

Issue 001 - November 2017

The Top 21 Ways To Start A Classical Music Renovation

Greetings, oh ye Fan of Classical Music.

Here we go. First issue evuh of Concert Hotshots...

A Renovation of Classical Music. But why not a revolution? Because not everything is bad. And everyone seems to have revolutions these days, from entire countries (the historical norm) to just about every industry on the planet. Quite frankly, I'm fed up with revolutions. And Classical Music itself don't need no scrapping and starting from scratch. There are just some parts that need updating, modernizing. Mostly, its presentation, to be honest. That, and the Elite's financial hold forcing us to maintain outdated and irrelevant traditions that keep most of us away from live classical music concerts. Yes, I mean "us" coz I don't like going to "those" events either. I feel out of place. Yet I'm a Conductor and Composer, so how come I don't swallow up the Establishment's rules and regulations? I've already told you - they are outdated and no longer relevant to life. But Classical Music is, and that's why it needs renovating.

With that in mind, how do we start to renovate a fundamental part of life? I was going to say how do we renovate an industry, but then I realized "the industry" is probably the biggest part of the problem. So let's not refer to the industry so much. Let's keep our

minds focused on what the industry is supposed to be there to support and help us share with each other: classical music. Notice the change in capital letters. Here's a bonus point already, before we've started:

Classical Music vs. classical music.

This is a controversial point, especially for many aficionados, such as Academics and the Establishment Elite.

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And that's how society got confused.

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music we now lovingly refer to as orchestras, opera, choirs, string quartets, solo piano, recitals, ...all that formally organized sound still being created and passionately shared.

Yes, classical music includes Classical Music!

More on that later.

Here are my top 21 points to start a classical music renovation, then:

1. Get real familiar (oo-er).

Whether you are an audience member or a performer, as a fan of classical music it is probably wise to get familiar with the instruments that people are using to share music with you.

That means knowing the difference between a violin, viola (pronounced vee-oh-lah) and cello (pronounced chair-low).

You might even consider the fact that the human voice can also be a musical instrument, especially when singing, but for some reason society still prefers to differentiate between instrumentalists and singers.

Like they do Musicians and Conductors (hrumph!).

Even if you play or sing in an ensemble, can you actually name all the other instruments being used in the same piece of music you are sharing?

No?

Hrumph.

If you are attending a concert, do you know which instruments are being used?

A typical wind quintet, for example, doubtfully includes bagpipes or a baritone saxophone, but you never know.

Unless you know.

One way to find out is to ask someone - either a stranger in the lobby during the intermission, someone you meet at a nearby bar during post-concert drinks, or the person you took to the concert with you.

Engaging in conversations about classical music is vital to your enjoyment and making the most of concerts.

2. When left is right and right is left..

There are combinations of instruments that present classical music in a standard setup.

Orchestras are usually the best example to use because they are large, sometimes you can see everyone (depending on where you sit), and they contain the largest variety of instruments, although any ensemble will likely follow a standard setup.

For audience members it's great to know where different instruments are so that when you hear a horn melody floating through the airwaves, or a piccolo player trilling above everything else, you know where to look.

For performers it is vital to know who is sitting where simply so that you can share the music more faithfully. You are, after all, supposed to be working together, so if you don't know where to focus your hearing as you play then the likelihood of you playing together is minimal. Of course, it is up to the Conductor, if you have one, to encourage you all to play in the same style and the same time, thereby producing something greater than the sum of its parts (cliché groan), but even they can't help you if you are listening in the wrong direction.

There are, of course, exceptions:

Timpanists who learned the German-style of playing place their drums with the smallest one (highest notes) on their left and the largest drum (lowest notes) on their right. Most players in the rest of the world put the high notes on the right and the low notes on the left, just like a piano.

Some orchestras have all the violins together on the left side of the stage (known as “Stage Right”) and cellos on the right (“Stage Left”), but others put the cellos in the middle so the firsts (higher notes) are on the Conductor's left and the seconds (lower, harmony notes, usually) are on their right.

Tchaikovsky was used to an orchestra like that, but nowadays it's all down to personal preference - there are pros and cons to both setups.

The point is, being aware of the setup of an ensemble will enhance your live classical music concert experience muchly.

3. How to find context from history.

It is useful to recognize that music is either from a particular period in human history, or is at least in the style of a particular period. For example, Prokofiev lived in the 20th Century and wrote quite a bit of really weird music, with strange harmonies and occasional melodies which was typical of the Modern period, in addition to the beautiful music he wrote such as “Peter and the Wolf”. But, he also composed a symphony in the “Classical” style. In fact, he suggested it would have been the kind of music Haydn would have composed had he had the instrumental resources and performer techniques that Prokofiev had access to almost two hundred years later. It's why that piece is nicknamed the “Classical Symphony.” And it is delightful.

Getting to know music's historical periods, of which Classical is one, will only enhance your live concert experience. At minimum you will have some sense of context: wars, geographical boundaries, individuals with impact, natural events, accepted social behaviors and expectations, etc. (Hint: Classical music was written approximately 1750-1825, after Baroque and before Romantic music.) See what other periods of historical musical styles you can find.

