

**This music is for perusal only.**

***OUR  
NATIVE  
SONG***

*ESSAYS ON MUSIC  
BY GLENN BUHR*

Copyright 2013 by Glenn Buhr.

Design and layout by Melody Morrissette.  
Printed in Canada by Friesens.

ISBN 978-0-9918771-0-2

Counterpoint Music Library Services Inc.  
42 Frater Ave.  
Toronto, ON  
M4C 2H6  
[www.cpmusiclibrary.ca](http://www.cpmusiclibrary.ca)

# CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	9
<b>Our Native Song (Introduction)</b>	11
1 <b>Credo/Sanctus</b>	15
2 <b>A Song is a Bar of Soap</b>	21
3 <b>Very Dull at a Party</b>	25
4 <b>Morality</b>	31
5 <b>The New Governments of Music-making</b>	37
6 <b>Musical Literacy is Overrated</b>	43
7 <b>Sit Still and Listen</b>	53
8 <b>The Dead, the Semi-dead and the Living Musics</b>	63
9 <b>They Yawp; We Squeak</b>	79
10 <b>The Great Big Tuxedoed Machine (3 Anecdotes about Symphony Orchestras)</b>	87
11 <b>In Theory</b>	101
12 <b>The Masterpiece</b>	113
13 <b>Local Classical Guy Tries His Hand at Roots</b>	127
14 <b>Music is Love</b>	133
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	143

***This book is dedicated to my students.***

## PREFACE

**As a teacher, I'm known as a provocateur, a button-pusher. I like to nudge my students into discomfort zones; encourage them to question ideas that they take for granted, because I feel that any knee-jerk obedience is very bad for critical thinking. I've carried that button-pushing habit into this book, and for the same reason.**

**In this text, I celebrate the spirit of revolution. I don't really want citizens to engage in revolution; that kind of anguish is not something I wish on anyone. But some of us do need to push our contrary beliefs forward to challenge established beliefs, especially if those established beliefs quash our own cultural personality. I feel that more of us need to be engaged in that sort of rebellion. It's our responsibility as artists and as citizens to fight for our own culture.**

**The world is always changing; it's never really established, other than as a constantly changing entity. So, established ideas need regular upgrades, and sometimes they need to be replaced. It's a real mistake to assume that any system will last forever, or that systems passed to us by our elders will always be functional in our own world, which is in a steady state of renewal.**

**Any individual's principal responsibility as a professional is to recognize problems in his or her field, and to work toward solutions. My field is music, and my problem is that in my own country - Canada - we do not value our own music as much as other cultures value theirs. We're happy to recycle the music of other cultures, rather than assert ourselves as a musical people with a unique voice of our own.**

**Another problem in my field is the general public's indifference toward new concert music, so I spend some time analyzing that issue from the perspective of a concert music composer. In one chapter I scrutinize some theoretical issues that are ongoing, and in another I discuss some issues which concern the economics of music making: classical versus popular music; large nations versus small.**

I'm also very interested in how the world is changing these days, especially relative to the rapidly unfolding new technologies. What are the implications of that for our cultural expression? I'm curious about what music actually is, and why we seem to need to sing and dance and create music no matter where we live. I hold several things up for closer scrutiny: right versus wrong notes; symphony orchestras; reggae music; simple songs, pop music and jazz.

My thesis is that all music is folk music, and the essays look at the implications of that from various perspectives. The sequence of essays presented here is simply the way I like to lay them out, but they can be read in any order.

The writing of these essays was a salve for my own curiosity, and in writing them I was able to sort through some issues that affect my own professional life. But also, I hope that young creative musicians will be challenged by the ideas here, and flesh them out in their own work. Maybe they'd even overturn some of the logic, and come up with a better understanding about how music functions in our lives, and how we can better nurture our own culture.

**GLENN BUHR**

*Winnipeg  
January, 2013*

I'm a Canadian artist.  
Sandwiched culturally between the imperial forces of the USA  
and Europe.  
A rock, and a hard place.

From that crevice – in which we Canadians attempt to express  
ourselves – I've come up with these ideas.  
Many of the ideas are not cause for joy.  
I suggest that Canadians need a revolution.  
Americans have already had theirs; a bloody revolution that  
cost many lives.  
But the American Revolution – the spirit that generated the rev-  
olution – is a direct cause of the vibrant American culture.

In the early days after that revolution, Americans must have  
been giddy with the celebration of their new, unique and  
diverse society.

New, unique,  
And with a sharply drawn personality, like its citizens.

That is exactly what every nation needs.

