

Contemporary Classical Music: Crisis, What Crisis?

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It is the oft-stated fear of many music critics, and more than a few practising musicians, that there is some kind of “crisis” in classical music. Whether the fear is expressed – as recently, in *Maestros, Masterpieces, and Madness* – by Norman Lebrecht, that an art form (recorded classical music) has essentially come to an end, or by Adorno, in the 1930s, that the practice of hearing itself has regressed, it seems that the sense of a crisis is perpetual. Books with doom-laden titles such as *What Good Are The Arts?* (Carey) and *Who Needs Classical Music?* (Johnson) proliferate, and while these authors have all attempted to offer some hopeful messages, they are often pessimistic and can make for depressing reading.

The argument that classical music is either dying or dead is usually put as follows:

- The number of new classical recordings is in free-fall, along with CD sales in general.
- Audience sizes are rapidly declining, and those that are left are aging fast.

It may therefore come as a surprise to hear, especially from a composer, that I believe that my – most niche – classical music activity, so-called “contemporary classical music” has never been in ruder health, and that there has never been a better time to be a “contemporary classical” composer.

The Decline and Fall of CD Sales

It is true that the number of CDs in general and classical music recordings in particular, *as reported by the RIAA and other established industry bodies*, has fallen somewhat in recent years. For example, classical music’s share of the global recorded music market in 2005-06 fell from \$294m (a share of 2.4% of \$12.3bn) to \$219m (1.9% of \$11.5bn) according to the RIAA’s latest figures. However, these same figures admit a reliability of +/-2.8%, which implies that classical’s share of the 05-06 market could in fact have been \$540m (4.7% of \$11.5bn). Such are the perils of reporting tiny movements in a vast market!

The feeling that an awful lot more recordings are sold than the RIAA is able to report is backed up by both a little research and some common sense. The RIAA’s figures are only for recordings shipped via a few large distributors. They do not necessarily include data on independent labels, and they do not include data on recordings issued by unsigned artists. As the technology to produce and distribute a high quality recording has become available to those with the most modest of budgets, so it seems that every artist is busy releasing records on their own labels.

The Decline and Fall of the Concert Audience

While it may be true in some concert halls that audience numbers are falling, we have to consider the possibility that “the audience” for classical music goes significantly beyond the concert hall. It is unfortunately true, however, that while aspiring rock stars will invest huge amounts of time touring hundreds of small venues, classical groups expect the same acclaim from a few appearances at a few major concert halls. If there is a decline in the concert-going audience, then a large part of the blame must lie with the artists themselves, and not with the public at large, who appear quite happy to go along and listen in ever-increasing numbers to unknown and increasingly diverse touring rock and electronica acts.

As for the corollary that what audience is left, is aging fast: it is no good simply to count those who say that their favourite music is classical music. For the allegedly missing generation of younger classical music fans, it is frequently impossible to identify a favourite genre of music. Taste among this new, younger audience is remarkably eclectic, as can easily be seen by looking at the population of MySpace, for example, or the readership of *The Wire*.

Downloads: The Future?

While the big record companies appear (according to the RIAA, at least) to be suffering a down-turn in overall classical sales, online MP3 record stores are reporting substantial rises. On Apple's iTunes, for example, classical accounts for 12% of sales (compare this to classical's 2-3% share of the market at large). Individual success-stories for digital classical downloads abound; Janine Jansen's recent *The Four Seasons* made 75% of its sales through downloads, according to Universal, and famously, there were 1.4m downloads of Beethoven symphonies in just two weeks when the BBC made the recordings available free.

The barrier to entry to the market for independent musicians is even lower with digital downloads than with self-produced CDs. Sites such as MySpace make promotion relatively straightforward, and for sales, iTunes and a host of other online outlets are available.

The paradigm shift today, however, is not so much that it is incredibly easy to produce and distribute a high quality recording, but that it is incredibly easy for the music fan to find music that they enjoy – the so-called “Long Tail” economic model. The democratisation of music through the search engine allows listeners to find, with a great deal of precision, exactly what they want, and allows a vast amount of music that might not be popular enough to be stocked in a physical store to be made easily available over the web.

Time To Be A Composer

No matter which period of history we consider, it has never been easier for composers' music to be heard. I claim no special position: the technology is available to anyone willing to put in a bit of effort, and however small the niche of one's music, the sheer size of the online population means that there will always be a taste to be catered for. For new classical music, this combination of factors portends nothing less than a revolution, and it is down to individual artists and composers to heed the call-to-arms.

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