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Tending the gardens of music

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The sixth in a series titled "Lengthened shadows."

America may be a young country, but it fairly dominated music in the twentieth century. When I say music, I mean classical music, but the statement applies equally to popular music—maybe even with more force. Think of Gershwin, Rodgers, Porter, and the jazz greats, just for starters. It all went wrong in about 1970—you're free to pick your own date—but that is another long, sour essay.

In classical music, America's strength is little short of astonishing. We are talking about a European art form, which the United States embraced with gusto. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, Mozart was already twenty; America had a lot of mud (and political genius and some other things). By the Civil War, we had little to commend us but Louis Moreau Gottschalk. But by the end of World War II, we were rolling.

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Of course, Europe helped us immensely, by persecuting—when not trying to kill—so many of its people. America grew to dominance in classical music partly by default, as it did in other areas. Conductors like Reiner, Szell, and Solti may not have chosen to have American careers, but those were the careers they wound up having. Our musical institutions were built on the talent and drive of European émigrés. And those institutions are healthy now, despite clamorous claiming to the contrary. Will they continue to be healthy—even dominant—as the twenty-first century progresses? Probably so, as long as America remains welcoming, ambitious, and free.

To remark the preeminence of America is not to say that Europe is nothing—not at all. Vienna is still a worthy music capital, and Berlin has much to offer, and so does London, not to mention numerous smaller places, such as Oslo. But the United States is still the place where the action is, where big careers are made, where music-making is most predictably excellent—in the orchestral hall, in the opera house, and elsewhere. An acknowledgement of this should have no odor of chauvinism whatever; it is a matter of objectivity. Music is a universal, not a national, enterprise anyway, and people from all over the world come to America to make music, rendering this activity not so much American as human.

The death of classical music is frequently proclaimed, and it has ever been thus. As Charles Rosen once wrote, "The death of classical music is perhaps its oldest tradition." The arguments in favor of death (if you will) are so tired and weak they are hardly worth confronting anymore. But we are usually drawn in. In my experience, some people actually enjoy predicting, or announcing, the death of classical music, because, when they do, others are apt to nod sadly and knowingly. To proclaim the death of classical music marks the proclaimer as a defender of civilization, and a foe of the destroyers.

One who doggedly counters the death idea is Gary Graffman, the pianist and director of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He was even moved to title a recent speech "Dead Again"! He noted that he kept having to give essentially the same speech, because prophecies of doom would not let up. "Disaster is always just around the corner," he said. But "one advantage of having reached the age of pontification"—Graffman is in his mid-seventies—"is that I actually *lived* through experiences identical to those which are now considered unique to our present philistine conditions." He went on to give multiple examples, many of them amusing. Consider this: In 1961, RCA Victor wanted Horowitz to record an album of popular music. His wife, Wanda—the daughter of Toscanini—shouted to an executive, "Better you should open a whorehouse!" RCA canceled the pianist's contract. Somehow, he survived.

When Graffman was coming up, the music business was puny compared with today. In the late 1940s, "there were only two major concert managements, with a total of about 40 pianists between them." In 2001, *Musical America*—a professional bible—listed 624 pianists. "So maybe we should be worrying more about glut than decline." Moreover, at mid-century, "New York had only one large concert hall, and—believe me, because I was there—very few performances were anywhere near sold out." For Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Heifetz? Yes. But for Serkin, Milstein, and Piatigorsky, Carnegie Hall was not even half full. No one thought this condition odd or alarming. Indeed, "a half-empty (or half-full) hall" was "the norm."

Zarin Mehta is eloquent on the subject of glut, as he is on other subjects. (Mehta is the executive director of the New York Philharmonic, and the brother of the conductor Zubin.) "If people think that classical music was healthier in earlier decades," he says, "they should investigate how many seats were available then versus now." The success of classical music in the 1960s and 1970s, when

orchestras became full-time instead of part-time, "led to an explosion in every city"—and not just large ones, but simple burbs. Communities wanted their own orchestras. "Many, many more seats became available for classical music." So "if ticket sales are deemed soft today, perhaps it's a question of supply."

I will take a little tour of the American music world, looking in on various facets. But here is a basic point: How you think classical music is doing depends, in large measure, on what your expectations are. If you expect classical music to be as popular as popular music, you will be sorely disappointed. As I frequently have cause to say to people, "That's why they call it popular music, you know." There will always be a type that can't stand that the broad public fails to share his concerns, passions, loves. Many such people have an evangelizing, proselytizing spirit—they can hardly sleep at night knowing that their neighbors prefer musical dross to gold. They will not reconcile themselves to the fact that classical music will always be, as it has always been, a minority taste. But the minority—lucky us—has an abundance before it.

The great mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne said to me, in an interview, "Classical music is under assault in this country." This is an understandable—if strikingly dark—point of view, for in some ways we are slipping. For example, music education in grades K through 12 has all but ceased. And the song recital—a major Horne concern—is dismayingly rare. But in other respects, we are going gangbusters: Chamber music has exploded, for instance. You can hardly walk a block without encountering a chamber-music concert, or festival. As Gary Graffman pointed out to me, there used to be only the Budapest String Quartet, and its most prominent member, Alexander (Sasha) Schneider, liked to recall, "Vee vent by bus." Now there is a comparatively huge number of musicians who make a living in chamber music, and they don't go by bus.

