

Emerging Trends and **Issues** in the **Music Profession**

and Their Impact on the Individual Music Teacher

by Douglas Lowry

This article is adapted from an address given at the Summit for MTNA Leadership in Cincinnati, Ohio, September 5, 2003.

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Our collective angst about emerging trends in the music profession is undoubtedly rooted in our concern for the future of the music we know and love. We hear reports of its demise, fueled, perhaps, by what we are told are dwindling audiences, sales of CDs and traumas brought on by what we sense are emerging trends in our culture. Yet, I, for one, do not view emerging trends as threats. I, like many, continue to assert my faith in the future of great music, probably for the simple reason that it has a deep and abiding meaning for too many people committed to its sustenance for it to simply disappear. Speculation on my part, perhaps, but the composition, performance and study of great music is a thriving enterprise.

That said, there are concerns: for one, the extent to which great music is considered a public art; put another way, the degree to which some feel it ought to be an art reserved for only the most educated, knowledgeable connoisseur. Or, concerns about the manner in which music, as we present it, engages,

not because of its content, but because of the established means and manner by which it is transmitted.

Which brings me to a more fundamental question: if we are confident about that which we do—create, study, teach and perform great music—are we equally as confident about its basic argument? That is, why do we do—what it is we do?

I bring up these questions to those who spend their time teaching and performing music because there are some emerging trends—cultural and musical—that dramatically affect what and how we do what we do. The very title of this presentation begins with two key words: “emerging” and “trends.” Both share a common underlying theme: change. What is changing, what has and will change, and perhaps most relevantly, how will we adapt to that change? Adaptability enables cultures to endure and also is a forming agent in its evolution. Charles Darwin wrote very much to this point, suggesting natural forces will impose change even if we don’t wish it to be so. Species, including art forms, that don’t

adapt, die off. Yet, to what are we supposed to adapt?

Perhaps to “emerging trends.”

If so, what are some of these emerging trends?

Culture: The Visual

We talk a lot about shrinking audiences for classical music. Some attribute this to the very nature of what we do. First, I’m not sure that audiences for classical music are in fact shrinking. They’ve always been pretty small, and for some pretty good reasons. First of all, classical music is rarified music. It takes time, a little bit of appreciation and an investment of consciousness on the part of the listener. Secondly, music is a nonverbal medium. That said, serious music struggles to survive in an increasingly visually oriented world dominated by media that do not require us to invest. Although there is certainly a visual element in musical performance, for those who say we’re plenty exciting just the way we are might think twice if we were to stop and consider that concert dress hasn’t changed for probably a couple of hundred years. Although what the performing artist looks and behaves like on stage does affect how we perceive what we hear in live performance. One of the ironies of music as we know it is that we also can glean significant aesthetic satisfaction from listening to a recording in the privacy of our own home. Yet live performance of great music must live its life in a culture deeply rooted in the moving visual image; more particularly, television, videos, streamed images on the Internet and motion pictures. I do not believe the intoxicating impact of television can be minimized. You might declare that you don’t watch television, but if you use e-mail, surf the Internet or use your computer in any way, shape or form, you watch television. Its seductive power for making some tasks visually stimulating and interesting is part of the reason we become addicted to, for example, e-mail. For writing letters, creating *PowerPoint* presentations, for sending photographs as attachments in e-mails,

it is titillating because it’s made to be that way. Bill Gates has made sure it’s entertaining and not dull, and he has done that because he knows you and I are stimulated by colorful visual images.

The very desktop of your computer, with its colored icons floating across the screen or the different fonts you can use for your typed messages, all creates a new playground for you. The Microsoft “ding” that goes off when you receive an e-mail sends you jumping to the computer to see who or what has contacted you. Then there’s e-mail itself, which can be a form of addiction because it offers you an opportunity to receive good (or bad) information and (1) react by sending a reply or (2) leave it alone. In either case, you don’t have to either face or speak with your correspondent. You never have to hear, smell or see the person to whom you are writing. It’s the same thing with TV. You can sit there and react in the privacy of your own home, fall asleep, get your drama, all without any human interaction at all.

But if messages, artistic or otherwise, need to be wrapped in visually enticing packages for them to get our attention, how does an art form fare whose power does not come from its visual efficacy or glamour or buzz? An art form whose beauty evolves from organized or disorganized sound?

Culture: Attention

Music, great music, and the study, teaching and practice of great music, requires attention. Yet, as we gravitate toward convenience, we also tend to be impatient if we can’t get things on short notice. Along with the ravages of time compression, our impatience for anything that takes more than a nanosecond grows. Perhaps it is an anecdotal observation, but were any of us to sit down and boot up a vintage 1985 computer, Apple or PC, we instantly would grow impatient with the time it takes to get things done. Time compression and need satisfaction have combined to create a human animal that must have everything now. Ten years ago you’d only use Fed Ex

overnight if you absolutely had to. Now many use it for their routine mail. To complicate things, the manic twenty-first century human animal now bounces from interruption to interruption with amazing efficiency, now almost needing a bombardment of distractions to stay alive. But if there is one feature that tends to be common in these phenomena, it is that they occur in short bursts. The human animal is bored if it has to sit and contemplate a singular thing for more than ten seconds. Moreover, it now feels as if it has to be connected and wired twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, at any place in the world.

