

LISTEN TO THIS

CROSSING THE BORDER FROM CLASSICAL TO POP

I hate “classical music”: not the thing but the name. It traps a tenaciously living art in a theme park of the past. It cancels out the possibility that music in the spirit of Beethoven could still be created today. It banishes into limbo the work of thousands of active composers who have to explain to otherwise well-informed people what it is they do for a living. The phrase is a masterpiece of negative publicity, a tour de force of anti-hype. I wish there were another name. I envy jazz people who speak simply of “the music.” Some jazz aficionados also call their art “America’s classical music,” and I propose a trade: they can have “classical,” I’ll take “the music.”

For at least a century, the music has been captive to a cult of mediocre elitism that tries to manufacture self-esteem by clutching at empty formulas of intellectual superiority. Consider other names in circulation: “art” music, “serious” music, “great” music, “good” music. Yes, the music can be great and serious, but greatness and seriousness are not its defining characteristics. It can also be stupid, vulgar, and insane. Composers are artists, not etiquette columnists; they have the right to express any emotion, any state of mind. They have been betrayed by well-meaning acolytes who believe that the music should be marketed as a luxury good, one that replaces an inferior popular product. These guardians say, in effect, “The music you love is trash. Listen instead to our great, arty music.” They are making little headway with the unconverted because they have forgotten to define the music as something worth loving. Music is too personal a medium to support an absolute hierarchy of values. The best music is the music that persuades us that there is no other music in the world.

When people hear “classical,” they think “dead.” The music is described in terms of its distance from the present, its difference from the mass. No wonder that stories of its imminent demise are commonplace. Newspapers recite a familiar litany of problems: record companies are curtailing their classical divisions; orchestras are facing deficits; the music is barely taught in public schools, almost invisible in the media, ignored or mocked by Hollywood. Yet the same story was told forty, sixty, eighty years ago. *Stereo Review* wrote in 1969, “Fewer classical records are being sold because people are dying . . . Today’s dying classical market is what it is because fifteen years ago no one attempted to instill a love for classical music in the then impressionable children who have today become the market.” The conductor Alfred Wallenstein wrote in 1950, “The economic crisis confronting the American symphony orchestra is becoming increasingly acute.” The German critic Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt wrote in 1926, “Concerts are poorly attended and budget deficits grow from year to year.” Laments over the decline or death of the art appear as far back as the fourteenth century, when the sensuous melodies of Ars Nova were thought to signal the end of civilization. The pianist Charles Rosen has sagely observed, “The death of classical music is perhaps its oldest continuing tradition.”

The American classical audience is assumed to be a moribund crowd of the old, the white, the rich, and the bored. Statistics provided by the National Endowment for the Arts suggest that the situation is not quite so dire. Yes, the audience is older than that for any other art—the median age is forty-nine—but it is not the wealthiest. Musicals, plays, ballet, and museums all get larger slices of the \$50,000-or-more income pie (as does the ESPN channel, for that matter). The parterre section at the Metropolitan Opera plays host to CEOs and socialites, but the less expensive parts of the house—as of this writing, most seats in the Family Circle go for twenty-five dollars—are well populated by schoolteachers, proofreaders, students, retirees, and others with no entry in the Social Register. If you want to see an in-your-face, Swiss-bank-account display of wealth, go look at the millionaires sitting in the skyboxes at a Billy Joel show, if security lets you. As for the graying of the audience, there is no denying the general trend, although with any luck it may begin to level off. Paradoxically, even as the audience ages, the performers keep getting younger. The musicians of the Berlin Philharmonic are, on average, a generation younger than the Rolling Stones.

The music is always dying, ever-ending. It is like an ageless diva on a nonstop farewell tour, coming around for one absolutely final appearance. It is hard to name because it never really existed to begin with—not in the sense that it stemmed from a single time or place. It has no genealogy, no ethnicity: leading composers of today hail from China, Estonia, Argentina, Queens. The music is simply whatever composers create—a long string of written-down works to which various performing traditions have become attached. It encompasses the high, the low, empire, underground, dance, prayer, silence, noise. Composers are genius parasites; they feed voraciously on the song matter of their time in order to engender something new. They have gone through a rough stretch in the past hundred years, facing external obstacles (Hitler and Stalin were amateur music critics) as well as problems of their own invention (“Why doesn’t anyone like our beautiful twelve-tone music?”). But they may be on the verge of an improbable renaissance, and the music may take a form that no one today would recognize.

The critic Greg Sandow has written that the classical community needs to speak more from the heart about what the music means. He admits that it’s easier to analyze his ardor than to express it. The music does not lend itself to the same kind of generational identification as, say, *Sgt. Pepper*. There may be kids out there who lost their virginity during Brahms’s D-Minor Piano Concerto, but they don’t want to tell the story and you don’t want to hear it. The music attracts the reticent fraction of the population. It is an art of grand gestures and vast dimensions that plays to mobs of the quiet and the shy.

