

Adaptistration

Drew McManus on orchestra management

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TAFTO 2006 Contribution - Alex Shapiro

Are you ready for this? Nothing is off limits when it comes to [composer](#) and [blogger](#) Alex Shapiro when she engages the topic of the classical music concert experience. Alex goes so far as to challenge the notion that there are any notions at all and the result is a thoroughly entertaining TAFTO contribution.

Love it or hate it, you're assured to come away from the piece thinking about classical music from a different perspective than you did beforehand...

TAFTO 2006 Contribution

By: Alex Shapiro

Those of us constantly drenched in the wonders of Really Big Sound From A Large Group Of Humans are so used to this great spectacle that we rarely consider what it must be like for the ears of those new to such drama. But sometimes we go too far in the other direction, and are guilty of thinking that this experience is something for which a person must be dutifully prepared.

If this orchestral thing is so enjoyable, why the heck do we need to fortify, inform, pre-warn, pre-inform and generally pre-experience it for someone? Is it actually that scary? That risky? Will body armor be necessary? Are we supposed to treat a new listener like a piece of food and soak her in a rich marinade of background information in order to ready her for the searing flame of the auditorium seats? Ouch!

As with all live concerts in any genre- chamber, jazz, rock, reggae- symphonic music washes over us as a sensual experience. If we insist on viewing it as difficult and challenging (perhaps because that automatically makes those of us who like it look awfully darn smart), we're missing the point. And equally sadly, we're sending a message that it's an awful lot of work to listen to music. With an implication like that, people just might stay home, or opt to do something with their money that they perceive as a more obviously enjoyable experience. Hmmm. Sound familiar?

Drew McManus cares a lot about this topic, and has been kind enough to offer several of us the blog-floor to share our views. So, I'm including each of Drew's suggested essay questions herewith as the jumping-off point for my thoughts on this subject. Or, as the jumping-off point for ending my budding career as an essayist, depending. Here goes.

What could you do you to make [experiencing a live concert] special?

Party hats. Really. I mean it.

How could a regular patron initiate the idea [of attending a concert] with someone who isn't familiar with classical music?

They could try an opening line like "what's your sign." No, wait, too trite; it never worked on me. Ok, how about something utterly unique, like, "wanna join me at a concert sometime?"

If that still doesn't do the trick, pair the offer with an invitation to dinner afterward, perhaps followed by a visit to your local rock club's mosh pit for a little contrast. The perfect evening.

What can the newbies expect to experience?

If those of us in the music-making business are doing our job right, I would imagine that any newbie, no matter how new, can expect to experience... music. That's not unreasonable to ask, and given the ticket price, more than fair in exchange.

Beyond some sound flying around the air, there shouldn't be anything that a newbie should expect. Frankly, it's all this "expectation" that's gotten us into a pickle to begin with, because unfortunately too many of those expectations are negative ones. Newbies sometimes fear that going to the

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too many of those expectations are negative ones. Newbies sometimes fear that going to the symphony won't be fun, the way going to a club usually is. Which is often why newbies haven't been to the symphony in the first place. If that's what you anticipated, would you? Of course not. So anything we can do to change that old impression is a good thing. Short of calling it the sym-fun-ny.

How can a regular patron help newbies interpret the music and/or think critically?

A glass of wine, preferably two, prior to the downbeat. Ok, make that a nice single malt. The concessions at the venues these days often have full bars. What? Your guest doesn't drink like all those rascally musicians they hear about? Well then, ok, light up a joint before heading out for the evening.

Oh, all right, all right. Here's my final answer, speaking as a [momentarily sober] composer: the LAST thing a listener should do is to either believe that they need to "interpret" or "understand" the music, or have to "think critically" about it! THIS attitude is exactly the elitism and academic snobbery that has served to intimidate so many music lovers away from concert halls over time.

All a listener needs to do is FEEL. That's actually the very same reason people like to go to movies, and pointing out the similarity might be a good tactic for lowering any racing pulses due to the anxiety of not knowing when to unwrap that little sucking candy.

How could someone help to guide them through their first orchestra experience?

Aha! Here's the Big Question. Or, as I prefer, the Big Secret! And I'm going to tell you all the truth now....

..ready?

