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Why Classical Music Matters

Talk for Living Freedom Summer School, 30 June 2023

In order to make an argument for ‘Why Classical Music Matters’, we need to identify the object in question. The term ‘Classical Music’ is used by music historians to refer to the work of a narrow period in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Central Europe; at the other extreme, the term can be used for a whole range of global musics – multiple traditions of Indian, Chinese, Korean, Iranian, Arabic, sub-Saharan African musics and so on. For Western traditions, musicologists have generally focused on the term ‘Western art music’ to denote a species of work, generally literate – in the sense of having been notated – and to be distinguished not only from folk and vernacular traditions, but also from urban ‘popular’ traditions, from music-hall and cabaret through jazz and blues to modern pop.

In many ways this is the tradition I refer to by the term ‘classical music’ (for ‘Western classical music’, since we are in the West) but I use ‘classical’ rather than ‘art’ for the purposes of sharpening the definition. I use it to refer to a body of notated music, developed over a period of more than a thousand years, generally under the auspices of church, court and concert hall, or for performance by dedicated amateur musicians, but – in the industrial age - with a degree of autonomy from commerce. Beyond this – and here is where the term ‘classical’ can be distinguished from simple ‘art’ – I refer primarily to that work which has developed a sustained listenership over a period of time. This qualifier is important because I do not necessarily feel the need to mount a defence of the voluminous amount of notated music developed under similar auspices which is now mostly forgotten, and often for good reason.

Repertoires and ‘canons’ of music have certainly been modified and adapted over time, and will likely continue to be so in some respects. However, two episodes in history made a large repertoire available to many for the first time: the major expansion of music publishing in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the development of recording in the twentieth, making many works being available to those not in a position to aurally imagine them or reconstruct them at the piano or other instrument in order to perceive their sonic and structural qualities. After both of these, the latter of which in the last half-century has entailed the re-excavation of many obscure works by forgotten composers, I believe there are unlikely to be many further major rediscoveries which could fundamentally modify perceptions of the most significant classical repertoire, at least for the ‘common practice’ period from the early baroque in the seventeenth century through to the early-twentieth century. Very few of the forgotten composers – some of whom I would call ‘justly neglected’ – have proved of more than passing interest.

That said, the situation is rather different for pre-baroque music, especially the medieval period up to around the mid-fifteenth century, about which information and surviving sources are more fragmentary and possibly unrepresentative, and wider information about performance practice is often incomplete or derived from rather paltry sources. And in the twentieth century and beyond, a disjunction appears between ‘canon’, the work which has achieved intellectual, academic and educational respectability, and ‘repertory’, the work which is most frequently played. To the

present day the pioneering atonal music of the ‘Second Viennese School’ – Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton von Webern – has never achieved so regular or secure a place in the common repertory as that of Giacomo Puccini or Sergei Rachmaninoff, who have received more sporadic musicological and other intellectual treatment.

There are plenty who would argue that the types of modernist music which develop out of the work of the Second Viennese School and a few other radical developments have been responsible for a decline in classical music as a living tradition. Some others would now relegate this to a historical period whose time has now passed, superseded by that of neo-tonal, minimalist and other figures – examples would include the composers Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Michael Nyman or Ludovico Einaudi. Others, dating back at least as far as the American critic Henry Pleasants in the 1950s, would say that the extravagance, unyieldingness, and not least distance from *vocal* rather than *instrumental* traditions have led thus to the classical tradition being superseded by jazz and popular song. This type of argument, without necessarily the same vocal emphasis, has also been used to argue for the primary importance of a body of popular music reaching into the present, sometimes employing obvious evidence of its far greater public profile than anything of the avant-garde.

