

Frankly, My Dear . . .

By Kyle Gann

Death of the Orchestra

What is falling, that one should also push.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Think of the classical music establishment as an ocean liner. Eighty years ago, they threw all the composers overboard. The composers swam to an island, and though life was tough for awhile, they built houses, bridges, and boats, and they're working their way back to civilization. But now—what's that out on the horizon? Why, the ship is sinking! How do the composers feel about that? Read my headline.

Whenever I meet with classical critics, they moan about orchestras folding up, decreasing audiences, the lack of new, young subscribers. Now comes a report from the American Symphony Orchestra League on what orchestras should do to survive, and the *Times's* Edward Rothstein used his July 11 space to bewail the multiculti recommendations.

Waxing noble on the essentiality of the composer, the report acknowledges that the orchestra has failed to evolve, but its recommendations are, if not too little, way too late. "[O]rchestras could easily become both culturally and socially irrelevant," it warns; gee, wasn't that a *fait accompli* 40 years ago? Gestures cited as exemplary—playing Copland's *El Salon Mexico* for Latino subscribers,

featuring graffiti artists and light shows for a visual element—are condescending, and show how out of touch orchestra people are with what new music has to offer. But while Rothstein finds the report tragic, I find it amusing. For if it does strike the fatal blow to our orchestras, as he fears, that might be the best thing that could possibly happen to serious music in America.

Back when Europe was musically healthy, old music had a different purpose. It was to be archived for composers to study, so that they'd learn the tricks of their trade and develop high standards. Take Beethoven: he knew Bach's *W.T.C.* backwards, but he didn't have to compete with it, because no one played Bach during Beethoven's lifetime. Beethoven was the first blockage in the repertoire colon, bad news for the next generation. Mendelssohn responded by playing within the great man's rules, Berlioz by going further out to find territory Beethoven hadn't conquered. And, thanks to chronic repertoire constipation, those two strategies are still the only ones we have today. Academics play within the latest rules (d'Indy, Schoenberg, now Fernyhough), avant-gardists bust their butts in search of originality at the expense of communication. If the world weren't so crowded with dead music, you could relax and write what you want, like Mozart.

I am as passionate a classical music lover as anyone I know. In my seven years at the *Voice*, I've

been to the Philharmonic three times. I know what they're playing. But as Virgil Thomson commented in 1940 in his first *Herald Tribune* review, the Philharmonic is not part of the city's intellectual life. That audience proved that they don't *want* good, listenable new music by walking out en masse during John Adams's *Harmonielehre* a few years ago. The theater clinches the point: if the American stage had been obsessed with pre-Ibsen theater for decades, we wouldn't have any great new plays, but we do because it isn't, and people demand them.

Rothstein's right in saying that a violent infusion of new music isn't going to help, especially given the orchestras' continual reliance on ivory-tower composers. Most of the composer residencies have been passed around via the same good-old-boy system that upholds the Pulitzer sham. Orchestra commissions, given to safe, academically accredited, middle-of-the-road composers, hardly ever represent the best new music. Daring composers learned long ago that orchestra pieces don't get played and quit writing them. (Cage, influential in this regard, advised young composers never to write without a performance lined up.)

Today, if the 20 best American composers got commissions, 18 would have to look up the instrument ranges in their college orchestration texts. That's not true of Europe and Australia, where orchestra funding is contingent on



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performance quotas for living and national composers. Australians I've met can hardly keep up with the demand. Here, composers are starved out by orchestras, whose gluttonous lobbies swallow NEA dollars that could be spread to more creative projects.

What my colleagues can't fathom is that the end of the orchestra is not the end of great music. The 17th-century vocal academy and the 19th-century oratorio society died, but music survived. If it were possible to kill the ongoing composition of serious music, it would have croaked years ago. It has survived for decades with only the most minimal institutional help. The best new music today has nothing to do with orchestras. It's made by La Monte Young playing his piano, David Rosenboom playing his computer, Michael Gordon with his personal philharmonic. Want to hear a

large acoustic ensemble again? Trimpin has invented machines that will play every instrument of the orchestra via computer. Someday, the composer will bring a floppy disc, sit in a hall full of instruments, and hear his own *Le Sacre* played flawlessly *and* acoustically. No conductors, no copying fees, no extravagant union costs, no urgency about filling the hall.

For 80 years, composers shouted that the boat wouldn't stay afloat without them. Nobody listened. A society dominated by the music of another culture—say, late 20th-century America by 18th-century Austria—is musically ill. Great composition can survive, if it has to, on a tiny allowance of money and audience support. Orchestras can't, nor can they survive without a living tradition of new creation. It's a little late to figure that out, but by this point, who cares? ■



—Rollino Stone

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