# CREDO

## *THE UNIVERSALITY OF MUSIC*

**I'm not a believer in the universality of music.**

**Almost everyone loves (or at least likes) music.  
But no one loves all music; no one loves the entire universe  
of music.**

**There is even some music that we do not comprehend at all.  
But that list is different for everyone.**

**Indonesian music uses patterns of notes similar to those of the  
pentatonic scales in Western music.**

**But they are not tuned the same, and it's noticeable even to the  
untrained ear.**

**For some, the similarity between these scale systems would be  
proof of the universality of music.**

**For me, it's the opposite.**

**The similarities of these two musics – or of any one music com-  
pared with another, or any element of one culture rela-  
tive to another – are interesting, but not as compelling as  
their differences.**

## *ALL MUSIC IS FOLK MUSIC*

**I believe that all music is folk music.**

**All music is social.**

**Human beings share music.**

**We communicate non-verbally with music.**

**Church music is social because church is social.**



What we in the West call classical music was the social music of the old European aristocracy:

Patrons with similar intellectual training gathering together to listen to concerts; sitting still together, and following the composer's argument and the performers' interpretations with a critical ear.

Pop music is social.

People listen to it together.

(Often blindly/deafly if it's background music on the radio or in an elevator.)

People dance to the music with each other.

Or tap their feet to the rhythms together, everyone feeling the same beat.

Or we sing along.

Music becomes a part of our culture when we hear it together and remember it together.

## *MUSIC AS LANGUAGE*

Music functions with a grammar of its own that's organic, like our spoken and written words.

And, like spoken language, music is a defining characteristic of every culture.

These essays are mostly about Western music because it's the music that I know well.

It's my mother tongue.

I also know other music well, though I've studied it as an outsider. (I consider myself an outsider if I did not grow up with the musical language.)

I'm an outsider if I play the music well, but listeners still hear the dialect of my own musical mother tongue, as if I were speaking a new language fluently, but with a thick accent.)

Grammar is not art.

But it is the ground state for all art-making that involves language, like music and poetry.

Grammar exists whether we've studied it formally or not.  
We absorb grammar spontaneously as we grow from child  
to adult.  
It's an essential element of every musical and spoken language.

## *RESONANCE*

Music resonates with people.  
When people hear music, they start behaving like the music.  
They move their bodies in the same rhythm, tapping a foot,  
or nodding to the beat, and sometimes they sing along  
to the tunes that they hear in concert or on a recording.  
(Or at least they try.)  
And if they don't do it visibly or audibly, they are resonating  
quietly and privately in their minds.

Some people don't though.  
A very few.  
These are the ones who are not listening.  
Or cannot listen.  
(Or they can't help focusing on other things when the music  
plays.  
They say that Napoleon loved the arts – loved all intellectual  
endeavour; but he was tone deaf.  
Perhaps he was planning the architecture of his next artillery  
line every time someone played the piano or sang a song  
in his presence.)

## *MASTERY*

I believe that musicians have a duty, like all professionals, to  
recognize problems in their field and to enact solutions.  
  
They have a duty to become masters in their discipline.  
To seek out their own culture – sometimes by exploring other  
cultures deeply – and to create music.

# **SANCTUS**

## *SPIRITUALITY*

**I believe that music has a spiritual, and also a healing quality.  
But I have no idea what that really means.**

# A SONG IS A BAR OF SOAP

Everyone sings.  
Some people sing badly, some less badly;  
but everyone sings.

Singing is resonant.  
As we get to know a song better and better, sometimes we  
move our lips to the words when someone else sings it.  
Sometimes we sing along.  
Sometimes we carry the song home and sing it there.  
Sometimes we sing it to our children.  
And then as they grow up, they sing the song too.  
By heart.

It requires very little intellectual effort to learn a song.

*A song is a bar of soap.  
It lasts about as long as a bar of soap,*  
says Tom Waits.

We find a song interesting – something outside of our usual  
experience and expectations – for a short while.  
Then it becomes a habit.  
It moves into rotation in the radio station that our brains be-  
come when we replay the songs we know in our head.

Unlike a classical symphony, which is made up of song-like  
melodies on its surface combined with a complex process  
of development at its core, most songs stay on the surface  
because they don't develop.  
Songs are closed forms built out of simple phrases, nothing more.

A phrase is the length of one breath.  
Often there's a second phrase, that responds to the first; an antecedent phrase and its consequence.  
The two together combine into a single larger unit, which is called a period.  
A period is two or more linked phrases.  
A section is one or two linked periods.  
A song's second section is a bit of new music; a period or two, somewhat different from the opening section.  
(The Beatles called this the *middle eight* because it's often eight bars long.)  
Many songs repeat the opening section – with different lyrics – to close the form.

Songs contain very few surprises because there is little room for complex modulations or extended episodes which can take a listener to undetermined places.

Songs are dear to every culture.  
We pass them down the generations without even noticing that this is something that glues us all together.  
We sing songs happily, and we listen to songs happily.  
But we rarely place them on the same pedestal as we do the Brahms symphonies.  
They occupy a different place for us.

