This kaleidoscopic collection reflects on the multifaceted world of classical music as it advances through the twenty-first century. With insights drawn from leading composers, performers, academics, journalists, and arts administrators, special focus is placed on classical music's defining traditions, challenges and contemporary scope. Innovative in structure and approach, the volume comprises two parts. The first provides detailed analyses of issues central to classical music in the present day, including diversity, governance, the identity and perception of classical music, and the challenges facing the achievement of financial stability in non-profit arts organizations. The second part offers case studies, from Miami to Seoul, of the innovative ways in which some arts organizations have responded to the challenges analyzed in the first part. Introductory material, as well as several of the essays, provide some preliminary thoughts about the impact of the crisis year 2020 on the world of classical music.

Classical Music: Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges will be a valuable and engaging resource for all readers interested in the development of the arts and classical music, especially academics, arts administrators and organizers, and classical music practitioners and audiences.
Introduction

Michael Beckerman

This is the third, or possibly the fourth, time I have sat down to write an introduction to our volume about classical music. It was mostly complete by the beginning of 2020 when Covid-19 hit. As my co-editor Paul Boghossian makes clear in his Preface, our “think tank” approach to the subject had emerged from a strong sense that classical music, however it is defined, is both something of great value, and in various ways also in crisis. The early effects of the pandemic sharpened both of these perspectives. The almost three million views of the Rotterdam Symphony performing a distanced version of the Beethoven Ninth, or viral footage of Italians singing opera from their balconies, were a testament to the surprising power of the tradition, while its vulnerability quickly became apparent as live presentations vanished and virtually all institutions faced unprecedented and devastating challenges, both artistic and economic.²

1 I would like to thank the following people for their help in this project. Prof. Catherine Provenzano, who served as an assistant to the endeavor in several of its stages; Brian Fairley and Samuel Chan, who offered essential and critically important advice throughout; Prof. Lorraine Byrne Bodley of Maynooth University in Ireland, who offered encouragement and valuable ideas; and to Dr. Karen Beckerman, who has been supportive throughout even though she has been hearing about this for far too long. Of course, great thanks are due to all those who participated in the project, and particularly those who offered written contributions. As Paul Boghossian notes in the Preface, we genuinely could not have finished this project without the hard-nosed work, wisdom and thoughtful contributions of Leigh Bond, to whom we are extremely grateful. And of course at the end, I owe a great debt to Paul Boghossian for involving me in this project. It has been a great ride, and now it is an honor and a privilege to see it through to the end together.

2 See Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (2020).
Yet no sooner had this reality been outlined in a fresh introduction, than we experienced the awful events of the late spring, with the murder of George Floyd and others, forcing a national reckoning about race which has had clear ramifications for the future of the country as a whole, and for our subject. So another rewrite—of both the introduction and parts of several chapters—was necessary to grapple with the legacy of classical music in the United States and its own very real history in relation to race and segregation.³

At this time, issues surrounding classical music seem almost quaint compared to the much more potent questions about the future direction of the United States. With ever-sharpening binaries it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine what kind of impact all of the events of this roiled year 2020 will have on the future of classical music... and everything else. In New York City, the Metropolitan Opera House, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and Carnegie Hall have cancelled their 2020-21 seasons, and all major houses in the country remain shuttered for anything resembling normal musical life. While many arts organizations have been enterprising in their use of online content, both live-streamed and recorded, considering the many hours people are already online (resulting in “Zoom fatigue” and other syndromes), it is not clear that this virtual world can ever take the place of live performances. At this particular moment there is a massive resurgence of the coronavirus with higher caseloads than ever, and while several vaccines have appeared, it is in no way clear when any kind of normal life—still less normal musical life—can begin again.

As we move forward to some new reality, discussions about systemic inequities have not only cast light on the history of classical music—and, to be fair, the entire music industry—but have raised questions about the extent to which the classical music world in particular is still very much a bastion of white privilege, and even further, the ways in which the musical substance itself may be tainted by some rotten core of racism, sexism and colonialism. These are not simple matters, and investigations of such things as the relationship between, say, racism, sexism, and musical content require enormous care and nuance to think through; shorthand slogans just will not do.

³ For other recent explorations of this topic, see Ross (2020); Tsioulcas (2020); Brodeur (2020); and Woolfe & Barone (2020).
Even though this volume is appearing in such a charged moment, it cannot and will not attempt to grapple fully with these issues, especially since much of it was written before the events of the late winter and early spring of 2020 shook the foundations of our world. But these issues of value, accountability, and context will not go away, and as several of our contributors write, finding solutions to them will be critical to the future of the enterprise.

