Whither Music?

why we need music and musicians

“All art is quite useless. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.” So quipped the ever erudite Oscar Wilde in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. One could forgive Wilde a little arrogance in his pronouncement, speaking as he was from the height of the late-Victorian gold-rush of culture that sprang so vociferously from writers like himself, Dickens and Bronte(s); and from composers like Mendelssohn, Wagner and Elgar - music, art and culture was springing from every pore and chimney stack, as the era of the relentless modern world came into being. It seemed in those days that the long-sought vision of elite art to redeem fallen Man, had finally acquired the necessary technological and intellectual might to fulfil its promise. Man was at the zenith of “his” expressive powers in beauty and form - the foundations of the human soul, and Man could not exist without a soul.

The decadence (as it was later seen) of the Romantic revolution in music was to lead to greater and greater tonal pictures. Vast soundscapes of music stupefying to the ear and eye exemplified in works such as Strauss’ Frieder auf Erder pushed tonality and form to their very rational limits. Starting around Wagner’s epic *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle and ending in Schoenberg's Gurreleider in 1910 - a continuous work nearly 2 hours, utilising nearly 150 instrumentalists and 200 singers. From there, the waters broke upon the levies, and the 20th century that dawned was a time of retraction and reassessment. The Atonality of Schoenberg shattered the syntax of music and the neoclassicism of Stravinsky rescued it (to some degree). There was a divide in the musical world from which raised the cry “whither music?”. The question was not in fact an existential one. Charles Ives’ *The Unanswered Question* was simply trying out the new clothes of music to see if they fit. Yet to this day, that same cry still resounds in a more desperate sense; “whither music?, whither the arts?, what of the future?”.

Such questions have always been asked to some extent, I hear you say. Recall Hobbs' quip about the good ol’ days: “competition of praise inclineth to a reverence of antiquity, for men contend with the living, not the dead.” Classical music has enjoyed good audiences, mass media has increased the reach and profile of musicians, and the Western world still holds - against all logic of utility - the classical musician as a worthy profession (just). But I would argue that in the last 50 years or so we have been the unhappy witnesses to a creeping retraction in Western societies that has accelerated more recently.

Median wages of classical musicians have shrunk, despite the median skill level vastly increasing. 90% of all classical music was composed before 1900, and the most influential composers of the 20th Century were active before 1940. The Modernism of the 20th Century, and the

postmodernism we see now has wrestled the humanity out of elite culture. What we must produce is Art that awakens us to a “reality” - as conceived by the artist, and the viewer/listener must contend with it, wallowing in the same sullied reality. We are caught in a death spiral of so-called realism and rationalisation. We look at Jeff Koons’ sculpture of a balloon dog or listen to Birtwistle's second string quartet and we cannot find fulfilment of form or perfection. We cannot in fact find anything; we stare into the abyss, and the abyss stares back at us. Beauty and form are seen as kitsch - something surely to be avoided. But if we excise beauty and form, what are we left with?

If Art is to have any meaningful impact it must “wake us up to the world of others…here is something more important that you”, to quote Scruton. Yet In these current circumstances, is it any wonder that there has been a rapid withdrawal of funding for the Arts? With the abandonment of the pursuit of a *perfection* of vision - be it aural or visual - we cut the ties to the language that expresses it. We continue onwards oblivious, until in straightened times we turn around and see we are adrift, with only a rationalised language to guide us. If a work of art is to be produced now, we must first know the value we can exploit from it. Teams of fundraisers and curators gather to first define the impact, reach and enjoyment the public must absorb, and then the piece is produced to those specifications. Fruitful work for the bureaucracy at least! Value itself becomes the aesthetic, never bridging the heights of the sublime from which we may experience a work as if from afar off. There is no relationship from which we can seek redemption from our failings.

Recently, the Arts Council of England withdrew the funding for English National Opera, the Britten Sinfonietta has suffered equally, and most recently the battle for the BBC Singers - the oldest and most providential BBC ensemble was axed unceremoniously - it’s recent stay of execution being something of a review of viability, rather than a reprieve. Whilst there are some winners in this, for example the Sheku Orchestra, public monies for the Arts have become so goal oriented, that the effort to measure those goals necessarily draws one further and further away from the artistic endeavour.

There exists now a disconnection between the endeavour of the Arts and the custodians of it - the artistic managers, the government and private investors, the performers and lastly, the listeners. We have lost, in the morass of utilitarian quasi-scientific hyper-rationalisation, the language of the Arts, and with it the courage to defend it. So let me offer something to music at least to reclaim some of that territory. For I believe as Manley-Hopkins might have put it - “for all this, *beauty* is never spent. There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”.

Music is the universal language of humans. It is the heightened speech that brings ideas and concepts into reality. Art and music in particular is in our very nature - the blood and the bones so-to-speak. From our very first cave paintings and animal-skin drums, music was the way ancestral humans thought about their survival, assessed strategies and tested ideas. To die in the idea, rather than to die in the real world was the critical strength to our ultimate ascendancy.

These ideas are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. Take Darius Millaud's *A Frenchman in Rio*, or Stravinsky's polyrhythms and preternatural idioms; music allows us to know cross-culturally better than any other medium. It sees as Scruton would have put it, "I to I", not just eye to eye. Think of the influence of Japanese art in the West, or the power of Shakespere and Beethoven in the East. Men have fought wars over less. But such things are hard to do. They don't happen as if they're dictated from the Gods. They are the result of a cultural underpinning that supports the dedicated work of these artists that must live and work and eat etc.

Yes, we *need* music, not just desire it. In good art we set aside ourselves and let the world dawn on us. Good music produces in the listener what we can bring to it, not what we can take from it. Choral societies, amateur orchestras, church choirs, youth orchestras; these all exist down-stream from a culture of excellence that rewards the endeavour as much as the result. But if, as Walter Peter said, "all art aspires to the condition of music", then where have all the flowers gone?! We must aspire to excellence and we must teach it. We must defend its ability to promote cognitive diversity in young people, teaching them to be better scientists, mathematicians and perhaps even composers. To quote myself for a moment: "To starve large sections of traditional education of funding, development and legitimacy is to starve a generation of children of the ability to thrive properly in the education system. Those huge cohorts of talented, creative and thoughtful children find no discovery of their temperaments, and no fulfilment of their talents."

The same is true of the professionals. Classical music is Shakespeare, it is Sassoon, it is Michaelangelo, it is Penicillin, it is Einstein. It is all the ways we creatively negotiate our problems. To stifle music of this sort is to malnourish society of a vitamin. We can stumble on for a while, but pretty soon the wounds stop healing, the bones weaken and the damage becomes evermore difficult to repair.

If we won't value it, then others will. The Chinese certainly do. They are reaching out with grateful and hungry hands to sweep up the opportunities and cultural capital that the West has taken centuries to accrue. They are doing so at breath-taking speed and with that single minded dedication that only the Chinese can inspire. The 21st Century of elite music belongs to them. Most if not all of the top classical musicians in the next 50 years will be Eastern and likely Chinese. The style and tonality will undergo a fundamental change not seen since the dawn of Atonality, and the very underlying philosophy of what it is there to express could alter beyond description. This may not be a bad thing for music per se, except for the fact that we, the West, didn't sell it, we simply didn't value it enough to be bothered to hold on to it.

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