I am a white American male who listened to nothing but classical music until the age of twenty. In retrospect, this seems bizarre; perhaps “freakish” is not too strong a word. Yet it felt natural at the time. I feel as though I grew up not during the seventies and eighties but during the thirties and forties, the decades of my parents’ youth. Neither my mother nor my father had musical training—both worked as research mineralogists—but they were devoted concertgoers and record collectors. They came of age in the great American middlebrow era, when the music had a rather different place in the culture than it does today. In those years, in what now seems like a dream world, millions listened as Toscanini conducted the NBC

Symphony on national radio. Walter Damrosch explained the classics to schoolchildren, singing ditties to help them remember the themes. (My mother remembers one of them: “This is / The sym-pho-nee / That Schubert wrote but never / Fi-nished . . .”) NBC would broadcast Ohio State vs. Indiana one afternoon, a recital by Lotte Lehmann the next. In my house, it was the Boston Symphony followed by the Washington Redskins. I was unaware of a yawning gap between the two.

Early on, I delved into my parents’ record collection, which was well stocked with artifacts of the golden age: Serge Koussevitzky’s Sibelius, Charles Munch’s Berlioz, the Thibaud-Casals-Cortot trio, the Budapest Quartet. The look and feel of the records were inseparable from the sound they made. There was Otto Klemperer’s Zeppelin-like, slow-motion account of the *St. Matthew Passion*, with nightmare-spawning art by the Master of Delft. Toscanini’s fierce renditions of Beethoven and Brahms were decorated with Robert Hupka’s snapshots of the Maestro in motion, his face registering every emotion between ecstasy and disgust. Mozart’s Divertimento in E-flat featured the famous portrait in which the composer looks down in sorrow, like a general surveying a hopeless battle. While listening, I read along in the liner notes, which were generally written in the over-the-top everyman-orator style that the media favored in the mid-twentieth century. Tchaikovsky, for example, was said to exhibit “melancholy, sometimes progressing to abysmal depths.” None of this made sense at the time; I had no acquaintance with melancholy, let alone abysmal depths. What mattered was the exaggerated swoop of the thought, which matched my response to the music.

The first work that I loved to the point of distraction was Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony. At a garage sale my mother found a disc of Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic—one of a series of Music-Appreciation Records put out by the Book-of-the-Month Club. A companion record provided Bernstein’s analysis of the symphony, a road map to its forty-five-minute sprawl. I now had names for the shapes that I perceived. (The conductor’s *Joy of Music* and *Infinite Variety of Music* remain the best introductory books of their kind.) Bernstein drew attention to something that happens about ten seconds in: the fanfarelike main theme, in the key of E-flat, is waylaid by the note C-sharp. “There has been a stab of intrusive otherness,” Bernstein said, cryptically but seductively, in his nicotine baritone. Over and over, I listened to this note of otherness. I bought a score

and deciphered the notation. I learned some time-beating gestures from Max Rudolf's conducting manual. I held my family hostage in the living room as I led the record player in a searing performance of the *Eroica*.

Did Lenny get a little carried away when he called that soft C-sharp in the cellos a "shock," a "wrench," a "stab"? If you were to play the *Eroica* for a fourteen-year-old hip-hop scholar versed in Eminem and 50 Cent, he might find it shockingly boring at best. No one is slicing up his wife or getting shot nine times. But your young gangsta friend will eventually have to admit that those artists are relatively shocking—relative to the social norms of their day. Although the *Eroica* ceased to be controversial in the these-crazy-kids-today sense around 1830, within the "classical" frame it has continued to deliver its surprises right on cue. Seven bars of E-flat major, then the C-sharp that hovers for a moment before disappearing: it is like a speaker stepping up to a microphone, launching into the first words of a solemn oration, and then faltering, as if he had just remembered something from childhood or seen a sinister face in the crowd.

I don't identify with the listener who responds to the *Eroica* by saying, "Ah, civilization." I don't listen to music to be civilized; sometimes, I listen precisely to escape the ordered world. What I love about the *Eroica* is the way it manages to have it all, uniting Romanticism and Enlightenment, civilization and revolution, brain and body, order and chaos. It knows which way you think the music is going and veers triumphantly in the wrong direction. The Danish composer Carl Nielsen once wrote a monologue for the spirit of Music, in which he or she or it says, "I love the vast surface of silence; and it is my chief delight to break it."

Around the time I got stabbed by Beethoven's C-sharp, I began trying to write music myself. My career as a composer lasted from the age of eight to the age of twenty. I lacked both genius and talent. My spiral-bound manuscript book includes an ambitious program of future compositions: thirty piano sonatas, twelve violin sonatas, various symphonies, concertos, fantasias, and funeral marches, most of them in the key of D minor. Scattered ideas for these works appear in the following pages, but they don't go anywhere, which was the story of my life as a composer. Still, I treasure the observation of one of my college teachers, the composer Peter Lieber-son, who wrote on the final page of my end-of-term submission that I had created a "most interesting and slightly peculiar sonatina." I put down my pen and withdrew into silence, like Sibelius in Järvenpää.