... are you sitting down?

Ok. Here it is: No guidance is necessary. Ahhhh. Exhale.

The only thing necessary is at least one functional ear; preferably two for that nifty stereo effect.

And this is where we get to the crux of my little essay: too many people in the concert music business have effectively stifled the interest of mere civilians (aka, non-musicians) by perpetuating all the silly 19th century constructs which bolster the stultifying formality of Going to the Symphony. No coughing. No talking. No clapping at the wrong times. No flip-flops and beach shorts. No party hats. No, no, no. Like dear Drew's very well intended questions, people assume that there's a set of rules and preparations necessary before being able to enjoy this wonderful, sensual pleasure. But take heart: many of us are finally decrying, enough already!

Music should be nothing but one big, thrilling YES!! How in the world did something as yes-filled as the marvel of orchestral music become so mired down in something as negative as all these classist, snooty, anti-proletariat rules? Since when does music have rules once it's out in the air? Sure, there are plenty of rules a composer and performer learn and adhere to in order to create those powerful sounds. But once those sounds are released, they are set free and can be heard without any need for all the inoculations, passports, visas and heavy baggage that many non-concert-goers associate with.... going to a concert.

The most important belief I have about music- orchestral or otherwise- is that if it's any good, the least significant organ it should affect is the brain. Wonderful music directly reaches the heart, the body, and the spirit. Interpretations from your talented cerebral cortex are meaningless without your emotions to guide them.

I happen to think an alluring way to get people to want to join us at concerts is to talk about music in the same glowing way we talk about love, sensuality and sex. There is no greater live onslaught of beautiful waveforms vibrating one's skeleton than that found at a symphony concert. This is uniquely human, and something to be celebrated, never feared. Well, almost never. There are some great stories out there...

So, if you've read this far, by now some of you are nodding your heads in approval. And others are shocked, appalled and generally, oh, disgusted that I would deign to take something as revered as Orchestral Music and cut it to the quick with bold references that include rock music, booze, drugs, sex and... fun. Oh, and don't forget the party hats. There are those who want to protect the formality and reverence of the art form and take enormous offense to anyone who might wish to, in their view, degrade it with exposure to the light of today's social freedoms. My observation is that those who treat something as egalitarian as music in that way, are fighting

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their own internal cultural wars. They are not protecting a tradition; they are protecting themselves from a fear of the less familiar.

If the tradition is worth something to people, it will continue on its own merit. Music is made up of lots of notes strung together, and not one of them has an agenda attached to it alongside all those phrasing and dynamic markings. In most cases, social context is ascribed to things after the fact; no composer today sits down to write a symphony thinking, "*Aha! Now I will finally be able to exclude all but the most brilliant listener from enjoying my masterful piece!*" A composer writes to communicate to fellow humans.

The art form of the symphony lives within us, not on the outside. We may choose to interpret as we wish. Some people will wear jeans and others will don dinner jackets. Some will sit perfectly still in those cramped seats and others will fidget. The music doesn't care. It washes over us all equally.

I think I may be the sole composer contributor in this year's Adaptistration TAFTO round (my apologies if I've overlooked a colleague). As such, these direct comments are the result of my daily work, in which I focus on music's ability to reach many kinds of people emotionally and authentically. I live in the Los Angeles area, a wonderfully diverse city that's home to one of the world's greatest orchestras. And as you probably know, also home to an astonishingly hip new hall, a terrific contemporary composer/conductor, and an increasingly forward-thinking programming schedule.

One day last year as I was driving, a radio ad for the L.A. Phil came on. A haughty-sounding middle-aged white woman was cooing an oily, British-inflected voiceover into a high-end microphone, telling listeners just how marvelous the upcoming season was and that we won't want to miss the "divine splendor and magnificence" (or some such combo of adjectives) of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

I was livid. This was "my" wonderful orchestra that was trying to get backsides into the seats, but this truly obnoxious ad "reached out" to only a very small and specialized segment of our population. How was this elitist presentation supposed to build audiences for the future? I love hearing the Phil at Disney Hall, but that radio spot even made me want to stay away, thinking, "gee, I guess this isn't for regular folks." These are the kinds of approaches that must be reconsidered, if the great tradition of the symphony orchestra is to continue. It has to do with the attitude we wear- not the clothes.

