Classical Music is Different—and it's Better

by Jamie C. Weir (April 2023)

Orquesta Sinfónica, Jean Dufy

I started going to hear orchestras perform live in the wake of the pandemic, mainly Edinburgh's Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and afterwards my only regret was that I hadn't done so sooner. I've always enjoyed classical music but I dismissed the idea of concerts: why pay to go and hear a tune when (unlike any other generation that has ever lived) I have access to every piece of music ever written in a tiny electronic box in my pocket? A private symphony orchestra at

my beck and call.

Nonetheless, I decided I ought to culture myself. As part of this campaign, I went along to hear some Beethoven with a friend on a September evening at the grand old Usher Hall in Edinburgh. It was the Emperor Concerto. The bells rang out in the corridor; it was time to take our seats. The lights dimmed. The conductor embraced the silence. Paused. Then the orchestra surged and the piano jangled into life. It was startlingly, rapturously impressive.

I admit now that my slightly haughty dismissal of classical concerts was wrongheaded, and I think part of the reason I was so wrong hinges on what, exactly, makes classical music as a whole so different. In conversation we speak of the music of the fifties, sixties, seventies, and so on, but under the awkward umbrella of 'classical music' we lump an eclectic mixture of tunes, dances, operas, and symphonies, written across tens of centuries. From this strange, heterogeneous collection pop out timeless melodies and motifs which have seeped into the culture and with which so many of us are familiar.

Indeed, it is interesting, looking back, to consider the extent to which the classic MGM and Disney cartoons of the early part of the last century served as a media through which children were unwittingly introduced to some of the greatest pieces of classical music. For example, we can find Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Beethoven, and Mussorgsky in *Fantasia* (1940) or *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). I vividly recall the classic Bugs Bunny sketch where he shaves Elmer Fudd to Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and, in another memorable scene, Strauss's 'Tales from the Vienna Woods' and 'Blue Danube' appear in 'A Corny Concerto.' The hapless feline Tom proved himself a talented concert pianist, hammering out Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2' with Jerry doing his best to frustrate him. Alongside his propensity for stage fright, Michigan Jay Frog's surprisingly versatile repertoire, from Rossini to 'Please

don’t talk about me when I’m gone,’ sticks very firmly in my mind. Naturally, I had no idea what these pieces were at the time and knew nothing about them, but they would henceforth be lodged in my mind.

The extent to which classical music was portrayed in these cartoons—still staples in my own youth—seems unthinkable today. For one, the world of classical music has an increasingly intimidating and perhaps even slightly embarrassing reputation. This filters through even in the cartoons: the men are all in tailcoats and white bowties, the women in long ball gowns. It is seen as boring, stuffy, old-fashioned, and (that most deadly heresy of the modern world) *exclusive*. *Classical music?* Classic? *Says who?* Surely musical taste is a matter of personal judgement? Indeed, it is quite an odd name for a whole genre of music, suggesting, depending on one’s outlook, either some culturally ingrained prejudices, or an unspoken collective acknowledgement that there *is* something about it that transcends other musical forms.

Like all clichés, there are elements of truth to the vision of classical music as a stuffy clique. The dress code for the audience has fallen away entirely, and jeans and trainers can easily be spotted, but the musicians still generally wear tie and tails. And what is wrong with that anyway? If the conductor turned up in a grubby white vest, like Bruce Willis freshly tumbled out of an air duct, the audience would surely be far from amused. But it is a characteristic of modern Western societies that any infringement on absolute personal autonomy is seen as stifling and oppressive, rather than simple respect for—and deference to—a paying audience. Not every social situation needs to a canvas on which we splash whatever sentiment takes hold of us today.

Perhaps the basic impression that underlies all these accusations of exclusivity is that classical music is simply rather alien. To those weaned on popular music, as almost everyone is nowadays, it is a wholly different animal. Pieces

can last for hours rather than minutes; there are no words (except in that most niche of niche art forms, opera); and the music frequently lacks the toe-tapping beat familiar to pop listeners. In fact, everything about it suggests it out to be mind-numbingly boring—the surprising thing is that it's *not*.

