

CLASSICAL MUSIC IS MORE FUN WHEN YOU

**COLOR
OUTSIDE
THE LINES**

**The eBook
Part 1**

by Brittany Mazzurco

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INTRODUCTION:

Thank you for your interest in this eBook! It is my hope that my research and personal findings will help you gain a deeper understanding into why it is necessary to adopt a more open-minded and creative outlook when planning your own classical music concerts.

I'd like to begin this first installment of "Color Outside the Lines" by bringing to light a few paradoxes which exist in classical music concerts.

Art (whether visual or performing) is not formulated. It does not come with a set of rules or guidelines. Art has no limitations.

But... if artists create without rules, so then why is the way we experience classical music so structured by them?

Art is ever-evolving. Whether theatre, visual art, poetry, literature, dance, etc., art changes to meet the needs of the people.

But... if art is ever evolving, why haven't classical concerts evolved since the nineteenth century?

Art is the voice of the people. It reacts to how our society evolves and serves as the creative voice for our population.

But... if art is representative of the people, why do so many people feel no emotional connection to classical music?

These are just a few of the questions I hope to answer in this eBook, but I hope they got you thinking about problems facing classical music today.

We need to start considering the barriers we've put up for ourselves, why they exist, and how we are going to tear them down. The first installment of this eBook will begin to do just that.

PART I:

Is Classical Music Dying?

Within the past 50 years, a series of negative events have been occurring within classical music.

Note: Many of which won't be that shocking.

Classical music is significantly declining in popularity. As a result, we see that interest in and general attendance of classical music concerts has been steadily decreasing, thus causing:

- orchestras to decrease their budgets.
- concert series to shrink.
- classical music outlets in the media to disappear.
- classical musicians and composers to struggle to find work.
- classical music business organizations to fail.

As you can see, despite the fact that this style was so popular in Europe for hundreds of years, this genre is now struggling to stay relevant and in the minds of music-lovers. Additionally it seems that if this negative trend keeps occurring, the genre may disappear altogether.

How is it that a one-time most popular genre has fallen into such a slump?

On the other hand, in a marketing survey I conducted in 2012¹, an overwhelming majority of students admitted to having a favorable opinion of classical music.

Additionally, the music industry blog, Hypebot, even reported that 12% of iTunes reported music sales in 2006 were of the classical genre.

Another music industry blog, TechCrunch, has even found that the popularity of the music-streaming platform, Spotify, has significantly boosted classical music sales across all music retail platforms.

Finally, since the invention of the iPod/iTunes, more people own classical music than ever before.

How is it that a genre can be favorable yet still unpopular?

¹ If you would like to know more about this research, feel free to contact me at brittany.mazzurco@gmail.com

Classical Music has an Image Problem

Classical music's main problem lies in the fact the culture surrounding the music is viewed so negatively by the public.

The following is a list of the most-commonly used adjectives I have found through various sources which people have used to describe classical music:

- Boring
- Overly formal
- Elitist
- Old fashioned
- Lack of visual content
- For old people
- Relaxing
- Irrelevant
- Lack of star power
- Lack of individuality

Even if you're not a public relations and marketing nut, it's obvious that having these words tarnishing your public image would greatly hurt your popularity, influence, and, eventually, profitability.

But again I ask: How is it that a one-time most popular genre has fallen into such a slump?

The answer to this question can only be found by looking to the past.

If we look back one-hundred and fifty years or so, we can see that there have been many political, social, and technological changes that have contributed to this image problem.

Here are six phenomena that I feel adequately describe this change:

- The Mozart Cover-Band Phenomenon
- Audio Recordings of Classical Music Are Terrible
- Modern Society's Escapist Mentality
- Modern Generations' Resistance Against Elitism
- The Death of the Album Format

The rest of this eBook will attempt to dissect all of these political/sociological factors and apply them to classical music.

The Mozart Cover Band Phenomenon

What is a cover band?

According to The Free Dictionary², cover bands are a group of musicians that play or record a version of a song that was previously recorded or made popular by another.

Or, according to URBAN DICTIONARY³, a cover band is:

“A band that does not approach a tune or tunes from a different angle...basically just dusts it off, polishes it up and regurgitates -
no that this is a bad thing, it just singles a certain level of talent...”

While the URBAN DICTIONARY is definitely the more crass of the two definitions, it accurately defines the stigma associated with the term. Why is the stigma relevant?

