

RPS Lecture 2010: Alex Ross
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Hold Your Applause: Inventing and Reinventing the Classical Concert

Last fall, Barack Obama hosted an evening of classical music at the White House—once an unremarkable event, more recently something of a freak occurrence. Beforehand, he said, “Now, if any of you in the audience are newcomers to classical music, and aren’t sure when to applaud, don’t be nervous. Apparently, President Kennedy had the same problem. He and Jackie held several classical-music events here, and more than once he started applauding when he wasn’t supposed to. So the social secretary worked out a system where she’d signal him through a crack in the door to the cross-hall. Now, fortunately, I have Michelle to tell me when to applaud. The rest of you are on your own.”

Obama was having some fun at the expense of the No-Appraise Rule, a central tenet of modern classical-music etiquette, which holds that one must refrain from clapping until all movements of a work have sounded. No aspect of the prevailing classical concert ritual seems to cause more puzzlement than this regulation. The problem isn’t that the No-Appraise Rule is so terribly arcane that even a law professor turned commander-in-chief cannot master it. Rather, it’s that the etiquette and the music sometimes work at cross purposes. When the average person hears this—

[EXAMPLE: End of third movement of *Pathétique*]

—his or her immediate instinct is to applaud. The music itself seems to demand it, even beg for it. The word “applause” comes from the instruction “*Plaudite*,” which appears at the end of Roman comedies, instructing the audience to clap. Chords such as these are the musical equivalent of “*Plaudite*.” They almost mimic the action of putting one’s hands together, the orchestra being unified in a series of quick, percussive sounds.

So if President Kennedy—or President Obama, for that matter—ever clapped after the third movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique*, or the first movement of the “Emperor” Concerto, or in other “wrong” places, he was intuitively following instructions contained in the score. This explains why newcomers exhibit such anxiety on the subject; it even appears that fear of incorrect applause can inhibit people from attending concerts, although they may be merely inventing excuses. Children pose a particular problem. If you examine literature handed out by various music-education associations, you notice that the suppression of enthusiasm in children is a major concern. Program booklets sometimes contain a little list of rules rendered in the style of God on Mount Sinai: “Thou shalt not applaud between movements of symphonies or other multisectional works listed on the program.” And it is often insisted that one may *only* applaud: “Appropriate applause is the only acceptable audible response from the audience.” One must make no other noise—for example, with one’s mouth.

The underlying message of the protocol is, in essence, “Curb your enthusiasm. Don’t get too excited.” Should we be surprised that people aren’t quite as excited about classical music as they used to be? To be sure, the question of concert etiquette is only part, and perhaps a rather small part, of the complicated social dilemma in which classical music finds itself—as a largely acoustic art in an electronic culture, as a mainly long-form art in a short-attention-span age. I worry that it is too trivial a subject for this noble setting. I am mindful of the fact that on the occasion of its founding the Royal Philharmonic Society dedicated itself to “the performance, in the most perfect manner possible, of the best and most approved Instrumental Music, consisting of Full Pieces, Concertantes for not less than three principal instruments, Sestetts, Quintetts and Trios; excluding Concertos, Solos and Duets; and requiring that Vocal Music, when introduced, shall have Full Orchestral Accompaniments, and shall be subjected to the same restrictions.” To refrain from applause during a Full Piece is one way of respecting the integrity of the Piece. As one who has been attending concerts since I was five or six, I have grown up with the great commandment, and I am always startled when it is broken.

Nevertheless, I do wonder about it, as I wonder about other tics of concert life: the vaguely Edwardian costumes, the convention-center lighting schemes, the aggressive affectlessness of the average professional musician, especially in America. The history of concert presentation is in itself a fascinating subject, and much of my talk tonight will be taken up with the curiously elusive question of how this one rule, the rule about applause, came to be, and what it might say about broader changes in classical music’s social role. I will then comment on contemporary experiments in alternative presentations and offer a few rough guesses as to the future evolution of the art. Please be assured that I do not plan to offer prescriptions: whether the format should change, and how it should change, are by no means easy questions. Indeed, in my view, the chief limitation of the classical ritual *is* its prescriptive quality; it supposes that all great works of music are essentially the same, that they can be placed upon a pedestal of a certain shape. What I

would like to see is a more flexible approach, so that the nature of the work itself dictates the nature of the presentation—and, by extension, the nature of the response.