My inability to finish anything, much less anything good, left me with a profound respect for this impossible mode of making a living. Composers are in rebellion against reality. They manufacture a product that is universally deemed superfluous—at least until their music enters public consciousness, at which point people begin to say that they could not live without it. Half of those on the League of American Orchestras' list of the twenty composers most frequently performed during the 2007–2008 season—Mahler, Strauss, Sibelius, Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Copland—hadn't been born when the first draft of the repertory got written.

Throughout my teens, I took piano lessons from a man named Denning Barnes. He also taught me composition, music history, and the art of listening. He was a wiry man with tangled hair, whose tweed jackets emitted an odd smell that was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just odd. He was intimate with Beethoven, Schubert, and Chopin, and he also loved twentieth-century music. Béla Bartók and Alban Berg were two of his favorites. He opened another door for me, in a wall that I never knew existed. His own music, as far as I can remember, was rambunctious, jazzy, a little nuts. One day he pounded out one of the variations in Beethoven's final piano sonata and said that it was an anticipation of boogie-woogie. I had no idea what boogie-woogie was, but I was excited by the idea that Beethoven had anticipated it. The marble-bust Beethoven of my childhood suddenly became an eagle-eyed sentinel on the ramparts of sound.

“Boogie-woogie” was a creature out of Bernstein's serious-fun world, and Mr. Barnes was my private Bernstein. There was not a snobbish bone in his body; he was a skeleton of enthusiasm, a fifteen-dollar-an-hour guerrilla fighter for the music he loved. He died of a brain tumor in 1989. The last time I saw him, we played a hair-raising version of Schubert's Fantasia in F Minor for piano four hands. It was full of wrong notes, most of them at my end of the keyboard, but it felt great and made a mighty noise, and to this day I have never been entirely satisfied with any other performance of the work.

By high school, a terrible truth had dawned: I was the only person my age who liked this stuff. Actually, there were other classical nerds at my school, but we were too diffident to form a posse. Several “normal” friends dragged me to a showing of *Pink Floyd The Wall*, after which I conceded that one passage sounded Mahlerian.

Only in college did my musical fortress finally crumble. I spent most of my time at the campus radio station, where I had a show and helped organize the classical contingent. I fanatically patrolled the boundaries of the classical broadcasting day, refusing to surrender even fifteen minutes of *Chamber Music Masterworks* and the like. At 10:00 p.m., the schedule switched from classical to punk, and only punk of the most recondite kind. Once a record sold more than a few hundred copies, it was kicked off the playlist. The DJs liked to start their sets with the shrillest, crudest songs in order to scandalize the classical crowd. I tried to one-up them with squalls of Xenakis. They hit back with Sinatra singing “Only the Lonely.” Once, they followed up my heartfelt tribute to Herbert von Karajan with Skrewdriver’s rousing neo-Nazi anthem “Prisoner of Peace”: “Free Rudolf Hess / How long can they keep him there? We can only guess.” Touché.

The thing about these cerebral punk rockers is that they were easily the most interesting people I’d ever met. Between painstakingly researched tributes to Mission of Burma and the Butthole Surfers, they composed undergraduate theses on fourth-century Roman fortifications and the liberal thought of Lionel Trilling. I began hanging around in the studio after my show was over, suppressing an instinctive fear of their sticker-covered leather jackets and multicolored hair. I informed them, as Mr. Barnes would have done, that the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg had pre-figured all this. And I began listening to new things. The first two rock records I bought were Pere Ubu’s *Terminal Tower* compilation and Sonic Youth’s *Daydream Nation*. I crept from underground rock to alternative rock and finally to the full-out commercial kind. Soon I was astounding my friends with pronouncements like “*Highway 61 Revisited* is a pretty good album,” or “The White Album is a masterpiece.” I abandoned the notion of classical superiority, which led to a crisis of faith: If the music wasn’t great and serious and high and mighty, what was it?

For a little while, living in Northern California after college, I thought of giving up on the music altogether. I sold off a lot of my CDs, including all my copies of the symphonies of Arnold Bax, in order to pay for more Pere Ubu and Sonic Youth. I cut my hair short, wore angry T-shirts, and started hanging out at the Berkeley punk club 924 Gilman Street. I became a fan of a band called Blatz, which was about as far from Bax as I could get. (Their big hit was “Fuk Shit Up.”) Fortunately, no one needed to

point out to my face that I was in the wrong place. It is a peculiar American dream, this notion that music can give you a new personality, a new class, even a new race. The out-of-body experience is thrilling as long as it lasts, but most people are eventually deposited back at the point where they started, and they may begin to hate the music for lying to them.

When I went back to the classical ghetto, I chose to accept its limitations. I realized that, despite the outward decrepitude of the culture, there was still a bright flame within. It occurred to me that if I could get from Brahms to Blatz, others could go the same route in the opposite direction. I have always wanted to talk about classical music as if it were popular music and popular music as if it were classical.