Even in areas where we seem to be distressed, the news is mixed. The recording industry is currently moribund, but why? Because the record stores are groaning with albums already made. Never has so much music been available to so many, and so cheaply. As Zarin Mehta commented, "I started buying records when I was sixteen or seventeen. I don't go to record stores anymore, because I have essentially everything I want. Do I need a fifth recording of the *Ring* cycle?" Furthermore, the Internet is now seen as a great robber of recordings, but it may prove a boon to music in the future. In addition, musicians are making CDs in their own homes or studios, at little expense, and selling them to interested parties.

So the business of music will evolve, as it always has. We may not be able to foresee its forms—but we can count on musical life.

For orchestras, times have changed dramatically since mid-century. Then, you could hardly make a living as an orchestral musician, even in the best orchestras. "The men," as they were called, had to sell shoes, paint houses, and do other odd jobs in the summer, just to make ends meet. A fifty-two-week contract was only a dream; it is now an entrenched reality. To work in an orchestra is not to take a vow of poverty; pay in one of the big orchestras begins at about $100,000 a

year; it soon rises.

Even aside from the top orchestras, there is an embarrassment of riches. Jack McAuliffe, chief operating officer of the American Symphony Orchestra League, reports that there are about 1,800 orchestras in the fifty states. Of these 1,800, about 600 are either youth, conservatory, or collegiate orchestras. They are "important for the development of both orchestras and audiences," says McAuliffe, "but they aren't necessarily a factor in discussing the economics of orchestras today." Of the remaining 1,200 "adult" orchestras, "you have orchestras in which everyone is paid, and, at the other end, orchestras in which no one is paid. Of the 1,200, about 350 fall into the category of professional orchestras, where the majority of members are paid, and participating for professional reasons, not merely for enjoyment."

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In the past couple of seasons—since September 11—orchestras have had trouble, as many businesses and other enterprises have. But, as McAuliffe notes, the decade of the 1990s was "probably the best ever for orchestras, with record attendance." About 32 million seats were filled in the 2000-01 season, up 16 percent from ten years before. "During the late '90s," that roaring time, "virtually every orchestra was showing at least a small surplus, with many in the process of building substantial endowments—and the ones that had them already were increasing them."

Since 9/11, we have, again, been in a "much more challenging time." Most orchestras are worrying, but they are succeeding—because they are knuckling down. "Of the 350 professional orchestras," says McAuliffe, "we're aware of eight that haven't made it—that have either ceased operations or filed for bankruptcy. That is a failure rate of three-quarters of 1 percent a year. For most industries, that would be downright enviable." But, if a couple of orchestras stumble, the media tend to play it in death-of-classical-music tones. To be sure, says McAuliffe, the failure of an orchestra is no fun for that orchestra's community, but part of economic life is that some institutions fail—and then, perhaps, recover, get reconstituted, as has happened with many orchestras. In the late 1980s and early 1990s—another difficult period—eight orchestras went under (by coincidence, the same number that would succumb a decade later). In time, however, each of those eight communities gained an orchestra of approximately the same size and scope of the one it lost. For example, the Denver Symphony came back as the Colorado Symphony. The orchestra in Birmingham came back as the Alabama Symphony. Etc. In most such cases, the same basic group plays under a new name, and under different governance.

Quite recently, Pittsburgh suffered a bankruptcy scare. The orchestra there is superb, bearing a storied past. But through the years, the PSO was not supported much by the community at large—that is, with donations—because a few prominent citizens, most of them named Heinz, took care of it. Pittsburghers in general did not have the sense that they needed to contribute in order to have an orchestra. But the prospect of bankruptcy jolted them awake—and they responded with their contributions, utterly unwilling to see their orchestra expire, or even flag.

McAuliffe sums up: "Orchestras are still a robust part of the artistic life of an awful lot of communities. In fact, they are often centerpieces of that artistic life, forming the basis of opera companies, dance companies, music education in schools" (such as it is). Orchestras will never "just work," without effort—"it really takes dedication." But "interest is this art form isn't dying; it's just an expensive form of art to support."

Not only are today's orchestras robust, they have sturdy homes to live in—in many cases, new ones. Listen to Robert Harth, executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall: "To those who would sing the swan song of classical music's death, I would point to the fact that the most talked about building on the planet was built for classical music." Harth made that statement in October 2003, and he was speaking of Disney Hall in Los Angeles, designed by Frank Gehry. "It's a magnificent building, a life-changing building, not just for the L.A. Philharmonic, but for that entire city. And that makes a dramatic and positive statement about classical music." Jack McAuliffe would point to Newark, too—yes, Newark: "The New Jersey Performing Arts Center was built in the middle of nothing, and it has spawned all sorts of development. It is now a pleasant experience to go to Newark. I guarantee you that wasn't the case ten years ago." And "the New Jersey Symphony is thriving."