Although classical music is still composed today, it is largely historical and comes from an age of fewer distractions. Hearing it live in concert helps recreate some of that atmosphere. One has to sit there in the dark, silent and still, with nothing but the music as an object of attention. That is a tall order for modern listeners when it seems that dwindling attention spans are even driving a kind of evolutionary process in pop music, shortening the length of introductory instrumentals for example. Classical music, then, was historically entertainment in a much more fundamental and substantial way, precisely because it was rarer and less accessible. Elaborate music was a precious commodity.

We can find the same sorts of patterns in written art. Popular music is almost comparable to limericks: amusing, rhythmic, and quickly gratifying, but typically without much depth. Classical music—an hour-long symphony, for example—is more like a novel. It requires patience, attention, and investment: in return we are carried along on an emotional journey. A story. Sections of the work ('movements'), like chapters, each have their own character, and unaccountably evoke their own palette of feelings. Free of other distractions, we lose control of ourselves to the music.

In some classical pieces, this narrative structure is explicit. The Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov's beautiful symphonic piece *Scheherazade* interprets the Sinbad stories of the *One Thousand and One Nights*—one movement, 'The Sea and Sinbad's Ship' mimics swelling, crashing waves, and the glamour of adventure; 'Festival at Bagdad' conjures up the exotic, dazzling variety of a Middle Eastern bazaar; and perhaps the most famous movement, the 'Young Prince and Young

Princess,' portrays a delicate romance.

The narrative power of this sort of music is also evident in films—even the greatest, best performed, most exquisitely directed films would surely be anaemic if robbed of their soundtrack. Can we imagine *Gone with the Wind* without 'Tara's Theme'? *The Great Escape* without its march? *Schindler's List*, *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park*, or *Star Wars* without the iconic scores of John Williams? Unconsciously they hang in the background playing on our emotions, pulling us along and deeper into the story. The Wagnerian operatic innovation of the *leitmotif* has become such a staple of film and television that it is easy to fail to properly appreciate it. Yet these melodies can encapsulate a character, an object, or an idea, so completely that it is difficult to imagine the one without the other.

But the question remains, glaringly obvious and just as difficult. What is classical music? How *exactly* is it different? Are the works of Gilbert and Sullivan classical music? Andrew Lloyd Webber? Generally, the answer to that would be yes. But it seems to me clear that there is something firmly distinct between their work and that of, say, Beethoven or Handel. Compare *HMS Pinafore* with Handel's *Messiah* and, as much as I love G&S, the juxtaposition seems a little absurd.

What about folk tunes and dances? The English pastoral composer Ralph Vaughan Williams travelled the countryside collecting and recording folk melodies, many of which have been distilled into some of his most famous works. Those have *become*, indisputably, pieces of classical music. But would we say that Scottish country dancing music—the 'Dashing White Sergeant,' 'Canadian Barn Dance,' or the 'Gay Gordons'—also fit that epithet?

It is surprising that there is no clear agreement even among musical scholars about where exactly this line can be drawn, and that the classical catchment area is seemingly rather subjective. It sits at the intersection of various different

musical traditions and, within that, any given piece might get hoisted up into the canon over time, through a sort of organic, selective process of filtering.

That simple musical notes, strung together in certain sequences, can stir up feeling from some deep, primitive part of our mind is one of those timeless mysteries of the human condition. No dancing, no lyrics … just sound. For me, therein lies the essence of what makes the real classics of the classical music canon genuinely higher art. Certainly, much of what has been produced under the banner of classical music is destined to be seldom played, and then forgotten. And much of it will deserve that fate. There is nothing inherently or universally wonderful about everything that emanates from an orchestra, but when a great classical piece is written and played and heard its emotive power transcends dispute. It takes hold of something fundamental within us. The thousands all around the world who, regardless of culture or background, pour into dark theatres to hear Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and countless others, are testament to that strange, inexplicable power.

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