

Webster Young

Can There Be Great Composers Anymore?

In each nation of importance for Western music during the first half of the twentieth century, there thrived a handful of potentially “great” composers: authentic candidates for recognized greatness in fine art music. In England, Ralph Vaughan-Williams, Benjamin Britten, Gustav Holst, and William Walton loomed large. In France, Maurice Ravel was still composing, while the “French Six” arose—among them Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, and Darius Milhaud, with Eric Satie as their mentor. Igor Stravinsky was an expatriate in Paris.

Precommunist Russia had produced Sergei Rachmaninoff, who was then active in Europe and America, and under communism Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergey Prokofiev were at work. In Italy, Giacomo Puccini was working on one of his greatest operas, *Turandot*, until his death in 1923, and Pietro Mascagni’s creative period continued past the Second World War. In Germany, Richard Strauss was prolific, and Paul Hindemith became an international figure. In Vienna, the expressionist avant-garde gained intellectual supremacy through Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern. In Spain, a late-blooming nationalism produced a school of composers that included Manuel

De Falla, Enrique Granados, and Joaquín Turina. Eastern Europe brought forth Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, and Leoš Janáček. And from Finland, Jean Sibelius’s massive symphonic works began to conquer Europe and America. In the same period America also produced significant musical talent: Charles Ives, George Antheil, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Roy Harris, and Howard Hanson.

Composers of fine art music who have appeared after 1950, however, have never rivaled in stature their counterparts of the first half of the century. Elliot Carter and Milton Babbitt did not become household names. Even less known have been the names of recent Pulitzer Prize winners. We seem to be experiencing a drought of musical greatness, a drought which has now lasted two generations or more.

It will likely be surprising to those who are not professional musicians that the above composers, whether from the first or second half of the century, all relate to

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one of two parent schools of modern musical composition: the Parisian and the Viennese. The modern Parisian school grew out of the impressionism pioneered by Claude Debussy in the late nineteenth century, and the Viennese out of late German Romanticism pioneered by Wagner. Some composers who were not French by nationality owed a great deal to Paris in spirit—especially Stravinsky. The Spanish and American schools were trained in Paris, and the English, Italians, and Russians also owed much to French music.

The French school was capable of many moods and forms—naïve, cheerful, and humorous—and it did not abandon either melody or tonality. The Viennese style, on the other hand, proved restricted in terms of emotional expression and difficult for the creation of form. It abandoned tonality (being called “atonal”) and developed serialism (the twelve-tone system of Schoenberg) to deal with form and unity.

An extended explanation of atonality would be difficult for a reader who is not a musician. Put simply, atonality refers to music that lacks a sense of key, of musical centering, of a place to return to. Atonality can occur throughout a piece of music or only in sections of the music. It creates a sense of disorientation and the perception that the music is nearly formless. To draw an analogy to painting, atonality in music is like abstractionism in art. The first reaction of many encountering it is that an atonal composition is “not music.”

Although the Viennese atonal school now seems inferior to the Parisian, in its time it appeared to be the cutting edge in music. It had laid intellectual claim to being “new” and “original”—and therefore, “creative” (much the way cubism and abstraction in art did). As such, the atonal style was adopted and developed by radical European philosophers of art who sought novelty above all else. Even though the in-

fluence of Paris was widespread, creative, and popular, it was the Viennese school that, for the later twentieth century—and especially in America—became the heart of the avant-garde. It was atonality that led to almost everything of prominence, however unpopular with audiences, after 1945. The atonal developments of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern became the inspiration for a school in musical composition that still claims descendents to the present day. Every composer who uses atonal style today is directly indebted to the Viennese school, and this includes all avant-garde styles after the Second World War except minimalism. Elliot Carter, Milton Babbitt, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Dallapiccola, John Cage, and George Crumb are all in some way Viennese musical descendents.

This Viennese-born style produced an unbroken and unchallenged stream of musical influence until 1985 when, after the emergence of minimalism (Steve Reich, Philip Glass, John Adams) its value was seriously questioned. Still, at present, the atonal stream has resurfaced in eclectic postmodern styles. Atonality is even present in the works of recent Pulitzer Prize-winning composers like Aaron Jay Kernis—another name few will know. Most descendants of the Viennese school alienated audiences and marginalized classical music itself within the realm of high culture. Whereas before the Second World War large audiences of concert-goers eagerly anticipated new works by the great composers of the time, today new composition is followed only by a miniscule group of serious music lovers. The situation is extreme and it has seemed for the last forty years or more that there are no living composers who have a claim to greatness. This appears to be the fact not only to laymen and connoisseurs of music, but also to professional musicians.

