

Musical Literacy (in defence of)

Serious music is in danger of becoming an irrelevance. If we want to prevent that, if we want music to offer or mean anything of importance, it must be brought down from its ivory tower and be uncompromisingly earnest and self-critical.

Unfortunately, the musical fraternity has allowed its focus to lapse from the 'serious' to the casual and opportunistic. And our attitude to music reflects our attitude to other preoccupations in life. In this essay, I argue that the only way forward is to raise our levels of musical literacy - the ability to identify musical ingredients, follow their progress and make sense of them within the context of a composition - to the point that every musical artifice is valued as the direct product of human action and free will and that partaking in those actions can inspire our minds, feed the imagination and sharpen our intelligence with, or through, an improved sense of musical realism.

'Serious' music, music which seeks to elevate us out of the ordinary into the extraordinary, addresses serious issues and proposes approaches that mirror attitudes to other realities. Just as in theatre, literature or art, we, the composers, make up these realities, present them and propose ways of confronting them. This may meet with approval or disapproval - either way, it leaves an impression and invites a response which may vary from 'I liked it' to 'I learned something from it'; from 'it inspired me' to 'it leaves me cold'; from 'I never thought he would pull it off' to 'what is he trying to tell us'? If music doesn't get the human treatment, it cannot be a force for good and will remain outside the realm of truthfulness. Creativity is the one faculty that exemplifies humanity's distinctive potential. Creativity in music is one branch of that potential. But it needs an education to flourish - that is the essence of musical literacy.

Before I seek to identify the nature of the crisis in music today, it is important to define common expressions which may cause confusion:

Classical music, strictly speaking, covers music written in the classical era, roughly between 1750 and 1820 or so. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are generally considered its principle representatives. However, the term is often used to cover practically all of the music written between the fourteenth and the twentieth centuries - the sort of music which is generally performed on established concert platforms and broadcast on dedicated radio stations such as BBC Radio 3, France Musique, MDR Klassik etc.

Serious music is a distinction made by radio stations and concert platforms to separate them from broadcasters of popular music. It covers 'classical music' in the broader sense as described above. I shall use the term - for want of a better one - for music written from the medieval, through the renaissance, baroque, classical and romantic eras to the present, written or otherwise designed with the particular intention to draw attention to its own inner workings and in doing so, elevate us out of the ordinary into the extraordinary. That is to say, showing us where the creative mind leads us when it is allowed to experiment with unusual solutions to sometimes unusual, self-imposed problems.

Contemporary music, also called 'contemporary classical music', is, generally speaking, music written or otherwise designed by living composers, although the term is still used for dead composers from the twentieth century who belonged to the avant-garde of classical music. It is also used more widely to include practically all twentieth century composers by concert promoters who consider any music beyond Wagner and Debussy to be avant-garde, daring or risky.

Pop music, or 'popular music', written, improvised or simply performed and recorded for mass consumption, is not an altogether straightforward category. 'Serious' composers such as Mozart wrote popular music (Serenades), so did Brahms (Hungarian Dances), Schubert (Dances and Marches), and Ravel (Bolero). And some tunes have *become* popular in advertising such as Debussy's 'Clair de Lune', Strauss's opening bars of 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' and Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'.

From serious to the not so serious.

Various concerns have been raised recently about the future of classical music, not least of contemporary classical music. Over the course of this essay I will attempt to identify the nature of the problem or crisis, investigate its causes and suggest solutions. It all began sometime after the Second World War when many long-held beliefs got trampled under a surge of revolutionary zeal, and challenged – if not uprooted – by open questioning and provocation.

The fact that the kind of music I am concerned with is deemed 'serious music' is in itself symptomatic of the problem. The distinction between serious and non-serious music however is not clear-cut at all. It runs vaguely along a scale from the widely accepted notion of what is 'serious' (say Bach or Beethoven) through the increasingly obscure terrain of entertainment, light entertainment (Glenn Miller, Johann Strauss, Lloyd Webber...), the trendy or fashionable, to rock bottom – music not meant to be *listened* to as such, but to be *digested* as the background of all sorts of environments: dance halls, pubs, shopping centres, or the privacy of the car and the iPod (techno music; easy listening etc). In other words, it runs from music which demands attention to detail and structural ingenuity, through music which demands less and less of the listener's attention, eventually reaching run-off-the-mill clichés of genre.