For many, pop music is the soundtrack of raging adolescence, while the other kind chimes in during the long twilight of maturity. For me, it's the reverse. Listening to the *Eroica* reconnects me with a kind of childlike energy, a happy ferocity about the world. Since I came late to pop, I invest it with more adult feeling. To me, it's penetrating, knowing, full of microscopic shades of truth about the way things really are. Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* anatomizes a doomed relationship with a saturnine clarity that a canonical work such as *Die schöne Müllerin* can't match. (When Ian Bostridge sang Schubert's cycle at Lincoln Center a few years ago, I had the thought that the protagonist might never have spoken to the miller girl for whose sake he drowns himself. How classical of him.) If I were in a perverse mood, I'd say that the *Eroica* is the raw, thuggish thing—a blast of ego and id—whereas a song like Radiohead's "Everything in Its Right Place" is all cool adult irony. The idea that life is flowing along with unsettling smoothness, the dark C-sharpness of the world sensed but not confirmed, is a resigned sort of sentiment that Beethoven probably never even felt, much less communicated. What I refuse to accept is that one kind of music soothes the mind and another kind soothes the soul. It depends on whose mind, whose soul.

The fatal phrase came into circulation late in the game. From Machaut to Beethoven, modern music was essentially the only music, bartered about in a marketplace that resembled pop culture. Music of the past was either quickly forgotten or studied mainly in academic settings. Even in the churches there was incessant demand for new work. In 1687, in the German town of Flensburg, dismissal proceedings were initiated against a

local cantor who kept recycling old pieces and neglected to play anything contemporary. When, in 1730, Johann Sebastian Bach remonstrated with the town council of Leipzig for failing to hire an adequate complement of singers and musicians, he stated that “the former style of music no longer seems to please our ears” and that expert performers were needed to “master the new kinds of music.”

Well into the nineteenth century, concerts were eclectic hootenannies in which opera arias collided with chunks of sonatas and concertos. Barrel-organ grinders carried the best-known classical melodies out into the streets, where they were blended with folk tunes. Audiences regularly made their feelings known by applauding or calling out while the music was playing. Mozart, recounting the premiere of his “Paris” Symphony in 1778, described how he milked the crowd: “Right in the middle of the First Allegro came a Passage that I knew would please, and the entire audience was sent into raptures—there was a big applaudißement;—and as I knew, when I wrote the passage, what good effect it would make, I brought it once more at the end of the movement—and sure enough there they were: the shouts of Da capo.” James Johnson, in his book *Listening in Paris*, evokes a night at the Paris Opéra in the same period:

While most were in their places by the end of the first act, the continuous movement and low din of conversation never really stopped. Lackeys and young bachelors milled about in the crowded and often boisterous parterre, the floor-level pit to which only men were admitted. Princes of the blood and dukes visited among themselves in the highly visible first-row boxes. Worldly abbés chatted happily with ladies in jewels on the second level, occasionally earning indecent shouts from the parterre when their conversation turned too cordial. And lovers sought the dim heights of the third balcony—the paradise—away from the probing lorgnettes.

In America, musical events were a stylistic free-for-all, a mirror of the country’s mixed-up nature. Walt Whitman mobilized opera as a metaphor for democracy; the voices of his favorite singers were integral to the swelling sound of his “barbaric yawp.”

In Europe, the past began to encroach on the present just after 1800. Johann Nikolaus Forkel’s 1802 biography of Bach, one of the first major books devoted to a dead composer, may be the founding document of the

classical mentality. All the earmarks are there: the longing for lost worlds, the adulation of a single godlike entity, the horror of the present. Bach was “the first classic that ever was, or perhaps ever will be,” Forkel proclaimed. He also said, “If the art is to remain an art and not to be degraded into a mere idle amusement, more use must be made of classical works than has been done for some time.” By “idle amusement” Forkel probably had in mind the prattling of Italian opera; his biography is addressed to “patriotic admirers of true musical art,” namely the German. The notion that the music of Forkel’s time was teetering toward extinction is, of course, amusing in retrospect; in the summer of 1802, Beethoven began work on the *Eroica*.

Classical concerts began to take on cultlike aspects. The written score became a sacred object; improvisation was gradually phased out. Concert halls grew quiet and reserved, habits and attire formal. Patrons of the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, which opened in 1876, were particularly militant in their suppression of applause. At the premiere of *Parsifal*, in 1882, Wagner requested that there be no curtain calls for the performers, in order to preserve the rapt atmosphere of his “sacred festival play.” The audience interpreted this instruction as a general ban on applause. Cosima Wagner, the composer’s wife, described in her diary what happened at the second performance: “After the first act there is a reverent silence, which has a pleasant effect. But when, after the second, the applauders are again hissed, it becomes embarrassing.” Two weeks later, listeners rebuked a man who yelled out “Bravo!” after the Flower Maidens scene. They did not realize that they were hissing the composer. The Wagnerians were taking Wagner more seriously than he took himself—an alarming development.