Talking openly about this shift in attitude with pals we'd like to expose to the fabulous orchestral experience will do two things: it will encourage our friends to join us at the symphony because they might finally believe that it could really be enjoyable, and it will begin to perpetuate a new culture of happy concert attendees who can spread the gospel that the Cold War of stymieing symphonic stiffness has ceased. Say that five times fast!

What tips would you offer on what to do if you get bored or how to handle a situation if the program and/or musicians are "less than what you expected"?

The way I've handled the situation in the past is to bring a coupla guyz from Jersey backstage and threatened to have a few kneecaps broken if a poor performance like that ever happens again. Hmm, could be why I don't get those big orchestra commissions. So nowadays, I just remind any momentarily intolerant companions that hey, this is art and it's nothing but variables, which is what makes it art and not mathematics. Would they prefer to attend a lecture on algebra?

Music is the real deal, as human as it gets. Being in a hall with 90 people flailing away on their instruments and one person doing something weird with a stick is a sight and sound like no other. Don't miss out, because even when it's not perfect, it's still a helluva lot better than 93 percent of the other things you could be doing.

How would you go about selecting an ideal program for a newbie?

I usually grab the remote control and flip around until there's something cool on PBS or the cooking channel. Oh, you mean an orchestral program? There is no ideal program, because every listener is different. Too many people think that someone's first visit to a symphonic concert has to include hallowed standards from Beethoven, Mozart or Brahms. Not necessarily! Don't underestimate a newbie's tastes. A friend might be far more likely to be turned on by something contemporary, composed by a living, breathing person who shops at the same supermarket and listens to (and is possibly influenced by) the same rock and jazz as they do.

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Anything else you think would be helpful.

World peace. But that's another essay, for "Take a Friend to Voting Booth" month! Meanwhile, we should all spread peace by spreading beauty, and orchestras around the world help enormously with that important joy.

And a nice single malt doesn't hurt, either.

All About Alex Shapiro

Posted by dmcmanus at April 10, 2006 12:11 AM

COMMENTS

I was deeply disturbed by Ms. Shapiro's frequent use of humor in her comments about the orchestral experience. I was under the impression that it was actually illegal to use humor in reference to classical music.

Posted by: David Gray at April 10, 2006 9:21 AM

Well said Alex! I hope that Drew forwards this to ASOL and the LA Phil--they should hire you or put you on their board. Perhaps your essay could be required reading before their next meeting??

(And, I hate those snooty-white-guy-stuffy-classical-radio announcers. They ARE the death of music. But that's another blog....)

Posted by: [teresa mccollough](#) at April 10, 2006 11:19 AM

As usual, whether Alex is escribing hem-dem-semiquavers with finale or writing words on her Mac, she hits all the right notes!

I raise my beaker of single malt to you, oh clever and skilled friend-writer-composer!

Cheers!

Bill

Posted by: Bill Peterson at April 10, 2006 1:05 PM

This is marvelous! I've been singing in the same chorus for years; that arts institutions, museums, orchestras, etc., spend so much effort telling you what you are experiencing instead of letting you experience it. Americans, I think, suffer from a need to understand how things are made. Maybe, this tendency to explain is some kind of "apology" for allowing art to exist in a culture that is so materialistic, that the inexplicable, the mystical, the ineffable, that which is art, is a way to assuage guilt over feeling something. Part of the leftovers from our puritanical past, in other words.

The visual arts analogy to what Shapiro describes, is the horrid invention, the "acoustaphone," which buzzes so audibly from users' headphones, that nearby viewers at museums can't lose themselves in the art because of the distraction. What does anyone ever remember from a performance? The explanation? Or, the music? The art!

Posted by: margaret koscielny at April 10, 2006 1:17 PM

Brava to Ms. Shapiro for exposing and tackling so many ridiculous and outdated elitist behaviors! I am especially amused by the fact that I read this the same day as I read Daniel Barenboim's snobby remarks printed in the Arts section on Telegraph.co.uk: "Accessibility does not come through populism, accessibility comes through more interest and more knowledge." This from the same man who's leaving his position in Chicago because he doesn't want to bother thanking the donors who make his obscenely over-compensated job possible.

