


Death Wish

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During the election campaign, George W. Bush—darling of the NRA and oil companies—referred time and time again to Al Gore as “the special-interest candidate” (who? unions? women?). During the post-election party, as Bush was proclaiming himself president and Gore was keeping out of sight, the media portrayed them as two mudslinging brats. Newspapers and radio simply reported such statements without comment on their patent absurdity. Thus the political world took on the same aura of unreality that my musical life has had for years, that peculiar state in which you know something is true, and it is even well documented, and everyone goes around saying exactly the opposite.

Like when I lecture for an hour about new music and the first question from the audience is “Why have there been no great composers since Shostakovich?” Or when, recently, I told a group of academic publishers that they were publishing boring, pointless books, and that if they looked on the Internet, they’d discover all the exciting young musical scholars who’ve been discouraged by the publishing world, and they, without even disagreeing with me, answered in a complete non sequitur: “You’re asking us to lose money—we’re just never going to do that.”

New music is at an impasse—you can’t convince people it exists. There is a certain small culture around it, but it is impossible to get power brokers outside that culture to believe that anything is going on. The official line is, classical music is finished, a closed book, Glass, Reich, and maybe John Zorn the end of history. And it does not help that jazz is ever more officially referred to as “America’s classical music.” First of all, what is that supposed to do for jazz?

Legitimize it, make it blandly respectable and therefore ignorable? And it slaps those composers whose training *is* classical out of the water. With the Wynton Marsalis crowd threatening to bring jazz history to a close and turn it into a repertoire museum, jazz musicians who believe in the ongoing evolution of the art are in the same boat as the new-music people. We need to band together.

There are, it seems to me, two ways to interpret this impasse. One is the Matthew Arnold/David Mamet-type theory of cultural decline, according to which societies are born, mature, decay, and die, and in their decaying stage nothing can go right. Classical music is dead because the society has an internal, collectively subconscious need to believe that it is dead, so the society can go to sleep. As Mamet writes in his essay “Decay” in *Writing in Restaurants*, “In this time of decay those things which society will reward with fame and recognition are bad acting, bad writing, choices which inhibit thought, reflection, and release; and these things will be called art.” No matter what great new music you produce, the society will bypass it, and search out instead the bad music that fulfills its mythic need to die.

The other interpretation is perhaps more hopeful—that rather than the collective subconscious, some human agency is imposing on us what looks like a death wish. The corporations that own large record chains and publishing houses can make more money off classical and jazz repertoires whose histories are finished, whose “100 greatest hits” can be defined and engraved in stone. New music represents a risk, a need for creative thinking, and therefore an inconvenience. Those same corporations stand to gain more tax breaks from Republicans than from Democrats, and therefore find it convenient for the newspapers they own to take Dubya’s bizarre remarks at face value. I’m not talking about an organized conspiracy, but a growing, unquestioned habit of determining every decision by the financial bottom line.

The difference between these interpretations may be moot—the society wants to die, and chooses corporate thinking as its suicide weapon. But I see a lot of composers sit and whine about their collective impotence, and others pursue blindly optimistic marketing strategies that never amount to anything because they’re trying to buy into a corporate mind-set built to exclude them. Both types might lead more effective lives if they pinpointed, and took guerrilla action against, the specific forces that keep their music out of the public ear. That the culture is dying and we can’t stop it might be exactly what the corporations hope we’ll believe.