In short then, questions along the lines of “what shall we do about ‘the arts’?” that might have been raised in February 2020 have been ratcheted up to an entirely new level in almost every way.

The Experience of Classical Music

Yet even as we consider these thorny issues, for many of those who are reading this volume, as listeners, composers, performers, and presenters, the experience of encountering something they would call “classical music” has been, and is still one of the most valuable things in their lives. Remarkable in their power and immediacy are such things as sonic beauty and structural coherence; physical (in the case of opera), intellectual, and spiritual drama; the powerful connections between sound and philosophy; the sheer sweep of certain compositions; and breathtaking virtuosic skill. That these aspects of classical music, however, are not the focus of this volume, should not be taken as a sign that the writers here assembled lack strong and meaningful experiences with it, or are somehow ashamed of it, but rather that there are other things afoot at this particular moment.

It follows, then, that this collection of essays is not meant as a simple celebration of classical music—still less of only its elite composers, performers, and practitioners—but resulted at least as much from our sense of a community in crisis as it did from our sense of its value. As you will read in several chapters (and probably already know), audiences are aging and it is not clear that they are being replaced by younger members; the number of positions in arts journalism and serious criticism has dwindled dramatically; cycles of financial boom and bust have put large arts organizations, whose costs go up every year, in a precarious position, dependent on donors who may or may not be able to come up with the funds—and this was even before the
pandemic. If this were not enough, the staggering and increasing amount of online content has kept viewers at their smartphones and laptops and away from concert halls more than ever. For some, these problems have been created by the classical music world itself: there is a view that it is outdated and out of touch, at best a kind of museum. It has therefore been our task to contemplate and test some of these ideas by putting together a group representing arts and academic administrators, performers, educators, critics, and composers to give their perspectives on these matters.

Some Non-Definitions

In *Henry V* Shakespeare famously has a character ask: “What ish my nation?” And we have struggled with the question, “What ish our subject?” Of course, narrow attempts to circumscribe precisely what we mean can be pointless. And yet if one is writing about classical music, one had better explain what is being spoken about. Despite our best efforts, as you will see in several chapters, we were not always able to agree exactly on just what “classical music” meant; whether in using that expression we were speaking, essentially, about the highly skilled professional caste of musicians in Europe, North America, and Asia performing the music (largely) of the Western canon, or really, the whole gamut of activities, institutions and individuals associated with it, involving a broad repertoire all over the world. Even after the conclusion of our discussions, it is not clear whether we would all agree that things like Yo-Yo Ma’s “Songs of Comfort and Hope,” an eight-year-old practicing Bach Inventions in Dubai, and a beginner string trio in Kinshasa are involved in the same classical music “enterprise,” any more than it can be easily determined whether a performance of *Tosca* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, an amateur staging of *Brundibár* in Thailand, a version of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* at the Boston Early Music Festival and Tyshawn Sorey’s *Perle Noire* are part of the same operatic world. Could classical music then be merely anything one might find in the classical section of a miraculously surviving record store, or simply the music that appears under “classical” on your iTunes or Spotify app?

If there were contrasting views on these matters among our group, it was even more difficult when it came to weighing the material on
the chronological endpoints of the “classical” spectrum. Several of us wondered how to characterize Early Music, whether as “classical music” or another, more self-contained subset. And if trying to decide whether such things as Gregorian chant and Renaissance motets were part of any putative “classical music world,” things were even trickier when we considered what constitutes “New Music” or “Contemporary Music.” The jury is out on the basis of extended discussions with composers, performers, and critics, some of whom are insistent that what they do is part of, and dependent on, the ongoing tradition of Western classical music, while others are equally adamant about distancing themselves (some vehemently so) from that tradition.