Sometimes songs help us define a precious time in our life.  
They support our need for nostalgia.  
Sometimes we just like the sound of the song, so we sing it together with friends.

And though we do take the time to listen to performers sing songs in concert, we spend just as much time listening to songs, and also singing them, in other contexts.

We don't define songs as concert music.  
They're a part of our lives.  
They live with us as we live through our days and weeks.  
We accumulate songs as we carry on with our lives.  
We learn them all by heart,  
and effortlessly.

We do not learn a Brahms symphony by heart without effort.  
It takes quite a few listenings to contain a symphony in our  
memory.

And once there, it's something that we can digest: ponder, an-  
alyze and appreciate for its multileveled riches.

Compared to a symphony, a song is a small thing.

A symphony is created for listeners who appreciate it as a  
work of art.

A song is just a song.

A bar of soap.

# VERY DULL AT A PARTY

Music pervades our lives on many planes.  
It infiltrates through our neighbour's walls – unpleasant  
or nostalgic.  
There's hopeful drumming in the rhythm of our walking.  
Nuisance memories of familiar, unpleasant songs.  
Our proud symphonies and anthems.  
Stadium rock.

Social philosopher Jane Jacobs attributed a great deal of power to music.  
She felt that songs have often saved oppressed cultures from forgetfulness by preserving the sound and music of a people – its protests; the feel of its thinking; the way the people dance and express themselves – in the emotive and easily remembered package which is a song:

*Song is an extremely effective way of passing a culture down through the generations. As we all recognize, memorable songs and poems that we learn when we're young stay with us in old age. The emotional powers of the arts – authentic arts, not official propaganda – are obviously central to every culture.*

(Jane Jacobs, from *Dark Age Ahead*, p. 173)

Jacobs feels that music is an indigenous art form that defines and protects culture.  
Music is at the core of what she feels keeps a culture strong and durable.

Her most vivid example is the case of the Irish, who against all odds have managed to protect their unique culture by keeping it alive through the ages in the form of song.

Music is not a universal language.

If so, the universe would have only one culture, as indeed was the design of many powerful leaders in the past, who justified their brutal plans for expansion and the subsequent demise of several indigenous cultures because they were on a mission to civilize the world.

As social creatures in the modern world, we've outgrown those kind of priorities, but the music fostered by European conquerors during the time of their bloodiest expansions, still lingers everywhere.

It's what we commonly call classical music.

Some call classical music the highest form of musical expression, but there's no such thing.

No one culture or one music is greater than any other, though some might reflect imperial values, while others don't.

Some nations have had more attention in the larger world for various reasons, and have imposed their cultural values on everyone.

(Like Western Europe through its classical arts, or the United States through its popular culture.)

But as our communications have expanded we have had much more access to other cultures, some of which value music in radically different ways than we do.

African music, for example, is more overtly social than European classical music, so the rituals for listening are very different.

(There's more dancing, and singing along.)

We can never understand music unless we know the culture from which it sprang.

It's frivolous to study any music without an awareness of its cultural foundation.

Learning the music by ear is a good first step.

It's the first step that all good musicians take when they begin their obsession with music.



We can learn much about music by living inside it.

We can develop a deeper understanding of any culture by listening to its music with a disciplined ear, and we can come to a deeper understanding of ourselves by listening deeply to our own music.

But listening for our native song in the 21st century in the midst of the din of the times can be confusing even for the most confident artist.

There's a lot of background noise.

These days it's not always easy to hear one's own voice clearly.

The song we listen for is often drowned out.

Or it's someone else's song.

Jane Jacobs declares that song is an extremely effective way of passing a culture down through the generations.

But if we have nothing of our own to sing, then there's nothing to pass down.

A nation without song is a nation with no personality.

Very dull at a party.

Should we still be writing music for orchestras, even though there are few orchestral works written in the last half century that have found their way into the repertoire?

Should we be learning the intricacies of jazz, even though the popular enthusiasm that supported the great jazz innovators has disappeared?

Isn't it a waste of energy to try to contribute new music to our society if your work is forgotten or ignored?

Should we bother teaching young musicians these things if by doing so we are only supporting someone else's cultural ideal by mimicking the the past musical glories of other nations?

Not everyone in the world is American or European.

And if the values of those or any other cultures force their way into our lives, we should complain.

And loudly.

A single global culture is a very bad idea.  
If such a thing were ever to unfold, most of us would be cultural slaves.

I'm not interested in criticizing the powerful cultures.  
We should all be excited by the success and sophistication of European classical culture.