4. How the record companies got us all confused.

This is a controversial point, especially for many aficionados such as Academics and the Establishment Elite.

First, a little context:

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Sticking with that modern definition of classical music, then, there are within it a multitude of Genres. In music, a genre can be defined as a particular style or form of composition. In other words, pieces of similar styles and forms can be categorized together into one genre. Like... Opera. But even then sub-genres can exist, such as Comic Opera, Ballad Opera, Dramatic Opera, etc. As far as classical music is concerned, genres today include things like Orchestral, Symphonic, Concert Band, Choral, Liturgical, and hundreds of others.

Being aware of the genre of a particular piece, concert or ensemble goes a long way to renovating your experience of classical music concerts, and even gives you an advantage over most of your peers.

Careful... you're on your way to becoming an expert!

5. Please leave the candy at home.

Please leave the candy at home. Really. There are people who still unwrap sugar candy in the middle of a piece of music. They do so slowly and drag out the excruciating process because they think it's quieter. And they think only a few people can hear them unwrapping. Believe me, sweet wrappers are like the triangle - it doesn't matter how much noise is going on, it'll still be heard by everyone in the concert venue. Please don't bother trying to prove me wrong - you won't be able to and you'll just annoy a bunch of performers and audience members during your experiment.

Another thing about annoying audience members (I'm going to call them Noosances) is when they shush you. There are times it is good to stay quiet. There are also times it is totally okay to cheer, whistle, clap and get on your feet, too. Even during the music. In fact, whether a solo player does a fabulous job or there is a really rousing end to the movement or piece, the only way the performers know they did a decent job is if you clap. If it was FABULOUS then get up and cheer, too! You may notice, sometimes, ensemble players scrape their feet on the floor during the music - that is their own way of letting a performer know they did well. Often happens after individual solos. For some reason, oboe players particularly like it.

But what about all this nonsense about 'to clap or not to clap' and those Noosances that tell you to be quiet? It is nonsense. Let me let you in on a secret.

All this silence between the movements of a piece is a relatively new phenomenon, and not at all what the original composers were expecting (of classical music written before 1940, at least.) Indeed, this is the story: In the 1930s the conductor Toscanini would present concerts live on the radio throughout the USA. Everyone knew how long the music lasted, so the radio program was designed to last that long and then they could add commercials and whatever else to help pay for broadcast. Unfortunately, the programs kept running late and over time. Toscanini swore (in Italian, probably) that he was not conducting the music slower, and then someone realized... it was the clapping between movements that added extra time! That was normal, by the way. Beethoven's concerts would last three or four hours with lots of music, and even the movements of his symphonies were divided up with other music being played in between! All the while, the audience were mingling, sitting, drinking and eating, and there was generally some chatting, too. Kind of like a regular non-classical concert these days, actually.

Well, the radio station had to ask audiences to not clap between movements of a concerto or symphony and a new ‘tradition’ was born. Academics then decided to add a further layer of snobbery by stating things like “clapping between movements ruins the flow of the whole piece” and other such “considerations.” As Rubeus Hagrid said, “Codswallop.” When you next attend one of my own concerts, feel free to go ahead and let the performers know exactly what you think of their efforts. Have you heard the one about the audience throwing chairs around during the World Premiere of a piece by Stravinsky? Look that story up, if not. Hardly a silent audience indeed.

Anyway, the bottom line of Audience Etiquette is... follow the lead of the conductor, leader of the ensemble, solo performer, and *then* the audience around you. If you see them moving slowly, calmly and quietly, it’s probably best not to clap. If they are smiling, laughing, happy, energetic, swooping, go right ahead and join in their fun! If you feel out of place clapping (even when everyone else is), then don’t clap. If you don’t care and can’t restrain your enthusiasm, then go ahead and let the world know how happy you are. Nothing wrong with that. And if a Noosance tells you to be quiet with a giant shhh (which, by the way, is to a performer like nails on a chalkboard), ask them proudly (while still clapping) “You *seriously* didn’t think that was AWESOME?! Come on, dude! Get real!” You’ll be giving classical music its long overdue renovation, for sure.

Oh, one last thing about the Audience Etiquette point: Don’t arrive late. Evuh. Not at the start of a concert, and certainly not after the intermission. André Rieu was onstage in New Jersey waiting to start his performance while audience members were still arriving. He asked them what the problem was and someone said “Traffic.” He replied “What, you think we don’t have traffic in Denmark? Yet we can get places on time.” Fair point. Just don’t be late to your seat. Pleez.

6. Performer Etiquette.

Did you know your facial features move? Bet you weren’t aware of that. You might cringe at the excessive body swaying some “professional” performers do and you’re right - it’s distracting and totally not necessary. Show-offs, basically. But your face is a whole other matter. String players, particularly, are capable of smiling while playing. Wind and brass players can smile with their eyes and eyebrows, sometimes their cheeks, too. Percussionists are usually smiling anyway coz it’s so much fun playing percussion. Answer me this: if you don’t look like you are enjoying sharing live music with other

people, how do expect them to enjoy it? Oh, you don't think that's your job, huh? It's not up to you? [Imagine Dr. Evil stroking his cat:] Riiiiight.