The sacralization of music, to take a term from the scholar Lawrence Levine, had its advantages. Many composers liked the fact that the public was quieting down; the subtle shock of a C-sharp wouldn’t register if noise and chatter filled the hall. They began to write with a silent, well-schooled crowd in mind. Even so, the emergence of a self-styled elite audience had limited appeal for the likes of Beethoven and Verdi. The nineteenth-century masters were, most of them, egomaniacs, but they were not snobs. Wagner, surrounded by luxury, royalty, and pretension, nonetheless railed against the idea of a “classical” repertory, for which he blamed the Jews. His nauseating anti-Semitism went hand in hand with a sometimes charming populism. In a letter to Franz Liszt, he raged against

the “monumental character” of the music of his time, the “clinging firmly to the past.” Another letter demanded, “*Kinder! macht Neues! Neues!, und abermals Neues!*” Or, as Ezra Pound later put it, “Make it new.”

Unfortunately, the European bourgeoisie, having made a demigod of Beethoven, began losing interest in even the most vital living composers. In 1859, a critic wrote, “New works do not succeed in Leipzig. Again at the fourteenth Gewandhaus concert a composition was borne to its grave.” The music in question was Brahms’s First Piano Concerto. (Brahms knew that things were going badly when he heard no applause after the first movement.) At around the same time, organizers of a Paris series observed that their subscribers “get upset when they see the name of a single contemporary composer on the programs.” The scholar William Weber has shown how historical repertory came to dominate concerts across Europe. In 1782, in Leipzig, the proportion of music by living composers was as high as 89 percent. By 1845, it had declined to around 50 percent, and later in the nineteenth century, it hovered around 25 percent.

The fetishizing of the past had a degrading effect on composers’ morale. They started to doubt their ability to please this implacable audience, which seemed prepared to reject their wares no matter what style they wrote in. If no one cares, composers reasoned, we might as well write for one another. This was the attitude that led to the intransigent, sometimes antisocial mentality of the twentieth-century avant-garde. A critic who attended the premiere of the *Eroica* saw the impasse coming: “Music could quickly come to such a point, that everyone who is not precisely familiar with the rules and difficulties of the art would find absolutely no enjoyment in it.”

In America, the middle classes carried the worship of the classics to a necrophiliac extreme. Lawrence Levine, in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, gives a devastating portrait of the country’s musical culture at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a world that abhorred virtuosity, extravagance, anything that smacked of entertainment. Orchestras dedicated themselves to “the great works of the great composers greatly performed, the best and profoundest art, these and these alone,” in the redundant words of the conductor Theodore Thomas, who more or less founded the modern American orchestra.

In some ways, Levine’s sharp critique of Gilded Age culture goes too far; while much of the audience unquestionably appropriated European music as a status symbol, many leaders of the orchestral world—among them

Henry Lee Higginson, the founder of the Boston Symphony—saw their mission in altruistic terms, welcoming listeners of all classes, nationalities, and races. The cheaper seats at the big urban concert halls didn't cost much more than tickets for the vaudeville, usually starting at twenty-five cents. All the same, paternalism stalked the scene; classical music began to define itself as a mode of spiritual uplift, of collective self-improvement, rather than as a sphere of uninhibited artistic expression.

Within a decade or two, the American symphony orchestra seemed so ossified that progressive spirits were calling for change. "America is saddled, hag-ridden, with culture," the critic-composer Arthur Farwell wrote in 1912. "There is a conventionalism, a cynicism, a self-consciousness, in symphony concert, recital, and opera." Daniel Gregory Mason, a maverick Columbia professor, similarly attacked the "prestige-hypnotized" plutocrats who ran the New York Philharmonic; he found more excitement at open-air concerts at Lewisohn Stadium, in Harlem, where the audience expressed itself freely. Mason delightedly quoted a notice that read, "We would respectfully request that the audience refrain from throwing mats."

In the concert halls, a stricter etiquette took hold. Applause was rationed once again; listeners were admonished to control themselves not only during the music but between movements of a large-scale composition—even after those noisy first-movement codas that practically beg for a round of clapping and shouting. German musicians and critics concocted this rule in the first years of the twentieth century. Leopold Stokowski, when he led the Philadelphia Orchestra, was instrumental in bringing the practice to America. Mason wrote in his book: "After the Funeral March of the *Eroica*, someone suggested, Mr. Stokowski might at least have pressed a button to inform the audience by (noiseless) illuminated sign: 'You may now cross the other leg.'"

In the 1930s, a new generation of composers, conductors, and broadcasters embraced Farwell's idea of "music for all." The storied middlebrow age began. David Sarnoff, the head of NBC, had a vision of Toscanini conducting for a mass public, and the public duly materialized, in the millions. Hollywood studios hired composers such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Aaron Copland, and Bernard Herrmann, and even pursued the modernist giants Schoenberg and Stravinsky (both of whom asked for too much money). The Roosevelt administration funded the Federal Music Project,

which in two and a half years entertained ninety-five million people; there were concerts in delinquent-boys' homes and rural Oklahoma towns. Never before had classical music reached such vast and diverse audiences. Those who consider the art form inherently elitist might ponder an irony: at a time of sustained economic crisis, when America moved more to the left than at any time in its history, when socialistic ideas threatened the national religion of free enterprise, classical music attained maximum popularity. Toscanini's Beethoven performances symbolized a spirit of selflessness and togetherness, both during the Great Depression and in the war years that followed.

