

Good Music v. Bad Music: The Importance of Defining Greatness in the Arts

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The purpose of this essay is to respond to some of the questions posed in the 2009 College Music Society Common Topic, Part Three of which reads:

What standards should be used to measure music? What defines good or great music? Is this question relevant today?

These questions are not only relevant, but the process of applying answers to them may indeed save our dying profession. It is my belief that universal, objective standards can, and should, be applied to the evaluation of art and artists, and that these standards can be reconciled with the profoundly subjective nature of the creative and critical processes associated with art.

A quick study of the word “great” provides an indication of the difficulties faced by its application to art: the definition provides no objective standards by which one can definitively achieve the rank of “great,” and therefore anyone who wishes to pronounce the greatness of something or someone can, because the standards by which that pronouncement is made are vague. Since the meaning of the word implies no quantifiable standards on its own, these standards must be artificially applied. This problem is compounded by applying a vague term to a subject which is inherently subjective and largely governed by the whims of individual preference.

Reaching any consensus on these standards, however, will take a dramatic shift in the aesthetics of our profession. The first step in this process is understanding and accepting as fact the idea that not all music is created equal. We must accept that there are such creatures as bad music, and bad music making. 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. 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. Though the tune may very well have an emotional impact on both child and parent, it does not possess the intricacy of compositional technique displayed by many other composers who have by the consensus of many thousands of musicians over in some cases many hundreds of years been deemed “Great.”

The second idea that must be accepted in order to define greatness is that the recognition of what is great in any art form is, and should be, independent of the evaluator’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?). One can indeed like bad music, and similarly, one can dislike good music.

Too often, though, “what I like” is equivalent to “what makes a piece great.” This, precisely, is the trap, in which what is enjoyable is substituted for what is necessary. It is the non-thinker’s guide to musical criticism: leading us to erroneous conclusions in the least amount of time, and ultimately, making us lazy as listeners. If, on the other hand, 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 individual listener along a path of discovery.

Thirdly, we must accept that training, experience, and knowledge matter, both in the evaluation and in the creation of art. A musician who relies on instinct, his or her “ear,” to create music must not be evaluated equally with someone who has spent many years studying and who has emerged from that study with a mastery of the theory and application of the art. The trained artist has a much larger set of tools with which to create, and the study of repertoire provides a much larger perspective on what is possible

and what is not. Eloquence in writing, for example, requires a command of technique beyond the fundamentals. It goes beyond choosing acceptable words, spelling them correctly, and placing them into subject-verb sentences. Great writers, especially novelists and poets, 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. Great composers can do this in their scores; great performers can make someone hear things he or she had never heard before.

In evaluating music, one must be able to carefully and rationally decide if a choice made by a composer is more effective than another possibility. What does that one chord do in the course of the piece, and if that chord were altered, would the piece be as communicative? In repeated sections, did the composer make a change, and why? What did the performer show the listener about what the composer felt?

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 must, I think, be the primary goal of music education. This listener knows enough “great” literature to be able to make intelligent comparisons to less familiar music. While this listener may have initially been told which pieces are great, and maybe (hopefully?) even why those pieces are great, he or she 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. Not all of us, of course, can be experts, and 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 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 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 by which we can evaluate music: carefully evaluating the strength of these can, in any piece of music, lead to an objective assessment of the greatness of that work. I intend this list to be a starting point, and is by no means complete.

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 the first 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 may very well 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 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, rare examples of music that becomes relevant again after a period of irrelevance (the music of J.S. Bach, for example): this is evidence of the continually evolving nature of the definition of “great,” and would seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

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) that still qualify as great, such as Barber’s Adagio, 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.

The question of originality with regard to greatness is, like the artistic reason, difficult to adequately define. On the one hand, artists who have developed entirely new approaches to their art (I think here primarily of Schoenberg, though one might make

similar arguments for Freud, Picasso, and others) are considered to be great because, in part, of these contributions. Indeed, the practice of the art is forever changed because of these contributions. I would argue, though, that contributions of this magnitude are rare, and the greatness ascribed to them is ascribed in part because of the rarity. On the other hand, originality more commonly manifests itself in new solutions to existing problems. An artist's ability to create links between widely disparate elements, and to do so in ways that are convincing to his or her audience, is a measure of that artist's greatness.