I do not accept any of these positions, as a performing musician and scholar heavily invested in a modernist/avant-garde tradition which I believe is both current and vivid, and also rooted in classical traditions at least as much as that of the neo-tonalists and others. Time does not permit me to argue the case for the modernist traditions here, and I will concentrate on the *historical* classical tradition. But I equally reject the position of some other avant-gardists, especially some who identify their work as ‘experimental’ music, and some involved in electroacoustic and other forms of studio composition, who present their own work and that of colleagues and allies as the antidote of ‘tradition’, even claiming commonality with contemporary popular traditions, mostly on the grounds of simple chronological equivalence, or some small areas of overlap when popular musicians have occasionally flirted with musical developments from the avant-garde.

The case for this classical tradition is self-evident to me, as I would equally say for equivalent traditions of literature, visual arts, theatre, or more recent cultural traditions of film or for that matter other musics such as jazz, which might be viewed as akin to a type of classical tradition of its own. But I would put the case as follows: classical music constitutes a hugely diverse range of traditions, developed primarily in Europe, then later in the Americas, East Asia and further afield, drawing upon a much wider range of roots, including African and Middle Eastern traditions, as the scholar and educationalist Estelle R. Jorgensen has argued. It is the most extensive *literate* tradition, for which the widest and most varied range of notated sources have survived, and has the potential to the present day to convey a vast range of experience, emotion, sensation, evocation, as well as wider information appertaining to its time and place, though by no means limited to this. It has also been, within the West, the tradition which has afforded the greatest freedom to individual composers. Not all have especially partaken of this, for sure, and a great many produced workaday generic composition of little distinction. But sufficient *have* done so to form a major and immensely rich tradition.

Western history certainly contains much evidence of bloodshed, vast inequality (especially of gender), oppression, colonialism, slavery and more – charges which can equally be laid at the door of most major world civilisations. I am not amongst those who thinks that therefore the whole musical tradition is primarily an outgrowth of societies and wider small-c cultures indefensible by modern standards, and thus heavily tainted and at most of merely historical interest. At the same time, nor do I think music or other culture can be entirely disassociated from these factors. Many ethnomusicologists – a term which no longer necessarily indicates an interest in music of the non-Western world but rather the study of the social and cultural function of music, decentering the sounding music in itself – take what I would maintain is a highly reductive view of music. They view it as a secondary product of other phenomenon, allowing for little consideration of the possibilities of musical relative *autonomy*. From this perspective there is little to redeem music which played a notable function in oppressive societies of the past, and to do so is somehow to fetishise it and hear it in an illegitimate manner. But as I have pointed out to an ethnomusicologist colleague, just because I am deeply drawn to J.S. Bach's Cantatas does not mean I buy into Bach's Lutheran theology, nor have to hear them in the liturgical context for which they were originally conceived. Similar considerations apply to the music of arch-Catholic Olivier Messiaen, something of an obsession to me for many decades, and whose major cycles for piano I have performed complete, despite being an atheist. In neither case would I discount the religious elements could be discounted in terms of the conception and realisation of the music, but it is possible to appreciate it to the full while rejecting some of them.

So listening to this historical tradition does not have to be solely or primarily an exercise in re-imagining or re-inhabiting its original historical or cultural context. If this were the case, I doubt it would have sustained a listenership for as long as it has. Rather, this is music which has continued to generate new responses, meanings, relevances during changing historical and social periods.

But it would be too easy to dismiss the sense of historical or cultural *distance* which some experience when encountering such music for the first time, especially if they do so in adulthood. Similarly, a first-time reader of *Beowulf* or *La Chanson de Roland* may be likely to feel estranged from the context depicted therein, to say nothing of the archaic language. Nonetheless, many have been able to ingest these factors and discover aspects in such literature which 'speak' today. Exactly the same applies to classical music, and to some other musical traditions. But this does often require a degree of active agency or volition, entailing conscious effort, which exceeds that required for seemingly more immediate contemporary commercial music designed for mass consumption, often to be heard while undertaking other activities. In short, engagement with classical music is generally facilitated by a degree of *education*.