And if quality and quantity of song is an accurate gauge of a country's cultural health, then we should be envious of America's success too:

*American culture is saturated with heart and emotion; it revels in the richness of its indigenous arts. In song alone, America has gospel music and blues; songs of labour unions, cowboys and chain gangs; hits from musicals and films; country music, jazz, ballads, sea shanteys, rock and roll, and rap; patriotic, war, antiwar, and seasonal songs; advertising ditties; nursery rhymes; school, campfire, drinking, homesick and love songs; lullabies; revival hymns; plus disrespectful parodies of the lot.*

(Jane Jacobs, from *Dark Age Ahead*, p. 174)

But smaller powers have been overwhelmed by these empire builders.

The audience is controlled by those with the resources to dominate the media, so smaller, less influential centres sometimes have no way to engage an audience.

And cultural dominance supports economic dominance, so it's in the interest of the larger powers to spread their culture beyond their own frontiers through the media.

But the drive toward dominance serves only those in the driver's seat.

The rest of us are simply confused about our identity because of the noisy ones, and we're led to wonder whether we deserve a cultural voice at all.

We usually seek success by imitating the powerful.  
But it's not a good idea for lesser nations to become assimilated  
within the greater nations.  
Nor is it very interesting.

The natural world is diverse; an ecological balance of many  
contradicting forces.

The same is true with culture.

We gain nothing by declaring the universality of any one lan-  
guage of music.

A healthy cultural ecology requires diversity, and diversity is  
always interesting.

In the context of global ecology, a powerful nation is a major  
contributor, not the arbiter of culture.

Maybe the quieter, more distant voices can learn from the suc-  
cesses of the powerful.

And then continue to sing their own songs.

# MUSICAL LITERACY IS OVERRATED

Many people believe that Western European music is superior to other music because of its advanced notation system and the legacy that the logging and the mapping of the music has engendered.

I'm not one of those people.

The music that we know from 18th-century Europe is what we call its classical music.

The only way we have of knowing other music from that time is anecdotal.

Any music made and preserved without notation – the so-called folk music of the era – would have been passed on by rote, by listening, and playing along.

Some of the un-notated music of that time is still with us, but we have no idea if it sounds the same as it did then because we have no record of those early performances.

But notation preserves classical music.

And the study of performance practice preserves the manner and style of musical performance.

And that has provided us with the illusion that this music is greater than others.

That it's immortal, because it's lasted.

While other musics aren't, because they haven't.

Until the invention of the phonograph in the 20th century.

*CASE STUDY*  
**CHARLIE PARKER**

**Bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker is regarded as great – a jazz giant – because he was a fascinating ground-breaking creative musician.**

**And we know this in our own time because his music is preserved on recordings.**

**Parker's work endures in our culture, just as many classical European works do, and for the same reasons: the music is wonderful, and it has been preserved so that we can listen to it many times.**

**And upon listening many times, the music becomes absorbed into the culture.**

**It attains the status of literature, even though very little reading and writing is involved when the music is created, performed or preserved.**

**So it isn't the ability to read and write music that defines great music.**

**It's preservation of excellent music for the sake of repeated listening.**

**Mozart's medium was the orchestra, and the opera house; the string quartet.**

**All of his music was performed from notated score and also preserved that way.**

**Charlie Parker's medium was the saxophone, and the jazz band.**

**Much of bebop jazz is improvised.**

**Some is performed from score, though the score is usually not much more than a simple one-page lead sheet.**

**So most of the music has been preserved by sound recording rather than by published notation.**

**Parker's improvised solos are now learned by all sax players who study jazz.**

**Most of the solos have been transcribed into notation from the recordings, and learning those solos note for note is a requirement for any serious improvisational saxophonist who wants to understand the performance practice of American jazz.**

But Parker himself did not write down the solos.  
He created them spontaneously.  
And we would not know the music at all if he had lived in the era that predated sound recording, because at that time there was no way to preserve improvisation.  
(All of the master composers in Old Europe were known to be wonderful improvisers, but the only clue we have about the sound of their improvisations is the music that they left behind in manuscript.)

## RESONANCE

Resonance is a wonderful concept.  
Both poetic and scientific.

Imagine two long strings with the same weight and density,  
and both tuned to the same pitch.

(Meaning that they have identical tension.)

If one is set in motion (if we pluck it), in a short while, the other starts to vibrate spontaneously.

Air molecules are set in motion when the plucked string vibrates, and we hear a note when the vibrating air agitates the ear drum.

Those wave-motined air molecules also begin to move the unplucked stationary string back and forth in the same way that they agitate the ear drum.

This phenomenon of *sympathetic vibrations* is called resonance.

It gets better:

If the unplucked string is twice as long as the plucked string, but tuned to the same tension, it would normally sound an octave lower than the plucked string.

But still the unplucked string begins to vibrate on its own once the other string is set in motion, because its harmonics are in tune with the plucked string.

That means that the longer string vibrates in subdivisions; in this case at half its length – which corresponds to the length and pitch of the plucked string.