A fifth criterion of greatness is the artist's work ethic. Great artists tend to work more and harder at their art than do lesser artists. This may be a convenient generalization in some cases, and perhaps this criterion is the least specific of all I will present here. It may be true that average artists do work hard to achieve all that they can, and that their results are limited by lesser results in other criteria; it may also be true that artists with great abilities in the other criteria do not achieve their full potential by coasting on talent alone. One can even argue that average abilities can be to some extent overcome by a work ethic that borders on obsession. But if obsessive work can improve the average artist by ten, it can improve the great artist by fifteen.

The artist's innate natural ability is the sixth criterion. I will not attempt an explanation of the hows and whys of talent here, but it should be stated that some artists are born with greater artistic capacity than are others. Talent provides the artist with the ability to excel in all of the criteria listed here, and will always separate artists of

Consistency

Talent

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.

With these criteria in mind, one might simply score a work of art in each of those categories: higher scores equating to higher "greatness." While this seems like a juvenile approach to the evaluation of a masterpiece, it at least gives us a number, and numbers at least seem more objective.

Perhaps a more important application of this might be for the evaluation of student potential by their teachers. Clearly, some adjustment of the terminology would be in order: we could evaluate the potential to communicate; the artistry and creativity (or potential for) of a performer, composer or future educator; the technical proficiency of the student; and the ability to develop and transmit an interpretation of a score or musical event on his or her own, using only the sources (scores or historical evidence).

After considering these criteria 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 choosing to eat only ice cream: 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 aesthetic enjoyment.

To continue with the dessert metaphor, our educational system has for decades placed a strong emphasis on teaching dietary responsibility. We have all been taught how much of one substance we should consume, and how little of another. This information is deemed to be crucial because the health of the student (locally) and of the healthcare

system (globally) is affected by a child's food consumption. It would be at best irresponsible to teach a child that he or she could eat only that which tastes best.

I submit that a person's intellectual health should be every bit as important as his or her physical health. If physical health requires a proper diet, so too does intellectual health. Why then, would you eat only dessert? Why teach young students that popular music is on equal artistic footing with concert music? In doing so, we teach students to go only for the food that tastes best to them, and is easiest to digest, and we reinforce the negative (and lazy) instant gratification epidemic.

There are a few points I would like to reinforce at this point in the essay. The first is that the list of criteria I have presented here is by no means exhaustive. Each of us is entitled to his or her own list of important characteristics: this is indeed how subjectivity and objectivity can be reconciled. Additionally, if many of these important characteristics are shared, then comparisons are more meaningful. There will still be debate on a good many issues, but art that is not great does not allow for multiple, simultaneous, credible interpretations.

The next point is that while we evaluate, we must remove our emotional reactions from the evaluation process and remain detached from that which we are evaluating. One could give many reasons why Hip-Hop might sound bad to him or her, but that information is purely subjective and therefore meaningless. The follow-up question, "Why?" is the important one here. One must be able to rationally justify one's rankings. The ability to discern very small increments is also crucial, especially if we proceed from the premise that no two pieces are equal. While we all care about our students, we must detach ourselves from the evaluation process, lest we lose perspective. Additionally, our students must learn that our objectivity and honesty means we actually do care about them: a student's self-worth must derive from his or her accomplishments, and not from our praise.

Finally, our evaluations are only helpful if we realize that the majority of the music we will hear will fall into the average or above-average range. Using the term “great” too frequently robs the word of its significance. If everything is great, then nothing is great. Norman Lebrecht wrote in 2003:

There is still greatness around us, more than there is goodness. It may contradict political correctness to shout aloud that some artists are superior to others, but those of us who admire the human mind have a duty to use "great" sparingly and defend it from media depredation. (Lebrecht *Greatness*)

We should reserve “great” for the upper end of the ability spectrum. It should no longer be considered an insult to be labeled “average,” because most musicians are.

Unfortunately, our society has placed so much artificial importance on good grades that if a parent hears that his or her child is merely “average” they blame the teacher for not recognizing the child’s obvious brilliance. Then again, when a student is objectively gifted, the other children might feel threatened, and the “average” students feel bad about themselves if the gifted student gets too much attention. Neither of these situations helps ensure the longevity of the profession, however. We must as musicians and educators have the courage to set the bar high and ruthlessly adhere to those standards, beginning with our own musical practice.

