

Kirk O’Riordan

Good Music v. Bad Music

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I would like to begin this essay by making a statement that many will likely find to be at the least counter-intuitive: One can like bad music, and similarly, one can dislike good music.

How can that be? Do we not think music we don’t like is automatically bad? That is usually how we describe music we don’t care for, is it not?

The reason that my seemingly contradictory statement works is because our definitions of what makes music good and bad are in need of significant revision. For most of us, the issue of quality is related directly to the issue of personal taste: so much so that the two are intertwined beyond hope of separation. This is the non-thinker’s guide to musical criticism: it leads us to erroneous conclusions in the least amount of time, and ultimately, makes us lazy as listeners.

How then should we define good and bad? In order to accomplish what will seem to be at first a simple, but increasingly difficult task, we must first accept the premise that there is such a creature as bad music. Many listeners are reluctant to do this, because, after all, music is the universal language, and music can reach everyone emotionally, etc. Maybe so, but just as some writers are more eloquent than others, some composers are as well. A simple tune sung to a young child may have an emotional impact on both child and parent, but it may not possess the intricacy of compositional technique displayed by composers who have by the consensus of many thousands of musicians over in some cases many hundreds of years been deemed “Great.” We could correctly say that “C is for Cookie” is not as good as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, even though “C is for Cookie” has a strong connection with its intended audience and required some creative ability on the part of its composer.

Eloquence in writing requires a command of technique beyond the fundamentals. It goes beyond choosing acceptable words, spelling them correctly, placing them into competent subject-verb sentences, and getting a point across. Great writers are able to

manipulate language and its components so that there are layers of meaning for the reader to decipher. Often, this is accomplished so subtly that the reader may not be aware that there are levels beyond the surface: the clues, though, are there, and when the reader makes a discovery, the impact is profound.

I submit that the recognition of what is great with regard to writing (or for that matter, any art form) is for the most part independent of the reader's personal taste. One can certainly admire the techniques used in the telling of a story without actually enjoying the story (Joyce's *Ulysses*?). Similarly, one can enjoy a story that has little technical merit, but its other qualities mitigate the lack of displayed technical proficiency (the Harry Potter series?).

If, in music, the listener can separate "great" from "enjoyable," the listener can begin to objectively evaluate the music being listened to, and standards can be set and adhered to which help guide the listener along a path of discovery.

Are there objective criteria which can be used to discern great music from mediocre? Yes, I believe there are, but I will stipulate that those criteria are in significant ways affected by the priorities brought to the music by the individual listener. This idea is easy to confuse with personal taste, because often "what I like" is equivalent to "what makes a piece great." This, precisely, is the trap mentioned above, in which what is enjoyable is substituted for what is necessary. A critical listener must avoid this. Instead, one must carefully and rationally decide if a choice made by a composer is more effective than another possibility. What are the advantages of using a tonal language over a serial construction? And the disadvantages? What does that one chord do in the course of the piece, and if that chord were altered, would the piece be as communicative?

These are questions that presuppose a knowledgeable, attentive listener who is willing to ponder these questions over repeated hearings by different performers. This is precisely the kind of listener that concert music requires, and is I think the goal of music appreciation classes (or, at least, it should be). This listener knows enough "great" literature to be able to make intelligent comparisons to less familiar music. While this listener may have been told which pieces are great, and maybe (hopefully?) even why those pieces are great, they can still use these works as a starting point.

Thus, it is not mandatory for one to possess professional-level knowledge to be able to discern good from bad. The difficult process is, though, made much easier with more experience and knowledge. This means that not all of us can be experts, and that some opinions may have more credibility than others. For example, while I feel relatively comfortable making pronouncements in public about the quality of certain pieces of music, for me to make similar pronouncements about a surgeon's ability to repair damaged brain tissue at the microscopic level would be ridiculous. I simply do not have the experience, or the fundamental (let alone advanced) knowledge necessary to make any reasonable evaluation of said surgeon's abilities. I must rely on people with that experience and knowledge to give me a starting point. I am ok with this.

The more I learn about music, the less I feel like I know. I continually need to find people whom I consider to be experts and in whom I have trust to help me continue to refine my own objective standards for the evaluation of music. Because of this process, I can constantly and consistently increase my ability to process and evaluate music. I am reminded of how infinite the body of musical knowledge is, and rather than being intimidated, I am inspired. It is my most sincere hope that you will embrace music in the same way: there is always more to learn, no matter how much experience and knowledge we have. If you are not afraid of that, then you will likely find intellectual and artistic fulfillment throughout your life.