A notion has therefore arisen that it is just *not possible* for new great composers to appear—because the stream of Western serious music has simply played out. We do not find ourselves in a drought, relief from which may be just around the corner; rather, the drought-like condition of musical composition is a reflection of the fact that Western music has come to an end. This claim was already the subject of a book-length treatment as early as 1955: *The Agony of Modern Music* by Henry Pleasants. It is now a widespread explanation for the lack of great composers in recent decades. It has been aired in passing by a number of prominent figures in public forums; this author has heard it suggested by various musicians in two separate interviews with the radio and television presenter Charlie Rose.

There are a number of reasons given to support this contention, the chief of which is that the styles of modern music have become so individual and idiosyncratic that there can no longer be general movements in music, and therefore no “influence” of one composer on another: there can only be iconoclasts. Another claim is that all the possibilities of harmony have by now been tried, so nothing new is possible. A Pulitzer Prize-winning composer thus stated in a televised interview that there will never be another Mozart. And the contention that Western music has reached its end does seem to be born out by the facts. Of all the composers from the second half of the twentieth century named here, not one can be called a candidate for greatness—not even the most famous of them, like Philip Glass.

Having come this far, a preliminary question that has not yet been addressed becomes apparent. What exactly do we mean by “greatness” in music? Alfred Einstein, the musicologist and music historian (and possibly a distant cousin of Albert),

argued decades ago in *Greatness in Music* (1941) that this greatness is of three kinds: historical, musical, and esoteric. *Historical* greatness is self-explanatory: it is the stature a composer attains in the historical retelling of subsequent ages. *Musical* greatness is a technical and artistic brilliance in compositional achievement reflected in a body of works. *Esoteric* greatness is an attribute of composers who were musically great, prolific, and historically great, but who subsided from prominence in later epochs. In this last group are the great composers of the Renaissance like Palestrina, believed by some to be the greatest composer of all time. The vast majority of his hundreds of brilliant works are now found only in libraries, while only a handful are well known to audiences.

Einstein does not extrapolate from these distinctions any ready method for ascertaining the greatness of one’s contemporaries. But reason dictates that one cannot ask regarding the composers of the present, *Are any of these composers historically great?* History cannot yet have accorded them greatness. Even sixty years (two generations) may not be enough time for a culture to make a final judgment on this question (though it may be enough to get a sense for an emerging pantheon.) Likewise, we also cannot ask of a present-day composer, *Does he possess esoteric greatness?* No, one can only ask, *Are any contemporary composers musically great?*

In this respect, the work of current composers can be examined for technical and artistic brilliance, and critics and musicians can try to determine how great their musical achievement really is. If we determine that certain of our contemporaries are indeed musically great, then we might further ask, *Might they become historically great in future generations?* This is how, using Einstein’s distinctions, we must approach an inquiry into the possibility of

musical greatness in our time. In the notion that no great composers can appear any longer, the greatness referred to must perforce mean current musical brilliance that shows the potential for achieving historical greatness. Using Einstein's distinctions, the popular notion we are considering here is really a contention that no composer in the present day can become both musically brilliant and later historically great—a very pessimistic view when put in these terms. As already noted, the chief cause given by proponents of this notion is that individuality is so characteristic of modern music that no commonality of practice in composition exists. Each composer is thus on his own and cannot refine previous techniques.

The term “common practice” is used by music theoreticians and pedagogues to denote past eras of musical composition in which an observer can find enough common material in the works of various composers to discern a method or practice by which they worked. This practice may be unconscious, but it can at least be found running through otherwise disparate works. To put this in simple terms, it means that in any given period of one or two decades, composers can be found using the same chords, harmonies, and forms. It follows that during eras of “common practice” in music, the practice can be seen to evolve, and this allows for a history of music in which musical evolution is demonstrable.

To give a concrete example, it is quite easy to show that the music of Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (to put them in chronological order) exhibits a common practice, each composer working with similar materials and sharing common methods. While they share most techniques, evolution is present as well, and thus Beethoven is somewhat different from Gluck. However, the common

features of their practice were so extensive that, in today's modernist atmosphere, they would all be accused of blatant theft of each others' music. There was no such issue in their time, however—they were simply working in an era of common practice.