Too many patrons, musicians, conductors, artistic administrators, and music critics have alienated "newbies" through their disdain of the uninitiated - glaring at those who come to concerts in jeans, clap at the "wrong time," or whatever. Then they moan about the empty seats in the concert hall. Reminds me of trying to find a job when I was fresh out of college and kept being told I didn't

have enough "experience." How can I gain "experience" if no one gives me a chance??

I can't think of anything in this world that hasn't had/doesn't have to change over time to survive: the government, the church, a business, interpersonal relationships, etc. While the core of the orchestral concert experience should not change - the excellent performance of excellent music - many other aspects may have to in order for the art form to survive among the myriad entertainment options in today's society.

Posted by: Stephanie at April 10, 2006 3:50 PM

Wow, someone who gets it - at least up to a point. I've never tried party hats, but I think it's a good idea, and not just for the brass players.

I've always been mystified as to why we call it "classical" music. Isn't classical music the stuff that was written between 1730 and 1820? I haven't read Grout in years, but I think that's about right. Let's get real: if the music that people actually want to listen to today is called "popular music," why don't we call the stuff that symphony orchestras play "unpopular music?"

There is clearly a reason that I would rather listen to a Mahler Symphony on my ipod than hear it in a stuffy concert hall for \$95. The symphony business does not make it easy or fun to attend a concert. Usually the musicians look pretty pissed off anyway (although I admit it's hard to smile when you have a viola tucked under your chin).

"Classical" and symphonic music won't go away - there will always be a demographic of people over 55. But the way music is delivered, and the people who deliver it, will evolve.

Posted by: [Mitch Gershenfeld](#) at April 10, 2006 4:14 PM

Alex,

Skimmed/read this, but you do have the essayist touch!!

I agree completely on your basic premise. Actually, I think if the orchestras went into the clubs, then people could keep their "club" behavior and that's that. The musicians would probably have a terrible time playing while the margarita blender is working and other such problems, but with a few compromises, I think it would work. People would be blown away by their openness and intrigued at such a unique enterprise. (Imagine excerpts from "Wozzeck" at "The Mint" wow). Then, you could tell them to come to the "big house" and maybe they'd feel less intimidated and do it. At any rate, thanks for the interesting reading.

Steve Lockwood

Posted by: Steve Lockwood at April 10, 2006 8:52 PM

First off, I heartily support the idea of TAFTO.

However, I am in strong disagreement with the approach outlined by this author. The concept that not only Mr. Shapiro, but others seem to put forth is that classical music is readily accessible to anyone. All that is required is to have a listen. And if the listener is turned off, well, that must be the result of elitist rituals rather than the music itself. I do not concur.

There's a name for music that hooks a listener the first time it is heard: pop music. In fact, the ability to appeal rapidly to a large, general audience is perhaps the defining characteristic of pop music. (Yes, some classical was pop in its day, but that day is long past). Even with pop, virtually everyone I know will admit that a song always grows on you after a few listens. One of my indie rock buddies puts out his top 10 album list with a two year lag - he says it takes that long to properly judge them. If this is true of pop music, how much more so for classical, which is generally much more complex? I generally have a policy of listen to a recording of an unfamiliar piece at least three times before attending a performance to make sure that I'm properly acclimated to the music.

This idea that classical music is just another type of popular music is not accurate. Learning to understand and appreciate classical music is hard work. These are works that demand study and attention, not just a casual listen, to fully get.

I think we are misled because many of us, including myself, experienced a kind of epiphany at a specific performance that really turned us on to classical music. But I'd suggest that it is rare for someone with no musical training or experience to have that on the first attendance. I worked for

a classical music radio station for two years and never gained an appreciation of the music. It took four years of opera attendance and a lot effort to understand it to break through the medium.

There also seems to be an implicit suggestion that a better audience is necessarily a better one. And that classical music is for "everybody". I don't believe this. Classical music has generally been the province of some type of an elite audience, and I see no reason for this to change. In the past audiences may have been larger, but they still weren't completely broad based. (Heck, in the early 20th century large tracts of America had no electricity or running water, so it is doubtful they were attending the symphony).