The pre-requisite to the ability to identify good music is knowledge and the willingness to work to acquire it. The process of creating useable, objective standards by which we can evaluate the music we hear is then the reason this knowledge is acquired. With your indulgence, I would like to suggest a few criteria that may serve as a starting place for you as you begin your own journey. It is likely that you will alter these criteria in many ways as you gain more experience. That is good.

The first of my criteria for great music is arguably the most important: great music must possess the potential to communicate to its listeners, and must have the potential to be able to do so to future generations of listeners. I use the word "potential" purposefully here because not every listener is able to receive the message from a piece of music in every hearing. Like great written literature which often requires multiple readings, it may take repeated listenings and intense study to fully understand what the

composer is attempting to say. When this happens, it is likely that these repeated hearings will continue to hold meaning for the listener: the challenge of figuring the piece out becomes part of the appeal. Do not pieces that are too easy to figure out lose their appeal after a short time? Is this not why the trends of popular music recycle weekly? If we get bored with a piece it is because it likely does not have the potential for communication to future generations. The cliché about “standing the test of time” describes precisely this phenomenon.

Additionally, these “future generations of listeners” may be listening long after the composer has passed on. If the music does not speak to those listeners—if the music does not present commentary on the human condition which remains universal and relevant—it will vanish. While a composer can document in prose that which they have wished to express, it will still need to be evident in the music, and music which loses its expressive potential with time does so because the message is not relevant to contemporary audiences. There are, of course, examples of music that becomes relevant again after a period of irrelevance, and this is evidence of the continually evolving nature of the definition of “great.”

The next criterion for identifying great music is that the composer must have had a driving, artistic reason for the composition of that piece. This is closely connected with the message, and is probably the most difficult to adequately define. It is true that many of the great masterworks of the Western Art Music tradition were composed because someone paid the composer a great deal of money to create the work. While I cannot disagree, I believe that an artist has no choice but to create art. It is as natural as breathing, and equally necessary. And while we all need to eat and pay our bills, we artists will continue to create art regardless of whether or not we are getting paid for it. That which we need to say must be said. Thus the “need to say” actually motivates the work, and the money merely allows the composer to focus. One can find examples of music composed for purely intellectual reasons: this music is often alienating to the listener, precisely because there is no emotional message, and therefore no artistic reason for its composition.

A third criterion is that great music requires significant technical command on the part of the composer to create. While there certainly are pieces which could be described

as simple (or at least *more* simple)—such as Barber’s Adagio—that still qualify as great, the amount of ability on the part of composers to achieve greatness is staggering: the composer must have sufficient command as to be able to choose to use simplicity when it is most appropriate, and have the good taste and courage to do so. Great music requires this ability.

Finally, great music allows for the existence of multiple simultaneous interpretations, each with more or less equal credibility. While this might be a corollary to the first criterion listed here, it also speaks to the idea of great music allowing the listener to explore several ideas about why a piece was composed and ultimately arrive at conclusions which may have evolved significantly over time. By contrast, popular music cannot do this: beyond the surface aesthetics of pop music, the meanings are not able to withstand scrutiny. It is the fact that great music can and often does inspire debate (and occasionally, as in the case of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, a full scale riot) that must distinguish great music from mediocre.

The reader is free to argue to what degree or other any of these criteria apply to a certain piece of music. In fact, applying these criteria universally, to all music one hears, will be an illuminating exercise, one which will likely yield an epiphany about what each listener needs from the music he or she enjoys.

And, now having gone through the process, we can understand why one can enjoy bad music, and not enjoy great music. If the surface aesthetics are sufficient, all music is good. If more is required for satisfaction, then one must be more precise, and more ruthless, with one’s standards and the application of those standards. The choice here is similar to eating only dessert: the aesthetics of ice cream are wonderful, and ice cream has a well-defined role in a meal. We can enjoy it for what it does, or is supposed to do. But to rely on ice cream for sustenance is to invite poor health. It was not designed to deliver all the nutrition one needs. It was designed only for esthetic enjoyment. So enjoy it, but understand what is supposed to do, and appreciate it for its ability to perform its function. But also understand that dessert is not as good for you as the meal, even though (especially because?) the meal is harder to digest, requires more effort to prepare, and is ultimately better for you.