

Music Critic and Professor Greg Sandow - A very short blurb from his upcoming book on the state of classical music....

Again I might note that, for some people, moving away from everyday life is a virtue. These people think that everyday life – and the culture around it – has grown sour, which makes classical music a beloved (and, some would say, necessary) refuge.

As I've said, I disagree with this idea, but certainly I respect the deep feeling behind it. And I admire this line of thinking at least for its honesty, because it jibes with mine in one crucial way, in agreeing that classical music really does sit in a world of its own, far away from current culture.

What kind of current culture don't we find in classical music? I'll list a few things that our culture now seems to stress, and that classical music mostly ignores:

First, informality. Here's one way to approach this. If you look at photos of crowds at baseball games in past generations – before the '60s – you'll see men in suits and ties. And hats! Now, of course, if you go to a game, you see t-shirts. (Plus, of course, a lot of women.) You could say, if you like, that baseball is a sport, not an art, and that by nature it's informal, as classical music might not be. But that wouldn't explain why people used to wear business suits to baseball games, and why they don't now, while the formality of classical concerts until very recently didn't change.

Second: the sound of contemporary life. The musical sound, I mean. Contemporary music, outside the classical world, has a beat. Classical music doesn't. You might say that of course it doesn't, because so much of it was written long ago, before the beat of rock and jazz had evolved. But that only underlines the point I'm making, that classical music doesn't sound like contemporary life.

And what about new classical pieces? Why don't they have a beat? Well, some of them do, written by younger composers, very likely working outside the classical mainstream. But most new pieces that you'll encounter at classical concerts don't have a beat, and thus – by this simple, gut-feeling measure – don't truly sound contemporary.

Of course, you could say that classical music should be free to go its own way (as of course it should), or that the beat of rock and jazz is superficial, that it batters away all rhythmic subtlety (a contention I most definitely don't accept, and which I'll look at in the chapter on the supposed superiority of classical music).

But if classical music goes its own way and ignores the beat, what message does that send? The beat of current nonclassical idioms comes from their partly African origins, and represents – in an unspoken, but profound way – a larger evolution of world culture, away from western hegemony. So by not having a beat, is classical music resisting this evolution, and dreaming that the west should still rule?

That might be an extreme judgment, but – if you put classical music in any larger context – you can't blame someone for making it. And the simple fact remains that –whatever the

reason, and whatever conclusion anyone draws from this -- classical music just doesn't carry the sound of contemporary life.

[Which, let's note, we now find in other arts. We can see serious modern dance, set to music with a beat. Broadway musicals might have a beat. Of course music in the movies has one. We see music with a beat referred to in novels and poetry, and in serious plays. In past eras, classical music sounded like the other music in the culture around it, and in fact borrowed from that music. Why not now?]

Third (and this joins with what I've just said): classical music doesn't reflect the content of everyday life. Current everyday life, I mean. And of course that's partly because the music played at classical performances so largely comes from the past. But even new classical pieces may not bring in everyday life. Many of them live in a world of their own, not the world the classical audience inhabits, but not the world anyone outside classical music lives in, either. (This is changing, happily.) And the old classical pieces did bring in the life of their time. Maybe in idealized form -- happy peasants, reacting to weather, or to the seasons, terrified by storms -- but still a version of the life of the time. (Even if, as we've seen, much was left out.)

And other arts, in our time, have caught up. We think, sometimes, that classical music can function as a museum, exhibiting works from the past. But museums now stress contemporary work, and much of it touches on everyday life -- shows, for example, of contemporary photographs. Plays, poetry, novels, and obviously pop music -- they all show the life of our time. So why not classical music?

Fourth: alternative art and lifestyles. The word "lifestyle," hackneyed as it is, reflects an important truth -- that we acknowledge many ways of living. But classical music doesn't show us this. You could say that it doesn't have to, that our taste in music (as tastes in pop music clearly show) is itself a reflection of the life we live. And so a love for classical music would itself be a lifestyle choice. Why then should it open us to other ways of living?

But are we saying now that classical music closes us off from the world? And the relation of music and lifestyle is really much more complex. Suppose the music that you love -- that you identify with -- is some kind of pop. (Which is almost like saying, "Suppose you're a citizen of our current world.") Fine. You have your taste, which both reflects and reinforces the way that you live. But you also very likely like other kinds of pop, too, as the rich diversity of pop music unfolds before you. And you're aware of many kinds of pop that you might not listen to. If you're not Hispanic, just for instance, you most likely never listen to Latin music.

And now someone might say that classical music works in similar ways, that you might love early music but not romantic symphonies, or you might love chamber music and not care for opera. But you're still not much like a pop listener, because it's not clear, whatever kind of classical music you might love, that people who love another kind are very different from you. You just don't share their taste.

In pop, by contrast, you'd know that people with different taste don't share your lifestyle. There might be overlaps, but still -- people with different taste might not be fully like you. I'd notice this when I was a pop music critic. I'd go to concerts of different kinds of music, and

notice different kinds of people. The most obvious difference was racial. No white people (except me) would go to a Luther Vandross show, and there'd be hardly anyone black in the audience for Bruce Springsteen. (Both blacks and whites showing up for Prince, which was truly exceptional.)

And there were many smaller distinctions, very fine demographic slices, somehow evoked by the varied music of many different bands. As a pop listener, you're most definitely aware of this. You know there's music that you hate – heavy metal, maybe, if you're not a disaffected younger guy. (Or at least that was who went to metal shows when I was a pop critic.) But you know these styles exist, along with the people who love them. You know that Latin music's out there, even if you don't listen to it. Which is another way of saying that you know you share the world with many different kinds of people – or, more grandly, that all of us share a larger world – something not evident inside the classical concert hall.