It's politically incorrect to say it, but I think classical music should not try to maximize the size of its audience, but rather focus on the quality of audience: that is, people who will be deeply engaged intellectually and artistically with the music. That must be the audience core. I do think that we could have a much larger base of those people than we do now, but the idea that nearly anybody could be transformed into a classical music fan if we just got them to a concert and ditched the rituals is a naive one.

Posted by: [Thrasymachus](#) at April 11, 2006 10:45 AM

Stephanie-You are misinterpreting Barenboim's comments. I was at the lecture which was excerpted in the Telegraph and his larger point is not that accessibility is the problem, but rather the wrong kind of accessibility. By playing classical music in shops or in elevators or in TV commercials, people become immune to the simple act of listening to the music without a visual to accompany it. Barenboim wants people to listen to the music on its own terms, which isn't so far removed from Alex Shapiro's comments.

Posted by: [Marc Geelhoed](#) at April 11, 2006 10:51 AM

Clubs? I drive by a lot of those on my way to events in Los Angeles. There are lines out the door, people are identically semi-dressed to the hilt, and there's someone out front determining who gets in. Makes classical music events seem positively welcoming.

Ravi Narasimhan
Redondo Beach, CA

Posted by: [Ravi Narasimhan](#) at April 11, 2006 11:39 AM

I am pleased to read "Thrasymachus" opposing views, which speaks very clearly for his or her stance. Unabashedly, s/he states that "Classical Music" is most definitely the realm of the intellectual and musically trained, and has no place in the lives of... uh, commoners. (I do, however, humbly ask for my gender to be returned to its locked and upright position). This is the kind of dialogue that's so much fun on the web, so I couldn't resist setting aside my work for a moment and volleying back.

When he or she writes (unlike the mythical T, I did visit this writer's blog to seek a clue as to who the author might be, but the profile offers none): "some classical was pop in its day, but that day is long past", it contradicts every other point s/he makes in the rest of the response. If pop music is, as T infers, simplistic and of lesser value, then why are we all still listening to music from the Classical period that its contemporaries enjoyed? And wouldn't that be a good thing, a sign of the music's success to reach people? T has told us that what we now refer to as Classical music was, in its time... popular! That gives composers like me hope, thank you: if people enjoy my music right now, it may even be enjoyed in a hundred years. Gee.

T writes, "I generally have a policy of listen to a recording of an unfamiliar piece at least three times before attending a performance to make sure that I'm properly acclimated to the music."

I think it's great that T takes music seriously and choose to prepare so thoroughly. If that's what one needs to feel comfortable at a concert, I respect that. It does, however, rule out attending concerts of any new pieces that, premiere or no, have yet to be commercially recorded. And more to the point, knowing what to expect, and making sure that one is "properly acclimated" (Disney Hall's elevation is only about 143 feet, so most fare well there), often serves to remove the very excitement of the new that so many of us seek from a concert. Music is an abstract emotion for which there can be no ultimate preparation. A recording can't give us the unexpected chill down our spine when the brass section suddenly wails, or when the timpani thunder- no matter how well

we've acquainted ourselves with the score. For some, there's no greater level of enjoyment than being absolutely delighted and surprised when a live performance takes over our heart. But others, like T, prefer the comfort of predicatability. Ironically, that's why popular music is so... popular! It's predictable, and that feels good.

T continues: "Learning to understand and appreciate classical music is hard work. These are works that demand study and attention, not just a casual listen, to fully get."

If one is going for Ph.D in musicology, T's statement is 100 percent correct. "Learning" about the depths of music is lot of work, indeed! Most of us attend concerts to listen and enjoy ourselves, rather than first and foremost to seek an educational experience. T describes concert-going as quite a chore! If people were to believe that, most wouldn't want to go when they could do something effortless and enjoyable with all that money.

Education can often be the by-product of the evening (discovering a composer's music, or being fascinated by the colors of the instrumentation). However, music is work when IT doesn't work on an emotional, sensual level, not when WE don't work to understand it. Perhaps T is trying too hard. Or perhaps the concerts s/he chooses to attend are filled with ill-conceived pieces that are incapable of touching one's heart. For instance, (randomly choosing a Classical period piece that most of us cite as a great symphony), how much work is it to be bowled over by Beethoven's Seventh? Or, even more of a case in point, his Fifth? There's a great example of popular music, I'd say. Everyone knows the hook! And golly, many of those folks don't even have diplomas!