It has been pointed out countless times that the classical concert of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was radically different from the rather staid and timid affair of today. Famous evidence comes from a letter Mozart wrote to his father in 1778, concerning the premiere of the “Paris” Symphony, in the French city of the same name:

Right in the middle of the First Allegro came a Passage that I knew would please, and the entire audience was sent into raptures—there was a big applaudiBement;—and as I knew, when I wrote the passage, what good effect it would make, I brought it once more at the end of the movement—and sure enough there they were: the shouts of Da capo. The Andante was well received as well, but the final Allegro pleased especially—because I had heard that here the final Allegros begin like first Allegros, namely with all instruments playing and mostly unisono; therefore, I began the movement with just 2 violins playing softly for 8 bars—then suddenly comes a forte—but the audience had, because of the quiet beginning, shushed each other, as I expected they would, and then came the forte—well, hearing it and clapping was one and the same. I was so delighted, I went right after the Sinfonie to the Palais Royal—bought myself an ice cream, prayed a rosary as I had pledged—and went home.

At the risk of perpetrating something disastrously vulgar and American, I’d like to try a little experiment, if you are willing to participate. I would like to play a recording of the beginning of the finale of the “Paris” Symphony, and see if we might not re-create the applause that Mozart describes.

[EXAMPLE: Beginning of third movement of “Paris” Symphony]

It’s a little difficult to reconstruct exactly where the applause should go, but it seems in line with what you find today in jazz clubs, where people applaud after each solo as well as at the end of each number. It is an interruption, to be sure, but it also is a signal of attentiveness and a demarcation of structure. To us, it may seem bizarre that great works of music originated in such boisterous settings, but there may be a hidden correlation between the music’s capacity for “rapture” and the audience’s capacity to show it. We can find a few relics of this kind of audience participation here and there, notably at the Proms, but for the most part it has become unthinkable. And music may have lost something in the process. I would certainly be interested to see a contemporary composer defy expectations in such a way that the audience is shocked into applause.

The great change began with the onset of the Romantic era. Composers imposed new kinds of continuity on the extant multi-movement forms, drawing listeners into an ever-changing sonic landscape. The cult of the Work, complete in itself, awesome in its implications, replaced the episodic entertainments of the eighteenth century. Lydia Goehr, in her landmark book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, writes: “Just as transparency through fidelity was the ideal that regulated performing and conducting, the same ideal was decreed to regulate audience behavior. Like performers and conductors, audiences were asked to be literally and metaphorically silent, so that the truth or beauty of the work could be heard in itself.”

Beethoven is obviously the crucial figure in the “great transformation of musical taste,” to borrow the title of an important study by William Weber. The *ex nihilo* opening of the Ninth Symphony requires silence in order to make its full impact. In the Fifth and Sixth symphonies, Beethoven experimented with stitching movements together in a larger whole, leading the way for Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy* and the symphonic poetry of Liszt and Strauss. With Schumann and Mendelssohn, you begin to sense a resistance to bursts of interstitial applause. Mendelssohn, in his “Scottish” Symphony, explicitly asks that the work be played without a break, to avoid “the usual lengthy interruptions.” Schumann pursues similar continuities in his First and Fourth Symphonies and his piano and cello concertos. In 1835, in the guise of Florestan, Schumann criticized the audiences of his time and said, “You should be turned to stone pagodas.”