Well, most times, when we think of cover bands, we think of bands imitating Led Zeppelin, Guns & Roses, Kiss, and other pop music legends. Essentially we think of people playing dress up while performing songs that don't require much artistic interpretation - a “regurgitation,” if you will.

We would never think of the Bethlehem Bach Choir, the New York Philharmonic, or any other notable classical music organization as a cover band... But essentially that is what they are (as insulting as that may seem).

In fact, did you know that the most popular 50 classical music pieces on iTunes get played more frequently by professional orchestras than any other song within the genre combined?

Just like how all influential rock bands have their own “greatest hits” album that are commonly played by imitation groups, with all major classical music organizations playing the same top 50 classical music pieces repeatedly, we are essentially limiting ourselves to the roles of glorified cover bands.

I know it sounds harsh, but with the general lack of originality and the constant rehashing of standards, today's classical musicians are more-and-more falling into the garish definition of “cover bands.”

When we think of classical musicians in this way (i.e. glorified cover bands), it's no wonder why classical music concerts are so unsuccessful. Modern audiences go to concerts to see original music, not covers (especially not centuries-old covers)!

² full definition found here: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/cover+version>

³ full definition found here: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cover%20band>

A quick aside...

Real World Example: For all you classical musicians reading this, how many of you have heard the phrase, “standard [insert instrument here] repertoire,” before? You know, the songs you “need to know” in order to be taken seriously as a classical musician. I’m not saying these pieces aren’t wonderful, and there is much merit to learning the classics. After all, you wouldn’t be able to become an English teacher without reading Dickens, Shakespeare, Brönte(s), etc. However, classical music’s “standard repertoire” seems to stop at the beginning of the twenty-first century. No other art form seems to marginalize contemporary pieces like classical music has.

Just something to think about.

Now onto the second phenomenon!

Audio Recordings of Classical Music Are Terrible

Before I discuss which specific characteristics of classical music recordings are terrible, I want to elaborate a little more about classical music sales.

As I stated earlier, since the invention of the iPod, more people own classical music recordings than ever before. While this is certainly a reassuring sign that people are still interested in the genre, there are some negative implications to this. Specifically, research has shown that most new listeners are buying only the same, over-performed staples in classical music repertoire. This echoes the fact that I suggested on the previous section: there is essentially a “Top 50 Greatest Hits”⁴ in classical music.

There are dozens, maybe even hundreds, of albums and playlists formatted in this way - itemized lists of the pieces you “need to know” to truly appreciate the genre. You don’t know classical music if you don’t know these pieces.

Apparently there’s a lot of people that “know” classical music, because iTunes sales for them are quite considerable.

While listening to only the “Top 50” hits is certainly better than nothing at all, this pattern suggests that modern generations are only interested in specific pieces and not the genre as a whole. I mean, you may personally own one or two Justin Bieber songs, but I doubt you would claim to have “Bieber Fever.”

The fact of the matter is that 50 pieces do not accurately reflect the scope of classical music as a whole. For example, no where on any of the lists I’ve looked into is there a mention of Cage, Stravinski, Rutter, Bernstein, or even Puccini. This list is stagnant and contains only pieces that literally everyone (and their mother) knows the tune to.

Applying this “Bieber Fever” analogy to classical music: while many people may still have quite a bit of classical music on their iPods, we’re not creating any super-fans and loyal classical music consumers.

I realize the solution to this problem lies in educating the masses, but it is an important point to make note of.

And now, on to what makes recorded classical music so terrible.

Recorded classical music is hardly a good representation of the real-life beauty of the music.

⁴ Full list here: <http://www.greatestclassicalmusicever.com/50GreatestPieces/>

Classical music, by its very nature, is more complex than popular music. Not just in its structure and format but sonically as well. There are two main factors that contribute to this statement:

- **Extreme frequencies**, in order to make music files small enough to store thousands on an iPod, are cut away from a recording. These “unnecessary” frequencies are the extreme high and low notes that are more felt and experienced rather than directly heard. While this trimming effect may not affect popular music tracks much, this effect significantly degrades the quality of classical music. The overtones, sense of space, and general magic of the piece is degraded and almost lost entirely. This is especially true with classical voice, a style of singing that relies heavily on the production of resonant overtones and reverberation.
- **Compression** is an audio recording technique that affects the dynamic range of a track. When a recording is heavily “compressed,” the dynamics are “leveled out.” Think of it like this: have you ever watched a movie where the sound effects and background music were really loud but the dialogue seemed incredibly soft? If you compressed that movie clip effectively, the dialogue would be made louder and the sound effects/music would be made softer to not be so dramatically different.