T says, "I think we are misled because many of us, including myself, experienced a kind of epiphany at a specific performance that really turned us on to classical music. But I'd suggest that it is rare for someone with no musical training or experience to have than on the first attendance."

How does T think all of us composers got be composers in the first place? At some point in our life, when we knew nothing and had, as T put it, "no musical training", we were exposed to this wondrous art form. And we were awed, amazed, inspired and had those epiphanies T mentions. Why would s/he assume that they are one of the select few people to have such a moving experience?

What if we did as T suggests:

"I think classical music should... focus on the quality of audience: that is, people who will be deeply engaged intellectually and artistically with the music."

Hmm... should we then only allow a certain type of person to attend these concerts? Yes, that's it! I see it now: a short multiple choice music history/rudimentary theory questionnaire that must be filled out (number 2 pencil, only please) and graded (the ushers can do this; they're often music students) prior to allowing the prospective attendee to purchase a ticket into the hallowed hall. [haughty voice]: "Oops, I'm sorry Ms. Shapiro, you failed to correctly answer the question about the Neapolitan Sixth, and you completely blew questions 4a through 7c regarding early 17th century rhythmic motives. Goodbye."

T states: "Classical music has generally been the province of some type of an elite audience, and I see no reason for this to change."

I appreciate T's candor. But I can think of a few compelling reasons for this to change. Take a look out the window. In every major city with a symphony orchestra worth sustaining, the population is changing, the economics are changing, and the social attitudes are changing. All those wealthy, educated grey-haired people that comprise the "elite audience" are going to die. If T loves the symphony so much, who does s/he think will replace those people? While those who make up the elite in the U.S. are certainly the most powerful, they are increasingly in the minority of the population. Without a more expansive reach to a broader audience, the art form of the symphony, and all the expenses that go with it, will have no support and will die as well if we choose to treat it like a mummified relic. There's probably a reason one can't spell "Adaptistration" without... ADAPT.

My final comment on T's statement above: What joy does someone get from being exclusionary? Why wouldn't one wish to share an immense pleasure with everyone possible? I am having a hard time trying to find a single reason that anyone would wish to maintain an "elite only" audience, unless they were racist, classist, selfish, and terribly unhappy and insecure.

And I would hate to think that such adjectives would refer to anyone intelligent and emotional enough to love Classical music.

It is certainly gratifying to get a personal response from Ms. Shapiro (my apologies on the gender confusion).

I would like to refine my statements a bit. My attempt is to describe things as they are, not to describe them as they should be. Certainly, I would love it if everyone were classical music fans (provided the music wasn't significantly altered in a bad way to attract a mass audience), I just don't expect that to be the case.

I think there's a trap we all fall into that we view our own tastes and preferences as self-evidently of value and ascribe others not buying into them as a result of outside forces. For example, I love living in a city, walking and taking public transit, shopping at local, independent businesses, etc. I can't see why anyone would want to live in the suburbs in a tract home on a cul-de-sac and have to fight terrible traffic to go to generic big box chain stores. I used to buy into the new urbanist view that much of this was a result of bad government planning and a lack of choices. Now I don't. After seeing so many of my city friends move to the burbs, it is very clear that they, no matter how much I can't fathom it, just like that lifestyle better. They might have complaints about traffic, but on the whole, they like it. It isn't lack of exposure or enlightenment, just a difference in taste. I think classical music is a bit like urban living in this regard. People who love it, really love it, and wouldn't trade it for anything. But the vast majority of people simply prefer something different.

When I speak of an elite audience, I'm referring to the elite of those with a strong taste for classical music, not per se a wealthy or educated elite. I myself would be disqualified on both points as I'm not rich, nor do I have any formal music education (or informal music education for that matter, beyond the excellent courses on tape I bought from the Teaching Company, which I very much recommend). At 36 years old, the graying of the audience is of major concern to me because I would like to see arts organizations around for me to spend my time patronizing when I retire.