When I was in college I attended a myriad of concerts - as many as I could get free tickets for. Some performers generously gave them out (BBC Symphony Orchestra players, for example), whereas others were harder to get. One of the few times I attended a concert given by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the late 1980s was at the Royal Festival Hall... one of my favorite venues in the world to both perform and attend concerts in. During the concert I noticed a number of brass players had actually brought their pints of beer onstage. Need I say more?

And it would be really awesome if every player covered their upper arms and knees, please. Seeing excess skin on upper arms flapping around is hardly conducive to a meaningful musical experience, and many performers seem to forget they are sitting on a stage higher than many audience members, whose eyes are at knee height and looking up. Need I say more?

There are other things performers can do to renovate live classical music concerts, but let's leave it there for now. I am a fan of anyone willing to share live classical music with others, and I am not out to bash performers. I am one!

7. What's in a title?

Literally. What are all those odd numbers and abbreviations you see on posters and in programs? Sometimes it can get confusing looking at the title of a piece of classical music. Sometimes it's easy to look at the title and think "Sounds great! I'd like to hear that piece." For example, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, or *Sea Pictures* by Edward Elgar. But tell someone the local library has a concert featuring Bach's Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 for solo violin, and you're more likely to go get ice cream instead.

Fear not, dear classical music fan.

Here's a breakdown of the usual title formatting:

First, the composer's last name. Bach.

Second, the form, genre or structure of the composition. In our case, a Partita (which basically means a suite, or collection of little pieces, for just one performer on one instrument).

Then if the composer has written other pieces like it, you'll get which one this is. In our case, this is Bach's second partita (for solo violin). Hence, No. 2.

Next comes the key of the piece. People write books and books about keys, but suffice it to say here that the key is another identifying feature of the music. We all respond differently to different keys, and some folk even think of colors when they hear music in particular keys. But most of the time, it's just saying 'this piece' as opposed to 'that piece'. Here's what you might hear a couple of musicians saying to each other:

“Yeah, I've got to prepare a Bach piece, too.”

“Wochya gonna do?”

“Probably a Partita.”

“The E Major?”

“Nah, probably the D minor.”

“Sweet. Good luck with that one!”

Most of the time these long titles end with a publisher's identifying catalogue number. In our case, Bach's catalogue is abbreviated BWV, short for Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis. Ironically, this translates to “Bach Works Catalogue” and all Bach's music is grouped together in themes rather than chronologically. You're probably more familiar with seeing “Op. 23” or something. Op. is short for Opus (which is latin for a physical “work” much like the Italian word Opera also means “work”), and usually composers' catalogues that use Opus numbers do so in chronological order - the order in which the music was written. Or at least, published. (Did you know Dvořák wrote his symphonies 4, 5 and 6 after he wrote symphonies 7, 8 and 9? But they were numbered in the order they were published). Other times, music researchers memorialize themselves with their own cataloguing reference, such as Anthony van Hoboken who re-organized Haydn's music. Instead of HWV or Op., you'll now see a Hob. number.

Finally, there might be another number at the very end. This is usually when the piece of music contains multiple little pieces. They are not necessarily related movements, but just a bunch of little pieces the composer (or more accurately, the publisher) thought would be nice (i.e. cost-effective) to combine for your listening pleasure (or... marketing: more bang for your buck).

The title below should now look quite familiar. Can you translate its parts?

Rachmaninoff Prelude in G minor, Op. 23, No. 5, for solo piano.

8. Which is which and who does what?

As a classical music insider, there are some things that still shock me when I realize most people on the planet have no idea about classical music. For example, living in a part of the world where people from all over the USA and other places congregate for anything but classical music (i.e. sun, sand, sea, Mickey Mouse and alcohol), I frequently hear people stumbling over the terms Conductor and Composer. They clearly don't know which is which and who does what. In case you find yourself alongside someone who doesn't know (it's not their fault!), you might feel inclined to help them appreciate some of the differences. Doing so will definitely help them make the most of the live classical music concert you suggested they attend! Try explaining it this way:

A Composer is the person who created the piece of music. They wrote it. They dreamed up and described (using symbols we call notation) what sounds should be played when, how and by what instrument. A composer composes a composition. A concert is the event in which that composition is shared with others.

A Conductor is the person who helps a whole bunch of people share a particular composition. Not every group of musicians needs a Conductor, but if the composition/ piece is complicated or there is only a short time for preparation, a Conductor [should] help to ensure everyone knows when to start, when to finish, reminds folk how they agreed to interpret the Composer's symbols, and can also help if something goes wrong onstage (like a player loses where they are in the music, an instrument breaks, etc.). There's a lot more a Conductor does as well, and the vast majority (about 90%) of a Conductor's work is done before the concert even begins.

Yes, lots of Composers conduct.