This matter of a common practice in music is crucial in the development of great composers. To really understand what a great composer *is*, one must understand that his musical achievement is as much the result of a common practice as it is of personal genius. In other words, for all Mozart's musical ability, his music would be completely unrecognizable to us if it were not for the materials he took from those who went before him. His music would not have the form, the harmony, the shape of melody, and the embellishments it has without the common practice that he inherited. He did not invent most of the major features of his music. This cannot be stated too strongly: Mozart's music would be utterly unrecognizable without the elements of music he inherited from his predecessors.

One of the advantages of a common practice is that it allows a succession of composers to improve upon the work of their predecessors—just as in science, researchers build upon previous research. Mozart could take the work of Gluck, Haydn, or the composers of the Mannheim school, and improve upon it, having the advantage of objectivity and the energy of youth. The resulting music of Mozart is not, therefore, a quantum leap over and beyond Haydn or Gluck: it is just enough of a refinement of form to make Mozart the high point of his era.

A common practice does not develop in a single generation. One artist cannot create, in a flash of inspiration, a new common practice. Rather, a building process must take place in which many compos-

ers participate. A Mozart can arrive on the scene only as the culmination of such a process (and that is precisely what knowledgeable music historians and theorists say about him). The best case for complete originality of device in Mozart might be made with respect to his piano concerti, but even here he builds on the past. His work is a brilliant culmination of what went before; he is the crown jewel (in the view of later generations) of a building process in musical style, and it is precisely because of the common practice surrounding him that he has become so.

As already noted, our era—a modernist era—has not been one of common practice in music; it has been one of individuality at all costs with a resulting iconoclasm among composers. There has been little refinement of methods under the regime of iconoclasm. Each composer, until very recently, has had to stand on his own and has had little chance to benefit from the work of others. Each has been obliged to initiate a mini-revolution and to be innovative in everything. To the extent that a composer was not completely novel, he was condemned as “derivative” or “unoriginal.”

There appears to be—at least in public view—no common practice now evident in the works of contemporary composers. Nonetheless, there is no reason why the absence of a common practice need be a permanent condition of our musical culture. The winds of change may already be bringing fairer times; the drought just may be coming to an end. There has been a movement afoot since the advent of minimalism called “the New Tonality,” and

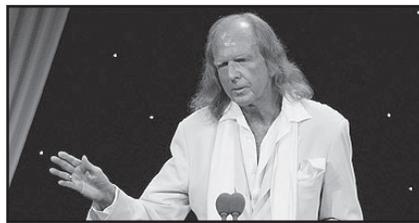
by now it boasts a number of representatives gaining a reputation—especially John Taverner, Henryk Górecki, and Arvo Pärt. There are also a number of composers in this vein who have not yet reached the limelight. These composers are closer to a common practice than anyone in recent decades. They use materials that are not original with them, and they do not strive for novelty at all costs. They appear

to be both learning from those who went before them and not afraid to use musical materials that others have used.

Are these composers possibly new “great composers,” and do they themselves disprove the contention we

are discussing? Thus far it cannot be said, even though there are hints of a common practice developing, that any of them are, in Einstein’s terms, musically great—that is, technically brilliant. Pierre Boulez has characterized their music as “unimpressive.” Even though he is the natural enemy of the New Tonality—being of the Viennese brand of modernism—his judgment rings true, thus far. These new composers seem promising—and they have achieved some popularity—but they are not musically great. However, a final judgment must be reserved, because it is not likely that all their best works have yet been heard. The seeds of new greatness may thus be in this movement, almost undetected, and the question arises as to whether cultural conditions exist to allow these seeds to grow.

There are two conditions that will be crucial for nurturing the growth of any new greatness: the existence of a common practice, and the rise of a new music criticism to match. For a common practice to survive, a new criticism will have to be de-



John Taverner

veloped to go with it, and this new criticism will have to self-consciously reject the tenets of modernism. (We may as well use the simple term “modernism” to cover virtually all of the music of the past sixty years, rather than introduce such distinctions as “modern,” “post-modern,” and “post-post-modern”: in reality, the “post-post” term that one now sometimes encounters is a tacit admission of the failure of modernism to evolve into anything of substance.) As we have already seen, a common practice in music is by its very nature contrary to the iconoclasm fostered by modernism. It is precisely the theoretical tenets of modernism that have caused the “impatient search for novelty at all costs” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s phrase), and the resulting dearth of a common practice in music. The notion that there can be no new great composers is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy arising out of musical modernism itself: both as a goal, and as an excuse.

