularly music without words. Without words, even old music can be difficult to listen to for novice listeners. Likewise, the forum in which new music places itself—as music to be listened to—is unusual both in terms of contemporary experience and of European history. Until the piano recitals of Franz Liszt began to change the standard, it was expected that audiences would talk and clap in the middle of performances. For most people today and for most people before Liszt, attending a concert was a social event of which music happened to be the main attraction. In the Baroque era, audiences would even eat dinner and play cards at concerts.

In the place of these valid although inadequate expectations, listeners must form new ones when approaching new music. At a most basic level, to “get” new music, listeners must be curious about sounds. As they appreciate these sounds, they should notice their responses to them and allow themselves to associate these sounds with life and with other sounds.

Listeners also should be aware of the primary elements that make new music different than the music they normally experience. These elements are worth exploring because not only do they constitute the basis for figuring out what goes on in new music but they also serve as a valuable framework by which to listen to any music.

1. INHERENT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ART MUSIC AND POPULAR MUSIC

This distinction isn’t that all classical music is artistic (it is not) nor that all popular music is un-artistic (some of it is quite so); however, between these two musics there is a fundamental difference of approach. Lawrence Kramer, in *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, explains that “most popular melodies are all of a piece, self-contained wholes sustaining or deepening a single mood. They are meant mainly to be repeated in different voices, styles, textures, and levels of intensity, and they may be repeated at will. . . .

“[In contrast,] most classical melodies are either less than a whole or less wholly self-contained. Those that are less than a whole consist of single phrases or subphrases (motives, figures, thematic ideas), expressive fragments from which a whole must somehow be made, or almost made, or never quite made. . . . The larger musical whole comes into being as the differences internal to melody play themselves out through time.

Few classical melodies are allowed to go for long without meeting a partner or a rival, a figure that answers or questions, a counterpart or contrary” (48–49).

This distinction was already in place well before the twentieth century; however, the developments of the twentieth century exacerbated the difference.

2. INFLUENCE OF RECORDED SOUND

Before recordings, if you wanted to hear music, either you attended church or a concert or you played it yourself. In the absence of these alternatives, you did not hear music. Some kinds of music were particularly difficult to access. For instance, unless you lived in a big city, you likely would rarely encounter orchestral music, if ever.

For music to come from an object was bizarre and unsettling. After attending a demonstration party of Thomas Edison’s

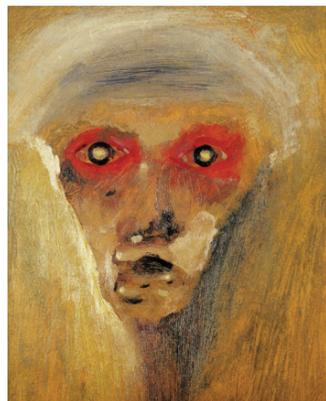


phonography, Sir Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) described himself as “astonished and somewhat terrified.” Not only was hearing real sounds coming from an inanimate box difficult to swallow, but also hearing a piece of music performed exactly the same way every time was foreign to pre-recording conceptions of music making. (What terrified Sullivan was the thought “that so much hideous and bad music may be put on record forever.”)

Despite the initial shock, listeners quickly embraced recordings. Recorded sound enabled contact with many types of music, almost on demand. Not only did this help composers be more informed about other music but it also changed their musical perceptions. Before recordings, if you were to listen to a piece of music, you would hear the entire thing from start to finish (unless you got up and walked out). Likewise, you were at the mercy of

Lithograph of an Edison phonograph, circa 1911

In addition to being a composer, Arnold Schoenberg was also a painter. “Red Gaze” (right) is one of his self-portraits.





Magnetic tape fueled the emancipation of noise in music. In 1948, Pierre Schaffer created one of the first such pieces using train sounds.

the musicians for the ordering of the music you would hear. Now music became interactive. You could jump from one piece to another piece in any order you would like. This ability to jump quickly among different musics revolutionized the way composers thought about style and musical time.

3. DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TIME

The interactivity that recorded sound created was echoed in another contemporaneous invention: motion pictures. According to Erwin Panofsky, film had two aspects that made it unique: the “dynamization of space” and the “spatialization of time.” Regarding the first aspect, in film, you can be in India one second and in New York City the next. Similarly, you can see two people talking from a distance one second and be right up near the speaker’s face the next. In this sense, the viewers’ concept of space is dynamic. Viewers are not limited to a single perspective. The second aspect, time, is also subjected to this kind of crosscutting. Film can

depict the passing of a few hours in a matter of seconds and can jump back and forth through time at will. Thus in film, time becomes a spatial dimension.

The appropriation of these conventions into music further pushed classical music, which was already more fragmentary in nature, away from popular music. Since composers such as Debussy and Stravinsky began using these techniques—juxtaposing and superimposing musical ideas at will—this *modus operandi* has become a dominant trend in classical music of the twentieth century.

Film, however, wasn’t the only influence on Western composers’ concept of time. Most music familiar to Westerners, whether a three-minute pop song or a thirty-minute symphony, “moves forward.” Ideas lead into one another in an order that suggests cause and effect. Through the influence of Asian classical musics, though, many prominent composers, such as Saïte, Cage, Feldman, and Xenakis, abandoned such narrative

structures altogether. In this music, rather than “telling a story,” the composer creates for the listener a sort of “meditative space,” in which the composer intends for the listener simply to enjoy the beauty of the musical sounds presented.