If we take 'serious music' as music which demands attention, listen for example to the opening movement of Beethoven's third symphony. Top of the scale I would say. Right from the very start the composer *demand*s our full attention and within the confines of a short but intricate drama he alerts us in miniature form of things to come – things not to be missed if we want to 'understand' the symphony's progress and the music's ambition. And to fully appreciate the extent of the movement's inner workings, its levels of activity and the cross-references that take place over time requires the support of a dedicated memory and the ability to identify musical ingredients and manoeuvres. The more the ear learns to identify the music's 'inner consciousness'¹, the more there is to explore in the musical landscape – and the more rewarding the listening experience becomes.

A similar mindset is fundamental to fully appreciate, for example, the famous Mass by Guillaume de Machault, a madrigal by Gesualdo di Venosa, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Debussy's *La Mer* or Varèse's *Arcana*. Additionally, an interest in the practice of composing and performing of the period is almost as indispensable as a discerning ear for the specific beauty and craftsmanship in a particular composition.

But where on the scale would we put, for example, Palestrina? His rather more eclectic and abstract style, intended to fit neatly (albeit elaborately) into the ritual format of a Roman Catholic service, doesn't assert itself in the same way that Beethoven's symphony does. However skilful and intricate its composition is, its principle object is to enhance the divine atmosphere of the service – not unlike Gregorian chant, or the ornate and impressive interior of a cathedral. As an exhibition of pure craftsmanship it is on a par with Bach's *Kunst der Fuge*. Much church music falls in this category

¹ 'Musical consciousness' is the way in which a piece of music emanates a sense of purpose. The composer seems to be constantly present and aware, keeping the music's progress under firm control.

except where the likes of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert etc. start drawing attention to their personal interpretations of the sacred texts with almost operatic takes on the genre - Verdi taking this to extremes in his famous *Requiem*.

Pick up the scale somewhere at *The Blue Danube* by Johan Strauss or a Hungarian Dance by Brahms; this kind of music might be referred to as sophisticated entertainment, to be enjoyed as the backdrop of a social gathering. Their musical aim is less ambitious than that of Beethoven's Symphony, but still interesting enough to claim attention to musical detail. I would put them on a par with Glenn Miller and similar bands of the period, which, not only in their music but also in their performing styles, excelled in sophistication: Frank Sinatra, Barbara Streisand, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Jacques Brel and other great entertainers and their arrangers who reach similar heights in their finest moments. More contemporary stars such as The Beatles, Kate Bush, David Bowie, Eric Clapton and others have produced music marked by originality and the clever use of their vocal or instrumental talents. In the same league are certain composers of major musicals and operettas (Lehar, Gershwin, Bernstein and others), film music and so on.

On a more questionable level, we land in the pretentious world of minimal music, which openly purports an ideology of doing as little as possible, often for as long as possible. Originally derived from Eastern music made popular in the sixties and seventies, it stirred a growing horde of 'serious' composers into dabbling in their own versions of the minimal and borderline minimal. It may be of particular interest to know that this musical style not only originated in the US but managed to acquire an aura of respectability as a genuine genre of 'serious' music. As such, it even became a formal category in state funding of commissions for, among others, works of minimal content and awards to composers of minimal content. Is it far-fetched to imagine a situation where *bad* music was recognized and extolled as a genuine genre? In the slipstream of composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman the floodgates of minimalist or even anti-music opened, nudging it into the classical canon. The virus of minimalism has invaded many territories, not least the arts and architecture.

And with the advance of ever cheaper (and bigger) sound installations new types of music and listening practices have evolved that seem to revolve primarily around volume and monotony. The power of this music relies almost entirely on electricity supply. In many public places conversation are smothered and eardrums seriously damaged by the relentless monotony of drums and basses in which higher frequencies (song, harmony, melody and speech) get drowned in the prevailing noise band of the ambiance. Its presence is *felt* but it doesn't ask to be *identified*.

What crisis? What problem?

If classical (or 'serious') music is in crisis, do we mean that

- fewer people listen to 'serious' music than before?
- fewer people take 'serious music' as seriously as they used to?
- fewer people come to concerts, buy recordings, listen to dedicated radio stations or join choirs, bands and orchestras than before?
- too many people find most contemporary music too much hard work, too difficult, too academic, downright boring or ugly?

It is true that many musicians, ensembles and orchestras struggle to sell their product, promote their skills, or get funding. Concert promoters struggle to fill venues. Composers struggle to get commissions, let alone performances of their work. Radio stations struggle to keep their audiences. Record companies and music publishers feel the squeeze in their range of serious music and have to

rely more and more on their core stock to pay for the less popular. But is that really the heart of the crisis or simply a symptom?