This is ultimately the sticking point, I believe, and a major reason why it is not hyperbolic to speak of a crisis in classical music today, at least in parts of the West. The requirements of such music in terms of cognition and overcoming unfamiliarity certainly vary enormously (compare listening to a well-known tune from a Puccini opera in isolation, or a highly colourful and evocative nineteenth-century Russian symphonic poem, with a Josquin Mass, late Beethoven string quartet or a work of Pierre Boulez). But we inhabit a world in which commercial popular music inhabits a

vast number of public spaces, and for this reason it is almost impossible for classical music to compete. At the same time, the opportunities to encounter it through education are diminishing.

I would think it to be a much poorer world if contemporary commercial music was all there is. And I wonder how many would really like it to be so, or how many also have more varied and minority musical interests of their own. Consider an analogy with a broadcaster who runs eleven television channels. Of the identifiable viewership, 10% watch the first channel, another 10% the second, another 10% the third, in relatively exclusive groups. But 80 or 90% of them all watch the eleventh channel. On grounds of simple 'popularity', the host broadcaster might then decide to ditch all the channels except the eleventh. But would this make practically any of the viewership happy, if their minority interests were disregarded simply by virtue of being as such?

So let me outline some of the problems classical music is currently facing, focusing on the United Kingdom. A tradition of public subsidy growing out of the post-1945 Arts Council, and of public broadcasting, dominated by the Third Programme which became BBC Radio 3, have been the mainstay of classical music, enabling it to function with some degree of autonomy from market forces, and present a varied diet of music without avoiding anything which might risk short-term audiences. Public service broadcasting of all types has come under question with the growth of wider commercial broadcasters, from early pirate radio stations through satellite and cable broadcasting from the late 1980s, to the situation now whereby vast amounts of television and radio are readily available through subscription services, and national terrestrial broadcasting struggles to maintain the central role it once had. And – in contrast to the situation in various other European countries, though they are often not free from such pressures – public subsidy of classical music has come under increased scrutiny, leading to cuts which force the closure of long-established institutions. Some of you will have read about the situation of English National Opera, the BBC Singers, as well as major reforms to BBC Orchestras, and the loss of subsidy for other institutions such as the Britten Sinfonia or the ensemble Psappha. This is not new – the same thing happened to Kent Opera in 1989 following the withdrawal of funding – but seems more intense today.

Some of this is down to simple economic factors and cuts to a wide range of public spending. While the sums involved are not large compared to other areas of government expenditure such as health, social security or defence, it would be surprising if the arts could remain immune from wider cuts.

But there is a bigger factor underlying this phenomenon, which is the progressive erosion of the cultural *status* of classical music. This relates to a wider intellectual climate and also the situation of education, which I will concentrate on for the last part of this talk.

It is probably fair to say that in Germany, which has one of the most extensive infrastructures for classical music of any European country, the support of not only national but also European traditions is generally tacitly accepted as a common good, and as such public support for the major network of concert halls and opera houses is not a 'hot' political issue in the sense that it is regularly contested. That is not the case

in this country, despite the range of institutions and the money going into them being considerably smaller. Why is this?

In part I believe this relates to the United Kingdom's not having really embraced the project of European integration as enthusiastically as many continental countries, and as such being less invested in wider European culture. To me the decline of classical music is an aspect of the same historical forces which brought about Brexit, though I recognise there will be people here who will strongly disagree on this. European enthusiasm can be contrasted with so-called 'fifty-first stateism' on the one hand, involving a lionisation of the United States and its associated popular culture, or that strange overlap between imperial nostalgia and varieties of modern multiculturalism, which fixate on the culture of former colonial countries, to the exclusion of those in Europe. This is a similar phenomenon which the historian Richard J. Evans has noted in some contemporary teaching of history, in which a 'global' approach specifically excludes a pan-European one.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century London was undoubtedly the major European centre for musical performance (composition was a different matter). It largely maintained such a position for a long time even in the face of major expansion of musical activities in rivals Paris, Vienna and later Berlin. The levels of public subsidy available to the major orchestras in Paris and Vienna did not exist in London, but a wide range of musical activity could still continue. This included in time a range of affordable concerts for less affluent members of society, some of which were the predecessors of the modern Proms Concerts. Ultimately the advent of the Third Programme and Arts Council were an extension of these processes, but in a new social democratic era which favoured a greater degree of progressive taxation and spending.