Other new halls include the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, Benaroya Hall in Seattle, the Max M. Fisher Center in Detroit (nicknamed the Max), the Meyerson Center in Dallas, Bass Hall in Fort Worth, Jacoby Hall in Jacksonville, and the Schuster Center in Dayton. Robert Harth adds, "Atlanta is building a new concert hall, and Toronto just redid theirs. Severance Hall in Cleveland has been completely revamped. This is 'dying'?"

But Marilyn Horne sounds a cautionary note. In Greenville, South Carolina, they built the Peace Center, a fabulous performing-arts complex. (It is named for a philanthropic family named Peace, not for the concept.) The center "has a recital hall, a concert hall, and extraordinary acoustics," says Horne,

> but, as the man responsible told me, "It's easier to raise money than to put a body in a seat." So what did he have to bring in, to put bodies in the seats? *Les Miz*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and so on. There's nothing wrong with bringing those pieces in, but it's not classical music, and that is worrying.

It is, indeed: but, in 2003-04, the Peace Center had not only *Les Miz*—and *Seussical*, for that matter—but the Emerson String Quartet (part of this chamber boom I mentioned).

A second cautionary note comes from Sedgwick Clark, editor of *Musical America*. He is concerned about the cost of all this music building. "We must take stock of what we're spending, and control our costs. I look at Disney Hall, and it's an extraordinary thing, but it's going to cost an arm and a leg to maintain." At Disney, "the cheapest seat will be $35. To sit in the orchestra will be $120. For a concert! Maybe I've just gotten old, but the fact of the matter is, $120 for a concert—how many CDs can I buy for that amount? This is a serious problem." Our new orchestral halls are impressive, Clark notes, but "if they're not sold out, or close to sold out, the orchestras have a terrible time." There are those generous salaries to look after, and employee benefits, and pension plans.

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Fundraising in music is a special art. Beverly Sills knows quite a bit about it, and about fundraising in general. "I raised $100 million for the March of Dimes," she informs me,

> and hundreds of millions for other charities. Medical causes do better than music. If you have some disease to cure, you're not going to want to fork over millions for another production of *La Bohéme*. But I say in all my speeches: "Art is the signature of civilization." We dance for joy, our hearts sing. When we're little children, we take crayons and know immediately how to scribble. When my husband and I moved into a new apartment, the first thing we did, poor as we were, was paint the walls and hang up Mama's pictures. In the car, we want the radio on. We don't want to be in a silent ambiance.

So she tells her audiences that the arts are not a luxury, and they—at least for her, a woman hard to turn down—come through.

Mention of Beverly Sills leads us to the opera. It's not easy to be gloomy about this slice of music, no matter how hard you try. Marc Scorca, the president of Opera America, supplies the essential facts: In the second half of the twentieth century, opera in the United States grew enormously—it was practically a boom. Opera America now has 115 member companies; there are companies in all but a handful of states. Aside from these, "there are many smaller, community-based endeavors, and lots of university and conservatory opera programs that put on performances for paying audiences." Of the 115, fully three-quarters have been established since 1960.

Understandably, opera is "the most expensive of the traditional performing arts," as Scorca says. "One of the reasons we see opera-company formation as a relatively recent phenomenon is that the financial and infrastructural requirements of opera are considerable: It takes a long time for a community to have a critical mass of audience members and donors prepared to sustain a company. You can't put on an opera very spontaneously." No, you have to have a chorus and an orchestra; you need technicians, stagehands, a costumer, a stage designer—and that's not even

mentioning the soloists. Plus, opera "is traditionally performed in a theater with an orchestra pit, and not every community has one of those. You can put on a play with two characters in a store front. You can have a dance program in a loft, as long as it doesn't have too many pillars." But opera is a formidable undertaking.

Therefore, the public must want it, for these companies to be born and to succeed. Scorca explains that opera is "a multimedia art form in a multimedia world." It includes texts, visual images, drama, often dance—"and these components are very much part of our popular culture." Opera

> doesn't ask you to sit and enjoy a purely auditory experience. It involves you in every way that other contemporary entertainments involve you. As people seek a classical-arts experience that is still based on the multimedia sensory experience they have enjoyed in the popular culture, opera is the classical art form they can respond to.

One boost to opera was the advent of titles—supertitles, seatback titles, those lines of words that help an audience member understand what's happening onstage. Says Beverly Sills, "I worked very hard to bring titles into the opera. Jimmy said, 'Over my dead body.'" (That would be James Levine, artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera.) But titles came to the Met, to the satisfaction of most everybody, and with Levine still breathing in the pit. Marc Scorca confirms that titles made for "a huge improvement in reaching out to new audiences." Before, there was always a severe language barrier to overcome. Now people do not sit flummoxed (except by plots and other operatic strangeness). Some traditionalists maintain that titles break an important visual connection to the performer—and they are right—but most of us judge it a sacrifice worth making.