Yet many young sophisticates of the twenties and thirties didn't look at it that way. They saw the opera and the symphony as cobwebbed fortresses of high society, and seized on popular culture as an avenue of escape. In 1925, a young socialite named Ellin Mackay, the daughter of the chairman of the board of the New York Philharmonic, caused a stir by abandoning the usual round of debutante balls for the cabaret and nightclub circuit. She justified her proclivities in a witty article titled "Why We Go to Cabarets: A Post-Debutante Explains," which appeared in a fledgling magazine called *The New Yorker*; the ensuing publicity enabled that publication to get on its feet. Opening night at the Metropolitan Opera was one of the dreaded rituals from which the Jazz Age debutante felt liberated. Mackay caused an even greater scandal when she became engaged to Irving Berlin, the composer of "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Her father publicly announced that he would disinherit his daughter if she went through with her plans. Ellin and Irving married anyway, and Clarence Mackay became a buffoonish figure in the popular press, the very image of the high-culture snob.

The defections were legion. Carl Van Vechten, the notorious author of *Nigger Heaven*, started out as a classical critic for *The New York Times*; he witnessed Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and hailed the composer as a savior. Then his attention began to wander, and he found more life and truth in ragtime, Tin Pan Alley, blues, and jazz. Gilbert Seldes, in his 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts*, declared that "'Alexander's Ragtime Band' and 'I Love a Piano' are musically and emotionally sounder pieces of work than *Indian Love Lyrics* and 'The Rosary'"—Gilded Age parlor songs—and that "the circus can be and often is more artistic than the Metropolitan Opera House in New York." For young African-American music mavens, the

disenchantment was more bitter and more personal. In 1893, Antonín Dvořák, the director of the National Conservatory in New York, had prophesied a great age of Negro music, and his words raised hopes that classical music would assist in the advancement of the race. The likes of James Weldon Johnson awaited the black Beethoven who would write the music of God's trombones. Soon enough, aspiring young singers, violinists, pianists, and composers ran up against a wall of racism. Only in popular music could they make a decent living.

There had been a major change in music's social function. In the Gilded Age, classical music had given the white middle-class aristocratic airs; in the Jazz Age, popular music helped the same class to feel down and dirty. A silly 1934 movie titled *Murder at the Vanities* sums up the genre wars of the era. It is set behind the scenes of a Ziegfeld-style variety show, one of whose numbers features a performer, dressed vaguely as Liszt, who plays the Second Hungarian Rhapsody. Duke Ellington and his band keep popping up in the background, throwing in insolent riffs. Eventually, they drive away the effete classical musicians and play a take-off called *Ebony Rhapsody*: "It's got those licks, it's got those tricks / That Mr. Liszt would never recognize." Liszt comes back with a submachine gun and mows down the band. The metaphor wasn't so far off the mark. Although many in the classical world spoke in praise of jazz—Ernest Ansermet lobbed the word "genius" at Sidney Bechet—others fired verbal machine guns in an effort to slay the upstart. Daniel Gregory Mason, the man who wanted more throwing of mats, was one of the worst offenders, calling jazz a "sick moment in the progress of the human soul."

The contempt flowed both ways. The culture of jazz, at least in its white precincts, was much affected by that inverse snobbery which endlessly congratulates itself on escaping the elite. (The singer in *Murder at the Vanities* brags of finding a rhythm that Liszt, of all people, could never comprehend: what a snob.) Classical music became a foil against which popular musicians could assert their cool. Composers, in turn, were irritated by the implication that they constituted some sort of moneyed behemoth. They were the ones who were feeling bulldozed by the power of cash. Such was the complaint made by Lawrence Gilman, of *The New York Tribune*, after Paul Whiteman and his Palais Royal Orchestra played Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* at Aeolian Hall. Gilman didn't like the *Rhapsody*, but what really incensed him was Whiteman's suggestion that jazz was an underdog fighting against symphony bigwigs. "It is the Palais Roy-

alists who represent the conservative, reactionary, respectable elements in the music of today,” Gilman wrote. “They are the aristocrats, the Top Dogs, of contemporary music. They are the Shining Ones, the commanders of huge salaries, the friends of Royalty.” The facts back Gilman up. By the late twenties, Gershwin was making at least a hundred thousand dollars a year. In 1938, Copland, one of the best-regarded composers of American concert music, had \$6.93 in his checking account.

Despite the ever-cresting surge of jazz and pop, classical music retained a high profile in America as the era of depression and war gave way to the Cold War and its attendant boom economy. Money was poured into the performing arts, partly in an effort to out-culture the Russians. Grants from the Ford Foundation led to a proliferation of musical ensembles, orchestras in particular; where there had been dozens of professional orchestras, now there were hundreds. Multipurpose performing-arts centers went up in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., their façades evoking sleek secular cathedrals. In the early years of the LP era, classical music made quite a bit of money for the major record labels; Decca ended up selling eighteen million copies of its pioneering studio recording of Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*.

