

A New Culture

by Greg Sandow

We've heard some fine analytical talk today. And so I'd like to do something different, and start simply by telling some stories. Here's one of them.

Some time ago, an American computer programmer named Jonathan Coulton decided to become a singer/songwriter. He quit his job, and each week he wrote a song, recorded it, and put it up on his blog.

After a while, people started to pay attention. Soon Coulton had fans. His fans were eager to buy his recordings, and in less than a year he was making \$3000 to \$5000 each month, selling his music online. Then the fans started making videos for his songs, and posting them on YouTube.

And then he started to tour. Because he had a database of people who'd communicated with him, he knew exactly where his fans were. He could go to those places, and be sure of finding an audience. Now he had a full professional career—and he built that career with no help at all from the music industry.¹

That's one story. Here's another. Imogen Heap is an imaginative, tech-savvy British singer/songwriter, who produces her albums, writing the songs, singing, and creating the instrumental tracks. When she started work on her most recent album, *Ellipse* (which was released in the summer of 2009), she announced that she'd spend two years producing it, and that she'd travel around the world while she did all the work.

She recorded the music on her computer, using Garage Band, a familiar piece of Apple software that costs almost nothing. People started following her on Twitter, people who wanted to know everything she did. By the time the album came out, she had 750,000 Twitter followers.

She made videos, in which she showed how she was making her album, and put the videos on YouTube. She asked her fans to contribute videos of their own, and promised that some would be used in her online biography. And she promised that graphics sent by her fans would show up in the album's cover art.²

And here's a third story. Peter Gregson, a cellist in Britain, gives astounding cello recitals in rooms or clubs equipped with video screens. People in the audience text or tweet comments while he plays, and the comments show up on the screen, creating a conversation—during the concert—about what he's playing.

Peter is 22 years old. He was hired by the BBC in the summer of 2009, to make the website they use for their popular Proms concerts more interesting for younger people. He went out on the street, where people were lined up to buy tickets. He interviewed them on video, then posted the videos on the reborn website. Soon

people were telling their Facebook friends, and their Twitter followers, and their blog readers to look at the videos. The Proms went viral.³

A fourth story. Jill Sobule, a singer/songwriter, in the United States, isn't signed to any record label, though she has been in the past, and even once had a hit song. But she doesn't need a record label. To finance her last album, she raised money from her fans. Many of them gave much more than a single copy of the album would cost.

She's one of many musicians in the US who have done that. Instead of financing her album with an advance from a record company, she found people who love her, and they paid for the album in advance.⁴

More stories. In New York, many of the most active, most prominent young composers make no distinctions anymore between classical music and pop. They know that they're influenced by both, and think it's natural for both kinds of music to show up in their work. The most famous of them, Nico Muhly, who's 29 years old, has a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. At one concert I heard him give, he collaborated with two friends, one a pop singer/songwriter and the other a folksinger, who sounds like he's high on a lonely mountain, crying out like Appalachian folksingers from many decades ago.

At the concert, these three people mixed their music up. Nico—a force of nature onstage—played the piano. If you knew classical music, you could hear that he loves Stravinsky, Ligeti, and Steve Reich. Meanwhile the man next to him onstage was wailing in Appalachian folk style. And it all fit together.⁵

Or I could talk about Bang On A Can, which right now is the leading organization that presents new classical music in New York. They give a marathon concert each year, and lately they've been staging it at the height of spring, with no tickets required, in a towering indoor public space along the Hudson River, a space that holds thousands of people. There are shops alongside the space, and people come through, shopping or talking a walk. They stay for the music, which some years has continued all night.

I've seen crowds of 2000 people at these events, going wild for contemporary classical compositions. One year, I counted 600 people, more or less, at 3 AM. Another year, I read in the program book that one of the composers whose music was played had one million hits for a video on YouTube. I didn't believe it, and when I went to YouTube to check, I found out that the number was wrong. The composer in fact had two million hits.⁶

And then in New York there's a concert series called Wordless Music, where indie rock bands and classical music show up on the same programs. The biggest Wordless Music event was a concert of contemporary classical orchestral music, featuring a piece by Jonny Greenwood, the guitarist in Radiohead, who'd been composer in residence with the BBC. His music was entirely classical, with no rock elements in it at all. The concert was played twice, on two successive nights, and drew a thousand people each time, who roared and whooped for the music.