The reigning house in America, of course—and in the world—is the Met. It has no real rivals, as its general manager, Joseph Volpe, points out (not boasting); it is a unique institution. There are other companies as renowned—La Scala in Milan, Covent Garden in London, the Staatsoper in Vienna—but no one company that does as much. Volpe notes that La Scala puts on seventy or eighty performances a season: "To be general manager there would be a semi-retirement job"! The Met has a full-time orchestra and a full-time chorus, and "it's important that they work"—more or less continuously. In Vienna, "they're known for putting on a production with no rehearsal at all, or just one rehearsal. They're also known for having one leading cast member," with the rest plucked from the company. "We are, and have been historically, noted for having top singers." But, Volpe continues,

> as the season expands, this becomes more and more difficult, particularly considering travel. A lot depends on the dollar. Our fees are lower than in the European houses. In Italy, they'll pay $30,000 for a single performance. They'll deny it, but it's true. Our top fee is $15,000. So, what's going to happen is, some singers will spend more time in Europe than in the United States.

Volpe cites Bryn Terfel, the beloved bass-baritone from Wales:

> He has three children, and it's easy for him to jump on a plane and fly to a city in Europe, sing, and go home. To come to the Met is a large commitment. You end up here a long period of time.

> You can't fly home to be back with the family, as you can in Europe. The days of great singers staying in America are over.

Like everyone else, the Met has taken a financial hit in the post-9/11 environment. Ticket sales and donations are down. But the institution is fundamentally sound. As Volpe observes, a house that survived the Great Depression can survive a lot. You just have to roll with events, and not panic.

A particular concern in recent days has been whether the famous Met radio broadcasts will continue. They began in 1931, and in 1940 came under the sponsorship of Texaco. In 2003, that company—now ChevronTexaco—announced that it would quit sponsoring the broadcasts. This was no small matter to the Met, because, as Volpe points out, radio is responsible for a good deal of its national and international reputation. Three million people listen to the broadcasts in the United States, and seven million listen in forty-one other countries. "That's very important to the Met's image." It takes about $7 million a year to produce these radio broadcasts. At this writing, the Met has not secured permanent sponsorship, but Volpe and Beverly Sills—who is chairman of the Met's board—are confident that they will. There is little reason to doubt them.

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About the prospect of making records again, it's hard to be as confident. The recording industry is now stagnant, as I have mentioned. Opera CDs coming out today, says Volpe, tend to be produced in Europe, "with orchestras that are paid a very small fee." Unionized orchestras in the U.S. would have none of that. "What's been happening in our country is that record companies have been saying for years and years and years, 'We can't afford to pay what the musicians demand, and we can't make any money off of classical music.' So business has dried up." And, "frankly, how many *Rosenkavalier*s do you need?" (Back to the glut problem.) Continues Volpe, "The only way the Met will get back into recording is if we produce recordings live, without paying fees, and then have some kind of revenue sharing with our people."

The general manager recounts a conversation with Renée Fleming, the celebrated soprano, who opened the 2003-04 Met season as Violetta. "Renée was unhappy because there was no television for her *Traviata*. I told her that we would broadcast on radio and that maybe, someday, there would be a recording of that." In truth, "that's the real McCoy,"the live broadcast, with no touching up, no corrective takes, "and I don't think it's so horrible" to represent the company that way.

Volpe and the Met are often criticized for producing too few new operas—for being a mere "museum," if not a "mausoleum." The GM protests,

> If you look at the last ten years, our track record with contemporary works is probably as good as any opera company's. But understand something: Commissioned works are very, very expensive. We have to fund the commissioning and fund the production. If we can do one every three years, that would be a nice pace. What we can do depends on our financial situation.

Sure, in the good old days, the Met produced one new opera after another. But "do you know what?" asks Volpe. "Composers would come in off the street, shove a manuscript into your hand, and say, 'Here's an opera. Wanna put it on?' They didn't start with, 'First give me $350,000, then . . .' And remember, we rehearse what we perform: We don't put things onstage unrehearsed." Rehearsal, like time—being time—is money.

The Met seems permanent, unbudgeable, like the U.S. Capitol. Will it be forever? "I think it will be forever," says the GM,

> because there are so many people who love this art form. The question is, What does that mean? The Met in the form of today? Maybe not. Does it mean thirty-two weeks of performances a year? Maybe not. So the question is—I hate the word "evolve." When I first started out, I hated that word. I said, "Don't tell me about 'evolve.' You've got to be in charge and decide things, not just let them evolve!"

But Joe Volpe is more comfortable with that concept now, as one is often forced to become.

A word about the audience—the concertgoers, the operagoers. From time immemorial, people have fretted over the "graying" of the audience, and the relative paucity of the young. This should not be high on any list of worries. As Sedgwick Clark puts it, "You come to appreciate music more when you' re older. Also, you tend to have more time and money." Carnegie Hall's Harth says, "If you look at pictures taken during Toscanini' s concerts, you will see that the audience is a sea of gray hair. I assume those attendees are now in another realm. But people still come for concerts conducted by Simon Rattle," and these tend also to be gray-headed.