The real reckoning arrived in the 1960s, when classical music made a decisive and seemingly permanent move to the cultural margin. The advent of Dylan and the Beatles again jeopardized classical music’s claim on “high art,” and this time an entire generation seemed to come of age without identifying strongly with the classical repertory. The audience grayed, attendance declined. According to one report, the classical share of total record sales dropped from 20 percent to 5 percent in the course of the decade. The music now occupies somewhere around 2 percent of the market. In an ironic twist of fate, jazz now has about the same slice of the mass audience, leaving Duke Ellington in the same league as Mr. Liszt.

All music becomes classical music in the end. Reading the histories of other genres, I often get a funny sense of déjà vu. The story of jazz, for example, seems to recapitulate classical history at high speed. First, the youth-rebellion period: Satchmo and the Duke and Bix and Jelly Roll teach a generation to lose itself in the music. Second, the era of bourgeois pomp: the high-class swing band parallels the Romantic orchestra. Stage 3: artists rebel against the bourgeois image, echoing the classical modernist revolution, sometimes by direct citation (Charlie Parker works the opening notes of *The Rite of Spring* into “Salt Peanuts”). Stage 4: free jazz

marks the point at which the vanguard loses touch with the masses and becomes a self-contained avant-garde. Stage 5: a period of retrenchment. Wynton Marsalis's attempt to launch a traditionalist jazz revival parallels the neo-Romantic music of many late-twentieth-century composers. But this effort comes too late to restore the art to the popular mainstream.

The same progression worms its way through rock and roll. What were my hyper-educated punk-rock friends but Stage 3 high modernists, rebelling against the bloated Romanticism of Stage 2 stadium rock? In the first years of the new century there was a lot of Stage 5 neoclassicism going on in what remained of rock. The Strokes, the Hives, the Vines, the Stills, the Thrills, the White Stripes, and various other bands harked back to some lost pure moment of the sixties or seventies. Many used old instruments, old amplifiers, old soundboards. One rocker was quoted as saying, "I intentionally won't use something I haven't heard before." A White Stripes record carried this Luddite notice: "No computers were used during the recording, mixing, or mastering of this record."

The original classical music is left in an interesting limbo. It has a chance to be liberated from the social clichés that currently pin it down. It is no longer the one form carrying the burden of the past. Moreover, it has the advantage of being able to sustain constant reinterpretation, to renew itself with each repetition. The best kind of classical performance is not a retreat into the past but an intensification of the present. The mistake that apostles of the classical have always made is to have joined their love of the past to a dislike of the present. The music has other ideas: it hates the past and wants to escape.

In 2003, I bought an iPod and began filling it with music from my CD collection. The device, fairly new at the time, had a setting called Shuffle, which skipped randomly from one track to another. There was something seductive about surrendering control and letting the iPod decide what to play next. The little machine went crashing through barriers of style in ways that changed how I listened. One day it jumped from the furious crescendo of "Dance of the Earth," ending Part I of *The Rite of Spring*, into the hot jam of Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues." The first became a gigantic upbeat to the second. On the iPod, music is freed from all fatuous self-definitions and delusions of significance. There are no record

jackets depicting bombastic Alpine scenes or celebrity conductors with a family resemblance to Rudolf Hess. Instead, as Berg once remarked to Gershwin, music is music.

A lot of younger listeners seem to think the way the iPod thinks. They are no longer so invested in a single genre, one that promises to mold their being or save the world. This gives the lifestyle disaster called “classical music” an interesting new opportunity. The playlists of smart rock fans often include a few twentieth-century classical pieces. Mavens of electronic dance music mention among their heroes Karlheinz Stockhausen, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich. Likewise, younger composers are writing music heavily influenced by minimalism and its electronic spawn, even as they hold on to the European tradition. And new generations of musicians are dropping the mask of Olympian detachment (silent, stone-faced musician walks onstage and begins to play). They’ve started mothballing the tuxedo, explaining the music from the stage, using lighting and backdrops to produce a mildly theatrical happening. They are finding allies in the “popular” world, some of whom care less about sales and fees than the average star violinist. The borders between “popular” and “classical” are becoming creatively blurred, and only the Johann Forkels in each camp see a problem.