After the first concert was over, I and a friend watched the crowd happily leave the performing space (a large church). My friend, at the time, worked for one of the biggest artist management companies in the U.S., representing big classical music stars. As we watched the crowd, he said: “This is the young audience that we in classical music have always wanted to find. But they’ll never come to any concert we give.”⁷

Why am I telling these stories? I don’t have quite enough time for a fully detailed answer, and so I’ll have to start simplifying. At times I might even rush through some big, important ideas. For which I apologize, but I don’t have any choice.

So I’ll start by saying that there are lessons these stories teach. For instance, we heard in a presentation in Session III about a paradigm shift, in the way that music is distributed.⁸ But that description, strong as it sounds, in fact should be stronger. What’s going on is more than a paradigm shift.

It’s bigger than that. It’s a huge revolution in culture—a revolution that largely has already happened. Stronger still, for those of us with established positions in various music worlds, it’s a revolution that happened without us. And it will continue without us. All we can do is try to catch up to it. My stories showed some of the changes the revolution has made.

Is the revolution dangerous? We talked, in a previous session, about the “digital tiger.”⁹ And tigers, of course, really are dangerous. But this revolution doesn’t feel like a tiger, or at least it doesn’t when you’re actually part of it. From the inside, it feels like a digital paradise, or else like a happy river to swim in, a new space in which there’s freedom to go after new opportunities, that just a few years ago didn’t exist. Technology has created a new kind of culture—a culture that people participate in, and which empowers them to go out and do things their own way.

And here’s something I hadn’t planned to say. But when I heard the talk in other sessions about cultural diversity and globalization,¹⁰ thought that there’s no reason—no reason at all—that traditional musicians, anywhere in the world, can’t use the tools that the new culture offers. Indian classical musicians could use them African musicians could use them, Tunisian musicians could use them. Two nights ago, at the concert we went to, we heard a terrific band, made up of younger people who play traditional Tunisian music. Someone could use the new digital tools to make them world-famous.

And to do that would cost hardly anything at all. The musicians could stay in Tunisia. In the new culture, people actively look for new kinds of music. They do it online. They love diversity, and they’ll embrace anything that seems exciting. They’d love these exciting young Tunisians! Someone just has to promote the group properly.

And now it's time for me to say that none of these new things—or virtually none of the—are happening in mainstream classical music. Mainstream classical music, in fact, is lagging far behind everything new.

Here I could build on what Timo Cantell said in the paper he gave at the start of this panel. Young people in Finland, he said, don't want to go to classical concerts.¹¹ And of course we see the same thing in the U.S.

I'd say, in fact that that things look bad for mainstream classical music. Classical music, at least in the U.S., feels stuck and out of date. And the most recent statistics from the U.S. look dramatically dire.

The National Endowment for the Arts, our government arts agency, has, since 1982, been studying participation in the arts. In June, 2009, it released its latest study, which showed that, since 1982, the percentage of adult Americans who go to classical concerts has dropped nearly 30%.¹²

And not only that, but the decline can be seen in every age group, except for people 65 and above, the only group left who still go to classical performances as much as they used to. But everyone younger has stopped going, to some degree, and in fact people under 30 dropped off the classical music map as far back as the 1980s.¹³

Here it's important to note that the classical audience used to be young. Many people don't want to believe this, but from studies done in past decades it's clear that, up through the 1960s, the audience for classical music in the U.S. had a median age in its 30s.¹⁴ If the audience now is much older, that must mean that a massive cultural shift has occurred, and I don't believe there's a ghost of a chance that the current audience, as it continues to age, will be replaced,

Or at least it won't be replaced in anything like its existing numbers. Because the problem now isn't just to bring in people in their 20s and 30s. We also need to bring in people in their 40s and 50s, and they—from all available evidence—are just not going to start going to classical concerts. This can be demonstrated by analyzing the trends I've already discussed.¹⁵

But you can also support my conclusion anecdotally. My wife, who's in her early forties, is chief classical music critic for the *Washington Post*, one of our leading newspapers. But her friends, people the same age she is, aren't going to classical concerts, and she sees no sign that they ever will. I know a professional classical music marketer, also in her early forties, who lives in Colorado, and says the same thing. People her age—even highly educated and cultured people—largely aren't going to go to classical performances, now or in the future.¹⁶

And part of the reason—ultimately, I think, the biggest part of the reason—is cultural.