Jack McAuliffe of the Orchestra League notes that the median age of an audience member—for an orchestral concert—is "somewhere in the mid-fifties." And "when you say that, most people think, 'Gee, the concert audience is over fifty-five' or so. But what it really means is that half the people are younger than that, and half are older—sometimes a lot older. What are we supposed to do? Kick people out when they're seventy or eighty? They keep coming." The quest—even lust—for younger people sometimes gets a little comic. They are, for many, a holy grail. Concert presenters want the young, the same as churches do. Experience has shown, however, that people take a while to come to both—that is, to music and to church.

But we should not be overly blithe. McAuliffe stresses a key difference between today and yesterday: "Most young people," now, "have grown up with absolutely no exposure to classical music. People knew something about music a generation or two ago. Even if they didn't want to, they learned something about it. Today, it's easy to avoid, and even if you want to learn about it, it's hard to get." In the past, orchestras were "the provider of the end product," and now they are

"the introduction" to it. Orchestras, opera companies, and other institutions are doing what they can to fight musical ignorance, by providing pre-concert lectures, notes on the Internet, and the like.

Zarin Mehta says that it is not only lack of education that gives pause, but "lack of espousal by the media." The larger culture seems unwilling to embrace and instill classical music. Therefore, Mehta wonders whether the gray heads will keep coming, as they always have. Not a few critics maintain that younger people would be attracted by additional contemporary music, as opposed to the standard repertory. Programming is a rich subject, demanding an essay, or a book, unto itself. But suffice it to say that evidence for this claim—newer would attract younger—is thin on the ground. Nor does common sense support it. As Mehta says, "A certain group of young people may go to an avant-garde evening, if it is created in a certain way, but when you talk about a symphony orchestra playing new music, it is as difficult for a young person as it is for an older person." Really, "if someone has not been exposed to much music, do you give him a festival of Beethoven or a festival of Ligeti?"

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Now to the death of the recital, or at least its diminishment. This is especially troubling in that a recital is, for many of us, an incomparably satisfying musical experience. Ignat Solzhenitsyn is a pianist and conductor (and son of the great man). Of recitals, he says, "They're going down the tubes. Apparently, they're too boring, they require too much concentration." And the explosion of chamber music has bitten badly into recitals, as presenting organizations "just view them as too risky, economically."

Of course, recitals still abound at Carnegie Hall. Indeed, Carnegie has opened a new hall within its complex—Zankel Hall—that will see a great many recitals. But Robert Harth does not necessarily expect a recital to sell out. He points to one of the best events—in his view, and mine—of the 2002-03 season, an all-unaccompanied recital courtesy of the great Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov. "Let me ask you something," says Harth:

> What's a successful concert? Carnegie Hall has 2,800 seats. For Vengerov, 2,000 were in attendance. I said to my board, "Is it not a success because 800 seats were empty? Or is it a success because 2,000 were filled?" It's absolutely a success, if it's a great concert and those who were there had a wonderful time. It becomes an *unsuccessful* concert when, as an administrator, you budget to sell 2,500. But if you budget to sell 1,500 or 1,800, you'll be happy.

Harth knows that Carnegie Hall will lose money—virtually all classical-music organizations do. He just wants to lose it wisely and enrichingly (in the nonmonetary sense!).

Since 1994, Marilyn Horne has devoted a good bit of her time to the Marilyn Horne Foundation. I have frequently described this organization as a "point of light," to adapt the famous—or once famous—term used by the first President Bush. It is dedicated, in particular, to the perpetuation of the song recital. Is it really true, I ask the great mezzo, that there are fewer recitals now than there used to be? "Oh, my God yes, please. I started going to song recitals when I was a child, and I started singing them in about 1960. From that time on, I could count on doing twenty or thirty recitals a year, depending on my availability. Some years were heavy with concerts [with orchestra] and some years were heavy with opera, but there was no question that the [recital] opportunities were there." The number of "community concerts" has greatly decreased. And those series that remain "seldom take classical singers. They don't take them at all, unless the singer is a big star. So where is the younger singer going to get experience?"

Horne faults the "dumbing down of America" and the tendency to "play to the lowest common denominator." Television, computers, and other innovations play their distracting roles. Opera, the singer concedes, is doing much better than the vocal recital, which is odd, in a way, because recitals are infinitely cheaper to present. "But you have to have people in the seats," regardless of the cost of staging the event. "And opera is much more glamorous, of course," suited to our "very visual age. You can see this is in the way casting is done, and the fact that the stage director and the scene designer have much more power than they used to have. If you read an opera review, you see that seven-eighths of it are about the production." The music is almost an afterthought.

A special shame about the decline of the vocal recital is that there are so many today who do it well. In lieder alone, I might name Michael Schade, Christine Schäfer, Thomas Quasthoff, Marjana Lipovšek, and Thomas Hampson, and I have barely gotten started. I, of course, have heard them, in some cases repeatedly—but I frequent halls in New York and Salzburg. Marilyn Horne has sung in all fifty states—the last of which was Wyoming, where she performed just as her (classical) career was closing. (She now does pop evenings, and marvelously, too.) Whatever the cause for optimism in other areas, it seems clear that the flame of the song recital—and of the recital in general—needs serious tending, which Horne, of course, is laudably engaged in doing.