Vibrating strings move back and forth at their full length.  
But they also vibrate – quicker and quieter – at their half length  
(an octave higher).  
And also their thirds length (an octave and a fifth higher).  
And quarter length (two octaves higher).  
And fifths length.  
Sixths length, etc.

So there is ample opportunity in this large world for resonant vibrations of all sorts.

If one string somewhere, at a certain length, is sounding a C, and there's another nearby that's the same length and tension, or is twice as long or three times as long, or half as long, etc, then that string will also begin to vibrate.

Music is always and only present when something or someone is creating a disturbance.

Sound is a disturbance of air molecules.

And if that disturbance has a regular pattern over a set period of time, then the motion of the original always propagates itself to other physical bodies and they move also, until the energy of the original disturbance fades.

It's like dancing.

Someone hears a funky rhythm, and starts tapping his fingers on the table.

Or the music leads him to tap a foot, sway his head; move back and forth, like a vibrating string.

He might even begin to dance.

And when Pete Seeger plays his banjo and sings a few verses, it doesn't take much encouragement from him to get his audience to sing along.

All good music resonates with someone.

Popular music resonates with many people.

So does classical music.

Or at least it did during the era in which it was written.

## CASE STUDY

### HAYDN

Haydn's music was extremely popular in his own lifetime.  
Something about his sense of balance and his sense of humour  
    appealed to a lot of people.  
His music delighted people.  
They demanded it, and remembered it.

Also, he was lucky.  
Like most pop stars, Haydn's success was the result of talent  
    and luck.  
And also steady hard work.

Though in Haydn's time, there were only two ways to hear  
    music: to listen to someone performing it, or to play it  
    yourself.  
If musicians wanted to make their music known, they would  
    have to set up concerts and tour.  
Or they could send manuscripts to others via their publishers.

Illiterate musicians could perform and tour.  
But they could not pass their work on by manuscript.

When we use the term folk music, we usually mean music  
    made by illiterate musicians.  
And we assume that since the music is made by and for people  
    who don't read or write music, that it is inferior.

But all music is folk music.  
Haydn's music is the folk music of the literate European elite.  
And it still resonates with the descendants of that tribe.

But just because it was created for a literate audience doesn't  
    mean that it's better than any other music.



## CASE STUDY

### JAMAICA

Jamaica was first conquered by the Spanish, who eliminated the aboriginal population and imported slaves from Africa.  
Then the French took over.  
Then the British.

By the time the British had left, the country was populated almost exclusively by descendants of the African slaves who spoke and understood English impeccably.  
(Though their own mother tongue – the Jamaican patois – evolved on its own, among the blacks, from the time of the first slave migration.)

Over time, Jamaica found its own heroes.  
Marcus Garvey, who preached about their African past.  
And Bob Marley who sang about Jamaica's history of oppression and, with his music, raised the people's hope for redemption.

*Lively up yourself, don't be no drag*, Marley would sing to his audience, if they weren't moving and grooving adequately to the music when he played.

This music is all about resonance.  
There's high political spirit in his work.  
But it's supported by rhythms and melody that invite us to join in the singing and dancing.

Marley's there on stage, and you are in the audience.  
30-50 metres separate you.  
And still you are moving your body in the same rhythm.  
Sharing that rhythm in *sympathetic vibrations*.  
Without a resonant audience, Bob Marley's music would not exist.

And Marley's reggae music has become as classical and as important to Jamaicans as Beethoven's symphonies have become for Europeans.  
It's championed by most music lovers from other backgrounds too, in much the same way that Duke Ellington's music was championed by the critics when he first toured Europe.

I have a doctorate in music composition and spent much of my time at graduate school studying the work of the great European composers, both living and dead.

Still, I find Marley's music as powerful and evocative as the classical masterworks.

Also relevant, important.

Tender.

Militant.

Beautiful and joyous.

These are the same words that I'd use to describe Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

Yet Marley's music rarely modulates to distant or related keys (as Beethoven's often does).

His songs are short – 3 to 5 minutes – relative to the long discourse of the traditional European symphony,

And the music requires little or no notation in order to recreate and preserve it.

But this doesn't mean that Marley's music is inferior to Beethoven's.

Marley's music was created for an engaged, active audience.

Dancing, and sometimes singing along while they listen.

Beethoven's music was created for an audience that was expected to be engaged without dancing or singing along.

~ ~ ~

We often think that reading and writing is an advanced skill. Those who can read and write have more opportunity in the world.

And the more literate the general population is, the better our intercommunication and therefore the better our invention.

And I agree.

But in the discipline of music that's only partially true.

The complex melodic compositions of East Indian classical music are loosely notated in order to preserve the music over the generations.

But the details of the music are taught by rote from guru to shishya; master to disciple.

In the pedagogical system of East Indian music, learning the basic compositions as a student is just a step on the way to becoming a master improviser.