4. EMANCIPATION OF NOISE AND SILENCE

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as technological advances began to permeate everyday life, artists found that the world in which they lived was fundamentally different from that of their predecessors. According to American composer Elliott Carter, composers felt “a desire to find a more emphatic and stronger way of presenting in the arts life as it was lived in the present time. There was this influence of psychoanalysis and . . . of machinery that we could fly that we could take automobiles—all this changed our whole view of how one thought about music.”

One of the primary ways in which composers did this was through the reconsideration of musical sounds themselves. Some composers, such as Henry Cowell and George Crumb, found new sounds by playing instruments in unusual ways, such as plucking the strings inside the piano. Others, such as Harry Partch, went so far as to create their own instruments. Still others harnessed the power of the tape recorder to make music from sounds recorded from everyday life.

A Twentieth-Century Sampler

John Cage — Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano (1946–48)

In these pieces, Cage instructs that screws, rubber, and other objects be inserted into a piano to create a kind of a percussion orchestra. Cage is also infamous for having written 4’33”, a piece composed entirely of silence.

Dmitri Shostakovich — Symphony No. 10 (1953)

After being censored by Stalin in 1937, Shostakovich lived the rest of his life in fear. Some critics argue that his Tenth Symphony contains coded messages against the tyranny of the Soviet dictatorship.

George Crumb — Black Angels (1971)

Written as a response to the Vietnam War, Crumb’s piece *Black Angels* exhibits many twentieth-century trends: extended performance techniques, stylistic collage, theatrical elements, and an extensive numerological underpinning.

Steve Reich — Music for 18 Musicians (1974)

In contrast to most composers working in the sixties, whose music varied its material very rapidly, Steve Reich decided to go to the opposite extreme and make change a gradual and perceivable process.

Toru Takemitsu — From Me Flows What You Call Time (1990)

In the nineteenth century, most composers wrote concerti for piano or violin. In the twentieth century, composers began to write for other instruments as well. Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu



John Cage, left, preparing the piano for a performance of one of his pieces.



Dmitri Shostakovich, composed in wide variety of genres, including film music.



Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu blended Japanese influences in the framework of the Western tradition.

fuses Eastern sensibilities with Western forms in this 1990 *percussion* concerto.

Györgi Ligeti — Nonsense Madrigals (1993)

BYU itself commissioned Ligeti to write this hilarious piece for the King’s Singers through BYU’s Barlow Endowment for Music Composition.

Thomas Adès — Asyla (1997)

As the twentieth century came to a close, composers increasingly incorporated a variety of styles into their pieces. In his orchestra piece *Asyla*, Adès references everything from Mahler symphonies to trance music.

Viewing music as organized sound naturally led to an interest in silence. Webern so liked the beauty of individual tones that he would set them off with frequent rests. Composers such as Morton Feldman and John Cage continued this trend. John Cage is particularly notorious for 4’33”, a piece composed entirely of silence.

5. EMPHASIS ON THE “SOUND”

As the nineteenth century progressed and composers became more conscious of the sounds they were using, they slowly realized that goal-directed harmony wasn’t their primary interest. Other variables such as texture, instrumental color, and pacing

were just as important in creating a narrative flow. Thus, composers began to explore these variables independent of “common practice” traditions (which had really only been the common practice for the previous hundred-and-fifty years out of the up-to-that-point nine-hundred-year-long Western musical tradition).

“Whenever we hear sounds we are changed: we are no longer the same after hearing certain sounds, and this is the more the case when we hear organized sounds, sounds organized by another human being: music.”

— Karlheinz Stockhausen in an address given in 1971

For many composers, this focus on sound led to the careful control of orchestral color. The richness of many current film scores derives largely from orchestral practices developed by composers such as Claude Debussy and Gustav Mahler.

Others composers’ focus on sound led them as far as to untether music from its traditional structural archetypes: speech and dance. In most Western music, melodies rise and fall just like speech, usually in a gradual manner. Likewise, as in speech, we usually interpret large leaps in melodies as emphatic gestures. The rhythmic aspects of music could be analyzed similarly in relation to dance. In the twentieth century, though, some composers

created music using different structural archetypes. For example, Iannis Xenakis based many pieces on statistical models of large groups, and Morton Feldman wrote hour-long pieces that are simply sequences of unpredictable chords and silences.

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Almost all music, including new music, seeks to move the listener. Some musics do this in a pre-established way. Film music, for instance, has developed a system of musical signs (a semiotics) through which music communicates to an audience. For example, when you see Darth Vader walk on the screen to minor-chord brass

fanfares, you know that the music is telling you Vader is the villain. Similarly, when two people are about to kiss on the screen accompanied by a soaring melody in the strings, you know they’re in love. In contrast, if you saw the same image accompanied by shrieking strings, you would know that someone is about to get killed.

In contrast to film, new music has no such signposts. Music that a Hollywood director would use to accompany a slaying, relative to itself might actually be tender and humane. Of all the hurdles confronting listeners to new music, this might be the most significant barrier. Despite the foreignness of the sounds, new music composers nonetheless write music to express human emotions and to connect with the audience. Iannis Xenakis, one of the most experimental European composers, wrote, “Art, and above all, music has a fundamental function, which is to catalyze the sublimation that it can bring about through all means of expression.” Its aim is to “draw towards a total exaltation in which the individual mingles, losing his consciousness in a truth immediate, rare, enormous, and perfect.”

Of course, there are plenty of bad new music pieces—just as there are plenty of bad country tunes, pop songs, and film scores. However, those who invest their time in this music will not only find new musical treasures but also experience pieces that are “immediate, rare, enormous, and perfect.”

Unlike film music, new music has no system of musical symbols. Below, a scene from the film Safety Last.