The reader will want to know what the tenets of a new criticism of music might be. If the seeds of a new common practice in music—as represented by the composers mentioned above, and by some we may not yet know—are present in today’s world, by what criteria shall we judge their work to be great, if not by the standards that are in place today? Put very simply, the critical methods of modernism must be replaced by the standards of neoclassicism. The tenets of neoclassicism are well known in the fields of architecture and painting. Unfortunately, they are virtually unknown in the field of music. In the Renaissance, Leone Battista Alberti and An-

drea Palladio took classical ideals from the Roman architect Vitruvius and from the Greek musical theory of the Pythagorean school. The neoclassical ideals of these architects could apply very well to music, but they have not been clearly articulated in the music conservatory, much less considered as an option for present-day music.

Modernism has been about revolution, individualism, and novelty; neoclassicism, for Palladio and Alberti and many others in subsequent ages, is about revival and the ancient ideals of beauty and harmony. And in fact, all the important movements in music up until the Romantic period were neoclassical revivals of one form or another. When Mozart was writing music, there was a new awareness of classicism in Europe. Later, even Romanticism had its neoclassicists. This

fact has faded from view under the regime of modernism, so much so that the following true statement will seem unbelievable to many: Richard Wagner—the spiritual ancestor of the Viennese school of modernism—considered himself one of the greatest neoclassicists of all time and the chief exponent of Greek ideals in music. Other Romantic composers, such as Brahms, were better known as being neoclassical. Brahms built directly on the forms of Beethoven, a great classicist.

It would take a book to fully describe neoclassicism and here we can limn only a bare outline. Classicism requires beauty and clarity of form, nobility of subject, meaningfulness, and catharsis in a work of art. The theme or subject must be worthy—as Aristotle states in his writings on



Henryk Górecki

the hero in drama. Meaningfulness must be put in a clear form by the artist—and form must achieve beauty through an integration of the parts into the whole. Each of these points could furnish several chapters in a treatise.

Where music is concerned, the humanist ideals in neoclassicism are important. Art is for a human audience and therefore man is at the center of art. In music, this means that melody, vocal in quality, is at the heart of music. The voice—which carries one sustained line of melody at a time—is the most immediately identifiable human thing in music. This makes melody the highest goal in a neoclassical framework—not innovations in form, style, or harmony (although an appropriate amount of innovation in these areas is welcome.) The greatest neoclassical composer will be a melodist, just as the greatest painter will portray the human figure. He will appeal to the human heart through beauty.

Further, classicism requires the use of all its principles. The use of one is not enough. There are some abstract works of art—lacking in any clear meaning—that exhibit the principle of beauty found in the integration of parts to the whole. But meaningless beauty is not classical. Other forms of modernism may use classical principles on material that is consistently grotesque. This violates another requirement of classicism—clarity. The classical principle says, *Do not arouse the passions or disgust of the patron so that he may lose his concentration and perception of the art.* Classicism requires appropriateness of subject matter for technical reasons. The obscene is mostly useless because its violence disturbs the perception of the total work of art. Classicism aims for the most complete participation (in consciousness of an artwork) by the patron.

If, in experiencing a modernist work, a patron steps back and says, *I do not know*

what the artist means, but it reminds me of such and such, the art has stopped his consciousness of the artwork itself and thrown the patron back on himself. The message he discerns is not the artist's, but something of his own associations. Classicism demands that the meaning of the art be contained within the work itself—including the transformation of that meaning. The story and its moral must be present in the material, the "plastic form," of the art—and in a suitable degree of beauty and clarity. It is this that allows the patron to learn and to gain something he did not have before from his experience of art.

The question of how music achieves meaning is one that has disappeared from composition courses in the music schools—and this also is the result of modernism. Much of modern art has been abstract, and it became fashionable to say that music as such could not have any meaning. Some earlier theories of meaning in music are still taught in the schools, but only as an esoteric sidelight in music history and musicology. A great deal of knowledge about the meaning of music is thus nearly completely lost to the conservatories. In Mozart's day, each tempo of music (the speed of rhythmic pulse) had a corresponding meaning in emotion that was tied to a part of life. Mozart was well aware of this. One musical speed, for example, corresponded to battle or anger, while another corresponded to introspection or melancholy. There were eight speeds identified in this way, corresponding to the number of the planets.