Here's an example of what I mean. If you look at popular culture—if you look at it carefully, and sympathetically—you'll see that it has developed its own kind of art.

That, for some people, may come as a shock. After all, when we've talked, in past decades, about art music, we've always known that it had to be classical. But that's no longer true. Jazz, for decades now, has been art music, and now people in pop are doing work as fully artistic as anything done in the classical.

I wish I had many extra minutes to play you samples of this! Radiohead and Bjork would be two of the most famous examples of what I mean. And sometimes—this is also true of younger pop music acts, especially alternative rock bands—it's not easy to distinguish what they do from some forms of contemporary classical music.

I'll add parenthetically that there's a book by Steven Johnson called—and he means this ironically—*Everything Bad Is Good For You*, which documents the intelligence of popular culture. Or, rather, the intelligence of popular culture in areas outside of music, because, significantly, Johnson assumes that everyone knows by now how intelligent popular music can be.¹⁷

So when educated younger people turn away from classical music, they don't do it because—as some might believe—classical music is too complicated for them to understand, or because they haven't been taught to understand it. The problem is that classical music—at least in the ways it's currently presented and performed—doesn't say much that they want to hear.

In his paper, Timo touched on this. I'm thinking of one of the people he interviewed, one of the young Finns who don't care about classical music. This person looked at advertisements for classical concerts, which showed pictures of the dead composers whose music was going to be played. And he called the concerts "obituaries."¹⁸

If we believe what we read in program notes for classical concerts, we're supposed to go to these performances and be excited by news from the past, by discussions, for instance about the relationship between Schumann and Brahms. If you care about their music, of course, you may well want to know how entangled they were. But if you're new to classical music, if you don't know whether you care about Schumann or Brahms, you can't help noticing that much more important things are discussed in the culture at large.

As an example of that, here's something that David Simon, a TV producer, said in an interview. Simon created a probing, disturbing TV series called *The Wire*, and in this interview, talked about his work on the show:

The Wire made the argument, from its first season, that the modern world is becoming increasingly indifferent to individual catharsis and individual dignity, and human beings are worth less. Every day, human beings are worth less. That's the triumph of capitalism. The money gets made, and the fewer people we need to make that money... I come from a city where 47 percent of the African-American males are out of work. They're not needed. We've constructed an economic model that doesn't need a lot of human beings. It doesn't need as many as it once did for certain people to attain wealth. In a world like that, the old superstitions start to seem less

superstitious. The idea that these massive institutions—school systems and police departments and drug trades and political entities and newspapers—might actually become utterly unfeeling to the people they're supposed to serve and the people who serve them seems to me to be the paradigm of the 20th century, and I think it's going to continue.¹⁹

In the five years that the series was on, Simon explored the American institutions he spoke about—including the police, the press, the political system, and labor unions—to show how badly they've failed. This might not have been the most popular show on television, but many people watched it, and many people talked about it. It was shown in other countries as well.

And this is the problem for classical music. If *The Wire* sets a high standard for contemporary culture—if it probes deeply into contemporary life, if it touches us deeply, if it shows us both ourselves and the world we live in—and if people respond to the standard it sets, how can these same people commit themselves to classical concerts, where they're presented with something predictable, something that's been repeated in more or less the same way hundreds or even thousands of times? How strongly can they be drawn to something presented—as so many classical performances are—without much visible energy? How can they be drawn to something tied up in the culture of the past?

I think, on the whole, that they'll stay away. They might go to the opera once in a while, or try a concert by their local orchestra, but they won't do these things often. And that will be true even if, somehow, we educate all of them about classical music. Because even if classical music starts to seem familiar, it still will offer all its old, familiar, comfortable messages, which people inspired by *The Wire* just might not care about.