Euroscepticism was a significant factor up to and beyond Britain's entry into the European Economic Community, but this had less impact upon classical music at the time. Nor did difficult economic times. On top of these factors we have to look to a wider ideological climate.

It would not be unfair to say a certain 'mandarin' outlook informed the Arts Council and the Third Programme, an extension of the wider attitudes of Lord Reith at the BBC. But as the older mandarins who controlled arts policy retired, including various people firmly associated with the left, new generations came up, informed in stages by a changing intellectual culture disseminated through universities.

In an article I published in 2021 in *The Spectator* about recent controversies in musicology, I identified three historical developments which had informed the current situation. One was the rise of British cultural studies, especially from the 1970s onwards, leading to an approach to the study of popular music with little if any engagement with the sounding work, often undertaken by those with little training in this. This came to be influential in academic music circles, with a shift from musical 'text' to its production and consumption, essentially sociological rather than musical concerns. Then there was the growth of ethnomusicology, whose origins were as much anthropological as musical. This also marginalised musical engagement in favour of cultural and social function, and in particular rejected any type of value judgement, such as lies at the heart of the definition of a classical repertoire. The third

development was the so-called ‘new musicology’, a morally loaded approach which claimed (falsely) to be the first to consider the social and political dimensions of music. New musicologists, like ethnomusicologists, contrasted this with a straw man portrayal of other musicological disciplines. They represented aesthetic judgement and musical autonomy as the outdated ideology of a ruling class, and focused instead on identifying of questionable ideologies of gender, sexuality or ethnicity sedimented in musical work, often on the basis of speculative hermeneutics.

The first two of these in particular informed two phenomena which I have identified as the ‘deskilling’ of musical education – the downplaying of long-established skills in notation, theory, analysis, history, aural skills, and so on – and ‘musicology without ears’, a form of musicology which does not require the scholar to engage with the aural dimension of music. No longer were the aspects of classical music which previously marked it out as important a central concern. Scholars could then indulge lazy rhetoric about ‘elitism’ and the alleged class basis of classical music, while disregarding real evidence of many ventures to make such music accessible to all, or of the genuine mass distribution of classical music in former communist countries.

Furthermore, like any European traditions, classical music was developed by a population which even today is around 85-90% of white European origin, and more so in previous centuries. This led those seeking to deny the value of anything particular to the West to attack the ‘whiteness’ of classical music. This has fed into the ‘decolonisation’ debate, which has been especially toxic in this context. The links between particular examples of Western classical music and colonialism have been explored for some time, but the ‘decolonisers’, concentrated in a few institutions, often use the term for a blanket attack on classical music, including work from areas which at the time of composition had few if any connections with the global colonial venture.

In this context, academics seeking to defend and continue the teaching of the classical tradition face regular denigration of such a venture by managers, other academics, and administrators involved in EDI. The rhetoric employed can be of such a charged, accusatory manner that I believe various institutions have become markedly hostile environments for classical musicians or those interest in such work, whether staff or students. Pop, by contrast, is seen as multi-racial and therefore good, regardless of whether this is necessarily true of many in the industry which controls it.

Others such as the American academic William Cheng have attempted to dismiss the value of much scholarly endeavour per se, to say nothing of anything which positively valorises this tradition, in the name of a passive-aggressive demand that music and musicology only be valued in terms of their doing what he and a few others deem as social good. From another angle, the requirement or even teaching of musical notation has been deemed ‘exclusive’ and therefore elitist and bad, an argument which was oddly expressed by right-wing columnist Charlotte Gill in 2017, and met with a range of rebuttals from prominent musicians and educators, but since then has become more mainstream in academic circles.