We now turn our attention to that "culprit," chamber music. America has progressed far beyond the Budapest String Quartet, the famed four who "vent by bus." There are dozens of string quartets, and other chamber ensembles, making a fine living. As Solzhenitsyn says, "Look at the numbers: The quantity of series and festivals devoted exclusively to chamber music is increasing every year." The Chamber Music Society of Philadelphia, for instance, started off with a handful of concerts, and "now they're doing seventy." Chamber music "has gone from precisely that—a private, intimate affair [in a chamber]—to a major staple of the concert stage."

A wag once said about chamber music, “It’s like the cockroach: Try as you might, you’ll never stamp it out.”

The leading chamber-music institution in the country is the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Founded in 1969, it was a mere “niche-filler,” to use Solzhenitsyn’s term, but it rapidly grew, spawning many imitators. Its artistic director is David Shifrin, who on the side is one of the world’s foremost clarinetists. He confirms that presenters find chamber music affordable and even profitable. “You can do it in someone’s living room or you can do it in Avery Fisher Hall. Organizations that can’t afford to pay stagehands or a high rent can present a chamber ensemble of the highest quality—they can do it in a high-school auditorium.” If you have any funds at all, “you have a great shot at getting a world-class performance in great and compelling repertoire.” But “as much as I enjoy playing chamber music, these concerts have sort of taken the place of recitals. I wish there were room for both.” To be sure, presenters will still engage “the superstar pianists, but not that many violinists or cellists—to say nothing of clarinetists, flutists, or French horn players—have a shot at a recital.” So the sonata repertoire, in particular, goes unheard. “Most presenters around the country go for star power, go for box office. If they can’t have a famous name, they want more people onstage.”

As for the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Shifrin believes that it will continue to flourish, if “with some bumps here and there,“ as in most any enterprise. And the festivals keep proliferating. “For a long time, there have been invitations to play really good music, with really good people, in wonderful places from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Now it’s even wider. Next year I’m going back to a chamber-music festival in Tucson in March.” For a quarter-century, Shifrin has been involved with Chamber Music Northwest, in Portland. That institution now operates year-round, not just in the summer. “They are able to do wonderful things there, in a city of about a million. Arguably the highest-quality cultural institution in Portland is that chamber-music festival.”

A wag once said about chamber music, “It’s like the cockroach: Try as you might, you’ll never stamp it out.” An unlovely comparison, perhaps, but clear.

In the field of education, the good news is at the top: Conservatories have rarely had it better. Endowments are full, and so are the practice rooms—full to overflowing, actually. Leading conservatories are the Curtis Institute, the Juilliard School, the Peabody Institute, and so on—names that have been renowned for decades. Newer on the block is the Colburn School in Los Angeles; the San Francisco Conservatory is still going strong farther north. Then there are the many music schools in universities, led, probably, by Indiana and Michigan. As Solzhenitsyn observes, there is “an obscene number” of music majors in the United States today—on the order of 100,000 a year. There are not plum jobs for all these aspirers, even if they were equal to them. But those who fall short of their highest goal may teach or otherwise stay close to music.

At Juilliard, applications increase by 10 percent annually. The school admits about 8 percent of those who apply. Joseph Polisi, the president of Juilliard, is adamant that his school provides a better education than it did, say, in 1930: For one thing, “we educate the entire human being, not just the artist." Students are presented with a liberal arts curriculum, and they study every aspect of music, not just their specialty. In addition, says Polisi, “we preach ‘the artist as citizen,’” seeking to endow the student with “a sense of responsibility for making sure that the arts flourish in society.”

People who tend to look for a dark lining say, “Well, yes, the better music schools are at a peak, but the students aren’t American—they come from overseas, mostly from Asia.” True, but, as Zarin Mehta says, “What do you mean by American?” Many of these kids become American in due course, along with the family members who surround them, just as people have done for generations. Polisi reports that 70 percent of the pianists studying at Juilliard come from abroad. The foreign country supplying the most students overall is South Korea, followed by Canada, Taiwan, Communist China, Japan, and then the former Soviet republics. Marilyn Horne reports a similar pattern at the Music Academy of the West (Santa Barbara), where she is voice director. We have gone from a time when Americans went abroad to study music and become musicians, to a time when the world beats a path to the American door.

Joseph Polisi has no doubt about Juilliard’s staying-power:

> I often get the Chicken Little question: Is the sky falling? Will music survive? Of course it will. I’m surrounded every day by about 800 absolutely motivated, talented, disciplined, energized young people. There’s no way in the world they’re going to be stopped in music, dance, and drama. They will create audiences, and they will be the leaders of the future. That’s what I ask them to be. Yes, the audiences of the New York Philharmonic are grayer than for Pearl Jam [a rock group]. There has never been a large niche for classical music. But it will survive.