So what can we do about this? We might believe—and not wrongly—that classical music embodies enduring values, that the promise of (to choose an obvious example) Beethoven's Ninth Symphony needs to survive, as an antidote, if nothing else, to the horrors *The Wire* depicts. How can we make that happen?

We face a dilemma. On one hand, we need to preserve classical music as it currently exists—at least for a while, even if younger people don't care for it—because the institutions that present classical music can't survive without the support of the people who love classical music in its traditional form.

But at the same time, classical music has to start moving into the new cultural space I described at the start of my talk. How can it do that?

I'll end with some suggestions. In the summer of 2008, in Britain, the BBC broadcast a reality TV show called *Maestro*, in which celebrities tried to conduct an orchestra. The show was great fun to watch—it was terrific TV—but it was also presented classical music quite seriously. The contestants (who were charmingly—and accurately—called “students”) really did have to conduct, and it was easy to hear if

they didn't do it well. You didn't need classical music training to understand what some of their problems were.

And as the show proceeded, it began to draw subtle distinctions among the contestants, about what worked and didn't work in their conducting. The judges—who included two conductors with worldwide fame, Sir Roger Norrington and Simone Young—made acute comments (which, in good TV style, were sometimes also quite funny) about what went wrong (or right) when the contestants conducted.

Which meant that anyone watching *Maestro* could learn a lot about how classical music works. The show was honest, and it was grounded in musical values; the contestants couldn't fake their conducting, and anyone watching could hear if they failed. And so *Maestro* broke down the separation between classical music and everyday life, or at least between classical music and the lives of people who—among other things they might do with their time—watch TV.²⁰

Here's another example. An American pianist, Greg McCallum, conceived a plan to take his grand piano to every county in North Carolina, the state where he lived. In each county, he thought, he'd give a recital, playing his normal classical repertoire.

But in each county he'd also offer a master class, for any pianist who wanted to work with him, no matter what kind of music they played. And also in each county he'd organize a second concert, this time for local pianists to play in, again in whatever musical genre they liked.

Greg got sick, unfortunately, before he could finish this project. But I think it was a brilliant plan, again breaking down barriers between classical music and the other kinds of music that people play on their own.²¹

And here's a story of my own. I was asked, last summer, to work with students at the National Orchestral Institute, one of the leading orchestral training programs in the U.S., which convenes each summer at the University of Maryland. The director of the NOI—James Ross, a true visionary—wanted the students to take control of one of the concerts on last summer's schedule, and produce it in any way they wanted. Maybe, or so Jim thought, if the students produced enough concerts this way, they might find an audience of their own age.

My job was to encourage them, to start them thinking about what they might do. So I spoke to them twice, first about what classical music was like in centuries past, when the audience talked during concerts, and would shout comments to Verdi while his operas were performed, or would applaud in a Mozart symphony the moment they heard something they liked.²²

I also showed videos of classical performances from the 1940s and the 1950s, when many classical musicians were more relaxed and more colloquial than most of what we see now, but also had their own kind of superstar grandeur. Among the musicians whose videos I showed were Artur Schnabel, Ezio Pinza, the Italian

baritone Gino Bechi (a true force of nature), and the great cellists Gregor Piatigorsky, unforgettably seen playing an arrangement of “The Swan” from *Carnival of the Animals*, accompanied by six gorgeous women playing harps.²³

Then the students offered some ideas about what they might do—and offered them, I must say, with real excitement. Then I’d finished my work. I went away, and returned some weeks later, when the students gave the concert they controlled. All on their own (and certainly without any prompting from me), they took the classical program Jim Ross had picked, and added things of their own—quirky arrangements of rock songs, improvisations (with the audience asked to join in), and lively explanations of a complex Elliott Carter piece, explanations that were so enticing that the audience shouted and whooped, giving Carter’s difficult music the most delighted applause it may ever have gotten.²⁴

There’s something else I want to say, and I might as well say it here. Ultimately—and this is a *very* big idea—the problem for classical music is that we’re seeing the end of the hegemony of western culture, which brings with it the end of any preeminent status for classical music. In a world that won’t be dominated by the United States and Europe—a world in which white people are a minority—we can’t very well pretend that the most important form of music is one that’s white and European. We now understand that it’s just one of many musical choices any of us might make.