Now, with a starting point for a usable standard of greatness in place, the following questions must now be addressed: Why do we need to define greatness? How will applying standards of greatness save our profession?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, our profession is dying, and is now facing a heightened, unprecedented crisis in our current economic climate. Art, too often viewed as a luxury and not a necessity, will be (indeed, has been) the first item cut from any budget, public or private. Even in better financial times, orchestras, opera houses, ballet companies, theaters, and museums were either cutting back services or folding altogether. At the same time, the remaining venues have experienced a gradual increase

in the median age of its audience, as well as the corresponding decrease in number. These audiences are not being replaced with younger audience members.

This is, as I see it, more of a reflection of our ever-decreasing cultural literacy than a lack of funding. We have failed our profession in that we have created two or three generations of children who would rather watch *High School Musical* than *La Boheme*; listen to Mylie Cyrus rather than Frederica von Stade; write pop songs in Garage Band rather than bothering to learn even the most rudimentary music notation; play video games than read anything; would rather text-message than write a coherent sentence; or spend hours on Facebook rather than interact with actual human beings.

Webern:

We teach this in a number of ways to our students. Firstly, we equate “composition” with the creation of music in popular styles. Making sounds happen in some order in Garage Band does not constitute musical composition, and we should not teach our students that it does. We can use these tools to teach the relationships between emotion and sound, to foster creativity and self expression, and, hopefully, to teach an appreciation for musical composition as it has been traditionally defined. Equating what Beethoven can do with what Green Day can do only encourages students to, like water, seek their lowest level.

Secondly, our culture equates pop musicians with artists, and treats these people like royalty. We allow them to participate in any behavior they want, regardless of how destructive, violent, misogynistic, or ignorant that behavior may be, and we still buy their music. We listen when they tell us who to vote for. We follow them around, screaming like banshees every time they get out of their limousines. Joshua Bell can take out his violin in a New York Subway and play for hours with barely any attention, but Brittany Spears goes crazy outside her front door and everyone on the planet knows within hours.

We have failed as educators because we have not taught our students, especially our young students, the difference between the popular and the truly artistic, nor have we taught them the value in doing the hard work that art requires of its audience. We have rewarded mediocrity by not being honest with students about their progress, and as such we have at some schools accepted people as music majors who cannot read bass clef. Indeed, we seem to care more about not ruining a child's dream than we do about the future of our profession. What is more, we have punished excellent students by not pushing them, and rewarded average students by telling them that they are excellent.

As a consequence, we have filled hundreds of collegiate music programs with people who will have little or no chance of feeding themselves as musicians. These students go on to doctoral programs and clog a job market which cannot support them. In short, we have created too many professional musicians, and not nearly enough amateur ones. Codifying, and enforcing—especially with young students, standards of Greatness is the solution to these problems.

As a result of not setting and enforcing standards, we have enabled the pronounced deterioration of the market for concert music, and for the arts in general. We have systematically driven away the ability of young students to metabolize any music longer than three minutes, to process and interpret abstraction, and to perceive similarity in widely disparate styles, and this has resulted in orchestras and opera companies, at all levels, folding at alarming rates because our students do not want to see this music performed live. Sales of recordings of concert music are meager in comparison to sales of popular music. We have, for all intents and purposes, become our own market: audiences for concert music consist primarily of other concert musicians and those of previous generations who have not been programmed to shun concert music. This is especially true for new music.

This means that the majority of our audience will die at a faster rate than we can replenish it. And with universities cranking out musicians by the thousands, few

professional positions to support them, and no one who will buy tickets to hear them play, I daresay the four horsemen of the musical apocalypse approacheth.

Unless we can teach this generation of students to define, appreciate, and embrace greatness, and that the process of doing so is eternal and in the end its own reward, our profession will end. We must treat this generation not as the future of performers, but as the future of patrons. We must focus on developing a need for profundity over immediate gratification. We must be honest with the students who should not be pursuing music as a career. Finally, we must hold ourselves to a higher standard in our own work, and lead our students by example. As their professional role models, we can most effectively demonstrate these values by actually living them.