And sometimes, you'll find a Conductor who also composes music (like me).

And then there are the other Conductors, the ones that everyone jokes about, thinking us musical Conductors haven't heard about before: Bus and Train Conductors. Not that different a role, really, when you think about it.

9. What We Can Learn from East Asian Education.

It's not necessary to dive into political discourse, so let's look at Education as impartially as we can, shall we?

Simultaneously, as the West continues to make moves in removing music education from public school curricula, many countries in the East are trying to figure out how to include it. Indeed, in China, every single child plays an instrument in their classroom at some point in their life - every day of the week for at least one academic year. In the UK many years ago, every single child would sing almost daily (but not anymore), whereas almost every child in East Asia who attends school learns how to sing well and in a group (according to Katherine Czehut in her Harvard Doctoral dissertation "The Achievement Gap, Revisited: An Empirical Assessment of What We Can Learn from East Asian Education" in 2012). A few years back the USA started to focus on STEM which must have been one of the worst decisions any public official could have agreed to. Recent efforts to reintegrate the Arts and make the curriculum more like STEAM are not making much headway.

Music is one of humankind's most fundamental forms of communication, and especially helps us express emotions that we fail to articulate using words. Politicians in the West seem to want to suppress knowledgeable growth of such essential communication (with disastrous behavioral outcomes), while decision-makers in the East seem more enlightened and are figuring out ways to allow everyone an equal opportunity to explore music.

The dramatic transference of classical music's cultural relevance even caught the attention of the New York Times a few years back in "Classical Music Looks Toward China With Hope" by Kahn and Wakin.

Politics and Education: two Establishments that are hot topics people love to yell and scream about, so let's leave that point there, shall we?!

10. Would you like to go for a drink?

Have I lost my mind? Nope. Alcohol will do that for you, not classical music. So bearing in mind this expensive publication is about a classical music renovation, why am I bringing up drinks? A couple of reasons:

1. For fun, think about how certain drinks might accompany certain concerts. Like wine pairing with food, a smooth red might go nicely with some Verdi, or a sherry could accompany Elgar. Maybe Reich goes well with cold Sprite (Lemonade in the UK), or a fancy sangria for Piazzolla. If you're not allowed to bring your drink into the concert hall, make sure you allow plenty of extra time to get in the right mood with an appropriate drink. Or go out afterwards and celebrate with something appropriate (a light lager for Rossini, but a Guinness for Walton!)
2. People often say, both before and after concerts "Want to go for a drink?" Say yes. This is your opportunity to influence someone else, AND you can talk about the concert/ music/ composer/ performers, etc. I can't stand it when folk shy away because either they have to drive, or they don't drink alcohol. Did you know coca-cola may officially be classified as a drink? It shouldn't matter what beverage you partake in (mine is still water, a little ice, with a slice of lime, please), going for a 'drink' is more the social activity than it is actually having an alcoholic beverage. Don't let them drinkers hijack the chance to share thoughts and responses to a live classical music concert!

And there you have it -

Drinking before, during and after concerts does not necessarily mean consuming alcohol, but it does give you and the person you took to a concert an opportunity to talk about the music, and perhaps even talk with others about the music, too. I have gained some wonderful friendships from chatting to strangers over post-concert drinks.

11. What dress shall I wear tonight?

Now I have lost my mind, right? But no, I won't be wearing a ballgown to any classical music concerts anytime soon. Perhaps it would have been better to say 'attire' but... Yawn.

It is fun to dress up and go on a date. Even when it's a classical music concert. Is it necessary? Nope. Is it expected? Depends who you're talking to. The thing is, anyone can wear whatever they want when they attend a live classical music concert, just like they can when they attend a restaurant to eat something somebody else cooked.

Some venues, including nightclubs and hotels, often do have a dress code. Most do not. I don't think I've ever been a concert hall that declares it has a dress code, or what their expectations of attire are. Yes, I have been in and attended many *events* with a specific

theme that suggest a dress code, such as a Viennese ball, or a Mad Men Gala. But never have I seen a dress code on the poster or ticket of an orchestra's presentation of Dvořák's Symphony No.8 in G major, Op. 88.

The problem comes when we care about other people's expectations... at least, what we perceive their expectations to be.

If you want to dress up to go to a concert, then go right ahead and dress up. I love wearing colorful sports coats to concerts, sometimes with a tie sometimes not. But I don't expect anyone else to. I love wearing all black when I'm on stage, including the tie, but I don't expect anyone else to (unless it's the attire we all agreed to wear). Go ahead and wear shorts and flip flops to see the Berlin Philharmonic! As long as you don't expect anyone else to.

And what if somebody says something about your "inappropriate" attire? First, thank them for complimenting you (i.e. catch them off guard), then say how much you appreciate them recognizing the guts it took to wear what you find comfortable among a sea of suits and expectations, and finally share with them that you finally no longer have a need to sparkle in public because you are comfortable with yourself and content with your place in society. (Then walk away, quickly).

Is there any inappropriate attire at all, then? Yes.