The composed sections – if there are any – of live professional performances are memorized after being learned by ear. The improvisations aren't notated at all.

Most African music is not notated.

And most emigrant African music – reggae music, soul music, blues, jazz – is either only partially notated, or not notated at all.

All of my colleagues who make their living as classical musicians are severely literate.

They read Western music notation quickly and impeccably. It's the basis of their art-making.

But they'd be uncomfortable in a reggae band or a blues band, unless someone transcribed the music so that they'd have something that they could read.

And there is no way that a musician trained primarily to read Western music notation could ever give an authentic performance of East Indian classical music.

With some music, impeccable literacy is not very useful.

# **THE DEAD, THE SEMI-DEAD AND THE LIVING MUSICS**

## *1. POP MUSIC (LIVING)*

In the early 20th century, the Soviets might have championed the idea of the classless society, but the Americans came the closest to actually achieving it.

Assisted by a growing mass media, a constitutional foundation of freedom and equality, and a free market system, individual Americans now have as much input into the music and art that's consumed and created as anyone in the old world aristocracy used to have in their own exclusive society.

American society is not entirely classless, nor is it without its imbalances.

But in the U.S.A. now, individual citizens can exercise their right to vote for cultural stimuli simply by attending the arts according to their own tastes.

America is a cultural success because its people are diverse, and also empowered.

## **AFRICA/AMERICA**

African-American culture (especially the music) has also thrived.

Most of the various threads of popular music have their roots in African-American music.

The blues – born in the American south – permeates popular music in every genre.

Rhythm and blues, jazz, the British pop bands, hiphop all have the same source: African music.

It's ironic that the British slave trade in America gave black music more cultural influence than it would have had if the slave trade never happened.

African-American culture was thrust onto the world stage as the U.S.A. grew to become the world's largest power.

African music is built on song and dance.

There is always a part that someone can play in the array of polyrhythms.

Someone is usually singing and dancing in performance, leading the audience to join in if they can.

Africans have never shown much interest in abstracting the qualities of song and dance for pure listening.

For them, music is more a means of communal sharing than an art form.

American black music sounds quite different than African music because of its multiple influences, but its social function is still same.

Jazz began as pure dance music.

An entertainment for Americans, nothing more.

But when Duke Ellington emerged with his unique medium – the jazz orchestra with its unprecedented sound – the music was hailed by European critics as a form of art equal to that of Debussy.

Ellington was adamant.

His music might be considered high art, but he always conceived of it as music for social dancing.

No special training expected or required.

As with African music, the big band audiences were encouraged to resonate with the music and join in, by dancing.

# **THE GREAT BIG TUXEDOED MACHINE**

## **(3 ANECDOTES ABOUT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS)**

### *1. BRAMWELL TOVEY AND THE WINNIPEG EXPERIMENT*

#### **THE WSO NEW MUSIC FESTIVAL**

In 1990, I was asked by the management of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra to join their staff as Composer-in-Residence and create a festival of new music.

My unofficial mandate was to placate the local composers, who had amalgamated into an association and had been noisily lobbying the orchestra management to perform their work.

The festival was to be a ghetto for this music.

A week in which it would all be gathered in one place and consumed by those few patrons – usually other composers – who routinely support new music ventures.

We expected and budgeted for an average audience size of about two hundred.

But we underestimated that considerably, and were overwhelmed by the response.

The smallest audience during the nine days of concerts at our first festival in January 1992 was five hundred.

The largest was twelve hundred.

And our audience grew over the next five years.  
The last concert that I curated in 1996 drew an audience of almost three thousand people.

We assumed that the festival's unprecedented success indicated that the public was now ready for new music in its symphony halls.

So we programmed more contemporary music in our other subscription series in an attempt to catch the wave that we had generated with the festival.

But that didn't work.

New music in the established series was still just tolerated, as it always had been, and there was no hint of the enthusiasm that we experienced from our new music festival audiences.

Our conventional symphony subscribers did not want new music.

They wanted classical music; that's why they bought subscriptions.

And they let us know that through our audience surveys.

In the subscription series we tried the same concert style and marketing technique that worked so well for our new music festival.

But it had no effect.

Our subscription audience did not grow.

Nor did that audience develop a new appreciation for modern music.

Our festival was a success as a festival.

But we weren't able to place any new works into the repertoire, so it wasn't helping the larger problems that plagued most symphony orchestras.

The festival itself was the star that created the excitement.

The music was unusual and therefore often quite entertaining; it flavoured the event and often entranced the audience.

But only temporarily.

Nothing that we performed hit the airwaves more regularly.

And the slight bump in sales of new music recordings that occurred during the festival had no effect on sales throughout the rest of the year.

We had succeeded in entertaining an audience for nine days with music by living composers.

But there were no successful spin-offs.

