



# An Ear is a Terrible Thing to Waste:

CLASSICAL MUSIC'S FAILURE IN THE YOUTH MARKET

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116 mother and her seven-year-old boy walk into a grocery store. The mother sees fifteen different kinds of toothbrushes. Her son sees only one, the Godzilla one, the one that oozes in three shades of slime. It seems to him to be screaming out his name.

They go into a Barnes & Noble. Mom sees books, but our seven-year-old sees only a brightly colored Winnie-the-Pooh bat-and-ball toy that, oh yeah, also comes with a book. His entire being is seized with desire.

All day, as Mom crosses items off her shopping list—towels, videos, socks, light fixtures—every merchandise display offers something tailor-made for her son. Marketers in their wisdom know that, try as she might, she's doomed to succumb to the pleading look on that poor, defenseless kid's face.

Depressingly, marketing seems to guarantee that certain norms will invade generations of Americans. Mom buys a hair drier because she places a value on hair that swings in the same direction. What guarantee would she have that her seven-year-old will share her grooming values, were it not for the kid's comb, brush and hair drier set imprinted with a Chicago Bulls logo, right there next to the one she's buying herself?

The reasoning of marketing is cynical, but it works all too well. And those who fail to fall in line with its dictates do so at their own peril. Witness what happens when a product is marketed not for every possible demographic but instead, for one-size-fits-all.

All the same, going against the grain, after a hard morning's shopping at the mall, the mom from our example would like to take her son to a children's concert at the local symphony orchestra. Would he like to come along? No way! She drags him there anyway. He wriggles and squirms and mumbles and pops gum as the conductor takes the orchestra through an unrehearsed mishmash—a little of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and a bit of Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. No money has been allocated specifically for assuring this concert's quality; little thought has gone into its overall presentation, educational thrust, or age-appropriateness. Kids of all ages turn up, including many who are not ready to sit still. The orchestra apparently sees no artistic or financial incentive to put more effort into this concert. After all, it's sold out. The fact that the hall is half-empty because many mothers and fathers couldn't get their kids to actually come—well that's another matter.

The mom in our example bought a \$75 ticket for herself to tonight's regular subscription concert. It's a glittery affair. There's the soprano up there singing, for a fee of \$70,000 for this single appearance. There's the conductor, earning \$6 million annually. Of course, Mom's not thinking about any of that. She sits back, closes her eyes, and allows the music to transport her, just as it always has done since she was a kid.

For all its powers to lift the spirit, Mom wonders why classical music hasn't caught on with her son's generation.

There was a time, within her memory, when classical music reached kids of all ages and socio-economic settings. Classical music performers were major cultural icons with appeal to young and old. Gaining sophistication in music gave working-class and immigrant families a leg-up on the social ladder. Most homes had pianos. Classical music could be heard all over the radio. Music

education was a staple in virtually all public schools. Concert tickets were relatively affordable for families.

In fact, Mom attended Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts with the New York Philharmonic beginning in 1958. Bernstein conducted fifty-three Young People's Concerts in fourteen years, many of them broadcast on primetime national television. The concerts had titles like "Jazz in the Concert Hall," "Folk Music in the Concert Hall," and the "Latin-American Spirit." Some were thematically inspired by the music of particular composers, others focused on aspects of musical theory, and still others considered broad aesthetic questions, such as, "What Does Music Mean?". Bernstein rehearsed the orchestra before the concerts and worked with Philharmonic staff to edit and critique the presentations. The scripts, which he himself wrote, have been published in book form. These concerts packed the house to the rafters.

Those days are gone. Sports, TV, and movie stars have replaced classical musicians among our kids' heroes. The cultivation of great music has lost its status as a rite of passage in the assimilation of upwardly mobile American families. In the home, computers have replaced pianos. Classical music has disappeared from most radio programming, and what remains lacks substance. According to Peter Newman, past president of the Classical Music Broadcasters Association, the number of classical stations around the country has dropped at least 25 percent in the past fifteen years. Music education has been dropped from public schools in favor of curricula deemed more likely to make high school graduates more competitive in the global marketplace.

In Charles Leonard's published survey, *The Status of Arts Education in American Public Schools*, we learn that in the last thirty years, the time allotted to general music at the elementary school level has decreased by 25 percent. Instrumental instruction throughout the grades has dropped by 35 percent. In *Strong Arts, Strong Schools*, Charles Fowler asserts, "Educators in the arts have not been successful at convincing the public of the educational importance of music and the other arts." He points to a recent Gallup poll, noting, "When asked what subjects they would require every college-bound public high

school student to take, respondents rated music the lowest of the fourteen choices listed, below health education, foreign languages and art."

In many stressed single-parent and dual-career households, children's private music study gets squeezed out. Even when there is enough time for it, there is seldom enough money: private lessons and concert tickets are more costly for families now than ever. The gap between the haves and have-nots widens every day and this quite rightly fuels outrage about elitism.