But I don't believe classical music is easily accessible or of interest to most people. I've often taken classical music novices to performances at Ravinia, which are as casual and fun as can be, but none of them has ever patronized a classical concert again independently as a result. If top notch food, wine, candlelight, a beautiful summer night, etc. won't convince people to like classical concerts, I don't think party hats is going to do the trick.

If there were a silver bullet solution to getting people to like classical music, I'm sure it would have been discovered by now. Given the sheer number of arts organizations, the large amount of marketing dollars spent, and the number of marketing tricks tried, I don't see that it is matter of simply convincing people to come or tweaking the rituals. If ditching the dress code and handing out party hats were the answer, somebody would have done it by now and proven that it works.

Why then do I support TAFTO? I do think there are people out there who will get hooked on classical music. I think we need to cast the net wide - I just don't expect to catch that many fish.

The problem I have is with what we might call the "unmediated experience" approach you advocate. Imagine someone whose musical background and experience consisted exclusively of classical music. Now imagine that person showing up at a hip-hop concert, knowing nothing about the music, the rituals, etc. Or make it rock-n-roll, bebop or whatever. It simply wouldn't make any sense because that person wouldn't have any context in which to process the information. The answer may not be to listen to everything three times - though I should mention that your fellow TAFTO blogger Marc Geelhoed also suggests something like this - but it would be helpful in the extreme to get someone at least somewhat up to speed on what the heck is going on. The average newbie is completely disconnected from classical music aesthetically, intellectually (understanding the structures, etc), spiritually (understanding the music's religious or emotional context), and socially. Somehow we need to bridge that divide.

The same thing is evidenced within the classical music community itself. What percentage of devoted 19th century music fans are also avid consumers of Renaissance masses or avant garde compositions? If we can't get existing classical music fans to listen to something new (that's the real challenge to music's future, IMO), why would we think we can very easily get non-classical fans interested in Schubert?

While I don't think changing the concert going ritual is the answer, I do share your view that classical music is currently way too pretentious. I myself am often bewildered at the assumption that everyone must be some sort of musical expert. Reading an opera review or internet site, you'd

think you would need a Ph.D. in singing technique, as well an exhaustive knowledge of every singer from the last 100 years and the details of every single recording of every opera and what parts you like better on this version vs. that (which one omitted which parts, added some notes, has improvised cadenzas, who takes their high E-flat, etc., etc., etc.) in order to know anything about or comment on opera. Mr. Geelhoed suggests that naturally we know our local orchestra's strengths and weaknesses. Why would he think the average concert goer knows that, or has an informed opinion on how Shostakovich is to be interpreted? I sure don't - at least not in an informed sense.

Whether or not classical music can be broadly popular is at the end a matter of opinion and conjecture. I'll be forthright in stating I believe that only a small percentage of people will ever be more than occasional classical fans. I can say that because I don't have funds to raise. An orchestra must at least maintain the effort to reach the broadest audience in order to justify the millions in community support needed to keep it afloat. It would be impolitic in the extreme to suggest that the symphony is only of appeal to a minority of the community. I don't labor under that constraint.

I would also say that I think it is not necessarily in the best interests of music to have the broadest possible audience. Not because having a smaller audience per se is better, but because the long run implications of this might not be as positive as we think it is. This posting is way too long as it is, and I don't have time to full explain this, but like my namesake I feel I should put my cards on the table.

Thanks for reading.

PS: I suppose I should confess that I'm going to see the CSO performance of the New World Symphony tonight and I've never actually listened to a recording of it before. I'm also not wearing suit and tie!

Posted by: [Thrasymachus](#) at April 11, 2006 5:05 PM

Speaking of the CSO New World Symphony performance, they are offering special TAFTO \$25 Main Floor seats tickets on April 11th and 14th.

Call their ticket office at 312-294-3000 or visit www.cso.org to order the special price tickets.

Posted by: [Drew McManus](#) at April 11, 2006 5:15 PM

Brava to Alex for her posting! I do indeed find that hemp is a good anti-inflammatory and prepares the brain/body complex for music.

Barenboim's Reith lecture comments on Muzak are ludicrous and are expected from him. Good riddance!