What you should find inappropriate is when you interfere with other audience members' ability to enjoy the concert. For example, an Ascot hat. Really? Take it off, dear. All you are doing is blocking fifteen people's view of the audience, and attracting attention every time you move anything other than your eyeballs. It's just rude. Perhaps the only other inappropriate attire for a live classical music concert might be wearing just your underwear. Or a bikini, but there are times even that is acceptable! (I've presented concerts on beaches, so...)

Wear what you want, expect to be the only one wearing it, expect others to sneer at you (that's their problem, though), and don't give a damn what anyone else is wearing - they dressed exactly how they wanted to, just like you did. THAT'S equality.

12. 7 of the best places to sit in a concert hall

Many concert-goers often wonder where the best place to sit is.

Have you ever thought about that?

Obviously, it's where the tickets are most expensive, right?

Wrong.

Actually, it depends what you hope to get out of it. I recommend trying all sorts of seats in concert venues to see what you get from each area, but here is a basic run-down:

- To see the conductor's face (if there is a conductor) and how they interact with the other musicians: behind the ensemble.
- To see what the performers see: sit on the left or right of the stage, behind the performers.
- To get the best sound: probably about two-thirds of the way back, not underneath a balcony. If there are tiers of seating, try and sit in the front center of a tier about one-third of the way up.
- To see all the players simultaneously: up high, but not the highest.
- To get the vibe and not worry about seeing anything or the best sound: up really high, the highest point (it's where all the electricity gathers).
- To see the expression on the performers' faces: right up front (You might get sprayed when the performers start sweating. And they will).
- To be the first to the bar or parking lot: at the back on an aisle, under the balcony.
- To share your music with others: on stage. (Yes, that means you're one of the performers!)

(Okay - so that's 8 places to sit, but that last one was a little tease...!)

Where is probably the worst place to sit?

About one-third of the way back (which is probably where the most expensive seats are). From there, you can't see any details, you can't see the whole group, you can't see what the performers see, the soundwaves bounce right over your head, you can't get out very quickly or easily, and you'll be immersed in completely the wrong vibe: that of the luxurious wannabes who want to be seen more than experience a spectacular performance. It's also the area you'll come across the most Noosances.*

13. A reliable source of argument

One of the most reliable sources of one-sided arguments in my household (meaning, I'm arguing with the air around me rather than my dear wife) is my daily dose of TED Talks.

I watch one every weekday morning while eating breakfast.

What are TED Talks?

Free videos of the world's most prolific thinkers sharing what they have discovered about life, the universe and everything. Many of them talk about issues directly and indirectly relevant to renovating classical music. For example, Sir Ken Robinson's talk.

If you are not aware, Sir Ken Robinson is an educator whose Ted Talk from 2004 is *still* the most frequently watched video. He talks about how the Education Establishment dehumanizes us by educating creativity out of us. Think about that as you attend a live classical music concert.

Then there are talks about music itself, the arts, education, creativity, leadership, sociology, psychology, technology, and so on. All these topics affect how we relate to classical music, so watching them will somehow enhance your experience and help renovate classical music concerts for you.

Indeed, they could be a great source of conversation topics, too.

TED Talks also parade a handful of prodigious children mechanically sharing their skills, as well as many other remarkable performances. A piano teacher even shares an inspiring story about his blind student Derek Paravicini and how music gave his autism focus... defo watch that one!

14. I call it Passion. What do you call it?

One mistake I made early in my conducting career was telling a bunch of professional musicians "I'd rather work with people who actually *want* to be here than those who are just paid to be here." Oops.

Shouldn't have said that out loud to their faces, perhaps (although 20 years later one of them said it got them thinking, and helped them "renovate" their performing career), but I certainly still hold that perspective close to my heart.

Thanks to the public's expectations that edited, re-balanced, manipulated and even computer-generated recordings have spawned, the vast majority of performers these days are chasing a goal of perfection. Every single note, no matter how fast or small, long or grand, must begin perfectly and end perfectly and transition perfectly. Sorry folks, perfection doesn't exist.

What does exist is the sheet music (for classical musicians. Most other genres rely on aural tradition). How on earth anyone can imagine sheet music is the be-all and end-all of music is beyond me.

Sheet music notation is there to REMIND us how the music goes. It is not THE music. It is a representation. That's why the same composition can sound so very, very different not only in the hands of different performers, but also in different performances. Venues, moods, food, weather, bad taxi rides, all affect how a performer shares the music. The notes on the page are simply there to help us remember what music to share. Once a performer lets go of their desire to be technically perfect, then the music itself can speak. The easiest way to explain what results, is "passion."

Don't get me wrong: technique is important. Vital, in fact. If it wasn't I'd still be performing the solo piano parts of the Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, Op. 102 by Shostakovich whilst conducting the orchestra from the piano. But I lost that piano technique long ago because I focused on other things (and dream of the day I practice enough to do that sort of thing again). But technique is a tool, and perfection is an illusion.