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A repugnant fact: classical music is not part of the Pocahontas, Power Rangers, or Miss Piggy product lines. And it doesn't ooze in thirteen shades of slime. Even so, while classical music may not wish to stoop so low as Ninja Turtles and Barbie, something needs to be done to bring music to the ears of children, and there has never been a better time than the present.

For in recent years, study after study has affirmed what music lovers have always known by intuition: classical music is good for the brain, especially for the young brain. Leading the pack in proving the point through research have been University of California at Irvine physicist Gordon Shaw and experimental psychologist Frances Rauscher, now based at the University of Wisconsin. Shaw and Rauscher first made headlines in 1990, when they experimented by playing for students ten minutes of the Mozart K448 Sonata for two pianos before giving their audience certain kinds of behavioral tests. As measured against the scores of those children listening to various other sorts of music, as well as against a control group that heard no music, the Mozart group achieved the highest test scores by far. This phenomenon, which has been repeated in subsequent experiments, has been dubbed the "Mozart Effect."

In 1992 Rauscher taught three-year-old children in a day care center to play a toddler-sized keyboard. When tested after six months of keyboard study, these tots fared 34 percent better on spatial-temporal tests (which involve sequence, space, and time) than did their counterparts who had received no keyboard instruction.

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In the midst of this, it has also come to light that the average professional musician has a larger corpus collosum than does the average person. (The corpus collosum is a large bundle of fibers joining the left brain to the right brain.) Researchers have proved that in primates and in rats the size of the corpus collosum influences the speed of certain kinds of reasoning. So it follows that, as neuropsychologist Frank Wood has put it, "If you've got a larger corpus collosum, you've got a Pentium instead of a 286." "It's acknowledged," said Wood in a recent speech at a music conference, that "the brain comes to us at birth partially hard wired, with many connections depending on exterior stimulation to get hooked up. If not reinforced a certain number of times before a certain age, these synaptic connections are lost. Use it or lose it, in other words."

As demonstrated by all the research above, getting kids exposed to music, and lots of it, makes a critical difference.

In 1995, a professional woodwind quintet took up residence in Winston-Salem, N.C.'s Bolton Elementary School, where it performed for and interacted with children for one half hour per day for sixteen-week periods distributed over three years. In the last test just before the quintet residency project, 36.5 percent of students at the school tested at grade level

or above in reading and 38.1 percent tested at grade level or above in math. After the three years with the quintet, these numbers jumped to 85.7 and 89.3 percent respectively. Significantly for this area's demographics, the number of whites and blacks passing the competency exam was virtually the same. What's more—based on anecdotal evidence, not scientific—these kids are now turned on to classical music.

Surely the main contribution of the classical music industry to the decline of children's interest in its programming is that the industry assumed it would always enjoy a god-granted cultural supremacy. Like a long-ruling leader so sure of his power that he fails to mount a good re-election campaign, classical music was too self-confident to succeed with the younger generation. Meanwhile, Bugs Bunny and Run DMC and Nintendo and their marketers have moved into the kiddie turf.

The kiddie concert that our seven-year-old was dragged to adheres to a template still overwhelmingly favored by major orchestras, chamber ensembles, and soloists. But in modern marketing terms, it's a loser. No marketer of toothbrushes would dream of gathering 300 third graders in an auditorium and gesturing for ninety minutes at a giant plaster tooth, pointing out where the roots and the gums are, and explaining what happens when tooth decay strikes.

What really happens in the toothbrushing industry is a lot more fun, and ought to provide a model for classical music. Sure, toothbrushes are marketed to parents—as in "It's good for your kids." But that's only part of the story. Because, as we know, toothbrushes are also marketed to actual children. At your local grocery store, you can buy kids' brushes that glow in the dark, that come in weird shapes and sizes, or are adorned with representations of dolls or characters from popular books, movies, sports teams, or cartoons.

Why do Procter & Gamble and all the rest go to such lengths to target the kids' market? For one thing, says Nagisa Manabe, a product manager at Johnson & Johnson, "We actually care if children like their toothbrushes, because we actually want and need to sell them toothbrushes. If we don't, we're

out of business.” Reaching kids with toothbrushes is not just an admirable thing to do; reaching kids with toothbrushes is a bottom-line imperative.

The classical music industry has an interesting choice to make on the eve of the millennium. It can sit back and lament the cheapness of commercial culture. Or it can meet that culture halfway and embrace some amazing opportunities. One has only to look to the recent success of other genres formerly on the outs, notably country music.

Once a forgotten hillbilly relative of mainstream popular music, country music has lately enjoyed a phenomenal turnaround. Album sales have more than doubled since 1990, with a volume in 1996 of \$1.8 billion. Country music’s share of U.S. record sales has jumped from 9.6 percent of the total market in 1990 to 14.7 percent in 1996. Each week, forty-five million Americans listen to country radio stations, leading the second largest listener-ship format (“adult contemporary”) by more than seven million.

122 Consider the approach taken, as expressed in the mission statement of the Country Music Association (CMA): “[Our mission is] to guide and enhance the development of country music throughout the world; to demonstrate it as a viable medium to advertisers, consumers, and the media; and to provide a unity and purpose for the Country Music industry.” Note the words *advertisers*, *consumers*, and *media*. As a result, country artists have been recruited for such national ad and corporate promotions as Fruit of the Loom, Mobil 1, Kraft, Frito-Lay, and the Discover Card.

