The Evolution of Classical Music in the Past 30 Years

Christien Jackson

The purpose of this research was to identify the evolution of classical music in recent years. The scope of this research was focused towards three main points. The first point discussed the emergence of young professional musicians blending classical music into their contemporary style. The second point was directed towards the introduction of popular modern compositions into the repertoire of several orchestras to target a younger audience. While the last point targeted the change in demographics of orchestras and ensembles to accurately depict the ethnic make-up of the community and create a welcoming environment for future minority musicians.

While the standard debate revolving around classical music is usually dual sided with either alive or dead, there is also a less seen third option: evolving. As time progresses, styles of music evolve in order to stay popular which is exemplified by a great deal with classical music today. In his article, “Classical music explodes, both in sales and expanding boundaries” Jim Farber states that although classical music is growing increasingly popular, it’s not because large symphonies are suddenly attracting a larger audience, but rather the musicians are adapting to the changing times and blending their love for classical with their love for pop and electronic music. I agree with Jim Faber’s belief that classical music is neither dead nor alive in the traditional sense but rather simply evolving and merging different styles of music in order to reach a larger target audience.

Due to the larger audience, it’s only natural for classical music sales to increase as was the case from 2013 to 2014 when they rose by 5%.1 It is also important to remember that the increase in these sales were not from a resurgence of popularity of some Bach concerto or Mozart sonata but rather from young crossover musicians, although not always, such as Lindsey Sterling and Andrea Bocelli. From these two musicians alone, they accounted for over 600,000 albums.2 Apart from just having younger artist to attract a younger crowd, another tactic being used is the broadening acceptance of who can be allowed to enter the world of classical music. In previous years, only musicians who were classically trained were considered to be eligible to participate in the classical music environment due to the perceived notion of elitism. However, with this new definition more musicians such as Bryce Dessner of the rock band The National and Chris Thile of the band The Punch Brothers are attempting and often succeeding at composing classical pieces. Dessner’s compositions were so well received that he was offered the opportunity to record with Deustche Grammophon, the oldest and considered by some to be the most prestigious recording company.3 As for what caused this new way of thinking about classical music, according to Nico Muhly, a contemporary classical music composer who has created orchestrations for Grizzly Bear and Bjork, believes that the death of record stores and transition to online music services such as iTunes helped destroy the barrier. He even goes as far

---

2 Farber, "Classical Music Explodes, Both in Sales and Expanding Boundaries."
3 Farber, "Classical Music Explodes, Both in Sales and Expanding Boundaries."
to state that buying classical music was similar to buying porn due to the separated music rooms often found in record stores.4

I agree with Farber’s belief that classical music is evolving simply because it has to. In the past few years, several orchestras have been driven into bankruptcy such as the Honolulu Symphony and Syracuse Symphony with several others such as the Philadelphia Orchestra and Louisville Symphony facing dire financial troubles.5 The attendance has also dropped from 23.8 million in 2002 to 20.9 million in 2008.6 Another factor in the current problems with classical music is the age of the majority of the audience. If the trend continues, then the “audience is expected to drop by 14% by 2018” due to the natural cycle of life.7 In order to combat this disturbing trend, the state of classical music as entered a state of evolution. In order to increase sales, many orchestras have now begun performing “young people’s concerts” which include more exciting pieces as well as promotions through Twitter and Facebook.8 Besides these concerts targeting younger children, several ensembles have been organized such as: Chicago’s eighth blackbird, New York’s Bang on a Can All-Stars, and Alarm Will Sound. These ensembles are composed of young musicians usually in their mid-twenties who travel to college campuses around the country. In addition to being young themselves, their repertoire is extremely flexible ranging from Josquin des Prez, György Ligeti, and Harrison Birtwistle to the Beatles. Another factor option that has been gaining popularity is the formation of youth orchestras. The purpose of this is to spark an interest of classical music in a child early on and hopefully continue the legacy of classical music. Although the purpose of these youth orchestras is to push classical music, they are not limited in that aspect. Many of these orchestras often include jazz, folk, and rock songs in their repertoire in order to increase the number of kids interested in joining.

Another aspect in which classical music is evolving during this time period, is by changing those who the orchestra comprises of. In the majority of orchestras across the country many of the musicians are either White or Asian which hardly reflects the ethnic makeup of the country. For example, Gale Anson, a musician in the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra located in Boston, Massachusetts has been the only African American in the group for over two decades.9 For this there are many reasons, with the most probable being that the orchestral environment is an “uninviting, intimidating, unfriendly place to minority musician.”10 In order to force this change, youth orchestras and organizations with an emphasis towards those in metropolitan areas, such as The Chicago Sinfonietta and the Sphinx Organization been critical.11 The Sphinx Organization

4 Farber, "Classical Music Explodes, Both in Sales and Expanding Boundaries."
alone has several components such as the Sphinx Competition, the Sphinx Symphony, comprised completely of African American and Latino musicians, and the Artist Academy String Quartet that have touched the lives of hundreds of children. The effect of this organization has led many former members to go on and attend many prestigious universities and conservatories such as: Julliard, Yale, Boston University, and Eastman School of Music. While the Sphinx Organization prioritizes itself with getting children of color interested in classical music, the Chicago Sinfonietta prioritizes playing music composed by African Americans. The unique style of the group comes from the varied background of its conductor, Paul Freeman. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, Dr. Freeman directed several organizations across the country over the years such as the Hochstein Music School in Rochester, New York, the San Francisco Conservatory Orchestra, and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra before founding the Sinfonietta in 1987.

As time continues to move onwards, the only way for classical music to stay relevant is to evolve. In the past decades, classical music had been in a steady depression due to the inaccessibility, lack of youth engagement, and lack of representation. Only in the recent years has this changed. With the cross overs of artists that the younger generation know of, youth participation, and accurate portrayal of the demographics, classical music has steadily risen and has the potential to its formal glory albeit in a different fashion.

Bibliography


12 Clements, “String training programs for underrepresented youth in American orchestras: Success factors in a metropolitan youth orchestra community program”