And so we have the poor music teacher who knows that becoming a musician, a good one, requires layer after layer worked out and applied day after day, month after month, year after year, teaching long pieces of Brahms or Beethoven, works that require depth of attention and depth of dramatic insight, all in a cultural milieu that doesn’t want anything to take long, even death.

Culture: Curricula

Fifty years ago college curricula in music dealt exclusively with what we’d call Western European art music. But now, because we want to educate and train the “comprehensive musician,” we have world music. We not only have world music, we have world musics. We have gender studies in music. We have scholarly conferences that discuss whether Beethoven was an imperialist because of his dominating musical gestures in the Fifth Symphony. We have pop, jazz and film. These are not bad things, but they are facts. The influences, and the demands of those influences, are significant. We live in a world that now demands a much broader definition of art music. And that is because the world is changing.

Culture: Demographics

I once was part of a delegation of executives from some of America’s leading music institutions that had

gone to London to meet with our British counterparts from their distinguished music schools. One afternoon, the British contingent proudly proclaimed that a referendum had been passed in England requiring all graduating students—not just music students—to have a basic and rudimentary knowledge of music. I asked them what repertoire was used to measure music proficiency in these exams. The stare was vacant. I said, “If you’re going to give an examination on music, you must use musical examples. What musical examples might those be?” The reply was, examples from the great repertoire. I asked, which great repertoire? They said, aside from the major British composers, the icons of Western European art music: Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Wagner, Schubert. At that time I was living in Los Angeles, a city that was 54 percent Latino, many of them first-generation immigrants for whom “common practice” music, as we know it, was simply a foreign object. Moreover, this was a state where the membership of the California Arts Council embraced more than just common practice music as art, as it does now.

Nontraditional art forms, in a highly charged and politicized environment, held equal sway. The analogy may be considered irrelevant were it not for one very important thing: the cultures themselves are changing, partly by virtue of their changes in demographics. Some of the new generation will buy into Western European art music. Many won’t. What will they buy into, even if they have listened to Bach and Mozart or read Shakespeare and Faulkner?

Culture: Popular

We now have *popular culture* accepted as an academic field. Yet, some of our finest contemporary composers are steeped in pop music, for it forms the basis of much of what they write. The titles of Michael Dougherty’s *Desi* (yes, *Desi* Arnaz) or John Adams’s *Lollapalooza* certainly do not allude to “sonata” or “chaconne,” although both composers may utilize those forms in

their music. Popular culture, then, furnishes our composers with their own kind of folk basis, much like Hungarian folk music did for Bartók, or folk songs for Haydn.

Culture: New Sounds, New Instruments

The synthesizer can replicate acoustic sounds so successfully that the public doesn’t know the difference! Film composers write entire scores using nothing but computer-generated sounds. And there are prominent Hollywood film composers who are affectionately known as “hummers” because they can’t read music and rely on talented transcribers and orchestrators to do the “real” work! Yet, perhaps the most powerful manifestation of computer-generated music as a sonic tool, is the invention of new sounds. Is this latter development so different than the evolutionary changes brought about by the emergence of the modern symphony orchestra? Was there a precursor to the piano? Was the flute always metal? Did the horn always have valves? And now, modern-day orchestra percussionists must learn a battery of instruments unheard of even thirty years ago, for with every new composer comes a new sound he or she wants banged out there in the back row.

Culture: Audience Fragmentation

Markets have become fragmented. Audiences have become fragmented. Some kinds of concerts have virtually disappeared from the concert-going landscape. It used to be that art song recitals were fairly regular on performing arts series. They nearly are extinct. It’s the same for chamber music, or so some say.

Others claim these audiences always have been small.

Culture: Saturation of the Market

Bernard Holland, the acerbic critic of the *New York Times*, has said, “After fifty recordings of the Brahms 4th, Nos. 51 and 52 become irrelevant.” It takes no more than a cursory glance at the inventory of available classical music recordings to realize the market

for common practice may be reaching a point of critical mass. To compound the market saturation issue, it is nowadays so astonishingly easy to create a CD replete with glamour packaging that receiving such an item, as I do several times a week, perhaps does not have that special, unique allure that producing a phonograph recording of old did. Recording technology has enabled us to make a commercial quality CD from our homes, which I suppose makes us think that if anyone can do it, then it must not be so special anymore. Furthermore, you can reproduce it for eighty cents a copy and send it to all of your friends, who can, if they like it, make copies on their computer.

So, is it all going to hell in a hand basket?

No. But I do believe we’re going to have to face a few facts.