It would be easy to get out of all this by making the platitudinous claim that “classical music” is but a mirror in which everyone sees themselves as they want to be, either in harmony with or opposed to, or to say that classical music is simply the sum total of everything people think it is. Part of the quandary, as my philosopher colleagues know, is the problem of making sets. One thinks one knows what belongs in the set called “classical music”—say, Bach’s Goldberg Variations—and what does not—Freddy and the Dreamers’ recording of “I’m Telling You Now.” But what about all those things that might or might not belong: light classics, film music, Duke Ellington’s Black, Brown and Beige, the Three Tenors, nineteenth-century parlor songs, Croatian folksong arrangements? When confronted by a set with fuzzy edges one can either say that such a thing poses no problem at all, or argue more dangerously that the fuzzy edges are ultimately destabilizing and, like the voracious Pac-Man, always eat their way to the center of the set, destroying it. In this case the resulting conclusion would be that there is simply no such thing as classical music. At that point, someone is always bound to step in and say, “look, we all know what we’re talking about, so let’s stop the nonsense!” Yet after all this time, and considerable effort on the part of our group, we cannot and do not speak with a single voice about such things. This is not something negative, for it is our view that the tension, the problem of what comprises classical music and how we should regard it, refuses to disappear. Far from being a drawback, we believe that this dissent has contributed to the vitality of this cohesive yet diverse collection of essays.
Classical Music and the Academy

Since this report comes out of a project sponsored by a university, it is worth noting that attitudes towards classical music have changed dramatically in the academy in the last decades. As observed several times in this volume, under the influence of such things as feminist and queer theory, cultural studies, critical theory and critical race theory, the notion of a traditional canon has been relentlessly problematized, and dismissed outright by many as a massive impediment, or even fraud, both inaccurate and reactionary. It is argued in many quarters that the virtual monopoly classical music has had on curricula at many universities needs to be drastically dismantled, and many music departments have made fundamental changes to address this. At their most polemical, such approaches attack the classical tradition for everything from its white supremacy to misogyny, and consider it something like a sonic advertisement for imperialism, sexism, and colonialism. While more than half of our contributors come from outside the academic world, and while one should not necessarily overrate the influence of such ideas about classical music, they cannot be ignored, nor completely defended. It is, however, worth noting that many criticisms of classical music are written in a kind of opaque idiolect which makes a Beethoven quartet seem like Doo-wop by comparison. This is not incidental: to the extent that much academic writing fails to acknowledge the complicity between itself and the very things it sets itself against, it does not always need be taken as seriously as it would like to be. Yet other aspects of these arguments about the implications of classical music are thoughtfully couched and raise compelling questions that cannot be sidestepped; we have addressed them here when appropriate.

The Volume, Part 1

In Chapter 1, Ellen T. Harris and I have tried to tackle a central question about the “enduring value” of classical music. This is a thorny problem for many reasons. Even if we could “define” classical music, which presents challenges for the reasons suggested above, discussions of value inevitably trigger subjectivist and relativist impulses. Thus arguing for
the value of classical music, even if carefully done, often comes close to proclaiming its superiority over other kinds of music—clearly an argument that is neither sensible, sustainable or correct.

In Chapter 2 a pair of noted philosophers, Kit Fine and Chris Peacocke, take on another question which has become of considerable moment since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic: wherein lies the power of live music? This is always a vexed question, especially since we clearly are capable of deriving enormous pleasure from recorded works. When we look at a “Rembrandt painting” in a book, we absolutely know it is a reproduction, but I am not sure we have that sense when listening to a recording of a Bartók string quartet. In fact, recorded music usually feels like the real thing rather than a copy of it. This has, of course, become even more confused over the last months, where we find ourselves making distinctions between live-in-person, recorded video, recorded audio, and live-streamed presentations. Yet the authors of this chapter make a powerful argument that “There is literally a world of difference between experiencing an event for real and experiencing a copy or simulacrum of the event; and this difference is of great value to us.”

Preliminary data from a serious study of the effects of music education on everything from socialization to brain development and “connectivity” strongly suggests a correlation between music lessons and a host of positive attributes. While no evidence attaches this specifically to classical music, what obviously matters most is that some form of serious and even rigorous music education contributes to the process of becoming a mature individual. Both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 address this issue of education in different ways. The former gives an overview of the way education plays out in various groups and categories, resisting the temptation to make global claims about what a music education should look like, especially in a period of major change. Yet the four authors of this chapter agree without hesitation that change must come. Chapter 4 is both a highly detailed scientific study of music training from the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California, and an advocacy document for music education more broadly. It argues persuasively that access to quality music education “[s]hould not have to be on the grounds of research proven benefits...” but, rather, that “music and other arts are essential components of childhood development that will promote skill learning
and will give children access to creative imagination in a fundamentally enjoyable and interactive context.”

Few writers have had greater opportunity to track developments in new music than Alex Ross, who has chronicled them in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere for the last twenty-five years. In Chapter 5, writing about the field at large, he states simply that “the sheer quantity of music being produced from year to year defeats any attempt to encompass it.” Nonetheless he describes a “thriving culture” that is “distinct from mainstream classical music” and he makes the further suggestion that finding some kind of rapprochement between this classical mainstream and the “kaleidoscopic” world of New Music is key to the future health and survival of this tradition.

