

KYLE GANN

Gann Goes Blind

Classical Sleaze

Who Killed Classical Music?

By Norman Lebrecht
Birch Lane Press, 455 pp., \$24.95

BY KYLE GANN

Common wisdom has it that classical music is dying because younger generations no longer listen to it, their attention spans more attuned to TV and the Internet. That's not the scenario drawn by British critic Norman Lebrecht, who paints a picture of a classical music industry consumed by greed and run by exploitative bureaucrats in his *Who Killed Classical Music?* In the very years in which classical audiences have been dwindling, classical music budgets have ballooned exponentially. Between 1971 and 1992, American orchestra expenditures rose eightfold; from 1989 to 1994, artists' fees rose 30 to 50 per cent. The patient isn't dying of hunger; it's being sucked dry by parasites.

It all began, as Lebrecht dopes it out, in 1841 with Gaetano Belloni, whom Franz Liszt hired to organize his concert schedule. Belloni would run ahead to each new town to prime the press and plant rumors of women overwhelmed by Liszt's sexual charisma. By 1855 P. T. Barnum had offered Liszt a

market . . . was to make the biggest noise with the biggest names," so the company poured a third of a million dollars into recording Beethoven's Triple Concerto with Barenboim, Perlman, and Yo-Yo Ma. So much money poured into high-profile ventures leaves none left over for risky projects or new artists.

Meanwhile, conflicts of interest flourished unchallenged. The redoubtable Arthur Judson became manager to dozens of major conductors and soloists and to several orchestras as well, forcing the orchestras to choose his own soloists and making a hefty commission on each contract. When

and mere gossip; that isn't to deny that the book is entertainingly enlightening.

NEXT TO THE DIRT LEBRECHT digs up, the new music I cover is a hotbed of bland integrity. I once heard that a certain new-music performer won a chance to curate a festival by sleeping with the guy who put up the funding. In 14 years of avid gossip-collecting, that's the sum total of the corruption I've uncovered in the new-music world. Exploiting MIDI-computer improvisers has its drawbacks as a get-rich-quick scheme. The minute you move to the Uptown composing establishment, though, where major per-

Times interviewer, "Prizes aren't important"? (I admit it, I always wanted to write Musto's column.)

The truth is, the kind of classical music Lebrecht means—the Eurocentric orchestra tradition—died decades ago, and you know what kind of animals a corpse attracts. "Classical music" turns out to be kind of a fake, industry-created category anyway. Mozart didn't think he was making classical music, he was trying to entertain and make money. And having created "classical music" as a highfalutin, Bach-to-Mahler entity in the lay public's mind, the industry's Dr. Franksteins may have the right to destroy their own creation.

The Judsons and McCormacks couldn't have made millions off of an art form that was still growing and taking risks, and so the still-living part of classical music had to extract itself from (or else be thrown out of) the marketing machine that was selling off the dead masterpieces. The one impulse I admire behind serialism was the explicit desire on the part of Boulez, Babbitt, and others to create a music that could not be co-opted by consumer merchandising. I agree that making music unmemorable, incomprehensible, and unlovable was a solution, I just doubt that it was the best one.

I don't want to belittle the threat that Lebrecht points to that vastly transcends the fate of

Influence Influenza

The great cliché of the 1990 has come home to roost. The last 500 press releases I've received all read, "My influences include Luciano Berio and James Brown." Or, alternatively "My influences include Iannis Xenakis and Jimi Hendrix." Even tenured professors feel compelled to pledge allegiance to heavy metal. But why is the form always, "My influences include [great modernist figure preferably European] and [great Black rock star]"? Isn't this beginning to sound like "Some of my best friends are Jewish"? Why don't I ever get press release that says, "My influences include Muzio Clementi and Yma Sumac"? Or Edward Elgar and Monty Python Or Captain Beefheart and Josquin DesPrez?

Or better yet, how about a press release that shouts, "I don't define myself in terms of



ciences have been dwindling, classical music budgets have ballooned exponentially. Between 1971 and 1992, American orchestra expenditures rose eightfold; from 1989 to 1994, artists' fees rose 30 to 50 per cent. The patient isn't dying of hunger; it's being sucked dry by parasites.