Passion should be the ultimate goal for any performer. How does the music make you feel? How do you want those you are sharing it with feel? Can you exaggerate any particular feeling? Remember: music is the language we use when we can't express our emotions with words. What emotion does the music convey to you? Many purists will argue there isn't any. Uh-huh. If only they experienced for one iota of a second what they are missing with that attitude, then the world would be a very different, calmer, peaceful place indeed.

This is the crux of my long-held catchphrase you see almost everywhere I have a presence:

There's more to music than music.

Let me break that down for you:

There's more to music (the experience) than [just the sheet] music.

Several of my teachers would harp on about the music. "It's all about the music," they would say. True. But "the music" is not what it is all about. There's more.

I call it passion. What do you call it?

15. You cannot fake Energy.

I feel like getting on a soap box about this point.

(Said as though I haven't been on one for the last few decades...)

No matter how you spin it, a recording can NEVER duplicate the live experience.

Marc Pachter said in his TED Talk that the people he selects for interviewing at the National Portrait Gallery are those with energy. You cannot fake energy, and it's the same with music. There is energy in the room coming from the performers, the audience, the ushers, the crew, and the building itself, that cannot be transferred onto a physical device and pushed through speakers, however large or small. Technology certainly has its place and, like Sir Simon Rattle, I would definitely not be able to accomplish as much as a Conductor as I do without recordings.

But, like sheet music, recordings are reference material for the real thing.

They are not the real thing.

Another issue with recordings is that they train us to expect perfection: Recordings are, on the whole, manipulated by both microphone placement and post-editing.

When I was pioneering a Student Associate Conductor program with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester UK, I would often attend recording sessions with the intellectual conductor Sir Edward Downes (formerly Music Director of the Royal Opera House). Talk about a lesson learned! The orchestra would arrive and warm-up before Sir Edward would enter the hall. He'd jump onto the podium muttering "Good morning," open a score and hold his hands up ready to begin. The orchestra would play for a few minutes. Then he would jump to the end of the piece and the orchestra would play for a few minutes. He would get them playing a couple of passages in the middle, maybe a minute or three at each spot. He would turn to the sound booth and wait. Someone in there would give a thumbs up and Sir Edward would turn back to the

orchestra, make sure his score was on page one and hold his hands up. All over the studio little red lights would come on and the music began. All the way through, non-stop.

When they were done, the little red lights stayed lit. The first time I saw this I wondered why. A moment of silence. Sir Edward called out a bar number or rehearsal mark, and the orchestra played for a few seconds. Then another. And another. At which point he jumped off the podium, headed for the sound booth. The little red lights went out.

Nobody talked. Nobody played. Nobody moved.

Sir Edward scuffled out of the sound booth, back to the podium and again, called out a bar number. The little red lights came on and the orchestra played for a minute. Sir Edward then looked at the sound booth, saw a thumbs up, said “Thank you!” and left the podium for the sound booth, where he sat in a big armchair in the middle of the room. The little red lights went out, and the Orchestra Manager stood next to the podium as some of the musicians left and others hung out for a few minutes to catch up on life, the universe and where they were going for lunch.

The one-hour session was over in about 25 minutes.

The sound booth, however, went into full swing and two weeks later released a master recording for publication, distribution, broadcast and posterity. That one track, though, had been through multiple listening sessions and adjustments such as “a little more oboe here, a little less double bass there,” and so on. There were sections spliced apart and put back together again. At one point, even the pitch of the solo trumpet was raised ever so slightly on just three notes, because they sounded a tad flat (I had to listen REAL HARD to notice it myself, but it was there.) (I was 21 years old!).

One decision made was to silence an early entry at one point (when a performer started playing before everyone else - only ever so slightly, but it was audible) whereas a decision was made to leave the unclean, untogether entry at a different point: “to give the recording a sense of humanness” was the reason.

In other words: "reality" was engineered.

Such recordings, now the norm, make us expect such “perfection” in the concert hall, and that will never happen, I’m afraid.

Some performers get real close (see the previous chapter about technique vs. passion), but no-one is perfect, and therefore no music can be presented “perfectly” either.

Sorry - that was a lot of text to demonstrate that recordings are not real music.

They are edited transcripts of an emotional story.

When you read fiction, the story is in your mind - the words are only reference.

When you listen to a recording, the music is in your heart - the recording is only reference.

The only time and place you get to experience the energy of real music is in the live environment.

Hence why I constantly encourage you to go to a concert.

16. Getting stuck in the instructions.

There are two ways to share music with others.

One way is to replicate what the creator (a.k.a. Composer) intended as closely as possible, and the other way is to convey the ‘thing’ the creator was suggesting.

That ‘thing’ could be an emotion, feeling, message, or any number of other inexpressible-with-words... things.

People who share music with others just by playing or singing it and getting the listeners to play or sing it back have generally been lumped into a box labelled “folk” music. Actually, most contemporary pop songs are like that: memorable tunes with some chords identified but little else to go on. As long as performers recreate that tune, it is the same piece of music. Different styles, different moods, different meanings, different instruments in different venues all mean the music itself is different, but it is still the same piece of music by the same creator.

Jazz musicians are also renowned for sharing music without notation, just loose guidelines.