It is not clear that either Alex Ross or Zachary Woolfe are able to sustain an equally optimistic tone about the world of musical journalism. They note, at the beginning of Chapter 6, that “since the advent of the digital age, journalism has encountered crises that have severely affected the financial stability of the business,” with the decline of readership and advertising. That same technology, measured in clicks, reveals just how small the audience for, say, music criticism actually is, further resulting in the loss of positions and prestige. Zachary Woolfe suggests, in relation to *The New York Times*, that today’s more national (and international) audience is less interested in local New York events than they once were, while Alex Ross muses that “journalism as we have long known it is in terminal decline.” While he self-deprecatingly describes himself in jest as “a member of a dying profession covering a dying art,” he also asserts that important voices will continue to appear and have their say.

While it is not clear that the survival of classical music as a sounding thing is identical to the survival of music journalism, the question of the health of large arts organizations is a different matter. These institutions—opera companies, symphony societies, presentation venues, and music festivals—are something like the major leagues in the sport of classical music, or perhaps more accurately, the aircraft carriers of the arts. While often criticized for the way they reinforce conservative tastes in programming, they also set a standard for skill, excellence, style and quality that plays a powerful role in everything from pedagogy to criticism. And it was the strong sense of our group that these organizations face unique dangers. For this reason, several
essays in our collection focus on the importance of boards, audiences, management, and unions in creating the optimal conditions for the survival of these organizations. In Chapter 7 Deborah Borda writes with great clarity about the significance and responsibility of governance for the financial health of large arts organizations, although many of her ideas might well be absorbed by anyone in a position of leadership, even the odd department chair. In fact, her ideas are so vitalizing that one can come to two different conclusions: the first, that organizations can indeed thrive and survive if they have highly skilled, honest, and visionary managers; the second, how difficult it is to find the kinds of leaders in any profession who can combine such things as intuition, faith, calculation, and charisma in order to move things in the right direction.

Chapter 8, by Ostrower and Calabrese, presents the results of a good deal of research based on two fundamental questions: what is the state of attendance at non-profit performing arts events, and how do we evaluate the financial health of the organizations which make those events possible? Through a careful review of the literature, the authors outline the ways in which various non-profit arts organizations are responding, and conclude that audience building “is not an isolated endeavor, but an undertaking that is related to other aspects of organization culture and operations.” In Chapter 9, Matthew VanBesien draws on his experience in both labor and management to wrestle with questions concerning the relationship between orchestras and unions. In doing so he highlights several kinds of institutional response to the Covid-19 pandemic; some more inspiring than others. At the core of the issue lies a paradox which will continue to cause difficulties between unions and managers, that is, the irreconcilable tensions between the acknowledged need to pay players a fair wage and provide appropriate benefits, on the one hand, and, on the other, the unsustainable financial model of these large organizations, which lose more money each year and have to figure out where and how to pay for everything.4

Chapter 10 is concerned with one of the most pressing and difficult matters facing the world of classical music and the United States as a whole: diversity, equity and inclusion. Subtitled “A Call to Action,” the chapter

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4 For other recent exploration of this topic, see Jacobs (2020).
opens with a powerful autobiographical reflection by Anthony McGill, Principle Clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, followed by Susan Feder’s honest, painful and entirely accurate discussion of the history of racism in classical music and serious discussion of what needs to be done. While acknowledging that there has been change in such matters, Feder also raises issues with regard to mentoring, the lack of diversity on boards, whether the unions are prepared to make changes about such things as auditions and tenure in order to be fairer, and finally asks “[t]o what extent do the internal cultures of classical music organizations allow for mistreatment to be acknowledged and acted upon?”

In Chapter 11 Laurent Bayle and Catherine Provenzano take on the broad question of the relationship between classical music and technology. While arguing that this particular moment of “estrangement” from concert life offers an opportunity to improve the quality of the online experience, there is a parallel longing “for something a livestreamed concert or a remote learning environment might never provide.” Looking at everything from digital innovations to concert hall design, and from pedagogy to creativity, the authors offer a broad overview of the possibilities—and perils—of technology. The chapter concludes with Provenzano’s peroration around Black Lives Matter, making it clear that “no digital tool is going to change the white-dominated and deeply classist lineage and current reality of the North American classical music world.”