On reflection, I can see now that the festival was more of a spin-off of the festival scene in Manitoba than an indication of an awakening to new music.

The people in Manitoba are served well by cultural festivals.

They like to get a lot for their admission ticket, and we offered them several concerts (many with full orchestra) for a bargain basement price.

Winnipeg produces one of the world's oldest and most successful folk festivals.

And its jazz festival, fringe festival and its various festivals of contemporary dance are always successful.

The WSO's New Music Festival simply added to that chain of successful events.

Also, the style of our festival was similar to the styles of the other festivals.

It was democratic: the music was new; the orchestra performed in a space which was surrounded on all sides by audience; the conductor – Bramwell Tovey – mingled with the masses at intermission and even played a kazoo once while conducting when it was called for in one of the scores.

The festival crushed the idea that a symphony orchestra is only for the elite, but only for nine days, and with a ticket price that wasn't possible without a huge subsidy.

After those nine days it was business as usual: classical music performed for a dwindling audience of well-wishers and connoisseurs.

(The WSO began an economic down-spin in the fourth year of the New Music Festival and did not recover for almost ten years.)



## **BRAMWELL TOVEY**

Those early years of the New Music Festival in Winnipeg have become known as the Bramwell Tovey years.

Tovey, an Englishman, was the Artistic Director of the orchestra at the time, and he brought a friendly, grass roots 'just-folks' public style to an institution in which arrogance is the expected norm.

The orchestra enjoyed a renaissance during the Tovey years. The new music festival became a symbol of the possible democratization of the symphony experience in Winnipeg, and Tovey was its figurehead.

The audiences were so excited by the festival buzz that Canadian and Manitoban composers were received at the festival with the same enthusiasm as our international guests. But when each festival closed, the apathy returned, and few patrons of the festival were willing to pony up the substantial ticket price to enjoy the symphony in its regular season.

The festival was fun.

It was contemporary and social.

But for our new music festival patrons, the regular season's classical concerts were dull by comparison.

The society reflected by the conventional concerts – symbolized by the formal dress and concert ritual and embodied by the music – is not our society.

Enthusiasts of contemporary culture just can't relate to the Old World style.

But Winnipeggers could relate to Bramwell Tovey, and not just because of his friendly nature and his considerable charm. (Winnipeggers cannot resist a British accent in a tux.)

A year or two after I left the symphony I read an article by Tovey about a short tour the orchestra made to small communities in northern Manitoba performing conventional repertoire.

He was very inspired by the landscape in the north and he was enamoured of its people.

The locals felt privileged because the orchestra visited them, and Tovey would join them for 'tea' at the local legion halls.

Tovey gained much of his considerable musicianship from his work with the Salvation Army.

And he's a flexible musician.

He can accompany singers on the piano and switch keys as necessary.

He plays all of the low brass instruments very well, and by ear if necessary, and he is a good jazz pianist, though he plays Brahms well too.

He fit right in with the Manitoba masses; he was one of us.

He wasn't pretending.

It was Tovey who broke down the class divisions between the wider audience and the symphony orchestra in Winnipeg, but it was because of his own personality and cultural background, not because of the music.

Most of the music that the orchestra plays is still classical wallpaper to as many Winnipeggers as before, but Tovey at least was an everyman, and he was quarterback of the largest musical institution in town.

~ ~ ~

I've reflected a lot on the success of the festival.

At the end of my five years as curator, I was still convinced that this was the new wave, and that it would spread to other orchestras.

I thought that it was the beginning of an inevitable new direction, and that symphony orchestras were finally catching up with the major political and social changes that had occurred in the past century.

But still, after another 16 years, no works presented in the festival have made it into the repertoire.

Many have been enthusiastically received by the audience, (who usually listen in rapt silence), but none of the works are heard regularly on the radio or in symphony halls when the festival adrenaline wears off.

New orchestral works haven't stuck with us like the classics have. The vision of a contemporary symphonic literature has not been realized.

So the symphony orchestra – in spite of all of its charms, and all of our efforts – is not a secure medium for our creative artists.

Tovey could not balance the needs of his traditional audience with the possibilities that we uncovered with the New Music Festival.

Unless orchestras stop playing so many standard symphonic works and replace them with new work, the institution will never be the voice of our own culture.

And I don't believe that either audiences or symphony musicians will ever let that happen.

Perhaps the job of a symphony orchestra is to preserve the Old World by performing the grand musical works of its past. Perhaps its function as a medium for creative artists has ended.

## 2. *THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ORCHESTRA*

*(CANADA'S HOUSE BAND)*

Toward the end of my tenure in Winnipeg in the mid-'90s, I was asked to interview for the position of Composer-in-Residence with the National Arts Centre Orchestra, and I was offered the position.

The National Arts Centre was established in Ottawa to show off Canadian culture by showcasing its best performing artists, and a small elite orchestra – the National Arts Centre Orchestra – was established as its house band.