We have a glut problem, however. Horne recalls saying fully twenty-five years ago, “We should close all the conservatories for five years,” just to give the job market a break. And “now the situation is worse!” For woodwind and brass players, life has always been tricky: Zarin Mehta tells me that, for a recent tuba opening in the Philharmonic, over 120 people applied. One result of all this redundant talent is that players tend to be quite good, everywhere. David Delta Gier, a conductor with wide experience both in America and abroad, says, “You should hear some of the players in Sioux Falls!” (The orchestra there is the South Dakota Symphony.) The sad part of our cornucopia is that many musicians wind up disappointed. Gier knows many fellow conductors—or would-be conductors—who have not had careers, or satisfying ones, simply because of the number of podiums available (versus all those who want to stand on them). “You get into a great school, you study with a great teacher, you work hard, you do everything right, and you think you ought to be rewarded. But a lot of people have been made to realize that that’s not necessarily the case.”

It would take a very hard-headed person to state the cold fact that no one asked anyone to pursue a career in music—or in film, or in journalism, or in anything else. But he would not be wrong.

The decline in music education from kindergarten through high school is a bit of a puzzle. Contrary to what many believe, America's public schools are awash in money. Never has per-pupil expenditure been higher. In some places, it is scandalously high (for what it produces). But music has been downgraded, meaning that it is almost surely a question of priority.

Most people of a certain age—people who love music—can remember with fondness particular music teachers. Marilyn Horne had two of them with whom she kept in touch till the end of their lives. In fact, when she was making a Christmas album (with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir), she remembered a carol from her schooldays, but could not locate the music. So she called the relevant teacher and asked her for it. "All she had was the melody, because we sang without any accompaniment—we only had a pitch pipe." Schools across the country rarely had elaborate facilities. Little Marilyn and her classmates—in Bradford, Pennsylvania—had what was called a "playroom," down in the basement. But there was a sense of caring about music, and the other arts, and nurturing them.

Obviously, there are pockets of excellence—of caring—in primary and secondary schools. As David Shifrin says, "I wouldn't count this country out." It is a big, continental nation, with thousands of school systems. But where music education does exist, it tends to be "aesthetic," according to Joseph Polisi, rather than "performance-based." In aesthetic education, "you just *talk* about the music. You don't play anything. You talk about a symphony or an opera or a piece of chamber music. That's easier to teach, because the teacher doesn't need to be an expert in the oboe, for example. The downside is, that kind of education doesn't stick, in my opinion." Performance-based education is far and away preferable. But we have apparently reached a point where any education at all is a welcome surprise.

As to the recording industry, it is certainly not true that no CDs are coming out—they are. Acres of them. But fewer are being made than in the past, particularly in the U.S. We could live off recordings already made pretty much forever, as almost all the known repertory has been recorded, often many times over. But that would be no fun. First, new music needs to be recorded—and it regularly is, despite the griping of composers and their advocates—and, second, it would be a shame not to capture musicians of today, or of the future, even in the most familiar repertory. Yes, we should have Renée Fleming's Violetta. And we should have Michael Schade's *Schöne Müllerin*, no matter how good Fritz Wunderlich's is.

I will share an anecdote that speaks to the nervous state of recording. It comes from Marilyn Horne, talking about Deborah Voigt, one of the most important sopranos now on the scene. Voigt was scheduled to appear in a gala for Horne's foundation. But she called Horne to say, "I would never do this to you, but I have a chance to record Wagner duets with Domingo, and it would be at the exact same time, and I feel I can't pass it up, because I simply don't get to record." Needless to

say, Horne understood, and released her; the recording—a superlative one on EMI—was made.

Horne is incensed at one tactic of the record companies:

> They're marketing singers as opera singers who aren't opera singers! Andrea Bocelli, Charlotte Church . . . Whatever else they are—and a person may like them—they're not opera singers. I let out a yell the other day, because I was doing the crossword puzzle, as I do daily, and one clue was "Tune for Bocelli." It turned out to be "aria," and I went, Â®&*@!" I wish him well, and he has a place, but please don't call him an opera singer.

This would be especially misleading, according to Horne, to those who are new to operatic music or to classical music in general. I could argue that Bocelli and other such "soft" singers are good for music—partly as a starting point for the public, a kind of gateway—but Horne, whose musical standards are rigorous, has a point.

We should also understand that not all companies have flopped with classical CDs. As Benjamin Ivry reported in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "independent" labels such as Naxos, Chandos, and Harmonia Mundi are more than getting by. "Naxos is thriving," said Klaus Heymann, that label's founder, "and other independents who make interesting recordings people want to buy are also doing well. . . . What has been killed, or rather committed suicide [!], are the big-budget, all-star productions which got so expensive that they could never recoup their investment." And Bernard Coutz, founder of Harmonia Mundi, remarked sensibly, "No one killed classical music, which makes up part of the patrimony of humanity." (In 1997, the critic Norman Lebrecht published an incendiary book called *Who Killed Classical Music?*) "Across 2,000 years of history, classical music, like painting or fine cuisine, has not necessarily attracted great crowds . . . but it has always interested people who by luck or talent have learned to love it." That is an attitude of maturity.

> Classical radio stations are dying—even when you can make money in classical, you can make more in pop.