What I find interesting is that most classically-trained performers are not usually taught to share that inexpressible thing.

Their teachers insist that performers play the notes on the page exactly as written.

They get stuck in the instructions, and never find the actual music.

Of course, even when composers like Gustav Mahler write incredibly detailed instructions, there is still room for interpretation or slight differences from one player to the next. All that means is, there is less of the performer's music and more of the creator's, but the notation should still be considered as reference or detailed guidelines.

It is a mistake to think that notation and sheet music is all there is to recreating music. There is so much more to music than just the notes on the page! Again, hence my catchphrase for the past twenty years: "There's more to music than music."

These days there are a multitude of notation formats, including free-style drawings. It all stems from a rather experimental stage in Music Education which encouraged everyone to be a composer.

After the writing of 4'33" by John Cage, anything is possible, I guess.

17. Take the stress out of watching.

On the surface, there are things at concerts to watch. Usually it's the performers, but I also like keeping an eye on the folk around me to see how they are interacting with the music. Or not.

To me, that's a big clue of whether or not someone is experiencing the actual music itself, or they are there physically but not particularly engaged with the music.

When the mind is racing and someone is thinking about the day's concerns, or the history of the piece, the soloist's biography, the fifth chair violinist's orange bow, I can almost guarantee you they are not "in" the musical moment.

Only when someone allows their feelings to be affected by the music are they experiencing the actual music. Otherwise, the performers are just providing a background soundtrack to a silent movie in your mind.

That's also the difference between listening and hearing. When you're listening, you are actively focusing on what you hear, and your mind and body react to it simultaneously. If your mind is focused on other things, you can hear the music but you are not listening

to it. Be careful when you find yourself watching more than listening... you are not letting the music “speak” to you and you are not getting the most out of the concert.

Take the stress out of watching, by listening.

18. How to turn a concert into an event.

Attending a concert means you are going to see one performance of some music shared by some performers.

A concert can have multiple performances: the same performers share the same music at different times and/ or places, but it is still one concert.

One of the habits I like to do is to turn every concert into an event, and if I am not performing and the performers themselves are not creating an event, I will turn the concert into my own event anyway (That is the Odyssey part of my training “How the Make the Most of Classical Music Concerts” available at <http://concertuniversity.com>).

How do you turn a concert into an event?

Lots of ways.

The simplest is to engage in conversation with someone else - your spouse or friend, but better yet someone else at the concert you don't know. After the concert, talk about what you felt, your experiences, what you noticed, and listen to what they have to say. Every once in a while such discussions may end up in a local drinking establishment to keep the conversation going!

I'm speaking from experience, of course.

Other ways to turn a concert into an event is to take a bunch of people from church, school, work, or your neighborhood. Make the suggestion, find out how many commit by getting their money, and you order all the tickets. You could even hire a bus, or book a local restaurant for your party. How about a museum trip, visit to an art gallery, or even arrange a meet and greet with some of the performers?

Many venues also offer a backstage tour.

You may be pleasantly surprised just how much enhanced your experience of the music is when you turn a concert into an event.

19. How a society's quality of life is actually reflected.

The advancement of technology in our world has been so rapid we still haven't figured out how to incorporate it into living.

Not really.

For example, technology generally makes everything available to us instantly and in short snippets.

Combined with an entire generation telling the Western World we can have whatever we want whenever we want it, Society at large has created a monstrous environment in which people just want Cheap and Fast.

In other words, being Good (at something, i.e. Quality) doesn't matter anymore.

In fact, such thinking has become so prevalent that a Common-Sensei such as Simon Sinek can make a fortune contradicting the Cheap/ Fast approach to life, even though it's a VERY recent phenomenon! Check out his interview with Tom Bilyeu about Millennials. It's all over Youtube.

What Cheap & Fast leads to is that most people in the First World now look at a classical music concert ticket and think "that's too expensive." There is no regard for anything else of value that ticket represents AND, in my experience, it matters not how much the ticket is: I've heard that exact phrase uttered at a \$15 ticket for a full choir and orchestra concert.

How disappointingly remarkable.

However, the good news is that a lot of people actually DO value what live classical music gives us impatient, harried, medicated, genetically-modified food ingesting modern 'advanced' humans. Most of them crave Quality over both Cheap and Fast.

Good for them, I cheer!

A society's quality of life can generally be reflected by its indulgence in communication

through high quality Arts.

Good quality music by a handful of expert performers is an incredible experience - no, it won't be perfect (thankfully) - but the experience will blow any thoughts of expense and boredom out of the water.

Always.

Without fail.

There is a huge difference between the cost of live classical music, and the value it brings to each individual's life.

Make sure you are on the right side of being a human being, and appreciate that the value of Quality far outweighs its cost.

20. What's true about program notes?

There was a time when people only had access to information about classical music when they attended a concert and read the program notes.

In most of the world such programs are an extra expense for audiences, but in the USA they give you programs for free!

Such a practice comes at a price, though, and free programs tend to be full of the ads that paid to get the program printed and the program notes written.