The status of 'serious' music

From the sixties onward and as a by-product of the anti-authoritarian attitudes of that era, an ideology took hold that we should stop discriminating between the various genres of music. Pop music deserved just as much recognition as 'serious' music and played a similar role in society, met the same politico-cultural criteria. Take this to its logical conclusion and your average Mills and Boon romance can be considered the equal of a novel by Joseph Conrad; a sketch by your average life-class student becomes no less admirable than a work by Van Gogh. People know what they like and don't want patronizing. Even when the whole population eats themselves into rampant obesity at McDonald's, we have no right to question the freedom of choice that is every individual's birthright – however much this is costing the National Health Service and the economy, not to mention the happiness of the people affected. Who is to tell people that it's better to separate the wheat from the chaff and feed on 'good' music?

This anti-discrimination – or positive discrimination – ideology is embedded everywhere in the media and in politics. For a most unexpected example, take the monthly Music Magazine of the very respectable, left-leaning Sunday paper, The Observer. The broadsheet itself devotes hardly if any space to 'serious' music, let alone new, contemporary music. But the magazine's populist approach to the subject shows how deeply ingrained the ideology is – if it isn't also driven by blatant commercial opportunism. *Music equals popular music*; 'serious' music is but a footnote. Music journalism now boils down to exposing the titillating lifestyles, fortunes and misfortunes of the celebrity artists. If the subject of 'serious' music is touched on at all, it usually involves the glorification of a celebrity performer who graces our shores for a few precious moments – or an unobtrusive mention of a new release of a Mozart symphony may fill a small gap on a page.

It is considered improper to ask of people to make the effort to learn and delve a bit deeper into the substance of music. It is seen as patronising and pedantic to draw people's attention to the complicated business of the music's inner workings – 'life is complicated enough'. Classic FM, 'your relaxation station', has taken this philosophy to shameless extremes and offers a treasure trove of popular classics as the ultimate soporific. In the slipstream of this McDonald's of classical music, the likes of BBC Radio 3 and its European equivalents feel the heat and are being dragged down, desperately trying to keep their audiences and emulating some of Classic FM's weapons of seduction. They hardly ever use their enormous resources to educate and inform in genuine and grown-up language anymore, much less provide proper debate and healthy criticism. Performers and their interpretations, composers and their works – they are above criticism. Every product we sell is naturally good. Why else would we broadcast it? Why else should you listen to it?

How did we ever learn to appreciate Shakespeare, Dante, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Hardy, Marquez, and all the other giants of literature other than by being introduced to them and to the art of literary expression? It was not by accident! And not even by choice: it was by introduction and instruction! Enlightenment, so to speak! In the process we became familiar with the power of language and the power of verbal communication.

We have the likes of Margaret Thatcher to thank for this ruthless capitalist outlook – and let us not forget Tony Blair, who gave 'education, education, education!' such priority that the concept was reduced to the bare minimum needed to get a job. Business, manufacture and the service industry require basic skills and only these. Rather than learning for life, for personal fulfilment, happiness or

for the common good in the broadest sense of the word, education has been narrowed down to a mere utilitarian philosophy in the great economic scheme of things, to achieve guaranteed employment (which, in the end, it doesn't do anyway), and taxable income. Subjects such as music, the arts, literature, history and geography, foreign languages, home economics, cooking skills and knowledge of food, health and hygiene, civic responsibility, sex and family planning – let alone love and its secrets, or even philosophy – have either been relegated to the margins for softies, dreamers and underachievers, or never considered in the first place. Is it surprising then that we have to deal with statistics of misery on a daily basis in a world where people are being systematically underprepared for the complexities of life?

Do any schools offer decent music education today? I have been in music rooms at respectable secondary schools with not one decent instrument in sight but crappy keyboards with their prefabricated rhythm and harmony modules, and computers loaded with the holy grail of music education: *Sibelius*, the watered-down software version for schools. *Sibelius*, which takes the grind out of creativity and does it all for you!

What to do?

Let me start with a few assumptions and elaborate afterwards.

- Good music can elevate us out of the drudgery of daily chores and into a different realm in which genuine realities are played out in the concrete form and substance of sound. Although these 'realities' are imaginary, they can be grasped in a variety of forms whose impact on body and soul varies from person to person.
- At their best, these realities in sound represent models of decision-making, models of logic, of thought, problem solving and invention; in other words, models of the creative mind as it cuts a way through an evolving musical landscape, confronting the challenges it meets and opportunities it discovers. At worst, these realities in sound represent a lazy mind that follows clichés, dodges challenges and fails to exploit opportunities, preferring to stay on familiar ground and tested waters.
- Where beauty arises it is, more often than not, the result of elegance in dealing with these realities and not a goal in itself. Just as in mathematics, reliable solutions to problems usually appear in forms of specific beauty; mathematicians often tend to put more trust in solutions which look elegant than in those which do not. Composers who claim to compose for the sake of beauty alone usually end up with empty veneer.
- The more we learn about music, the better equipped we are to gauge the value of each individual work, to enjoy and absorb its impact and inner workings, to be inspired by it – or to rebuff it.
- The effort to learn pays off both in the long run and in the actual listening experience. The desire to learn is perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of a healthy mind and body in any walk of life.

