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The Unsung Success of Live Classical Music

Ticket sales are up, orchestra revenues are growing and there are more concerts than ever. As the fall season gets under way, classical music is secretly thriving.

By LEON BOTSTEIN

In Vienna this past June, I went to a thrilling production of Richard Strauss's "Capriccio." The next morning, in a 14th-century Gothic church, I was swept away by the reverberant beauty of a performance of a rarely heard Haydn mass. Both the opera house and church were filled to maximum capacity. The depth of the sound, its material sensuality and the allure of great music that has not been overplayed lent each listener an intimate sense of the human imagination that could be shared with hundreds of anonymous companions.

Nothing can reproduce the sonic and emotional power of live performance. But looking out at the audience at most classical music concerts in the United States, one sees a crowd that is largely middle-aged, verging on the geriatric. This has set off alarms within the music community, whose members are quick to blame the loss of a younger generation of listeners for the sorry state of classical music, waning ticket sales and a record market that has all but disappeared.

Memories are deceptive. Classical music has never been the passion of the young. It is an acquired taste that requires both encouragement and education, like voting or drinking Scotch. And in fact, more young people today are playing classical instruments than ever before, according to conservatory enrollments. More surprising, the classical music world has never been healthier; since the early 1970s the growth has been robust.

The heralding of the demise of classical music is based on flimsy evidence. The number of concert venues, summer festivals, performing ensembles and overall performances in classical music and opera has increased exponentially over the last four decades. There are currently nearly 400 professional orchestras in America, according to the League of American Orchestras, while 30 years ago there were 203. There are up to 500 youth orchestras, up from 63 in 1990. The number of orchestra concerts performed annually in the U.S. has risen 24% in the past decade, to 37,000. Ticket-sale income from orchestra performances grew almost 18%, to \$608 million, between the 2004-'05 and 2005-'06 seasons.

The widening of interest in classical music isn't limited to our shores. The Asian embrace of Western musical traditions took off in earnest after World War II. It first rose in Japan, then spread to Korea, and is now making its way throughout China, following the path of economic progress. The result: There are more young Asian instrumentalists and audience members for classical music than anywhere else in the world. In Venezuela, classical music training has become a powerful tool in the improvement of primary and secondary school education. When a nation backs music education, as in Finland, a new cadre of world-class young performers emerges and audiences grow accordingly. We are in the midst of a global classical musical renaissance marked by a new vitality and higher standards of virtuosity and finesse.

So why all the hand-wringing? Much of it stems from another false assumption: that classical music was once profitable, but is now failing financially. This distorted expectation is rooted in the peculiar experience of the last decades of the 19th century, after the rapid extension of literacy in Europe and America. Before recording became commercially viable in 1902, when the Columbia and Victor companies joined forces and issued discs, sales of instruments (particularly the piano), concert tickets and sheet music were thriving businesses. With the advent of recorded music -- first the player piano, then the radio, the 78 rpm record, the long-playing record and the digital CD -- novel, albeit brief, opportunities for making money followed. These circumstances do not represent the broader historical norm. Classical music never held the promise that it could enlist a mass audience. From its birth as a secular and church-based art form, classical music has depended on patronage and philanthropy, not on income from sales either at the box office or in record stores.

The euphoria about the potential of recording and the electronic transmission of music reached a fever pitch during the mid-20th century. Glenn Gould, the legendary and eccentric Canadian pianist, was the most articulate proponent of a vision of the future in which recordings would replace live performance. He believed the only way to realize classical music's full potential was in the pristine and minutely controlled recording studio. Listeners would then enjoy the recording by using high-fidelity equipment in an isolated environment.

Mr. Gould was wrong. The success of the iPod has demonstrated that while some connoisseurs find its compression annoying, most classical music lovers value freedom and mobility over high fidelity. And thanks in large part to the pioneering strategy of the Naxos label, today's public is blessed with an inexhaustible archive of recorded performances. Each unit costs less than \$10 to purchase or download, less than recordings from some better-known companies. And that's before considering the file-sharing, streaming and downloading that are all at hand.

Unprecedented easy access to the recorded treasures of classical music may have put an end to the commercial viability of recorded music, but there is a silver lining: It has inspired more people to go to live concerts. Recorded music now does what all reproductions should. It inspires the desire to experience the real thing, in real time and space.

The real attraction of classical music is the power and sensuality of the live sounds. The excitement that ensues from the unpredictability and drama of live performance is comparable to watching spectator sports. Following a game on television is enjoyable, but to be cheering at the stadium or sitting courtside is incomparable.

The world of classical music still faces serious challenges. The competition for patronage and philanthropy has become increasingly intense, as the private sector is now asked to shoulder responsibility not only for the arts but also for education and many social services once the exclusive province of government. There are few cost-saving measures at hand when operas and orchestras require over 100 professionals to realize a single performance of Mahler's Third Symphony or Verdi's "Aida."

The explosive world-wide growth of popular music has created a competitive tension between classical "art" music and popular music that performers and composers in that past would not recognize. With this new chasm come smug defenders who delude themselves that allegiance to classical music is a sign of some sort of superiority. Musicians of note have rarely held this view. Consider Haydn, Liszt, Copland and Stravinsky, composers who used popular and folk material -- or Leonard Bernstein, whose music bridged both worlds, and even the 20th-century violinist Jascha Heifetz, who wrote popular songs. Until recently classical musicians and their audiences have remained eclectic and catholic in their tastes.

Classical music has always appealed to older adults who, with the passing of years, tend to contemplate the kind of daily life conundrums that are freighted with ambiguity and complexity. The average classical listener has historically hovered around middle age. This is encouraging, as there is no shortage of baby boomers on the horizon. The challenge facing classical musicians is to persuade adults to listen, even those who have no experience with classical music. It would be swell if there were public investment in music education, but since that is unlikely, musicians and arts organizations have to assume leadership.

If classical music is in trouble, it is because its advocates are behaving as though it were terminally ill. To survive and flourish we need to stop playing the same repertoire in concert and in the opera. Would we run a movie theater by screening the same dozen films ad nauseam, never showing any new releases or

reviving old classics? There is so much more to be listened to in the history of music; yet judging from the repertoire that has become standard, it is as if all but two rooms in a museum were closed.

And how to explain why some orchestras are getting into financial trouble and suspending operations, as appears to be the case in Columbus, Ohio? Because crises crop up when inertia and excessive caution set in. To thrive, managements need to innovate and learn from the enthusiastic embrace of Western classical music around the world. Success will be found by adapting better to local circumstances and by looking beyond our borders. Los Angeles, Atlanta and Minneapolis are promising examples where orchestras have become more important to civic life by making their programs challenging and relevant, reaching out -- particularly to schools and colleges -- beyond the confines of a concert hall. Above all, let's abandon politically correct notions about how ethnicity and class constitute barriers to the appreciation of classical music, a universally admired dimension of high culture and the human imagination.

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