Due to the expressive quality of classical music, almost all pieces are littered with dynamics that cause these dramatic changes in sound levels. So as to not blow your eardrums out while listening to a concerto through your earphones, sound engineers compress the audio. The trade off for this, however, is that recorded classical music loses a lot of its expressivity, one of its most endearing characteristics.

Looking outside the actual recordings themselves, the way we buy our recordings (in a way) has negatively affected classical music’s image. **We are the iPod generation.** Most of us buy our music through iTunes or another digital music distribution service. Perhaps you even get your hands on music for free. Gone are the days of the album and high-quality CD recordings.

Real World Example: Now, imagine you were a new listener to classical music. You knew you wanted to buy Puccini’s “O mio babbino caro.” When looking for that piece, all you need to do is search for “O mio babbino caro” and a search engine spits out all the songs in their database with this title.

However, being a new listener, you don’t really know who the top sopranos are, nor do you know which are the best recordings of this piece. How do you decide which track to buy?

Unfortunately, people are always on the lookout for the cheapest (or free) versions of songs. While I am by no means saying that all cheap / free versions are terrible, let’s just say there is usually a reason why the tracks are so cheap. Whether they are performed by mediocre musicians or were recorded unprofessionally, these versions of songs are not the most flattering representation of the genre.

While listeners may still enjoy listening to their version of “O mio babbino caro,” they are most likely not going to be blown away and be moved by the recording.

Escapist Mentality

Having just graduated college, my generation has grown up with and been significantly affected by the current economic climate. We live in an age of economic hardship. Students are entering college *without* the assurance that their hard-earned degree will be put to use. Due to the current economic recession, financial security and stable jobs are no longer being taken for granted.

As a result, we have begun to experience a widespread emergence of “escapist mentalities.”

As SPIN magazine described in its Summer 2012 issue, feelings of hopelessness and apprehension for the future have affected our population. These feelings have affected our entertainment industry enormously. Have you noticed the rise in super-hero, disaster, and fantasy movies? This is due to society’s need to feel powerful, for these movies empower them to take on the financial obstacles that lie before them.

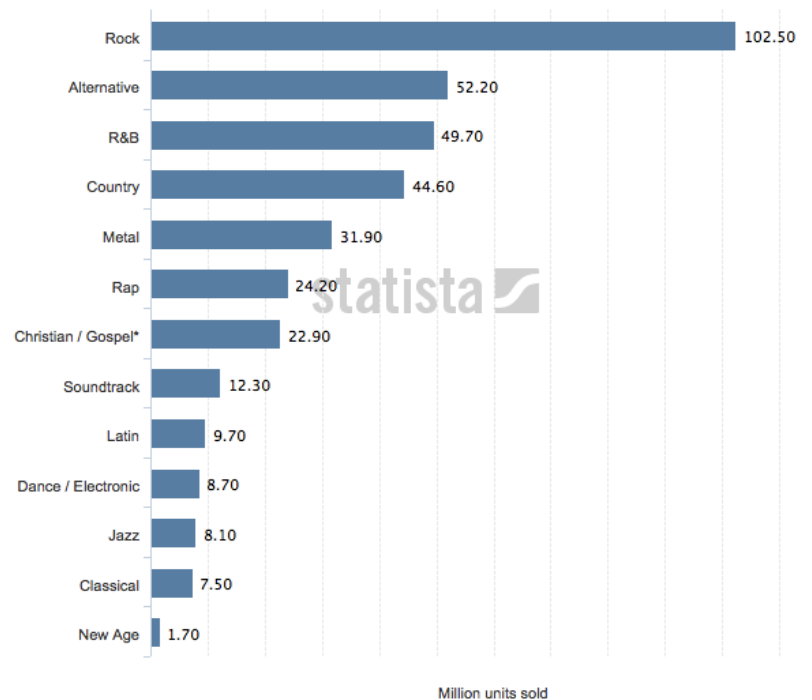
Interestingly enough though, these feelings are manifested very differently in music. Rather than look to the future, today’s youth focuses on enjoying the present. Rather than working hard for a potentially worthless degree, today’s generation puts more focus on living in the moment than ever before.

Note: This is not to say that today’s generation is lazy, but they certainly have different values than the generations before them.

This shift in values has caused a widespread need for instant gratification in many of our modes of entertainment. The music that plays on the radio reflects this sentiment - instant gratification in both music style and subject matter. Popular music today is geared towards this escapist mentality by offering easily enjoyable beats, melodies, lyrics, etc., that instantly lifts one’s spirits.