Although 'good music' is only *good* in the minds of those who create, perform, broadcast or listen to it, the value of their judgement depends on their knowledge and understanding, however intuitive these are. There is a lot to know and understand in music and not everybody can be a specialist – not to mention all those who simply weren't born with an ear for it. We don't need to be 'specialists' to appreciate or even be bowled over by one of Mozart's symphonies, but a certain level of familiarity with his language and that of his contemporaries is helpful; and a certain training to distinguish musical ingredients and manoeuvres is essential to turn the experience into something more than a passing sensation. To elicit both an emotional and rational response we need not only the ability to be 'grabbed' by musical proceedings, be they slow or fast, complex or simple, but we

also need the ability to anticipate certain twists and turns in order to experience surprise when the composer goes in unexpected directions or sheds new light on the matter. Only then may the music have something to offer and the recipient something to gain; only then may the music start *making sense*.

The difficulty is of course that not all music is top of the range, interesting or worth the effort. This is true for music of the past, but particularly for new music, which has to prove itself against the backdrop of a solid canon of works that have stood the test of time. And never in the history of music has old repertoire been the norm and new music the exception. It has been suggested that composers should try to *reconnect* with their audiences and find out what people really want so they can deliver to taste. This is a bizarre admonition. Firstly, composers compose their own stuff, with or without an audience in mind. If they can't put themselves in a listener's position they seal their own fate. Secondly, what sort of an audience is one supposed to aim for? Thirdly, audiences should make their own views known. Fourthly, if concert promoters suspect a particular type of music goes down badly, they either take the risk or don't schedule it. Bad luck if the gamble doesn't pay off, but hats off for taking risks. Finally, promotion is an art and the question is how much attention promoters and ensembles are paying to this!

Music is generally advertised and sold in the same way as cars or beauty products. It promises to satisfy and deliver. It is presented as seductively as possible, full of hyperbole, extra-musical chit-chat and usually with much more detail about the performers than the music. Mention of musical detail is avoided because that kind of profundity might confuse and be too challenging. The way brochures and posters lure an audience; the way radio and TV presenters maintain this relentless jubilation, pandering to their audience; the way music literature romanticises a subject – it often borders on the pathetic. It devalues the experience and encourages submissive adoration and unreal euphoria, blurs the music's substance and grossly underestimates the listener's abilities. It can't be denied, of course, that a sizeable portion of the public falls for this approach. On the other hand, pure technical detail can potentially kill all interest. But a balance can be struck.

This brings us to the question what role music education plays in all this, not only at primary and secondary levels, but also at music colleges, conservatoires and in one-to-one teaching. It is all very well to 'teach music' but, as with all subjects, it entirely depends on *good* teaching to achieve the level of understanding that guarantees a healthy rapport with music, which in turn seeps into the wider world. There is good teaching and bad teaching; there are good and bad teachers. Alas, state-sponsored institutions are under pressure to achieve exam standards, i.e. measurable results, adding to the problem.

Another issue is the pressure to take on as many students as possible in order to qualify for maximum state funding and the ensuing recruitment problem of more 'good' teachers. Now, most music students end up as musicians in ensembles and orchestras, or as teachers at schools and colleges or in the privacy of their homes. Some seek further schooling with private teachers (specialist instrumentalists, conductors, singers etc. at home or abroad) or take up positions of authority in musical life, in journalism, at radio and TV stations, in concert promotion, agency work, in politics, on the boards of funding institutions, of festivals, in juries, and so forth. Thus, the repercussions of bad teaching seep into all aspects of musical life.

What to do? Where to start?

First of all we need to agree that music plays a major part in the lives of vast numbers of people. It is everywhere and in massive abundance. It cannot be ignored.

Secondly, the more 'serious' the music², the more it aims to draw attention to its inner workings; to the choices a composer made; to the landscape he (or she) created; to the problems he took on and to the solutions he proposed; to the challenges he faced or dodged; to the opportunities he exploited or missed... A whole microcosm of thought and emotion can be concentrated in a single piece of music. At its best, music represents a form of life, a specific reality, that holds together and moves forward in degrees of consistency and complexity, of probability and predictability, of expectation and surprise.