First, I have faith in one basic precept, which is that great music will survive because of its riches and depth. However, we must not assume the way we’ve been doing things is the way they should be done forever. Current and future generations are conceiving, perceiving and experiencing the arts differently than we have.

Secondly, our charge as teachers is simple: figure out new ways to captivate, to engage, to refresh and to make the experience of making music special. And this heightening of engagement also must be inculcated in our students as performers and potential teachers themselves. And therein lies my central thesis: engagement. The arresting power of superbly prepared, inspirational, imaginative music—music whose every phrase begs us to listen to the next one—must be brought to life and must engage with listeners in a dramatic way. Music is drama, and drama relies on context, sometimes contemporized, but relevant to the times.

Finally, I would implore us also to think about what actions we must continually take to ensure the survival of our art form. Allow me to make some suggestions.

1. We must become passionate advocates for our craft. It has been said that an idea never sees its time until it has been subjected to the political process. In more local terms, this means music does not live a full life unless it completes its circuit, which means effectively relating to its audience. At a more rudimentary level, we must be politically active, something we historically have not wanted to do.
2. If the culture is more visually needy—and it is—we must consider ways in which our nonverbal, nonvisual art form can retain its unique power and remain relevant without succumbing to visual kitsch.
3. We must be courageous enough to change our curricula, that platform upon which we base our teaching.
4. We must give serious thought to teaching modalities, be they distance learning or visual learning enhancements, or consider ways of making the concert-going experience something more than just that. Orchestras and theater companies, for example, are seeking ways to imagine the concert-going experience as part of a larger evening's menu of activities. We purists might consider this an unnecessary intrusion, yet I think it is important for us, perhaps, to consider loosening the noose, so to speak, on the precious nature of the recital or concert. Music is, after all, a reflection of an interior life, not some kind of numeric abstraction.
5. Embrace technology.

We do not know the future of music. We feel a certain sense of loss when we see classical music audiences dwindling, fewer young people interested in what we do, and the short attention spans of the present culture demanding that we do short pieces because the longer, more substantial experience seems unreasonable. I don't know what to do about the latter, and leave it to the composers. But I must state flatly that we do, in fact, have what Vladimir Horowitz called a crisis in composition. Music, like areas of academic inquiry, has become more

specialized. Furthermore, the quest for finding an individual voice, regardless of its understandability to the audience—is an issue, because music has, for centuries, been a public art, and I'm not sure that our composition community feels that way. Audiences are excoriated for not understanding what composers write. But if it is true that our listening public has not, perhaps, grown in sophistication, why is it that our composers wish to compose music that is more difficult to comprehend? Not all feel this way, certainly, but many do. The notion that I, as a composer, might wish to write something for the performers and the audience is considered impure because it does not aspire to the highest ideals of art, which is, frankly, fundamentally wrong. And, if it is thought to be true, then perhaps the world of music is simply getting its just desserts.

It is the special nature of music that causes us to be engaged, causes us to teach it and promulgate it. Yet, great music will not continue to be of significant interest to the culture without people to teach it. For those who toil with their students for the sheer joy of watching a young music student grow into a piece of great music, it is the sudden merger of talent with art that completes the circuit with such satisfaction. Perhaps we have not done a good enough job of promoting the very special place of the individual music teacher in our culture, not impressing sufficiently upon young people the rich rewards of expressing their music through teaching.

In the end, the materials of music will be ever-changing. Nature will see to that. Yet, if music is to remain vital as a performed, taught and enjoyed art, we must figure out ways to make the art contemporary without sacrificing its basic nature. We also must acknowledge the materials of music will be ever-changing; nature will see to that. Yet, if music is to remain vital as a performed, taught and enjoyed art, and if the degree to which it is appreciated is at least partially due to the ability of the profession to become an agent of the culture, we must figure

out ways to make the art contemporary without sacrificing its need for a public. On one level, we raise concerns that classical music has not engaged sufficiently to support its financial demands. Yet on another level, we are experiencing unprecedented levels of young students taking private lessons. We all truly hope the latter will help plenary the former.

So, as for the demise of music as we know it, is it the music, or is it ... us?

Now, then, as a segue, to technology, the villain, considered as a tool. You all are familiar, I am sure, with notation programs like *Finale* and *Sibelius*; with sequencing programs that enable recorded sounds to be digitally routed into a hard disk. I will acknowledge that electronic keyboards are not an adequate substitute for an acoustic piano, but I will say that the state of the art in electronic keyboards—weighted, the sampled sounds—is astonishing. I bring this up because sequencing programs, simple ones at least, can serve as instant recorders for students to play back their interpretations. There are, of course, accompanying programs *Finale* has developed that serve as pretty reliable accompanying devices for those students who may not have access to an accompanist. Inferior to the real thing, they can nevertheless assist in instructing a soloist. I am referring to prerecorded accompaniments available on the market that can enhance the environment.

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