You might be lucky, though, and find a really awesome essay about the music. Unfortunately, things went a little too far when performers started seeking only credentialed academics to write the program notes. They became in-depth analyses of both history and theory which, to a handful of classical music geeks like me, became a viable source of information. But even I got tired of program notes and just wanted the story behind the music:

The why, what, where, when, maybe a little how.

Another problem with program notes also applies to online sources of information: they actually cannot be relied on.

Just because someone writes an essay about a piece of music, and may even offer some references, does not mean it is accurate. In many cases, we will never know what is accurate especially if the composer didn't write their own program notes. Even then, though, many academics twist their words and generate some quite remarkable fantasies!

There are also times when composers were not actually allowed to write anything but a specific story.

I'm thinking of Shostakovitch who wrote a remarkable amount of repertoire for the USSR. He kept his own private music very private until much later in life for fear of losing his head. As a result, much of his public writing conforms to dictatorial pandering rather than true meaning. We must ask ourselves "what could be true and what isn't?" of even many composers' reflections on their own music.

Suffice it to say that, like with most things these days, get your little snippets of information from here and there, online and in program notes, but take it all with a pinch of salt.

You are gathering just a handful of perspectives, some of which may corroborate and some which may not.

The important thing is: experience the music and let it talk to your inner self, your emotions.

Yes, use your imagination to tell yourself a story; yes, use the information you have about the composition to understand how it was put together, and yes, use the history of the piece and the composer and the world at the time to influence the emotions you believe were intended.

But...

music is alive.

Program notes, Wikipedia and every other source on the planet exist as support material. In fact, you will never be able to read or write enough words about music.

The truth is, words will never replace the actual live experience, and they will never be able to reveal the true truth about music.

They can't.

That's why music is.

21. 4 distractions that spoil your concert experience.

Another way we can renovate the classical music world is by helping others enhance *their* live music experience.

Encourage someone else to *participate* and *engage* with the music.

How? By listening and watching.

Like listening vs. hearing, there are differences between watching and looking.

When you look at something, you see it.

It may not register in your mind what it is or what it is doing, but you see it. Your instincts generally let you know whether you should run or engage. However, watching something, like listening, goes deeper.

Watching starts with seeing and looking and then incorporates observation and eventually meaning. Watch one player sharing their music. Look at their facial expressions (or lack thereof), look at their movements. Look at their fingers, hands, arms moving. You'll have a great time! But that's just looking. And you'll probably start thinking about a meeting you had earlier in the day, or the aftertaste of the soup you had at dinner.

Looking is not helpful for engaging in the music.

Instead, as you look at that one player for a few moments, consider the whys and hows:

Why are they pulling that face?

Why do they sway like that?

Is it for show, or are they adding some sort of weight to the sound?

Or are they simply dancing because they're enjoying themselves?!

How does moving their fingers in that way influence the music?

All this stuff is watching, and becomes part of your live music experience. You could

close your eyes and dream of far off lands and journeys if you wish, but sometimes it's nice to come back and watch how folk are sharing music with you.

Things to avoid looking at, and definitely not watch, include but are not limited to Noosance behavior:

people (performers and audiences) picking their nose,
yawning,
head-bopping (falling asleep but trying to keep their head up. You see it most often on trains and buses),
the conductor's flapping tails or bouncing hair,
and so on.

These are distractions and do not support the communication of emotions. In fact, they take you away from the music.

But we live in a Society that reacts.

Images are given to us, and auditory experiences take too much effort. Therefore, we tend look at what's moving the most rather than listen to the actual music.

Be different and listen more than you look.

What a surprise!

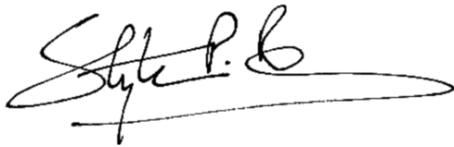
This first issue of Concert Hotshots expanded into a huge missive well beyond what I was expecting. But it's so worth it, I think you'll agree. There are so many points for you to consider as you embark on your live classical music experiences, and maybe you have realized some of your own expectations and practices were, in fact, interfering! Good. I'm glad if you are now more aware, and perhaps you have the opportunity to consider, and try, alternative approaches in the very near future.

I don't think there are enough concerts in the world. I don't think the classical music industry is setup to share live classical music with the world (the industry exists to make money). And I certainly don't think every single concert should consist of a full symphony orchestra and choir. Indeed, chamber music concerts can often be much more fun simply because of their intimacy with the audience!

Let's begin listening more than just hearing, and watching more than just looking or seeing. And, most importantly, let's expand who we share music with, and how often.

Whether you are a performer or audience member, you are a Fan. You appreciate there is more to music than just the music itself. You understand it is a momentary experience and a method for humans to communicate and process emotions in ways that words are simply unable to. You recognize the only way to approach classical music is, in fact, to...

Go to a concert.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen P. Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stephen P Brown

P.S. Make sure you listen to my latest classical Rate N Slate episode.
www.StephensClassicalRateNSlate.com