

Article:

WHY IS CLASSICAL MUSIC DYING? Just a thought.

It is indeed a very disturbing thought that what has been called the "language of the Soul" is becoming slowly but surely the language of the dead.

The reasons are complex and much has been lamented about the situation. But I wonder with wishfulness and some naive cockiness, if under some innovative circumstances, the tide could not be turned and thus lead to a revival of this most personal and elusive art form

Much has been said about the financial cuts taking place in the arts, the need to cultivate new audiences, getting the classical music to the young etc. However hardly anyone has been undiplomatic or foolish enough to mention that perhaps what goes on in the concert hall nowadays does not warrant either the cost of admission or the time spent listening to "dead" music, translated many times by emotionally unavailable, if not repressed performers (long live the obvious exceptions!).

The reasons for such an outrageous, if not utterly irreverent claim, are to be found in four overlapping factors: the need for music schools to justify their existence, the technological advances in the recording industry, the appearance of a new breed of "purists" and the ridiculous proliferation of competitions.

When one remembers Anton Rubinstein saying more than a century ago, with clear sadness, that most musicians play well, but great playing is rare, one wonders how he would have reacted to what goes on in today's learning establishments. Probably he would have opted to work at computers instead.

The need to survive as solvent institutions has led to the acceptance of students via competition. As Bartok put it-"competitions are for horses, not for musicians". In order to make sure that no member of the jury is offended-by-God forbid!-some show of individuality, the increasing numbers of students are espousing numbed and numbing playing, the difference between them being that some are more numb than others! After getting inside the school-by choice or by default, in order to solve the "numbness"problem-new competitions are appearing, in order to differentiate in the degree of numbness. And the judges themselves need to go slightly very numb in order to survive the onslaught of sounds ordered in space and time with a resounding lack of "raison d'etre".Where is a Cortot-like performer, throwing wrong notes around enough to create a symphony? But what wrong notes! Not that I love Cortot quite that much, but the principle of it all!

Thus, in due time, a new bore enters the concert circuit, by bringing numbness to new heights, playing pretty much in such a way that one asks if perhaps the audience should be paid for lost time, not to mention the energy spent in applauding, mostly as a relief that the ordeal is finally over...

And the question is: WHY? How could it be that the most intimate utterings of the human psyche can become so bastardized?

The terrific advances in technology of recording permits through long, expensive hours of editing and masterful splicing, to take an alive, but less than perfect performance and turn it into an embalmed corpse, made of perfect sounds with no real connective tissue or authenticity.

And I keep asking myself what would happen if instead of battling for technical false perfection, important as this may be, one were to strive to capture the meaning and the soul of the performance? Too hard or just not important enough? The kid in school has the perfection of the "doctored" record to live up to, with the result that hours on end are spent to achieve all the right notes, played as fast as possible, most of the time in physical and psychic discomfort, in order to sound as if conversing in a foreign language purely by rote, lacking in the understanding of the subtleties a composer uses to get a message across.

Is it the students' fault? Maybe it is a combination of factors which pushes a student to work hard, pay their dues, while getting more neurotic by the minute, in order to achieve something nobody wants or need, a conversation "con mortuis in Lingua Mortua" which will bring sooner or later the demise of classical music. And if all this were not enough, there is a relatively new group of "purists" in daily chat room discuss with Mozart, Beethoven etc.letting us all know what each one of these geniuses had in mind so we can at least be "historically correct"while extracting all the juice out of their works, leaving them- and the audience- high and dry. What a fate!

As Hurok used to say "you cannot stop an audience from not buying tickets". For sure! But we can reexamine the reasons they do not and finally admitting that the musician as translator does not music maketh, that interchanging "translations" of differently named performers does not enthuse

an audience and finally that in music, as in life, we should roar "Vive la difference" and stop creating clones of deadening sameness.