Although Wagner disliked the emergent notion of the classical concert as a musical museum—all that “clinging firmly to the past,” he wrote to Liszt—he played a no less pivotal role in the transformation of audience behavior. Something particularly notable happened at the first performances of *Parsifal*, in Bayreuth, in 1882. Wagner requested that there be no curtain calls after Act II, so as not to “impinge on the impression,” as Cosima Wagner wrote in her diary. But the audience misunderstood these remarks to mean that they shouldn’t applaud at all, and total silence greeted the final curtain. Wagner said to his companions, “Now I don’t know at all. Did the audience like it or not?” He once more addressed the crowd, saying that it was now appropriate to applaud. Amid calls for the singers, Wagner had to explain that he had tried to assemble them but they were now half-dressed in the dressing room. The confusion continued at the second performance. Cosima writes: “After the first act there is a reverent silence, which has a pleasant effect. But when, after the second, the applauders are again hissed, it becomes embarrassing.” Two weeks later, he slipped into his box to watch the Flower Maidens scene. When it was over, he called out, “Bravo!”—and was hissed. Alarmingly, Wagnerians were taking Wagner more seriously than he took himself.

On the matter of applause, however, opera culture and concert culture diverged. Although twentieth-century operagoers behaved quite differently from the riotous crowds of prior eras, the idea that one should stay quiet throughout an operatic act failed to catch on, except in the case of the Wagner operas and most through-composed works that followed in Wagner's wake. The tradition of applauding Mozart and Verdi arias remained. Few will argue, I assume, that this divergence came about because the Mozart and Verdi operas are less serious than symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms. Rather, the explanation may lie in the fact that some time around 1900 the concert hall began to take on a peculiar social burden. In America, especially, members of the upper and middle classes embraced the symphony orchestra as a faux-European bastion in a world of vulgar commerce. Opera, by contrast, was considered a little too frivolous, particularly in the days when Caruso grabbed headlines with his monkey business in Central Park. The orchestra became the pride of the upper crust and the chief beneficiary of its largesse. (You have heard of the Cleveland Orchestra and the Boston Symphony, but probably not of Opera Cleveland and the Boston Lyric Opera.) In the face of a rising popular culture, the concert hall was remade as a refuge—a vale far from the madding crowd. The dying out of applause may be considered one marker of that evolution.

Yet, as far as I can determine, the No-Appause Rule originated not in America but in Germany. And it took hold rather quickly, because at the turn of the century mid-symphonic applause was still routine. When Brahms's Fourth Symphony was played before the failing composer in Vienna in 1897, "the applause that broke forth after each movement was indescribable." At the first London performance of Elgar's First Symphony in 1908, the composer was called out several times after the first movement. Conversely, a lack of applause could be an ominous sign for an anxious composer. Brahms knew that his First Piano Concerto was going down in flames in Leipzig when silence reigned after the first two movements. And when Tchaikovsky said of his *Pathétique*, "Something strange is going on with this symphony," he was referring to a perceptible coolness that the audience showed at the premiere. Each movement was "heatedly applauded," as one critic said, but not as much as expected. It seems that the third movement, in particular, drew a puzzlingly tepid response. Interestingly, though, the critic Herman Laroche interpreted the silence as respect: "They behaved, as it were, in a *foreign* manner: without speaking or making noise, they listened with the greatest attention and applauded sparingly."

By the "foreign manner," Laroche probably had in mind habits that were forming in Central Europe. As historians such as Heinrich Schwab and Walter Salmen have described, the "reform of the concert hall" was the topic of much discussion in German music journals in the period just after 1900. Ornate, decorative architecture was criticized; showy vocal and instrumental soloists deplored; it was suggested that concerts be presented in subdued light and that orchestras be hidden behind a screen; and it was proposed that no one should applaud until each work was done. All of this was very much in the spirit of the Wagner festival, with its sacred aura, its famous "Bayreuth hush," and its sunken orchestra. Karl Klingler, the leader of the Klingler quartet, took credit for instituting the No-Appause Rule at his Berlin concerts during the 1909-1910 season, but before Klingler came the formidable young conductor Hermann Abendroth, who, after taking charge of orchestral concerts in Lübeck in 1905, instructed his audience not to clap between movements of a symphony. Abendroth was noted for his devotion to the music of Anton Bruckner, which often assumed a churchly atmosphere and tended to avoid conventional "*Plaudite*" gestures. Two other outspoken concert-hall reformers of the period—Paul Marsop and Paul Ehlers—were also avowed Brucknerites. Ehlers, who is now best remembered (if at all) for his anti-Semitic attacks on Mahler, wrote of "consecrating a temple to symphonic music."