It all began, as Lebrecht dopes it out, in 1841 with Gaetano Belloni, whom Franz Liszt hired to organize his concert schedule. Belloni would run ahead to each new town to prime the press and plant rumors of women overwhelmed by Liszt's sexual charisma. By 1855 P. T. Barnum had offered Liszt a half million dollars to make an American tour. Refused, he instead marketed soprano Jenny Lind among his midgets, bearded ladies, and other freaks, and charged ticket prices for her that would not be equaled for a hundred years. This set a pattern that has crescendoed out of control: management types, personally interested in classical music or not, pour money into marketing, raise ticket prices, raise artist fees (of which they take a hefty percentage), then drop the artist

at the first glimmer of diminishing returns. It makes a handful of artists unimaginably rich, and crushes thousands of others whom the overtaxed industry can no longer support.

Few stars have the willpower to resist the racket. German conductor Herbert von Karajan—the unreconstructed Nazi villain of Lebrecht's book, and the highest-paid musician in history—insisted on earning more than any European conductor, while lowering his Berlin Philharmonic commitment from 20 weeks a year to 12. For the second "Three Tenors" concert, Pavarotti, Domingo, and Carreras each received over 7 million dollars in advances, royalties, and broadcast fees. As an exec at EMI put it, "The only way left to record classics in an overcrowded

Eugene Goosens protested Judson's high commission, Judson made sure he never got another job, and Goosens ended his career in Australia. Judson was benign next to current entrepreneurs like Mark McCormack, a sports promoter who decided he could make a mint presenting soprano Kiri Te Kanawa in arenas and in Rolex watch advertisements.

The result is a system in which the stars considered necessary to draw in an audience soak up so much of an orchestra's budget that it has to cut back on concerts and player salaries, if not close down altogether. Lebrecht's book is confusingly organized, jumping hectically between past and present in a breathless style that makes little distinction between institutional disasters

performances and sometimes real money are involved, operations sleaze up fast.

Want some blind items? What Pulitzer prize winner, administering a grants panel, denied funding to a well-known new-music ensemble, then mailed them a package of his own scores—as if to say, "Play these and you might be luckier next year"? What breastful ingenue launched her now very successful new-music career by waltzing up to a famous musician, aiming her cleavage at his face, and composing, "Joe Pulitzer [another composing big shot, not his real name] told me I should show you my *things*"? What composer supposedly waged a years-long phone campaign to pressure a Pulitzer committee to give him the prize, then after he succeeded told a

survive the advent of public concerts in the mid 18th century. It was only a matter of time until Beethoven became another Monteverdi, an incredible genius buried by history.

At book's end Lebrecht lists several small ventures—record labels like Naxos and Hyperion, festivals like Marlboro—that are bucking the trend, avoiding stars and corporate money and running on idealism and love of music. If he were new-music savvy, he could have added virtually every new-music organization: Roulette, the Relache ensemble, the California E.A.R. Unit, Lovely Music, O.O. Discs, and on and on. The fall of the classical music business cannot affect them, because it gave them nothing to begin with. VII



growing and taking risks, and so the still-living part of classical music had to extract itself from (or else be thrown out of) the marketing machine that was selling off the dead masterpieces. The one impulse I admire behind serialism was the explicit desire on the part of Boulez, Babbitt, and others to create a music that could not be co-opted by consumer merchandising. I agree that making music unmemorable, incomprehensible, and unlovable was a solution, I just doubt that it was the best one.

I don't want to belittle the threat that Lebrecht points to that vastly transcends the fate of classical music institutions: the corporate totalitarianism that we move closer to every day. All that's dying at the moment, though, is the massive, inefficient support structure in place for the performance of European music of the 18th and 19th centuries. Classical music has gone through this before. The support structure for the music of Monteverdi—a composer every bit as daring and imaginative as Beethoven—didn't

Xenakis and Jimi Hendrix." Even tenured professors feel compelled to pledge allegiance to heavy metal. But why is the form always, "My influences include [great modernist figure, preferably European] and [great Black rock star]"? Isn't this beginning to sound like "Some of my best friends are Jewish"? Why don't I ever get a press release that says, "My influences include Muzio Clementi and Yma Sumac"? Or Edward Elgar and Montovani? Or Captain Beefheart and Josquin DesPrez?

Or better yet, how about a press release that shouts, "I don't define myself in terms of my influences." Isn't the word influence losing all meaning from being at the tip of every composer's lips? Did Beethoven introduce himself by saying, "My influences include Handel and Haydn"? Hasn't your list of influences become a way of crowing about your open-mindedness at the expense of your originality? Is your music really just a receptacle into which you pour equal parts of some stuff you heard on the radio and some stuff they taught you in music school? Or do you perhaps—God forbid—have an idea, something that you're really passionate about? Is this what Morton Feldman meant when he said that our age is an academic one, because we define all our music in terms of past music? —K.G.