No wonder why classical music, which requires personal reflection, interpretation, and introspection, has fallen out of favor!

This chart ⁵, which depicts the most popular genres of 2012, supports this theory.



⁵ United States; Nielsen SoundScan

Source: Nielsen

⁵ original source: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/188910/us-music-album-sales-by-genre-2010/>

Resistance Against Elitism

Another political movement that has affected classical music is the general population's resistance against elitism. Since the industrial revolution, a class war has broken out between America's blue and white collar workers. Over the years, the industrial middle class has begun to resist any and all things dominated by the upper class.

Flash forward into the twenty-first century, our vanishing middle class and increasingly wealthy corporate CEO's have only fueled our class war. (Let's not forget the 99% rallies that happened just this past year.)

While classical music is by no means a genre exclusively for the wealthy, the formalized rules, formerly high ticket prices, dress code, etc., associated with attending a classical concert creates the illusion of exclusivity and high society. Additionally, as seen in the "**Classical Music has an Image Problem**" section, the genre has done little to counter this highbrow image.

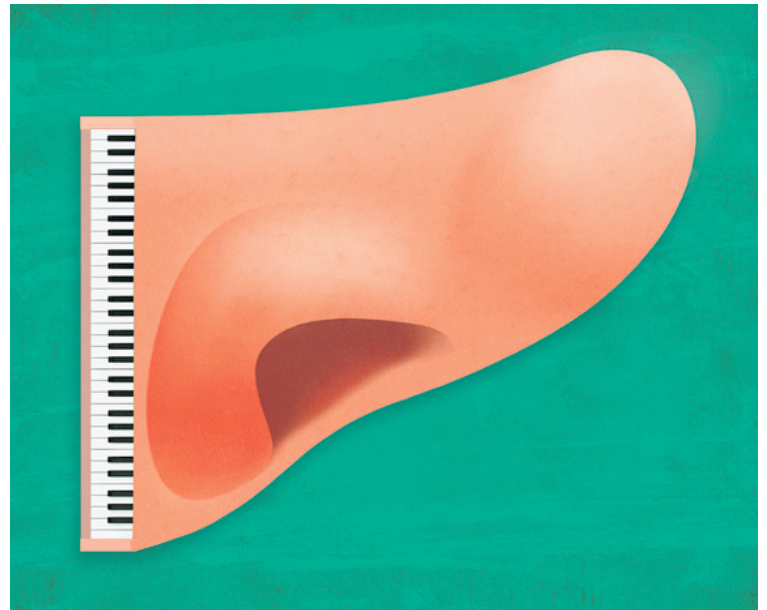
This "classical culture" is by nature not instantly accessible to modern generations. Whereas popular musicians make music that appeals to their audience, classical music already exists. It's purpose was at one point (namely, a few hundred years ago) to appeal to a wide audience, but as Alex Ross pointed out in his book *Listen to This*, classical music stopped innovating in the 1800s and now only exists for those who work to perpetuate it.

Because so many are working to perpetuate and maintain classical music's greatness, little is being done to modify it to appeal to today's generations.

Finally, the primary goal of classical musicians is to put on shows which demonstrate their abilities. Although performers certainly hope the audience enjoys their piece, their main concern is to simply perform the piece correctly. Audience enjoyment is essentially a side effect of a well-executed performance.

If the piece is performed perfectly and an audience member still may not have enjoyed the performance, the audience member's personal taste is to blame and not the musician.

This lack of *direct* concern for audience enjoyment is a major contributing factor into this "elitist" image.



Death of the Album

The invention of the iPod has completely revolutionized the way we listen to music. There has been a dramatic switch in listening from the full albums to playlists of carefully curated tracks. Playlist listening, also known as “themed listening,” is a way to compile music to serve an emotional purpose.

This isn't anything new.

For decades now people have been making mix tapes for their significant others, workout playlists, mix CDs for road trips, party music mixes, and more. We actively search for music to help elevate or promote a specific mood or mindset. This trend has even spread into various forms of radio. Sites like Pandora and Musicoverly have achieved success by creating custom playlists for people based on their tastes and moods.

Yet, seeing as most classical music concerts ARE formatted like playlists (i.e. similar themed songs with common theme connecting them), why are classical music concerts still so unpopular?

It should come as no surprise that since the advent of the iPod, we have been able to instantly access our music to fulfill our musical needs instantly. We can now find whatever song we wish to hear within seconds and change it as soon as it's lost its appeal.