Posted by: [Plush](#) at April 12, 2006 9:26 AM

My experiences are quite the opposite from Thrasymachus'. I teach music appreciation to adults obtaining a degree while working full-time (evening and weekend classes). Each session I introduce classical music, to some for the first time. They all (and I mean all) leave my class liking classical music. I challenge each of them to attend a concert, and not one of them has said they disliked or even hated the concert or "classical music." In fact, they return beaming and enlightened. I hear how incredible the experience and how they never knew such experiences existed. (Let me also say, at this point, I am not differentiating between standard repertoire and "new music.") I have found that a lack of exposure is what causes people to say "I don't like classical music," not a dislike of the aesthetics of so-called "classical music" or even "new music."

Posted by: [Daniel Gilliam](#) at April 12, 2006 4:07 PM

I appreciate Alex's comments. (Full disclosure-we have been friends and colleagues for more than a few years).

Along those lines, LACO is in the second season of a chamber music series called "Conversations," at the Zipper Hall, across from WDCH. Concerts start at 7 p.m., with free wine and snacks at 6. Reasonably priced tickets, not a bad seat in the house, no intermission, and held on Thursday

evenings. Following a welcome by executive director Ruth Eiel, each piece is introduced from the stage by one of the musicians. Each program is "thematic" in some way, and immediately following the playing, all the performers return to the stage to take questions from the audience. Very informal. Informative, without being stuffy. Typically very funny. And superb music making, most recently featuring Jeffrey Kahane and Edgar Meyer. No party hats, but a good time is had by all. The Mladi series, at the Los Aptos apartments on Wilshire, is another example of a relaxed audience friendly atmosphere, with uncompromising music making, and the wonderful Byron Adams as your gracious host. If anyone chose to make one of these concerts their first ever experience with this type of music, they would not be scared away, nor would they be bored or intimidated.

Posted by: [Bruce Babcock](#) at April 20, 2006 4:03 PM

About 6 or 7 years ago, I was in a bit of a funk. I was having some personal problems, I was lonely, I was bored. Then one Friday night I was walking by the local Orchestra hall, and noticed there was a concert that night. I had not been to a live orchestral concert for probably 20 years. No reason in particular for that. I just wasn't attracted, and didn't want to go to the trouble of dressing up, finding someone to go with, etc.

On this night I was just dressed in jeans and an old leather jacket. But while I saw a lot of people formally dressed, there were a lot of others in much the same level of togs as I, so I figured what the heck.

I bought a ticket way up in the back part of the balcony. And I sat down to listen. I took a cursory look at the program, but I really didn't want to know ABOUT the music, I just wanted to listen, and get out of my head. So I did.

In approaching the evening this way, with no expectations or preparation, I heard the music in a completely different way than I had ever heard it before. And I felt it as I had never felt it before. The orchestra is not by any means one of the world's best, but put 90 damn good musicians on a stage, and chances are it's going to sound pretty good, and it did.

In fact, it was by far one of the best musical experiences I've ever had in my life. And it's clear to me that it was the result of not over-thinking or over-analyzing or over-valuing, but simply...listening.

The soloist that night was Sharon Isbin, classical guitarist. She started in my home town of Minneapolis, and I had seen her name around town for years, but I had never heard her play.

She played a concerto with the orchestra which was fine. But then she came out and played solo, I think. And there was one passage of about 2 minutes of a song that was the most beautiful music I have ever heard in my life. I still remember how everything in the world seemed to come into crystal clear focus for those minutes.

I have no doubt that it was my lack of expectation and need to stay grounded in my heart that allowed me to hear the beauty of those notes and her playing.

There is nothing inherently wrong with an analytical approach to concert-experiencing. But it is only one of many ways to concert-experience. And we will have much difficulty experiencing something new if we always must refer to something old. Music, made by real musicians, is of the moment, and is a product of a million things and strings and sweat and air and humidity and wood. You can't read it as it's being played, you can only feel it as it passes through. Any other requirements or context are add-ons, they ain't in the score or the wood or the brass. I think it's helpful to have people be comfortable with starting there. Magic can occur.

Posted by: Charles Richardson at April 22, 2006 5:27 AM

It's very refreshing to read about this subject from the perspective of starting fresh, removing the "cobwebs" that can get in the way - so that one can experience music in the most direct, organic and communicative way. Bravo!

Posted by: Mike Lang at April 30, 2006 3:51 PM

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