Thirdly, the more 'serious' the music, the more the listener is being challenged. The more the listener is able to latch on to a particular piece, the more he gets out of it or gets drawn into it. He can be fascinated by it, bowled over by it, confused by it or left indifferent; he can learn from it and be inspired by it, be agitated or disappointed. It can enrich and impoverish, all depending on the 'connection' which evolves – or fails to evolve – between music and listener.

Ergo, music matters and is a force to be reckoned with. Promoting music of quality is therefore of the essence; promoting music of questionable quality should be a subject of debate. In the same way as it is important to question each other's beliefs it is crucial that we question quality in art. It is the life-blood of democracy to aim high, to emancipate and challenge rather than placate. Indifference leads to paralysis and makes music meaningless.

It is clear that open, honest and qualified debate about music is paramount. Mentioning real substance when talking about music is not only paying fair tribute to its nature, but essential when judging its merits. As a composer I have invested colossal amounts of training, research, energy, risk and commitment into the composition of my works, sometimes with less, sometimes with more success in the pursuit of results that I can be proud of. But each and every composition represents an enterprise of considerable magnitude and involves the complex process of designing a living organism out of raw materials, whilst trying to gauge the psychology of the listener at the same time. These works are packed with intentions and aspirations, considerations and decisions, with technicalities and applied skill on many levels. They were not made for a bit of fun or passing interest. They were made to communicate all this and to say: "listen, try and follow me. I am taking you on this journey into this landscape that I created. Let's see if we can share the experience the way I envisaged it when I mapped out its trajectories". My late friend and colleague, Jos Kunst³, argued that 'Music is audible human action.' I would go as far as to say: 'Music is *deliberate* human action.'

Musical literacy.

Whilst the future of 'serious' music may look bleak for those affected by the (perceived) slump of interest, the solution in my view lies not in cunning salesmanship but in the development of musical literacy. Not only amongst the wider public, but also within the music community itself, we need to look at how musical literacy can be addressed.

It is my profound belief that the low esteem in which 'serious' music is held is caused by the woeful inadequacy of the language in which we present it, and the painful absence of a grown-up

² Note that 'serious' doesn't mean grave, sombre or severe. It is a technical term and a definition is given on page 1.

³ Jos Kunst, 'Making Sense in Music: an enquiry into the formal pragmatics of art' – Gent 1978.

philosophy of music. I am not referring to academic 'philosophy' or musical philosophies from the past (such as Aristotle's or Pope Gregory's) but to an extant vision, a general consensus of what music is about, what it means in our lives, what it can contribute to our lives and to the advancement of creative thinking, alertness of mind, the imagination, and as vehicle of emotions. Development and promotion of musical literacy will not only increase interest in 'serious' music but will enrich the listening experience, increase the enjoyment we take from it, and at the same time lay the foundations for genuine critical debate. It will also enhance the performer's approach to connecting with an audience.

Musical literacy does not necessarily mean knowing your scales, standard rules for harmonic progression, formal conventions and all other technical matter we find in theory books that are used to get students up to exam standard. Although some of that knowledge may be helpful and of some relevance in certain types of music, it generally applies more to schoolwork and exercise books than to developing listening skills. Great composers seldom work by the rules! They create their own and do as they see fit in each situation. What counts is their *effectiveness* in a given musical context. Moreover, the world of music has expanded way beyond these theory books. Rules and conventions governing compositions constantly evolve, even within a single composer's output. We have to turn to the listening experience itself if we want to develop musical literacy. Let's try for a definition and take it from there. Leaving aside the question of enjoyment or emotion for a moment:

Musical literacy is the ability to identify musical ingredients, follow their progress and make sense of them within the context of a composition.

Lots of things happen in music: do we hear them; can we follow them; remember them, reinterpret them, create relationships between them, and put them in context? As Jos Kunst demonstrated in his dissertation, the ways in which people label and identify musical objects or a musical process are manifold. They are not usually in verbal or even in strictly musical form, but can take on the appearance of metaphor, colour, sensation, associations attached etc. Any image, be it abstract or concrete, can guide a receptive mind through a musical landscape. It is in the *active listening experience itself* that a musical ear develops: the dynamic exchange between what the music proposes and the listener is able to grasp. With the right sort of help and encouragement such training can take on a sophisticated learning curve until a composition becomes a home; a familiar environment in which the listener has been 'brought up' so to speak. Just as we cannot grasp the entirety of a landscape without revisiting it, mentally or physically, we will never be able to grasp the totality of a composition without rewinding the experience, mentally or physically. The more familiarity is bred in a variety of music, the more one comes prepared when confronted with unfamiliar, unusual music and the more one learns to learn.