A major issue for the first part of our century is, as Robert Harth puts it, "How do you legislate the use of music over the Internet? How do you not overpay, not underpay, not take advantage of musicians?" Harth expects that people will "get their musical fix" from the Internet the way they once did from the radio, and that is already occurring. A site called iClassics is offering "webcasts"—a new word that may become as familiar as "broadcasts"—meaning that people can watch and listen to concerts, over the Internet, for free. How, then, does a company make money? As a representative explained to me, the hope is that those watching and listening for free will

come to like the performer, or the music, and thus attend a concert or buy a CD. All involved are still feeling their way around in the new era.

As I mentioned earlier, musicians are beginning to make CDs on their own—without benefit of the big labels—and peddling them themselves. David Shifrin observes that "technology is such that any musician who really wants to be heard, and recorded for posterity, can just go ahead and do it. It costs practically nothing to record and produce CDs, compared to what it used to cost with vinyl." As a result, "you have a proliferation of vanity recordings, plus small labels that have success." The cellist David Finkel makes big-time Deutsche Grammophon recordings with the string quartet of which he is part: the Emerson. But he and his wife—the pianist Wu Han—started www.ArtistLed.com, which they bill as "classical music's first Internet recording company." Other musicians have started similar enterprises. Shifrin notes that "recordings are much easier to find on some websites than they were when you actually had to find a record store, a physical, bricks-and-mortar store. This whole trend is in its infancy."

Here again, we "evolve," to use the word that Joe Volpe has learned to love.

You could be sour about the music industry, if you wanted to be. Classical radio stations are dying—even when you can make money in classical, you can make more in pop. But a person can buy Heifetz in the Brahms and Tchaikovsky concertos for seven bucks. And you can listen to the world's best classical stations via the Internet, wherever they are, and wherever you are. It was said, eons ago, that radio would kill concerts, and then that the LP—mass produced and marketed—would. But concerts kept growing in popularity. Sadly, few orchestras now broadcast nationally. But the musicians' union has a lot to answer for. It may have helped to make its members more prosperous, but it has been self-defeating in other ways. Orchestras don't broadcast nationally—or record much—because of rigid union rules and, if I may, dumb, fruitless greed.

Some lament that classical musicians are ignored today, kept off the tube and *Time* magazine's cover. The critic and scholar Stuart Isacoff informed me that, when Anton Rubinstein first came to this country, he was greeted with a torchlight parade. And yet this day has its celebrities, ones so big they are known by their first names alone: Itzhak and Yo-Yo; Luciano, Plácido, Renée, Bryn. Some critics shudder at the Three Tenors stadium concerts, those vulgar spectacles—yet these may be the same critics who complain that classical music has no connection to the broader public. It is merely human to want things on one's own terms.

Music-lovers are a terribly nostalgic lot, always going on about golden eras (long past, of course) and cluck-clucking over the present. But there are great and historic musicians in every age—we simply tend not to recognize them when they are before us. The present age, in my view, is a thrilling one for singing. I could give you a list—a long one. And, yes, Heifetz and Milstein are dead. But have you heard Hilary Hahn and Maxim Vengerov? Rostropovich is getting old, but have you heard Han-Na Chang? Rostropovich certainly has: The young lady—girl, really—was the first cellist with whom Slava ever recorded, as conductor. Eventually, these young musicians will

teach, and create protégés. Hilary Hahn studied with Jascha Brodsky, who studied with Ysaÿe and Zimbalist. And so it goes.

Our musical institutions will survive because people insist that they do—not a vast number of people, as compared with those who love sports or soda, but enough people. As Sedgwick Clark says, "Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and the rest will always be performed. Always. There's no doubt about it. And, incidentally, I have no problem viewing orchestras [for example] as museums." This is one of the great sneers: that our institutions have become museums. "They *are* museums, no less than the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Museum of Modern Art. And there's nothing wrong with that. That doesn't mean that the orchestras don't play contemporary music—they bring it into the museum, and whether it stays on exhibit remains to be seen." I hasten to add that a museum is not a mausoleum. There is great life—throbbing, comforting, provocative, glorious life—in those musical museums of ours.

It pays to remember, too, that people who have been around for a while tend not to sweat the future of classical music. "The pendulum swings back and forth," says Gary Graffman. Already he has lived "through two or three of these round-trip swings"! To obsess over the fate of classical music, notes Graffman, is like obsessing over the fate of the stock market: We should take the long view, and not get carried away by sharp spikes up or sharp spikes down. Echoing our chairman of the Federal Reserve, I might say that both irrational exuberance and irrational gloom are errors to be avoided. And do not, as Gary Graffman says, make the mistake of thinking that "the audience is limitless." Always there will be classical-music fannies in the seats—just don't create a ridiculous excess of them (seats, that is).

And allow me a final repetition: Our institutions will not prosper by themselves. One has to work at them. One has to tend the gardens of music, and they will indeed grow, or if not grow, at least not die, blooming again every year, to one degree or another. America is lucky in its plenitude of gardeners, and the gardens they make. Amidst all the handwringing—some of it justifiable—we should pause, in gratitude, to fold those hands as well.

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found here.

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