The hidden orchestra did not catch on, but the No-Appause Rule did. The entry for "applause" in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910-11) observes: "The reverential spirit which abolished applause in church has tended to spread to the theatre and the concert-room, largely under the influence of the quasi-religious atmosphere of the Wagner performances at Baireuth." By the nineteen-twenties, several leading conductors—Toscanini, Klemperer, Stokowski, and Furtwängler—were discouraging excess applause. (Furtwängler had succeeded Abendroth in Lübeck and inherited his practice.) At first, many listeners resisted the Rule, regarding it as a display of arrogance on the part of a new breed of superstar maestro. In 1927, a letter to the *New York Times* mocked the practice: "See, I not only have my big orchestra well in hand, but I can also, by a mere gesture, control a manifold larger audience!" The composer and commentator Daniel Gregory Mason sardonically wrote, "After the Funeral March of the *Eroica*, someone suggested, Mr. Stokowski might at least have pressed a button to inform the audience by (noiseless) illuminated sign: 'You may now cross the other leg.'" Olin Downes, the chief critic of the *Times*, doggedly campaigned against the Rule in his columns. In 1938, after describing how Koussevitzky had gestured disapprovingly toward his audience when he heard clapping after the third movement of the *Pathétique*, Downes exclaimed, "How anti-musical it is! Snobism in excelsis!"

Not all conductors liked the innovation. Pierre Monteux said in a 1959 interview, "I do have one big complaint about audiences in all countries, and that is their artificial restraint from applause between movements or a concerto or symphony. I don't know where the habit started, but it certainly does not fit in with the composers' intentions." And Erich Leinsdorf wrote: "We surround our doings with a set of outdated manners and even mannerisms, some of them detrimental to the best and most natural enjoyment. At the top of my list is frowning on applause between the movements of a symphony or a concerto. . . . What utter nonsense. The notion, once entertained by questionable historians, was that an entity must not be interrupted by the mundane frivolity of hand clapping. The great composers were elated by applause, wherever it burst out." And he went on to tell the famous "Paris" Symphony anecdote. No one was more emphatic than Arthur Rubinstein, who, in a 1966 interview, said, "It's barbaric to tell people it is uncivilized to

applaud something you like." He blamed the phenomenon on an American inferiority complex. The week that interview appeared, Rubinstein played Mozart concertos in New York, and listeners dutifully clapped after the first of the first movements. In a seeming fit of perversity, Rubinstein gestured for them to stop.

In certain instances, the Rule seems perfectly in keeping with the music. No one wants applause between movements of, say, Sibelius's severely melancholic Fourth Symphony. I doubt you'd often want to hear it here at Wigmore Hall. In the case of big Romantic piano concertos, however, it can have a disconcerting effect. Emanuel Ax, hardly a showboating, applause-seeking virtuoso, complains on his website: "I am always a little taken aback when I hear the first movement of a concerto which is supposed to be full of excitement, passion, and virtuoso display (like the Brahms or Beethoven Concertos), and then hear a rustling of clothing, punctuated by a few coughs; the sheer force of the music calls for a wild audience reaction." We all know the sound to which he refers. I would much rather prefer to hear a smattering of applause than be subjected to that distinctly un-beautiful, un-musical, coughing, shuffling, rustling noise, which is quite literally the sound of people suppressing their instincts.

Even worse, in my opinion, is the hushing of attempted applause. People who applaud in the "wrong place"—usually the right place, in terms of the composer's intentions—are presumably not in the habit of attending concerts regularly. They may well be attending for the first time. Having been hissed at, they may never attend again. And let's remember that shushing is itself noise. I often hear "Shhhh!" from another part of the hall without having heard whatever minor disturbance elicited it. In an ironic twist, these self-appointed prefects of the parterre—or gods of the gods—have made themselves more of a nuisance than those whom they are righteously reprimanding. There is something dismaying about this narrow-eyed watchfulness on the part of connoisseurs and this fearfulness on the part of neophytes. I doubt that Beethoven had anything like it in mind when he set to music the words "Be embraced, you millions!"