This instant needs gratification has led to a steep decrease in attention span. People simply cannot listen to full albums anymore without feeling the need to hit “skip.”

The dramatic decline in society's attention span has dramatically affected classical music's popularity. Radio-length songs (3-4 minutes in length) are the norm, and we're so accustomed to the verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus format that anything else sounds strange and, frankly, boring. The blog, “How to Write a Great Song,” swears by this format. They cite research that proves that people tend to lose focus after the second chorus is over, which is why the change / climax moment at the bridge is so important. With classical music's altered format, it goes without saying that people are quite literally incapable of holding their attention to a 15-minute piano solo.

My Opinion

After researching each of the different phenomena that we just discovered, a few trends became easily apparent. First of all, people listen to classical music to fit a specific purpose: either for background music or to relax.

In either circumstance, you won't pay to experience these benefits from a live classical music group. It wouldn't be logical or economical. You can easily relax or tune out your thoughts by listening to a \$0.99 downloaded version of "Moonlight Sonata" and enjoy it from the comfort of your own home.

Everything those specific audience members hope to experience by listening to classical music, they can get from home. This is especially true when people obviously dislike the rigid formalities that come with attending these events. To this audience, classical music concerts do not satisfy what they hope to "get" out of a modern concert experience.

When people go to concerts, most expect:

- Great music
- Spectacular visuals
- A communal experience, with performer and audience
- An added "something" that they can't achieve by listening to the song at home

It's clear classical music doesn't offer many of these benefits.

However, there are still many people who keep an open mind with classical music and may attend concerts to be entertained and enriched. *These are the audience members we're looking to attract.* While they may not be **currently** involved in classical music, these people are the keys to classical music's future success.

So why isn't this target marketing attending?

The key to attracting these open-minded individuals is to more properly align their concept of a "concert" or "ideal classical music event" and format our concerts accordingly.

Bring Something New

Great art (to me) creates a resonance and opens up possibilities. It isn't the echoes of the past. It's not something you reproduce proficiently. Art is made out of anger or curiosity or awe or beauty or because you're in love or want someone to fall in love with you.

Artists don't just preserve the past. They make new things from the sum total of human experience. They tell new stories and find new ways of telling stories from the tools and influences that they have around them.

Culture isn't something that happened in Europe centuries ago that needs preservation. It's actually all that messy, beautiful, inspiring and wonderful stuff that is happening around us right now. Arts funding should reward innovation not preservation and vibrancy over bureaucracy.

Most importantly, no one art form or institution - however regarded - should have its funding quarantined and its position privileged so that it is never tested against all the other possibilities to which its resources may better be put.

We Need to Innovate!

Evolution cannot be stopped, yet by playing the same music and holding concerts in the same format for the past two hundred years, musicians have been generally resistant to change. Too many people forget that music is about personal interpretation and reinvention. This doesn't mean that you have to compose your own music to be a successful classical musician, although I am sure that couldn't hurt. However, in order to resonate with modern audiences, we need to change *something* about the way we perform classical music to differentiate it from the countless recordings and performances from artists who can perform the piece just as well (if not better than) you. If in the process we can entertain, inspire, and enrich our audience, all the better!

Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to reinvent the concert format.

Let's make concerts more economical: more entertainment and enrichment in exchange for your audience's time and money.

Thanks again for reading Part 1 of "Color Outside the Lines," and stay tuned for Part 2 in just a few weeks!

About Brittany Mazzurco

Brittany is a senior Music Business and Technology major (voice concentration) with a Marketing minor at Millersville University. Since her start at university, Brittany has merged her business and music curriculums in hopes to learn how to best promote her passion, classical music.

To date, Brittany has completed many music and marketing projects, including but not limited to:

- Performing in two recitals and one opera, “The Old Maid and the Thief”
- Conducting marketing research on the lack of attendance at MU’s concerts
- Promoting over half a dozen popular music concerts
- Performing in two rock/pop bands

As the former singer of two rock/pop bands in addition to studying opera, Brittany is actively involved in Lancaster’s classical- and indie-music scene.

In addition, she is the former President and current Marketing Chair of her university's recording company (Marauder Music Productions), one of the co-chairs of the marketing committee, and the studio's representative in the local nonprofit music charity. She is currently pursuing a career in Music Marketing and hopes to find a job managing bands in London's music scene.

To see more of Brittany’s work, or to just stay in touch, feel free to contact her at:

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