The Volume, Part 2

The second part of the volume offers five case studies related to specific venues, audiences and artforms. In the first of these, Chapter 12, Howard Herring and Craig Hall offer a view of the thorough, careful, and innovative approaches that can be used to attract and retain audiences. They focus on everything from venue type to programming, and also keep careful track of everything from age demographics to who returns and who does not. Taking advantage of everything from the weather in Miami to the presence of the charismatic Michael Tilson Thomas, the New World Symphony offers an example of a successful and thriving organization.
Tom Service begins **Chapter 13** wondering pessimistically whether anything called “classical” can attract the young audiences any medium needs to survive. Yet, in the end, he argues that there is much to be hopeful about. Noting the connection—pursued also today in the fields of musical scholarship—between music and gaming, he suggests that the sooner classical music loses its exclusive and elite status, the better. In his view, however, this push rarely emerges from the major classical music organizations but, in his words comes, “from the ground up,” referring to contemporary composers, gamers, cinema audiences, and even to sampling by pop artists. Service goes on to trace the many different attempts of the BBC to connect with its audiences, whether through programs such as Slow Radio, the Ten Pieces Project or Red Brick Sessions, noting that there has never been a time where there has been both greater opportunity and more at stake.

Another important subject is what might broadly be called “classical music as world music.” Our central focus on larger arts organizations in Europe and North America means that, with the exception of **Chapter 14**, which looks at contemporary music events in South Korea, we have not highlighted the considerable and profound impact of classical music in such places as China and Japan. Nor have we emphasised the emerging classical music cultures in the Middle East, Africa and India, or important practices throughout Latin America. How this plays out over the coming decades, with millions of music students in China alone, remains to be seen, but for this reason it is doubtful that the actual survival of classical music is in jeopardy.

In **Chapter 14**, Unsuk Chin and Maris Gothoni offer this trenchant observation: “In a way, the COVID-19 crisis could be likened to a macabre litmus test which mercilessly exposes the level of importance our societies attribute to non-functional and not immediately accessible art.” After a rich meditation on the lot of the composer, from the historic past to the present day, the authors look at the enormously successful Ars Nova festival of the Seoul Philharmonic, which Unsuk Chin curated for more than a decade. Taking the challenge of difficult new music seriously, they make the simple but powerful point that “cutting-edge works had to be put into specific contexts in order to create a point of orientation for listeners and musicians alike.”
In Chapter 15 Laurent Bayle outlines new conceptions of programming, artistic space, and especially the question of placing performing arts organizations away from elite downtown districts. Documenting robust debates within France around the question of “classical music as an art of the past,” the activities of the Philharmonie de Paris and the Démos project for children demonstrate the opposite: the vitality of the tradition when thoughtfully planned and presented. In particular, the creation of orchestras for children, combined with free training and musical instruments, along with the mixing of traditional repertoire with compositions reflecting different genres and a global reach, offers another model for revitalizing and sustaining the tradition.

Lest one think somehow that classical music is all about genius, we may mention that there is a great deal of it which is considered “mediocre” at best, by aficionados of that world. Ironically though, the very works whose greatness is most agreed upon are often derogated as “museum pieces,” implying both a certain objectified immobility, and the lack of an organic connection to the rest of the world. So perhaps it is appropriate that our collection ends in museums and galleries, with a provocative meditation which contrasts the extraordinary popularity and success of the visual and plastic arts over the last several decades with the more problematic status of classical music. Noting that museums have been wonderfully adept at merging the traditional and the new, and alluding to the sexiness of the astonishing prices that have emerged for contemporary art, in Chapter 16 Olivier Berggruen suggests several ways in which the classical music world might model that success. Of course, there is at least one nagging difference between a painting and a musical composition, and that is how much more time one usually invests in the latter. While one might easily move on in a matter of seconds from, say, a sculpture that does not resonate, sitting for the duration of a live new music performance can require a different level of patience.

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We who love music, whether we call it classical, pop, hip hop, jazz, world music or anything else, like to believe that there are sounds for every occasion, and that no matter how dark or difficult the situation, music can in some way ease our burden or frame our experience. The
last months—of Covid, of George Floyd, and the Capitol insurrection—remind us that there are some moments where no music of any kind seems appropriate. During such crises we may even yearn for a time when grappling with the challenges faced by classical music, and the other performing arts, seemed among the most urgent of matters. Let us hope those days will return in the not too distant future and that, when they do, this volume will make a modest contribution to helping us think of new ways of meeting those challenges.

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Berkeley, California
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