Why do we listen to classical music?

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It is said that as eras go by, there are many different reasons to listen to classical music. Bach, is said, wrote his church music to praise God and his secular music to train his children and amuse the courts. Good music for the church, court and opera was until Romanticism the aspiration of classical composers. Since then, we started putting importance on abstract aspirations of classical music; humanity, emotion, political and philosophical ideals, mysticism, avant-garde and shock. Classical music started becoming more inward and, later, composition ended up being an end in itself.

This inwardness of his music, that is why he feels the need to write it even if he recognizes that fewer people would like it, develops shortly Robert Schumann in a letter to his future wife Clara in 1838. "I am affected, he writes,

> by everything that goes on in the world, and think it all over in my own way, politics, literature, and people, and then I long to express my feelings and find an outlet for them in music. That is why my compositions are sometimes difficult to understand. ... And that is why so few [contemporary] compositions satisfy me, because ... they deal in musical sentiment of the lowest order, and commonplace lyrical effusions. ... Theirs may be a flower, but mine is a poem, and infinitely more spiritual; theirs is a mere natural impulse, mine the result of poetical consciousness."[1]

This inwardness was born by Romanticism of the early 19th century and through Expressionism of the late 19th century was rooted in Modernism of almost all the 20th century, leaving aside for a while Futurism of the early 20th century. For these classical composers, composition is an end in itself for the sake of individual evolution, distanciation of the artist, avant-garde, cerebralism and paraphysics (Theosophy for the early modernists, eastern religions for the late ones). Inwardness reached its apogee through the music of Arnold Schoenberg's modernist followers, serialists, as well as members of other modernist movements like experimentalists and spectralists. For these composers, we listen to classical music because it was simply written. The polemic of these movements American musicologist Richard Taruskin names this phenomenon as the *poietic fallacy*, which he defines as "the conviction that what matters most (or more strongly yet, that all that matters) in a work of art is the making of it, the maker's input."[2] So, is this reason enough for us to listen to classical music? As Taruskin continuously proves in his essays, the composers of these movements expressed disdain for the audience whom they accused for "tyranny over the composers" and were elitists even though they simultaneously deplored the low attendance at their concerts. Until what point can we then listen to music that was showily not written for us?

Modern and contemporary classical music being part of contemporary art, one of its aspirations had to be shock. Since a classical music composition is a work of art, then, according to architect Adolf Loos (1910) "it need not, unlike a house, please anyone. A work of art is a private matter of the artist. ... A work of art will be introduced into the world with no prior necessity. ... A work of art is liable to no one." Even more remarkably, "a work of art wants to put people out of their comfort."[3] Again of course, an idea of the early 20th century had to acquire dimensions of ridiculousness in the first year of the

21st century, when Karlheinz Stockhausen said that "the September 11 attacks are, of course—now all of you must adjust your brains—the biggest work of art there has ever been."[4] And why according to Stockhausen were they the biggest work of art? Because "there are people who are so concentrated on this single performance, and then five thousand people are driven to Resurrection. In one moment. I couldn't do that."[4] September 11 was thus a work of art because it was the result of so intense a process of mind, and because it also put us out of our comfort. According to himself, Stockhausen was a worse artist than Osama bin Laden because he didn't have the courage to do something so unconceivable, he appeared lesser in his self-imposed aspiration, to shock as many as he can with the shocking ability of his mind.

Do we listen to classical music in order to relax? Yes; but for the same reason we listen to other genres of music as well as many other irrelevant things, from the cicadas in Summer under the pines, to the sound of the train when we travel thereby. Do we listen to classical music in order to educate ourselves? Yes; but only if we take the text of Goethe's *Faust*, for example, and read it with great attention while simultaneously listening to it from Schumann or Mahler, or only if Richard Strauss's symphonic poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* inspires us so much so that we will read the eponymous work by Nietzsche. On the other hand, knowing the Christian texts by one of the greatest composers of all time, Bach, doesn't provide prestige in contemporary times, while how much education can a harpsichord concerto by Bach confer? Certainly, an interest in classical music, its theory and history, provides education but this comes afterwards and takes its time.

In addition to all these reasons, which sometimes are founded while some have been abused to the point of exaggeration and ridiculousness, we could find more reasons why we listen to classical music, and all these together certainly provide a certain prestige to classical music and admit it into fine arts. Unfortunately, however, for musicians, artists and philosophers who try to attribute to classical music all virtues of abstract genius, or scorn non-classical music, or classical music which is, or is not, melodious, avant-garde, against hierarchies or elitist (whatever one likes), the reason why we listen to classical music is all that, plus, however, the sine qua non *dance of soul*, let's call it.

No one would listen with love any piece of classical music if, like every other music, it didn't excite their body and spirit in a primitive way they cannot explain; if it didn't awake their least instinct of dance even when the composition is not purposefully danceable, even when the social circumstances don't allow for it. If rhythm doesn't make their head nod, if harmony and timbre doesn't give goose bumps to their arms. I had in mind when I started this essay that I would reach a point where I would write that rhythm is the Father, without whom there is no music; harmony and timbre are the Holy Spirit which brings epiphany, that is frisson, and quintessence, that is an immediate recognition of a musical culture which differs from other cultures; and melody is the Son, whom we most easily recognize in a music piece. However, I'm not now in a position to vehemently defend such an allegory. It seems to me though that some things are written in primitive human nature and touch the human soul more than any abstract trait like human ideals, cerebralism and avant-garde, maybe even melody itself. All these cannot exist by themselves the same way rhythm isn't classical music by itself. This is why we listen to classical music; because it manages to combine the primitive musical instinct with the highest human ideals. And this is why such a great part of contemporary classical music has no audience;

because it occupies itself only with the superficials, showing indifference to Taruskin's *subtactile pulse*, which, according to himself, can compel a music work to excite the listener, the same way Bach's concertos, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and bebop excited Steve Reich to become a musician.[5]

I see that whoever enjoys contemporary classical music also listens to a lot of non-classical popular music that fills in this gap. Conversely, whoever listens to classical music fanatically is no friend of contemporary classical music, especially of the aforementioned movements. Because to the ear, no matter what composition technique has taken place beforehand, be it serialism, aleatoricism, experimentalism or spectralism, the final result is the same, and superficial, if the dance of soul is absent. If all contemporary classical music left such a gap today, other genres would fill in. Thankfully, there are contemporary classical composers who still write with their instinct too.

Classical music demands intellect and has transcendentality and prestige but remains instinctive too, like every music genre.

Notes

1. *Jugendbriefe von Robert Schumann. Nach den originalen mitgetheilt von Clara Schumann.* Leipzig. Druck und Verlag von Breitkopf und Härtel. 1886.
2. Richard Taruskin. "The Poietic Fallacy" (2004). *The Danger of Music and other Anti-Utopian Essays.* University of California Press. 2009.
3. Adolf Loos. "Architektur" (1910). *Adolf Loos: Sämtliche Schriften in zwei Bänden – Erster Band.* Wien. Verlag Herold. 1962.
4. Interview of Karlheinz Stockhausen in Hamburg. September 16, 2001.
5. Richard Taruskin. "A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the Twenty-first Century" (1997). *The Danger of Music and other Anti-Utopian Essays.* University of California Press. 2009.