Lydia Goehr, Richard Taruskin, and other scholars have made us aware of the paradoxes of *Werktreue*—the cherished notion of following the score with absolute faithfulness. This philosophy can lead to distortions when performers fail to consider unwritten conventions that were well known at the time the music was written but that later fell from use: ornaments, cadenzas, improvised touches, and so on. I would propose that a similar distortion takes place when the audience assumes that every work requires a stony silence on the part of the listenership. It essentially Brucknerizes the classical repertory, framing every work as a grandiose object requiring awestruck contemplation. It may even do a disservice to Bruckner himself, who had his merry moments.

Let's look at a particular instance—Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*. It is perhaps the most fraught case of all. Some conductors freeze their arms in the air at the loud end of the third movement, perhaps bending the body some ways toward the audience in an effort to stop the applause that so often comes. Sometimes, even as applause is breaking out, he will lead straight into the Adagio lamentoso, so that the heart-rending opening bars of the movement go unheard. From time to time, an uglier incident occurs. At a performance of the *Pathétique* by the Sydney Symphony, in 2003, the conductor Alexander Lazarev became so irritated by his audience that he mockingly applauded back. Peter McCallum reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "At the extrovert close of the third movement, the ovation was so enthusiastic that the bemused orchestra was raised to its feet for a bow. But rather than creating an embarrassed silence for Tchaikovsky's tragic finale, the cheers swelled, the bravos grew, some took their coats and ran for trains." Even if Lazarev's tactic had succeeded, is "embarrassed silence" the right state of mind in which to listen to the final movement of the piece?

There is, of course, no way of knowing what Tchaikovsky might have thought of the Rule that emerged not long after his death. As the American classical-music blogger AC Douglas has observed—for some years he and I have been cordially jousting on the topic—the fact that Mozart, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky were happy to hear applause at certain moments says nothing about whether they approved of the practice in the abstract. They were measuring the success of their works according to the norms of their time. But we have to bear in mind the possibility that Tchaikovsky imagined applause while he was composing, and that he may even have counted on it. After that false ending, which has more than a trace of hollow bombast about it, the audience automatically swells with applause. Into that noise of public triumph tears the sound of private lament. In a way, applause may be crucial to the shock effect of this work, its unsettling inversion of the familiar Beethovenian narrative of solitary struggle giving way to collective joy.

Gustav Mahler imitated Tchaikovsky's structure in his Ninth Symphony, and he turned the screw a little further by inflecting his false Scherzo, the Rondo Burleske, with an unmistakably sardonic tone. "To my brothers in Apollo," he scrawled on one manuscript. If the audience applauds here, it may do so with misgivings, aware that night is falling around this mock-festive scene. Incidentally, I am struck by one detail in the performance history of the Ninth, to which the writer Bernard Sherman drew my attention. Many of you know the live recording of Bruno Walter's surpassingly powerful performance of the Mahler Ninth with the Vienna Philharmonic, in January 1938, two months before the Anschluss. Many in the crowd had attended Mahler's performances; some had known him personally. A note by the engineer Fred Gaisberg, the man who first recorded Caruso, indicates that the audience applauded after each movement, and that the noise was edited out. I, for one, wish that it had been left in, so that we could experience that singular performance as it transpired in the hall. It would have been precious evidence, in several ways, of a world that was about to be destroyed.

Interestingly, on a 1939 live recording of the Mahler First with the NBC Symphony under Walter's direction, you can hear a smidgen of applause before the engineers kill it. I'd like to thank Barney Sherman again for noticing this artifact:

[EXAMPLE: End of first movement of Mahler 1]

The fact that applause was removed from recordings of live music suggests another factor in the transformation of the concert ritual: habits acquired through listening at home. Seated before the wireless or the gramophone, we grew accustomed to those brief bands of silence between movements. Perhaps this explains why resistance to the suppression of applause seemed to subside rather quickly in the thirties and forties. I have the sense that in the course of the twentieth century concerts became less collective in spirit, less social in tone; instead, individuals increasingly gathered in one place to have essentially solitary, inward experiences. Where listeners once spoke of being swept away by music, to the point of gesturing or crying out loud, they now spoke of music sweeping over them, like an impressive weather system over which they had little control.