The fine art of musical composition has a significant number of features where meaning is evoked. Among these are speed, the character of musical meters (which are like the meters in poetry), harmonic "color," the shapes created by musical lines, the character of the modes (scales), the kind of "texture" created by

the overlapping of voices, overall musical forms, and more. Through all these devices, some forms of music may acquire a well-known, standard character or meaning, as with the “pastorale”: like a landscape painting, it is a musical description of a country scene. Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, the Sixth, is a great example.

Another feature of classicism is the idea that art begins from nature and builds upon it. Classical art tends to imitate and idealize nature. This is very important for music because its fundamental materials emerge from what is called “the chord of nature,” and this aspect of music has been known since the time of the ancient Greeks. The departure from nature—a characteristic of modernism—has not worked well in music because the very building blocks of this art are so close to what nature dictates. Classicism often leads back to the ancient fundamentals, and that is why modernism’s continual search for novelty has to be discarded. If music—even more than the other arts—must stay close to the fundamentals and close to nature, how can it be demanded, again and again, that new music be, above all, *novel*?

A neoclassicist musical criticism might differ from modernism in several important ways. For one, the shibboleth of supreme originality would be discarded. The imprimatur of artistic validity in a new work would no longer be granted only on account of novelty. Musical culture would begin to be unafraid of music that is strongly connected to the past or to other contemporary works. Concerns about “plagiarism” and the shunning of the “derivative” would be muted. The music critic’s first criterion would not be, *Is the work original?* Instead, it would be, *How beautiful and skilled is it?* Where there is innovation in the work, the critic might ask, *What good purpose does this innovation serve? Does it serve beauty, clarity,*

meaningfulness, or catharsis (the goals of classicism)? Or again, the critic might first ask, *How is the message of this work made clear, while being beautifully rendered?* The critic’s assessment of novelty would be distinctly secondary.

In this way, innovation would not come at all costs, and the highly skilled use of common materials would become acceptable and appropriately honored. Critics and audiences would not be taken aback by something that sounds similar to another new work—or even an old work. The real question would concern the meanings and possibilities involved and the skill of presentation. The old would be welcome as long as there is present within it a grain of the new. This new element might not at first seem very novel, but nonetheless might constitute the seed of things to come. It would be available to all as common material—something that could have meaning and be of use to other artists in a process of refining the art towards a common and beautiful and profoundly human purpose or goal.

When an innovation is merely a kind of diminution or destruction—as has been the case with so many of the innovations of modern music—it has no value or weight in a neoclassical framework. In a neoclassical perspective, true innovation will be recognized to take place most often one small step at a time, from composer to composer, because it will involve the *development* of forms, not the discarding of them. Furthermore, a neoclassicist criticism would have to set high standards for quality. To be viable, any new common practice will have to produce musical works that rival in sheer beauty the great works of the past. This would mean that works of music using techniques that “anyone could do” would become unacceptable. Otherwise, the music of the past will always dominate in the concert halls,

thus undermining the economic basis for new music in the present. Beethoven's "Für Elise" will always beat out a John Doe sitting in silence at the piano, à la John Cage, or a Jane Doe rapping her knuckles on a bamboo tube. But someone writing a truly beautiful melody has the chance of becoming a real rival to Beethoven.

These are just some of the tenets that might serve in a new musical criticism. With the benefit of such a criticism, a new common practice could flourish, and great composers could once again emerge. In the end, the notion that "there simply cannot be great composers any more" would prove to be an illusion created by modernism, both directly and indirectly. Modernism and iconoclasm in music have

by now shown themselves barren. The methods and ideals of the avant-garde have produced very little of lasting value in music in the last fifty years. The now century-old, superannuated avant-garde (a contradiction in terms) has, in the process, alienated audiences and ruined the economics for new music. As the modernist fog clears, a common practice in music—like that of the New Tonality now developing—will be reborn and recognized. If a neoclassical criticism can now also emerge, composers will once again build upon the past and upon each other's work, creating beautiful new melodies and nobly redefined forms. Eventually, a genius will appear who, like Mozart, will owe almost everything to those who went before him.



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