Much depends on the right introduction to music. Inspired and qualified teaching is essential, just as an open mind of both tutor and pupil guarantees open debate. Of course, taste plays a part. If certain music does not have the appeal to generate an interest it will be difficult to persuade a person to delve deeper. Therefore the choice of music used to engage someone into a musical education has to be made with care and consideration. However, trying to articulate one's taste or distaste sharpens the tools with which we judge or justify our preferences.

Where do we start and whom can we turn to?

As the 'crisis' took a couple of generations to develop, we can't expect overnight solutions. It will take at least a whole generation before a decent level of musical literacy can become common good.

Where, for example, can we find enough good teachers for schools and colleges? How can radio and TV presenters develop higher standards? Which media can we depend on to promote musical literacy?

As we have to start somewhere, I will concentrate on a few areas where improvement has the most chance to take hold.

Music Colleges.

1. As funding of colleges generally relies on measurable results set against pre-defined standards, the pressure to conform and to formalise is high. But is it productive? With a subject like music, which not only comes in fleeting forms but also doesn't exist as a primary necessity of life (such as, say, food and shelter) a much more flexible approach to teaching should be permitted. I am a great advocate of **project teaching** as it allows for much more in-depth study of and concentration on a chosen subject.
2. My second issue is with textbooks. Without discarding them altogether, I would suggest that the bulk of teaching about melody, harmony, rhythm, form, instrumentation, tonality, articulation, phrasing, interpreting etc. should be studied from live examples, i.e. by **listening** to (or, indeed, playing) music. And using music from many styles and genres guarantees that all these concepts not only become much more tangible, but also shows how they take on different guises and meanings in different contexts, sometimes completely individual to a certain piece! Learning harmony from the standard textbook only restricts the concept of harmony to a narrow set of arbitrary rules, and causes confusion when confronted with an ocean of music where a composer either takes liberties or obeys entirely different and individual rules. The notion of musical form, coherence or architecture cannot be obtained from memorising a few basic dance forms that were in use during a relatively small period in the history of music and merely relate to the skeleton of a piece anyway.
3. Along the way *sofège*⁴ becomes 'ear-training' in the true sense of the word: the ear gets trained in each and every lesson in ways that are infinitely more relevant than writing notes in a drab exercise book. Exercises can still be designed to test a student's astuteness of hearing. But they should be engineered to identify much more than just the notes. The obsession with *notes* should make place for an interest in *sound*; movement and constellations of sounds, which, in case we needed reminding, is music's raw material.
4. Discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of a composer or an individual work should be encouraged. No composer or musician is God, not even Beethoven! No music is untouchable, not even 'serious' music! I have already expressed the view that music is deliberate human action. In many compositions questions such as "why did he (or she) do that?" should arise. Or "I find this weird"; "this doesn't seem to make sense"; "I can't follow what's happening here – this is too fast or there is too much going on"; "why does he go on for so long with the same stuff?" Numerous aspects of a composition, a style or a composer can be questioned and should lead not only to properly ascertaining their value but also to sharpening perceptive skills.
5. In such an environment of learning, interpretation now becomes the fruit of all the knowledge obtained in this way. And again, discussing interpretation should be encouraged in the most articulate way possible, in order that musicians base their approach on genuine assumptions about the music. Too many interpreters use music to serve their own agenda, especially when they are soloists and not restricted by the views and participation of others. Mindless interpretations can mutilate music to the point of obscenity. Factual knowledge

⁴ *Sofège* is French for ear-training and is in use in many conservatoires to learn to write down a musical passage played on the piano or another medium.

will prevent this and enhance the truthfulness of a performance. We owe this to the composer and the audience.

6. Discrimination between or separation of new and old music does not make any sense in this context. It is both beneficial and academically sound to put any music in historic perspective, whether backward- or forward-looking. By comparing styles, genres and developments from different times and circumstances we can discover their relative merits and appreciate the human hand of the makers.

Music education of this kind becomes not only much more enjoyable but can lead to discoveries and unsuspected truths about the workings of art and their effect on people.

In the slipstream of this approach, music education at primary and secondary level should take on teachers trained to instruct on the principle of *listening* and the development of a discerning ear for the realities of a musical composition. But the importance of one aspect of music education cannot be overstated, and that is *learning to sing*! Both the psychological and physiological value of singing, covering a repertoire of both old and new songs, are immense and have been well researched. Many choirs for the elderly for example have shown that the benefits of singing range from the physical to the mental health of their members.

Radio and TV.