So here—moving from a grand thought to a smaller one—is my final suggestion for something that might be done in classical music. I’m not directly addressing the problem of western hegemony, or, for that matter, the equally serious problem of content, the depth of contemporary meaning we find in *The Wire* that we don’t find in most classical music. But then I think those problems will take care of themselves, once classical music functions once more—as it did in past generations—as part of contemporary life, and when it freely blends with other forms of music, just as we see other forms of music blending with each other.

So my final suggestion offers one more way for classical music to be contemporary. I’m especially fond of it today, because I thought of it right here in Tunis during a conversation I had just last night, on the subject of classical music competitions. I won’t name the person I was talking to, because that person may not want to be implicated in all the radical ideas I’m offering in my talk today.

But here’s what the two of us came up with. Competitions—which of course can be very important to the careers of young classical musicians—also tend to be boring. As everyone in the classical music world knows, competition winners are often chosen by a consensus vote of the judges, who—unable to agree about the most imaginative performers—settle on someone who at least doesn’t offend anyone. As a result, people with real imagination and originality might not win, because the judges can’t agree about them.

And then there's no guarantee, if you do win, that you're going to interest anyone in the outside world.

So I think that competitions should be run like reality shows on TV. And here I'm not just thinking of *Maestro*, but also of good non-music reality shows, for instance *Project Runway*, a show in which fashion designers compete. They have to design clothes, and then make them—all either in a single day, or at most a day and a half—in response to a challenge they're only told about when their countdown begins.

And the challenges are wildly diverse. One week the contestants have to design an outfit for recent college graduates to wear to their first job interviews. Another week they'll be asked to design something outrageous, for drag queens. Another week they'll design for pregnant women, or for little girls. Or they might have to make an outfit entirely out of newspaper, or with supplies they buy in a hardware store.

So why not take pianists, let's say, and put them on television, and give all of them the same short piece to play, maybe one of the Chopin preludes. The judges would listen, offer critiques, and decide who plays the piece best. And then, with no warning, the pianists would be told to play the same piece again, but differently! They could change the tempo, or the dynamics, or the phrasing, or the articulations. They could even ignore everything the composer indicates, but how they'd do it would be entirely up to them.

And then the judges would decide who changed the piece best. And we'd find out which pianist had the most imagination. Ben Verdery, the guitar teacher at the Yale School of Music, does something similar when students audition for him. He gives them a newly written piece, with no expressive markings in the score. "Make music out of this," he'll say. He quickly learns which guitarists can only play the way they're told to, and which have musical ideas of their own.²⁵ We could do that on my competition reality show.

And I can think of many more challenges. Contestants might have to compose a piece. Or they might have to mash together two pieces from their repertoire, finding ways to connect the two pieces seamlessly. Or they might—to steal an idea from *Project Runway*—go to a hardware store, and, using things they buy there, play a version of some famous piano piece that would of course be different from the original, but would also be instantly recognizable. And musical!

What might emerge from this is a competition winner with real imagination, with tremendous flair, and with an unshakeable sense of music, and also someone who shows true genuine grace under pressure. Or, in other words, a competition winner who could, just possibly, go out in the world and be a star.

I can imagine that this radical idea might get me stoned in some places I go, when I visit the orthodox temples of classical music. But younger classical musicians—who live both in the classical music world and in the culture at large—are likely to love it.

And I love it too, because classical music needs to be reborn. If it's going to survive, it has to emerge into the light of the wider world, and take its place as part of all the cultures that all of us share.

(Greg Sandow gratefully thanks Joseph Fosco, who transcribed a recording of this talk into written form.)

¹ Clive Thompson, "Sex, Drugs and Updating Your Blog." *New York Times Magazine*, May 13, 2007

² Michael McCarthy, "Imogen Heap: Queen of the Digital Age." *The Independent*, August 24, 2009

³ Conversation with Peter Gregson

⁴ James Reed, "Lighters Down, Checkbooks Up." *The Boston Globe*, April 12, 2009.

