Classical Music
Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges

Edited by
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Any serious discussion of “the enduring value of classical music in the Western tradition” must jump a number of significant hurdles. We begin with definitions. What does “classical” mean? Even within the field of music the answer is confused. Sometimes it is used to denote a period of time (generally 1750 to 1800 or thereabouts). Charles Rosen in *The Classical Style* (1971/1998) defined it by composer: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Lawrence Kramer, in his book *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (2007), extends this definition to mean music “since the eighteenth century” (11), but his range doesn’t reach much beyond 1900. More broadly, the word is used to encompass what for the lack of a better term can be called the European musical tradition stretching from the beginning of written music in the Middle Ages to the present, embracing music of vastly different styles, nationalities, and purposes.

The common method of defining Western classical music by antonym also never fully succeeds. The frequent contrast with “folk” music, for example, implies a sense of “folk” traditions as simple and the “classical” tradition as more complex. Although this has some merit (depending on how one defines “complexity”), it denigrates the intricacy of many folk traditions and overlooks the simplicity of much classical music. Defined as the opposite of “vernacular” music, classical music becomes akin to a “foreign” or, worse, “dead” language, an idea that may have more currency today than we would like to acknowledge. Richard Taruskin, in *The Oxford History of Western Music* (2005), suggests that classical music may have as its most distinguishing feature a largely written (literate)
tradition, but oral and improvisatory practices coexist alongside notated scores (as Taruskin is quick to point out), and Western music is neither the only nor first tradition to have developed notation; further, the term “literate” for Western classical suggests that music in other traditions is “illiterate,” which is not the case.

Even such seemingly specific words as “European” and “Western” need to be queried. Although these geographical markers may have had pertinence in earlier centuries in terms of music production—that is, where the music was written, who wrote it, and who performed it—the terms no longer carry any geographical significance given the creation and performance of so-called “Western” classical music around the globe. Joseph Auner, in *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2013) for the series entitled “Western Music in Context,” includes not only music influenced by music traditions from around the world, such as the gamelan-inspired music of Colin McPhee, Lou Harrison, and Evan Ziporyn, but also compositions from the global community of composers writing so-called Western classical music, including Toru Takemitsu and Chen Yi.

One of the more persistent definitions of classical music is that it is an elite tradition in opposition to popular music. Without doubt, this is also true in part. The Western classical tradition was principally created and preserved through the wealth of the Church and royal court, and to a large extent performed for the upper classes. However, there has always been exchange between court and street (e.g., with vocal music, later including opera, and dance music in particular), and composers from at least the fourteenth century engaged the vernacular traditions of their time (as in Dufay’s masses, Haydn’s symphonies, and Dvořák’s dances). But that doesn’t change the overall historical picture of how classical music was generally produced and heard.

If classical music remains elite today, it is because those concerned with its production and performance have enjoyed its historical prestige and fostered it in large and often forbidding institutions. And yet, we, the authors of this chapter, have seen the joy and serenity that live performance of classical music can bring to people from all walks of life—including children without any prior exposure to its sounds,
the homeless,\textsuperscript{1} and the frail and aged. In this book, Western classical music is examined in terms of the issues it is confronted with today: live performance in the face of sound recording and reproduction, failing music education, shaky financial stability, and audience expectations. It is examined in these terms because of our belief in the enduring value of this music for all.

But how can we ascribe “enduring value” to something so difficult to define? Classical music ranges from medieval chant and sacred works best heard in reverberant places of worship, to symphonies and operas performed in great purpose-built halls and opera houses, to the song heard in the privacy of a home, to marching bands in the streets, to contemporary compositions incorporating multiple compositional practices performed in untraditional venues. The musical traditions of North America have pushed the boundaries still further with such contributions as the Great American Songbook, Blues and Jazz, the Broadway musical, and the rise of film music. And the influence of global musical traditions has expanded the field of Western classical music still further. For those who decry the Western classical tradition as elite and hegemonic, the embrace of popular and global stylistic elements within the classical tradition becomes a form of neo-colonialism, appropriation, and commodification. For others, the openness to different ideas and styles is, and always has been, a strength of Western music. Although the geographical range of classical music was largely limited to Europe until the twentieth century, composers were always on the lookout for new stylistic ideas across borders (whether it was the Flemish eyeing the English in the fifteenth century; the English learning from the Italians in the early seventeenth century; or the Italians adopting French and German approaches in nineteenth-century opera).

When we assert the “enduring value” of “classical music in the Western tradition,” we do not, therefore, privilege any single element of this music, nor claim the superiority of classical music over other musical traditions at least as old and complex (although we are aware of those attitudes existing within the field). Rather, we argue that a great deal of music produced within the broadly construed Western tradition has intrinsic worth, giving it value that does not necessitate invidious

\textsuperscript{1} Shelter Music Boston is one such example. Its website lists many others with the same values.
comparisons. Nor does “enduring” for us indicate the immortalization of a core repertoire. The irony is that with few exceptions (Gregorian chant being one), and until the nineteenth century, the goal and history of Western classical music lay in contemporary performance rather than a tradition preserved in performance through time (in the way that some traditional folk musics—the Japanese shamisen tradition, and Senegalese sabar music, for example—have been passed on through generations of performers). That is, the predominant feature of classical music until the nineteenth century, with its development of large-scale performance venues, “Complete Works” editions, and the growth of technology, was a desire to constantly supersede itself. Around 1476, Johannes Tinctoris applauded “musica nova” and rejected any music written before 1430; Claudio Monteverdi defended the apparent stylistic solecisms in his music by calling them the “seconda prattica” as opposed to the older, more rigid practice; and in the eighteenth century the Academy of Ancient Music described “ancient music” as that which was at least thirty years old. The inherent strength of the Western musical tradition is not that it is “better” than other musical traditions, but rather its freedom of construction over centuries that has permitted a wide range of intellectual rigor, emotional depth, light-hearted frivolity, and spiritual intensity whose potency and communicative power is not restricted to the period of its composition, however much it may reflect it. Western classical music cannot, therefore, be thought of as stable or as a single type of music; the music of Palestrina, Bach, Stravinsky, and Glass co-exist within a musical framework of continual and contemporary rejuvenation.

As classical music is largely a literate tradition, the preservation of musical scores from centuries past allows for the continuing performance of music today apart from its original temporal and social context. This survival, akin to an architectural heritage, surely comprises one of the world’s great artistic legacies, but the intrinsic value of classical music lies rather in its continual reimagining. Previously considered a “universal language,” this older repertoire is now more properly recognized as a particular outgrowth of Western culture that has not always translated easily to other cultures, even though many cultures have embraced it. Its circumscribed geographical origin makes it no less valuable; indeed, the continuing use of the word “Western” in our nomenclature for this music
is obsolete. Classical music of today is no longer limited by geography, nationality, or race, but global in its freedom and inclusion of difference (think, say, of Scott Joplin, Osvaldo Golijov, Tan Dun, Wynton Marsalis, or Thomas Adès). Classical music (based on a European tradition of explicit notation enabling replication) continues to thrive best—in both composition and performance—on exploration and innovation; it grows ever more meaningful through repeated, close listening and, like all types of music, endures through live performance and technology well beyond the context of its creation.

References


Shelter Music Boston, https://www.sheltermusicboston.org/