If there is one place where the style of music presentation cannot be felt more acutely, it is at radio and TV stations. The majority of these broadcast 'popular' music and the DJ is entirely dedicated to seducing his audience, one way or another. His or her function is to keep up fever pitch, making sure the sensation of hype is maintained and that no doubt ever seeps through as to the quality of the music he presents.

Broadcasters of 'serious' or classical music have a slightly more sophisticated agenda, but their awareness of the popularity of less 'serious' stations means that concessions have to be made to hold on to audience numbers. Classic FM, 'your relaxation station', has made it its mission to completely and unscrupulously spoon-feed the masses with comfort food whilst exploiting the opportunity to advertise irrelevant products to mind-numbed listeners every ten or fifteen minutes. That leaves us with BBC Radio 3 and its various European counterparts, such as Radio 4 in the Netherlands and France Musique in France. Occasional music broadcasts on television such as the BBC Proms are offshoots of and managed by Radio 3. Therefore our only hope rests on these stations and our aim must be to start a revolution in music presentation to rival Classic FM with true musical substance. How do we do that?

1. The stations are equipped not only with phenomenal recording and broadcasting technology but also with symphony orchestras, choirs and sometimes other bands and ensembles. The BBC, for example, has a radiophonic workshop to create background music for documentaries, films and plays. Its potential for amazing music presentation is not only mouth-watering but virtually limitless. Apart from the obvious functionality of the workshop, hardly any of its vast potential is used for truly radiophonic music presentation. Most of the presentation is stuck in worn-out clichés aimed at warming people to the undisputed virtues, qualities and greatness of the music, the composers and the performers. The orchestras and choirs do the same as any other orchestra and choir: they perform the same music and tour the same cities, attracting the same conductors and soloists and wearing the same old outfits that have been in fashion for generations. The difference is that their work, without exception, is recorded for broadcasting. Apart from that, the station will

occasionally pick and choose concerts by other orchestras and ensembles elsewhere and record them for broadcast in exactly the same way. The remainder of broadcasting time is spent playing and endlessly comparing old and new recordings, more often than not of music that has already been played many times over.

2. Think about it! We are in the ideal place where any piece of music can be taken apart to its bare essentials and then reassembled again to illustrate how its composite material 'works', how its impact came about or how certain effects were achieved. In the hands of a good and knowledgeable presenter this can be done in most entertaining ways and be highly instructive at the same time! Just as programmes about nature, about steam engines, about the financial world, crime, cooking, you name it, can have mass appeal if done well – can tickle our curiosity and satisfy our brain, imagination and taste buds with factual detail – music can be dished up in exactly the same way!
3. In the process another aspect of music presentation gets a new lease of life. For too long classical music and its performers have been presented as untouchable and beyond criticism. Their marketing resembles that of any product by any manufacturer or shop whose only interest is to sell. The desperation to sell not only makes sycophants out of presenters but degrades music into something almost sectarian and religious, not of the real world, beyond the reach of us mortals, only accessible through adulation and submission. But music, I repeat, is made by men and women of flesh and blood, and made up of deliberate choices and decisions, some of which work out well, some very well, some less well, some not well at all!

The *credibility* of music lies in its material content, which is presented in audible sound. If that is deliberately downgraded into fairy-tale twaddle, any sensible listener's suspicions should be raised to the point of losing interest altogether. By going through a work with our ears open and examining it from close up, we not only sharpen our perception but learn to pass judgement and decide for ourselves whether we like it or not, whether it is any good or not, whether it delivers what it promised or not, whether it makes sense or not, or whether it whets our appetite for more.

4. Suddenly the true vocation of the radio ensembles and all the available technology and facilities becomes apparent: to do what they were designed for in the first place! That is, exploiting all this potential for the development of discerning and critical ears! They would not only become the envy of schools and colleges but an extension of them. Think about all the material that could be built up and archived for educational purposes and future reference! This is a goldmine of opportunities. And a more solid foundation for government funding (or the licence fee) is hardly imaginable. I shall be the first one to offer myself for test runs... It goes without saying that TV can play an even more interesting role in all this, but for the moment perhaps a start should be made in radio.

Concert performances.

Most classical music performances hold on to traditions which suggest that not much, if any thought goes into presentation - at least, not much creative or imaginative thought. Although the reputation of pop concerts seems to indicate that there are other ways of connecting with an audience, without trying to emulate them it should be obvious that many options are available to freshen up, liven up and open up these bastions of stale solemnity. It is taken for granted that concert performances are exclusive events and that their grandeur is best served by good old-fashioned ritual.

Hero worship is part of the problem. Great composers (on display in their aureoles), great conductors (some with matching egos), great performers (on exclusive salaries), great orchestras

(with expensive instruments), sublime concert halls (and matching ticket prices) – not to mention opera houses – all this greatness demands the full treatment: pomp and circumstance.