⁵ Personal observation. See my blog post about this concert: "[First Nights Out](#)," September 14, 2009.

⁶ See my two blog posts on these marathons: "[Happy All Night](#)," June 5, 2007; "[Bang on a Can 2008](#)," June 9, 2008.

⁷ See my blog post about this concert, "[Solutions—First of an Occasional Series](#)," January 21, 2008,

⁸ Manfred Lappé, "[Digital Music Distribution](#)," paper delivered at Session III of this conference.

⁹ Session III: "[Riding the Digital Tiger: New developments in digital distribution and the shake-out of the music industry](#)"

¹⁰ Session I: "[Supporting Musical Diversity: How UNESCO, governments and music organisations are implementing \(or obstructing\) the UNESCO Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#)"

¹¹ Timo Cantell, "[Discussions on visitors and non-visitors of classical and ethnic European music concerts](#)," paper delivered at Session V, "Challenges to Art Music."

¹² National Endowment for the Arts, "[Arts Participation 2008: Highlights from a National Survey](#)," June 2009. See also "[National Endowment for the Arts Announces Highlights from 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#)," press release, June 15, 2009. The online version includes links to further data, including detailed statistical tables from the full report.

¹³ National Endowment for the Arts, "[The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life](#)," 2002.

¹⁴ Margaret Grant and Herman S. Hettinger, *America's Symphony Orchestras and How They Are Supported*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1940, p. 227; Mid-Continent Surveys, "In-Concert Survey of the Audience Attending the November 11th Symphony Concert at Northrup Auditorium, University of Minnesota" (survey conducted for the Orchestral Association of Minneapolis), December 12, 1955 (unpublished, unpaginated); William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. New York: Twentieth Century Press, 1966, pp. 75ff. Also see [my page on the age of the audience](#) on my blog website, which includes links to excerpts from these studies.

¹⁵ League of American Orchestras, "[New Audience Research Findings](#)," December 1, 2009. See also two of my blog posts: "[Dire Data](#)," June 22, 2009, and "[Day of Reckoning](#)," December 10, 2009.

¹⁶ Private conversation.

¹⁷ Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2006

¹⁸ Cantell, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁹ Scott Tobias, "[Interview: David Simon](#)," *The Onion*, March 9, 2008. Note that *The Onion* is a satirical weekly, published in the US and aimed largely at younger people. But their cultural coverage is very serious, and if Simon's provocative thoughts appear in a publication like this, I'd call that yet another demonstration of how intelligent popular culture has become, and of why it poses a challenge to classical music.

²⁰ I've watched DVDs of all episodes of the show, which unfortunately aren't publicly available. The BBC has a [website](#) for the show, though the video excerpts available there can only be played by people in the UK.

²¹ Conversation with Greg McCallum.

²² See for instance Mozart's letter of July 3, 1778, to his father, about the premiere of his Paris Symphony, in Robert Spaethling, editor and translator, *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 159-60. And also *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, revised and edited by Elliott Forbes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 908 (about the premiere of the Ninth Symphony); Italo Pizzi, "Unpublished Verdi Memoirs," in Marcello Conati, ed. *Encounters with Verdi*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984, p. 345-346; James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 23ff.

²³ Some of the videos I showed can be found on YouTube: de Falla, [Ritual Fire Dance](#), played by Artur Rubinstein; Bizet, "[Toreador Song](#)," from *Carmen*, sung by Gino Bechi; Saint-Saens, "[The Swan](#)," from *Carnival of the Animals*, played by Gregor Piatigorsky. The Rubinstein and Piatigorsky performances, along with the Pinza performance I showed for the students, come from the 1946 film *Carnegie Hall*, a treasure trove of old-style singing and playing.

²⁴ See my blog posts about this project: "[Excitement for the Future](#)," June 3, 2009; "[Students' Ideas](#)," June 8, 2009; "[NOI Liftoff](#)," June 28, 2008.

²⁵ Conversation with Ben Verdery.