During the applause debates of the 1920s, Ossip Gabrilowitsch spoke approvingly of “those countries in the south of Europe where they shout when they are pleased; and when they are not, they hiss and throw potatoes.” He then said something that deserves to be underlined: “It is a mistake to think you have done your part when you buy your tickets.” There ought to be more of a give-and-take between performers and audience, he is saying. The passivity of modern concert behavior is too easily mistaken for boredom. Even the standing ovations can seem mechanical. The performers, for their part, cultivate too much detachment. American orchestral musicians appear to have taken classes in how not to show any emotion whatsoever—with the occasional exception of a slight smirk during the composer’s bow or a flicker of a smile during the soloist’s encore. I’m always pleasantly surprised to see the musicians of the London Symphony chatting animatedly between pieces at Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall, although perhaps they are talking about their visas. Central European orchestras tend to sway more with the music, which is also refreshing to see. Music is an art both of the mind and the body; dance rhythms course through most of the classics of the repertory. But in modern classical music the body seems repressed.

So: can anything be done? Should anything be done? If so, what? We are living in a time of considerable uncertainty about the future of classical music, with many alarming statistics in circulation and all manner of solutions being floated. Without wanting to dismiss the seriousness of the challenges that classical institutions face, I would point out first that the art has been in crisis for a long time. Its demise has been predicted many times in the past hundred years, and pessimism was often fashionable in the centuries that came before. Charles Rosen has sagely observed, “The death of classical music is perhaps its oldest continuing tradition.” I am sanguine about the future of the music itself. If anything from the last thousand years will still be of interest to people a thousand years from now—if there is a human race in a thousand years—what will it be? It will be Johann Sebastian Bach. Such music has withstood all manner of catastrophes and violent social changes; it seems indestructible, coded for survival. The institutions are, of course, another matter. There is good reason to worry about some of them, especially those that have essentially refused to evolve for the better part of a century. As evolution teaches us, species that do not adapt to changing circumstances tend to go extinct.

As I promised, I will not be offering an array of bullet-pointed recommendations for the transformation or devolution of concert life. Instead, I will speak more in an autobiographical vein about my experiences as a lifelong classical-music lover and also as a member of a generation—the so-called Generation X—which, according to some scary-looking graphs recently published by the League of American Orchestras, has yet to show the midlife surge of interest in classical music that previous generations displayed. I went to college with some extraordinarily smart and cultured people, who could recite passages from Joyce’s *Ulysses* from memory and discourse knowledgeably on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. But few of them knew classical music. I’ve long been in the habit of bringing such friends to concerts, and although they are pleased to be there I often sense a slight air of disappointment. They admire the music, but the evening in some way falls short. So I wonder whether the experience could be modified so that their admiration might turn to love.

There is no lack of proposals aimed at demystifying classical music: theatrical lighting schemes, videos, explanatory messages on handheld devices, invitations to Twitter during the performance, and so on. I have doubts about many of these, unless the music is by Messiaen, in which case tweeting seems apt. I have no wish to become one of those who clutch their heads and exclaim “Oh, horror!” when any novel scheme is put forward. Anything should be tried at least once, and if it works—not in the sense of selling tickets, but in the sense of taking deep root in musical life—then it will stay, no matter what I or others think of it. Yet, at the risk of sounding like an incipient old curmudgeon, I have to say that the introduction of gadgetry damages what has become for me the most distinctive quality of the place—its largely non-electronic nature. In a totally mediated society, where some form of electronic sound or image saturates nearly every minute of our waking lives, the act of sitting down in a hall, joining the expectant quiet in the moments before the music begins, and surrendering to the elemental properties of sound can have an almost spiritual dimension.