Sticking to a core repertoire of sure-fire hits that have stood the test of time also turns these events into ritual (which requires repetition) rather than adventure. As I said before, never in the history of music until after World War II has old repertoire overtaken the programming of new music to such an extent. For a healthy, dynamic culture this is counter-productive and the music community is digging its own grave. This attitude is no introduction into the tangible realities of music, just as the stifled traditions of monarchy are no introduction to real life. It bypasses every opportunity to involve people, venture into the inner workings of music and stir up interest and enthusiasm.

It is not only the performances themselves which are in need of a thorough overhaul, but also their advertising and publicity. I have a few suggestions:

1. Auction the penguin suits and ban all shades of black unless livened up with brightness and brilliance. They are emblems of priesthood, the sacred and the unapproachable. For many people they may actually work as a deterrent. Change outfits for different occasions, suited to the music played or the occasion celebrated. Avoid uniformity and bring on diversity. And in the process get rid of totally outdated rituals such as the silly habit of the conductor shaking the hand of the leader of an orchestra as he mounts his platform as if they are meeting for the first time. Get a grip! This is the twenty-first century.
2. Attract capable, knowledgeable and presentable people to introduce music, preferably, if not always, accompanied by live examples. New music in particular can benefit from detailed and lively introductions to help focus the attention on aspects that might be essential to follow a work and to appreciate or interpret characteristics that matter. And most important of all, talk about and illustrate with concrete musical substance, avoiding mystification. Pre-concert talks make particular sense if they can be followed up in post-concert talks. Questionnaires are perhaps another means of gauging people's opinion.
3. Let new music become the norm and challenge composers to come up with top quality music. Put them in the firing line at post-concert discussions and let the audience have their say, asking questions and levelling criticism or praise where they think fit. That way quality itself is pushed upwards in a virtuous circle! The rare appearance of new works in the present climate creates a vicious circle: composers don't have a chance to put their works to the test and learn from the experience. Of course, risk is involved in programming new work. No adventure without risk.
4. Publicity is an art. To *attract* people to concerts requires clever planning; to *keep* an audience requires that the event matches the publicity. In other words, don't promise more than what you have to offer, but focus on the exciting aspects that matter. Publicity should always aim to attract *new* people! There is complacency in assuming that the product on offer is by definition of interest; that people will automatically assume that it will be good and worth attending. Much publicity is based on reputation and is flushed through channels that are already used by everyone else on the tacit assumption that it will work. Without originality, without an effort to stand out, publicity loses its flavour and muscle.
5. Another aspect of publicity is involving schools and colleges in the run-up to concerts and preparing them for the music to be played. It doesn't have to stop there: relationships can be established with offices and corporate business. The press and the media can all be encouraged to contribute and boost interest in unorthodox ways.

Without pretending to be exhaustive or even spot-on in my recommendations and suggestions, I hope to have shown the importance if not primacy of musical literacy. It goes hand in hand with the importance of an open and critical mind. Music is not *just* fun and entertainment, not just a luxury

or, worse, an opiate for the people. Each piece of music says something different and fits into a context.

Conclusion

If we want to prevent music from becoming an irrelevance in the context of everyday life; if we want music to offer or mean anything of importance, it will have to be brought down from its ivory tower and down to earth and be uncompromisingly earnest and self-critical. I have tried to illustrate how the musical fraternity has allowed its focus to lapse from the 'serious' to the casual and opportunistic. It is my belief that our attitude to music is a reflection of our attitude to other preoccupations in life. The only way forward I can see is in raising our literacy levels to the point that every musical artifice is valued as the direct product of human action and free will and that partaking in these actions can inspire our minds, feed the imagination and sharpen our intelligence with, or through, an improved sense of musical realism. We may want to have a closer look at Venezuela's *El Sistema*!

In 'serious' music, serious issues are addressed and approaches suggested that mirror attitudes to other realities. Just as in theatre, literature or art, we, the composers, make up these realities, present them and propose ways of dealing with them. This may meet with approval or disapproval – either way, it leaves an impression and invites a response which may vary from 'I liked it' to 'I learned something from it'; from 'it inspired me' to 'it leaves me cold'; from 'I never thought he would pull it off' to 'what is he trying to tell us'? The essence of every valid response is within the realm of the tangible. If music doesn't get the human treatment, it cannot be a force for good and will remain outside the realm of truthfulness, if not expediency. Creativity is the one faculty that exemplifies humanity's distinctive potential. Creativity in music is one branch of that potential. But it needs an education to flourish – that is the essence of musical literacy.

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