The strange thing about classical music in America today is that large numbers of people seem aware of it, curious about it, even knowledgeable about it, but they do not go to concerts. The people who try to market orchestras have a name for these annoying phantoms: they are “culturally aware non-attenders,” to quote an article in the magazine *Symphony*. I know the type; most of my friends are case studies. They know the principal names and periods of musical history: they have read what Nietzsche wrote about Wagner, they can pick Stravinsky out of a lineup, they own Glenn Gould’s *Goldberg Variations* and some Mahler and maybe a CD of Arvo Pärt. They follow all the other arts—they go to gallery shows, read new novels, see art films. Yet they have never paid money for a classical concert. They almost make a point of their ignorance. “I don’t know a thing about Beethoven,” they announce, which is not what they would say if the subject were Henry James or Stanley Kubrick. This is one area where even sophisticates wrap themselves in the all-American anti-intellectual flag. It’s not all their fault: centuries of classical intolerance have gone into the creation of the culturally aware non-attender. When I tell people what I do for a living, I see the same look again and again—a flinching sideways

glance, as if they were about to be reprimanded for not knowing about C-sharps. After this comes the serene declaration of ignorance. The old culture war is fought and lost before I say a word.

I'm imagining myself on the other side—as a forty-something pop fan who wants to try something different. On a lark, I buy a record of Otto Klemperer conducting the *Eroica*, picking this one because Klemperer is the father of Colonel Klink, on *Hogan's Heroes*. I hear two impressive loud chords, then what the liner notes allege is a “truly heroic” theme. It sounds kind of feeble, lopsided, waltzlike. My mind drifts. A few days later, I try again. This time, I hear some attractive adolescent grandiosity, barbaric yawps here and there. The rest is mechanical, remote. But each time I go back I map out a little more of the imaginary world. I invent stories for each thing as it happens. Big chords, hero standing backstage, a troubling thought, hero orating over loudspeakers, some ideas for songs that don't catch on, a man or woman pleading, hero shouts back, tension, anger, conspiracies—assassination attempt? The nervous splendor of it all gets under my skin. I go to a bookstore and look at the classical shelf, which seems to have more books for Idiots and Dummies than any other section. I read Bernstein's essay in *The Infinite Variety of Music*, coordinate some of the examples with the music, enjoy stories of the composer screaming about Napoleon, and go back and listen again. Sometime after the tenth listen, the music becomes my own; I know what's around almost every corner and I exult in knowing. It's as if I could predict the news.

I am now enough of a fan that I buy a twenty-five-dollar ticket to hear a famous orchestra play the *Eroica* live. It is not a very heroic experience. I feel dispirited from the moment I walk in the hall. My black jeans draw disapproving glances from men who seem to be modeling the Johnny Carson collection. I look around warily at the twenty shades of beige in which the hall is decorated. The music starts, with the imperious chords that say, “Listen to this.” Yet I somehow find it hard to think of Beethoven's detestation of all tyranny over the human mind when the man next to me is a dead ringer for my dentist. The assassination sequence in the first movement is less exciting when the musicians have no emotion on their faces. I cough; a thin man, reading a dog-eared score, glares at me. When the movement is about a minute from ending, an ancient woman creeps slowly up the aisle, a look of enormous dissatisfaction on her face, followed at a few paces by a blank-faced husband. Finally, three smashing chords to finish, obviously intended to set off a roar of applause. I start to

clap, but the man with the score glares again. One does not applaud in the midst of greatly great great music, even if the composer wants one to! Coughing, squirming, whispering, the crowd suppresses its urge to express pleasure. It's like mass anal retention. The slow tread of the Funeral March, or Marcia funebre, as everyone insists on calling it, begins. I start to feel that my newfound respect for the music is dragging along behind the hearse.

But I stay with it. For the duration of the Marcia, I try to disregard the audience and concentrate on the music. It strikes me that what I'm hearing is an entirely natural phenomenon, the sum of the vibrations of various creaky old instruments reverberating around a boxlike hall. Each scrape of a bow translates into a strand of sound; what I see is what I hear. So when the cellos and basses make the floor tremble with their big low note in the middle of the march (what Bernstein calls the "wham!") the impact of the moment is purely physical. Amplifiers are for sissies, I'm starting to think. The orchestra isn't playing with the same cowed force as Klemperer's heroes, but the tone is warmer and deeper and rounder than on the CD. I make my peace with the stiffness of the scene by thinking of it as a cool frame for a hot event. Perhaps this is how it has to be: Beethoven needs a passive audience as a foil. To my left, a sleeping dentist; to my right, a put-upon aesthete; and, in front of me, the funeral march that rises to a fugal fury, and breaks down into softly sobbing memories of themes, and then gives way to an entirely new mood—hard-driving, laughing, lurching, a bit drunk.

Two centuries ago, Beethoven bent over the manuscript of the *Eroica* and struck out Napoleon's name. It is often said that he made himself the protagonist of the work instead. Indeed, he fashioned an archetype—the rebel artist hero—that modern artists are still recycling. I wonder, though, if Beethoven's gesture meant what people think it did. Perhaps he was freeing his music from a too specific interpretation, from his own preoccupations. He was setting his symphony adrift, as a message in a bottle. He could hardly have imagined it traveling two hundred years, through the dark heart of the twentieth century and into the pulverizing electronic age. But he knew it would go far, and he did not weigh it down. There was now a torn, blank space on the title page. The symphony became a fragmentary, unfinished thing, and unfinished it remains. It becomes whole again only in the mind and soul of someone listening for the first time, and listening again. The hero is you.