And you know – since the larger world is hardly static – that musical styles combine, that the crunchy optimistic sound of folk music, for instance, can meld with the savage shock of punk, or that all-white sound of metal can find common ground with hip-hop. Which again tells us that we live in a world with many kinds of people, but now with a delighted hope that we all might find some common ground.

Which – to state the obvious – we don't learn from classical music, no matter how loudly people say that classical music is somehow universal. People in the classical music world, in fact, might feel that they were separated from other people, from people who don't listen to classical music. A younger classical musician might – like one I know – happily fuse hip-hop and Vivaldi, but she'll do that in clubs, far from the classical mainstream, where stylistic fusion mostly shows up – here we go again – in discussions of the past.

[Berlioz, for instance, was one of the great intellectuals of 19th century music, and for that reason (among many others) he stood apart from – or, as some would have said, far above -- the popular strands of music in his time, especially what then was the most popular of musical styles, Italian opera. And yet his works are suffused with Italian opera. The "Romeo Alone" movement, from his sprawling symphonic landscape, *Roméo et Juliet*, is a symphonic translation of an Italian opera scene, complete with an orchestral version of a fast, showpiece aria, to bring the scene to an end.]

And here's something else. When we look at mainstream classical music culture, we're cut off from any feeling for alternative art, or even from an understanding that alternative art exists. But we see alternative art everywhere else. In pop music, alternative bands – in what might seem like a paradox – are even part of the mainstream. They got their name because they were far from the pop charts, and had a sound and aesthetic that weren't remotely popular. But now alternative music is a style (or collection of styles) like any other. Half the bands we see on *Saturday Night Live* are alternative.

And arthouse films might be called alternative movies. They might be not on everyone's film diet, but we all know about them. And here's a sharp and not entirely lovely irony. Classical music, as everybody knows, lives in an upscale, educated world. So you might expect people in the classical music demographic to go to art films. But if they do, their musical taste isn't remotely related to what they like in movies. This becomes a serious

problem, when we look at the younger segment of the classical music demographic. These younger people just about define themselves by their taste for alternative art. Or at least for alternative pop music (which, as we'll see in the chapter on pop, often functions as art).

So what can classical music offer them? Yes, there's alternative classical music, as I've very often said. But it's largely found outside the classical mainstream. So if we want younger people to come to mainstream classical concerts – Brahms at the Philadelphia Orchestra, Berlioz or Pierre Boulez in Cleveland – they very likely won't. These concerts offer nothing alternative (Boulez's music might not have much place in the classical mainstream, but it hardly echoes anything in the current alternative world), and thus present a deeply traditional view of both culture and life.

Fifth: some specific examples of what I mean:

Participation: We're a participatory society these days, something else that I think flows – at least in the long run – from the '60s, with all the talk back then of participatory democracy, and all the excitement from people doing new things.

But by now, participation really is what people – especially younger people – have come to expect. You go to a website, and you want to be able to comment on what you see. You want to read comments from others. If the website is selling anything, you want to read what others think about what's being sold. Music videos, these days, are made by fans of bands, and not so often by the bands themselves. They're available on YouTube, not on MTV. Corporations invite their customers to make commercials for the corporation's products. They might show the customer commercials on their websites, and – as happened in at least one famous case – they might include commercials that deride the product.

We all know about the Brokeback Mountain mashups, the videos so many people made, discovering or inventing gay subtexts for TV and movie scenes that nobody had seen as gay before. There's a website where Star Wars is being remade, one small segment at a time. People choose their segment, refilm it in their own way – using pets, friends, children, animation, themselves, whatever – and upload it to the site. Someday soon we'll be able to watch the entire movie, remade this way.

This all is part of an explosion of creativity in our society (as I've said before), creativity which – somewhat, I think, to the dismay or else the noncomprehension of people involved in established art worlds – takes place outside the official spheres of art. The bottom line is that people want to create things for themselves, and when they get involved in something already created, they want to get hands-on with it.

Classical music, meanwhile, remains a top-down affair. One sign of that: the belief that you have to be specially educated to enjoy classical music, even to listen to it passively. When classical music institutions share this belief, and act on it – by making educational materials (like videos) prominently available – they might discourage active participation, by implicitly suggesting that even the existing, loyal audience – the audience that gives them money – had better keep its thoughts to itself. Is there any sign that these institutions care what their audiences think?

A changed sense of beauty:

I single this out – among many traits of current culture – because it differs so much from what we find in classical music. I’ve written a great deal of marketing copy for classical music institutions. Always I’ve found myself stressing the beauty of the famous masterworks, their passion, their emotional force. Because that’s what’s normally emphasized about these pieces. It’s what the audience responds to. But in the wider culture, or at least in anything touched by alternative art, beauty isn’t a simple concept. Being beautiful, by itself, doesn’t mean anything.

What kind of beauty do we mean? Mindless beauty, beauty with an edge, evil beauty, seductive beauty, misleading beauty, beauty that’s one step away from ugliness, deep and peaceful beauty, beauty that’s a trap?

Here’s part of a Bjork lyric, from her song “Jóga” (on her 1997 album *Homogenic*):

Emotional landscapes,
They puzzle me,
Then the riddle gets solved,
And you push me up to this
State of emergency,
How beautiful to be,
State of emergency,
Is where I want to be.

Bjork wants to be in a place where beauty meets danger, while intricate music for strings weaves around her voice. We might find weaving strings in classical music, but where would we find a thought like this one?

We could also talk about any number of current indie bands, which sing lush songs with rich, simple harmony, overlaid with noise – as if beauty, without some textured non-beauty nearby (as we’d find it in the real world), just can’t be trusted.