This may seem to entail too great a focus on the study of music at tertiary level, which after all is something that the vast majority of the population are never likely to encounter. But I mention it because it forms the basis of a changed intellectual

climate, which has fed into wider public discourse, I believe, not least in other parts of education, but also into those making decisions on arts funding.

Today, fewer than 20% of university music students study degrees in which classical music, or history, theory and analysis, play any type of central role. Over 80% are enrolled instead on vocational courses in music technology, musical theatre, popular music and its performance, music business and a few others, which generally do not require many of these skills. A range of music departments have closed in the last two decades, beginning with that in Reading in 2004, and others have closed non-vocational, plain 'music' programmes. To some extent this is a response to declining enrolment, reflecting the diminishing role classical music has come to play in primary and secondary education, leading to fewer potential students with the types of prior skills which would have once been expected. Statistics have shown a fall of over 30% in those taking A-Level Music over the last decade. Some departments try to make up by providing the missing skills themselves as part of foundational training, but others find it simpler just to move entirely to the vocational courses. When this happens at places with research-based faculties, the disjunction between teaching and faculty expertise can become very stark, and numbers can end up falling rather than rising, as has occurred at departments such as Keele or Kingston. Furthermore, the more the domination of 'musicology without ears', the more the academic study of music loses the one factor – engagement with sounding music – which distinguishes it from other disciplines, without which it might be absorbed into these and further marginalised.

Defence of the arts and humanities requires some conception of their intrinsic value, which too few in academia really believe any longer, nor are in a position to make a case for such music to their students. Future music teachers at primary and secondary level will be made up of music graduates, over 80% of whom may have no knowledge of classical music, notation, theory and so on, as I said, and so are often unable to teach it to young people. Thus the whole situation spirals, and will continue to without proactive policies to change the situation as well as better funding of music provision in schools, which has also been cut. This latter has meant that fewer who are educated in the state system have the opportunity to learn an instrument or learn about classical music unless they have independent means.

All of this is possible in a society and culture in which demanding music is viewed primarily as an elitist and exclusive sociological phenomenon. But I do not believe any art simply reflects the world, but can equally *add* to that world. Furthermore, it can reflect *back* on the world from which it comes. Music, like other arts, can go beyond simply reflecting existing modes of consciousness to offer new possibilities – the utopian dimension alluded to by Theodor Adorno. Adorno had little faith in this possibility in musical work dominated by the concerns of the 'culture industry' – a concept which to him went beyond the commercial music industry, though it is fair to say he thought this realm the most dominated in this respect. I believe Adorno's formulation is too didactic, but nonetheless contains some truth. The stylistic and structural range available to highly commercial music has boundaries which are more rigid than in other musical realms, and there is less mass commercial potential in work which appeals to an educated ear. I have not often heard the argument which devalues James Joyce's *Ulysses* on the grounds it is too difficult, and thus exclusive and likely to be limited to a narrower audience, in comparison to the writing of Jeffrey Archer, Jilly Cooper or Dan Brown, favourably contrasted as being more

‘democratic’. But this really is the type of argument which is common now in musicological and music-educational circles.

When young people are not introduced to classical music at school, as was once relatively common, there will not be significant new audiences in the future. And in Higher Education, more programmes and departments will close. Popular music does not necessarily require the same educational infrastructure, and has managed historically quite independently from it. Those institutions which attempt to pile in students with promises of great careers as popular musicians or producers, and teach primarily specialised skills rather than the wider transferable ones which have long been a feature of the broader arts and humanities, may come to grief as it becomes clearer that there is not the work for the number of graduates produced, and politicians start to ask more questions about ‘low-value degrees’.

I do not believe classical music will ever die in this country, but I do think there is a real danger of its becoming once more the exclusive property of an elite, a type of self-fulfilling prophecy coming out of its dismissal on prior grounds of ‘elitism’, undoing all the progress of the earlier post-war period. This is not because of the music, but because the assistance which can make a real difference to its being accessible to all is being denied. This is something to try and combat as far as possible.