But *advertisers*, *consumers*, and *media* are dirty words in the classical music community. They do not appear anywhere in the mission statements of the ten largest industry service associations, and you won’t see Kurt Masur modeling Fruit of the Loom anytime soon. Chamber Music America (the other “CMA”), plays true to type: “Chamber Music America’s mission is to make chamber music a vital part of American Culture. In pursuit of this goal, CMA has designed programs and services to help those who perform and present professional chamber music.”

On television, the Nashville Network now reaches more than 68 mil-

lion households. Country Music Television (CMT) reaches 50.5 million households. All this at a time when fewer families live in rural areas than ever before. As a result, millions of kids have country music in their homes, even city kids who think potatoes grow in string bags and who think the purpose of a pick-up truck is delivering bagels. And many of these kids will become hooked on country music. As seen on TV.

There is not enough classical music in children’s television programming. We have the excellent but all too limited exposure of famous musicians on “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” and “Sesame Street.” We also now have “Charlie Horse’s Music Pizza,” which debuted in January 1998. A half-hour musical comedy starring the late Emmy-winning children’s performer, puppeteer, and ventriloquist Shari Lewis and characters from her long-running program, “Lamb Chop’s Play Along,” it provides some, but not enough, great music.

We also need better classical music videos. There’s one called “Baby Mozart” out there, which might insult the intelligence of even an eight-month-old. It comprises a variety of bad performances of assorted Mozart keyboard works on synthesizer. The visuals include dopey graphics of teddy bears and crib mobiles that bear no relationship to the music, interpretively, rhythmically, or otherwise. While Sony Classical’s Video series *Marsalis on Music* was not a success, some of its other attempts to reach children with music have been very fine. Examples include the feature film series that includes *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* and *Bizet’s Dream*.

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123 Encouraging work is being done for kids in the realm of books. In addition to the classic 1982 book, *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed*, we now have a series called *Getting to Know the Great Composers*, written and illustrated by

Mike Venezia. Venezia's approach is to tell the stories of the great composers through sympathetic narrative and hilarious comics.

And there is a record company that's reaching kids with high-quality material. In 1989, Amelia Haygood, president of Delos records, created "Young People's Notes," liner notes especially for kids, to go along with adult liner notes. These are highly accessible, warm, informative, and respectfully written.

Delos followed this up with a number of kids' releases, including a compilation of pieces for tots to listen to while they play dress-up, and a *Peter Pan* CD narrated by Derek Jacobi and others. The emphasis is on quality. "We think that this is the only direction for classical music to take in the future," says Haygood. "We need to create access for young people."

In the live music realm, the most exciting thing going on in children's programming is called "An Orchestra's Guide to the Young Person." A kiddie concert turned upside down and inside out, this offers a curriculum for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. In advance of the performance, the kids listen to music and generate rhythms, essays, lyrics, and more music. Those elements become part of the work that a professional orchestra then comes and rehearses with the kids. During the piece itself, the kids alternately act, recite, sing, and play percussion, recorders, and mallet instruments. It all culminates in a concert of scripted, notated, and improvised material, performed by the kids with members of the symphony.

The composer/creator of the work is the brilliant and free-spirited Arthur Bloom, a young Juilliard- and Yale-trained musician whose previous hits have included *Canzona da Sonare for piano*, *electric bass*, *actor* and *Miss Connecticut* and *O. J.: the Opera*. When commissioned by the Albany Symphony to write a children's piece last year, Bloom saw his opportunity to break some rules.

"I've always had trouble with the traditional kids' concert format. There are all these rules. The orchestra's there. The audience is here. I just wanted to do away with all the boundaries. When you break the rules, it's so refreshing."

There's a plot. A kid (played by a fourth grader) gets dragged to a concert by his parents (also played by fourth graders). He's bored and he falls asleep, and when he falls asleep, his imagination runs wild. The lights change and suddenly everything the kid imagines actually happens. In the course of the whole show, kids get everything from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* to an LL Cool J rap song, "Rock the Bells." At one point in the middle of all this, a trumpet player chases a kid around the audience. "They go wild for that one," says Bloom.

While it's laudable that some orchestras now send schools study materials in advance of kiddie concerts, it's doubly refreshing that in this case, it works the other way around: the kids send their original work to the orchestra and it gets incorporated into the piece. Response has been overwhelming, and Bloom has been asked to take the show to schools and symphonies around the country.

Classical music could be doing more things like these, things that would have kids begging their parents for a chance to go to the symphony or to buy a new CD. In experiencing music, kids would get a tremendous boost to their intellectual, emotional, and creative development. And they'd acquire a level of musical literacy that would enable them to enjoy classical music for a lifetime.

Until now, kids have not been regarded as an important classical music market. But some people are beginning to realize that, with more time, talent, and resources aimed at children, major gains could be achieved. Today the door is wide open for innovation. Opportunity knocks.