Perhaps concerts should become, in a way, *more* old-fashioned—more local, communal. By this I don’t have in mind superficial matters of dress or etiquette. Rather, institutions might work on strengthening the bond between performer and public—remarks beforehand, gatherings afterward, and, certainly, a relaxation of the Rule. I’m with Emanuel Ax when he says, “I think that if there were no ‘rules’ about when to applaud, we in the audience would have the right response almost always.” David Robertson has much the same attitude: he sometimes invites listeners to applaud when and where they wish. At the same time, I feel that the prevailing atmosphere is too humdrum, too

perfunctory. We fail to do justice to the music's uncanny presence. There are too many opportunities for distraction. I'm always disheartened when I see people around me burying their heads in program booklets. Perhaps it would be better to lower the lights in the hall and train the spotlight on the musicians.

But all that will be for naught without an audible and visible increase of passion onstage. I am hardly the only critic who believes that performances these days are altogether too focused on getting the notes right and insufficiently concerned with projecting style, emotion, the force of a phrase, the power of a large-scale structural conception. The scholar Robert Philip writes that the modern international style of performance, propagated through recordings, is a distinctly mixed blessing: it has generally raised standards, but it "limits the development of individual imagination, and it drives out local traditions." At its worst, it leads to "staleness," to "predictable perfection." These phrases sum up too many nights of recent years.

One encouraging trend in contemporary classical performance is to bring musicians out of their accustomed, "official" settings and place them in more intimate environments. For the past couple of years in New York people have been buzzing about a space called Le Poisson Rouge, on the site of the storied old Village Gate, on Bleecker Street. Short classical programs unfold in a jazz-club setting, with patrons seated at tables, waiters serving food and drink, and performers talking about their work from the stage. Experiments along the same lines are unfolding here in London, at Gabriel Prokofiev's series at the Horse & Groom pub, at the 100 Club, and elsewhere. For some, it's the happy wave of the future; for others, it sounds like a dystopian nightmare in which classical music is swallowed by the maw of popular culture.

My immediate response is to recall that the idea of putting on music in a club or tavern is, in fact, exceedingly old. As I commented in the *New Yorker*, Bach used to lead a weekly concert series at Zimmermann's coffee house, a university establishment in Leipzig, and, although we can't reconstruct the atmosphere of those events, they probably bore a closer resemblance to Poisson Rouge than to Carnegie Hall. It's the return of Tafelmusik—but with an important difference. The audience at Poisson Rouge is considerably more respectful than the ones we read about in descriptions of eighteenth-century musical culture. Indeed, the pianist Jonathan Biss commented to me that the crowd at Poisson Rouge was more attentive than any he had encountered in New York. This may not be saying much, given the legendary rudeness of certain New York audiences, but it's worth noting all the same. A few clinking glasses and noises from the kitchen aside, I find the atmosphere uncommonly friendly to the music, admirably serious, and, most important, intimate. But I would not go so far as to say that this kind of concert is the wave of the future. Rather, I'm happy to have a musical culture where a musician like Jonathan Biss can play both uptown and downtown, attracting different listeners in each place. I'd like to emphasize again the point with which I began: the radically different personalities of our composers, from Hildegard of Bingen to Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead, demand radically different approaches. The music is bigger than any kind of space we may design for it.

People often ask, "Has classical music become too serious?" I sometimes wonder whether it is serious enough. Certainly, it has acquired a veneer of solemnity, but too often that veneer is a cover for business as usual. I dream of the concert hall becoming a more vital, unpredictable environment, fully in thrall to the composers who mapped our musical landscapes and the performers who populate them. The great paradox of modern musical life, whether in the classical or pop arena, is that we both worship our idols and, in a way, straitjacket them. We consign them to cruelly specific roles: a certain rock band is expected to loosen us up, a certain composer is expected to ennoble us. Ah, Mozart; yeah, rock and roll. But what if a rock band wants to make us think and a composer wants to make us dance? Music should be a place where our expectations are shattered.

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