Because this house band played mostly Old European classics, I put forward a proposal of new music initiatives designed to catch the public's attention with its own voice.

My model was the Winnipeg festival because of its huge popular impact but I was also aware of the different demographic in Ottawa, the orchestra's unique and considerable public resources, and its mandate as a musical focal point for our culture.

I felt that these things made the case even more strongly that the orchestra should have a focused policy regarding contemporary music.

Upon receiving my proposals, the Music Director, withdrew the offer of appointment, and when he called to notify me about his decision, he was obviously very angry and told me that he was offended by my proposals.

He said that I was asking for a lot, but not giving anything.

I'm still baffled by those remarks, and I'm offended by the blatant Old World arrogance, all supported by the made-in-Canada management and the National Arts Centre's large government subsidy.

The music Director at that time was British, and visited Canada only to conduct his concerts in Ottawa.

Also, I was told by management that in that season, the Music Director was only with the orchestra for only six weeks out of a season that runs weekly for about nine months.

In the following season (which was to be my first) he was to be in Ottawa for only one week, yet he still had complete artistic authority, and a salary which was heavily subsidized by our tax dollars.

In the end they decided not to appoint anyone as Composer-in-Residence.

I'm assuming that they got nervous about passing on a bit of artistic control to the natives in spite of – or perhaps because of – the success story in Winnipeg.

### 3. *THE KITCHENER FIASCO*

#### **MARTIN FISCHER-DIESKAU**

A few years later I was invited by the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony to interview for the position of Artistic Director. The orchestra had functioned without a conductor for six years and in that period they had redefined their management structure, placing the General Manager at the top of the hierarchy and devolving power away from the Music Director.

This was because the previous Music Director had caused some turmoil that led to the departure of the orchestra's General Manager.

So a new team was in place; all except the conductor.

But in this interim period, the orchestra was functioning better without a resident conductor or Music Director than with one.

Peter Hatch, their Composer-in-Residence, had generated some interesting new initiatives.

The audience liked him and had an appreciation for his music, which was quite progressive relative to most of the other music that they were used to.

Gradually, more difficult new works were added to the programs, all carefully introduced by the composers who wrote them, or by members of the orchestra.

Again, I could see things moving toward more recognition of our own national voice, and in an established music institution with its roots in Old Europe.

So I suggested that the orchestra consider hiring an Artistic Director who was not a conductor and whose main job would be to coordinate the programming; to balance new work with the classics, and essentially carry on down the path that the orchestra was already on.

The management was interested in the idea, but in the end they hired a conductor: Martin Fischer-Dieskau, a German citizen, and also the son of the famous baritone, the late Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Martin Fischer-Dieskau was hired because of his pedigreed connection to European music, and also because of he was German.

(Kitchener is a city of music lovers, with a large German community.

It was originally called Berlin but was renamed during World War I.)

A well-heeled member of the German community helped bring the new conductor to Kitchener by subsidizing his salary.

But management gave him limited power, in accordance with the new bylaws, which were put in place after the departure of their previous conductor.

I was appointed Director of Contemporary Music, to oversee all aspects of new music programming.

The situation looked excellent on paper.

Both old and new music would be covered well by the two directors, and there would be some extra support from the German community who have a visceral interest in classical music since much of the great literature was created in their homeland.

But things disintegrated quickly.

Fischer-Dieskau was not interested in sharing the artistic decisions regarding contemporary music.

In fact he did not recognize any authority other than his own, regarding artistic matters, so my position was redundant.

He openly challenged the decisions made by management that clashed with his ideas for the orchestra's future.

He wanted to bring European composer friends to Kitchener and feature their music prominently, but would not consider the same for Canadians.

And I could not accept that.

The management eventually simply paid me off by putting me in charge of a 3-concert series of new music using about fifteen members of the orchestra.

That lasted for three seasons, then the series was canceled.

Eventually, Fischer-Dieskau was fired, allegedly because of a clash with the management and Board of Directors.

## **SCORCHED EARTH**

On the surface, this appears to be just another case of office politics gone sour and if that was the end of the story, there wouldn't be much point in telling it.

But that was only the beginning.

When management contacted me to let me know what was going on, I was told that Fischer-Dieskau openly vowed to destroy the orchestra if he was not reinstated, and the battle lines were drawn.

I opposed his scorched earth approach to the problem and wrote a much-quoted article for the local newspaper supporting the management's decision to let him go.

Though some of them took a similar public stand, the players in the orchestra were evenly split.

The German community was offended.

They felt it was a blow aimed at them because of their original support for the conductor.

He had also become personal friends with many influential people in the community who threatened to withdraw support.

The ugly debates played themselves out in the media, and everyone had an opinion, usually extreme on one side or the other.

Even the cabbies were weighing in with their opinions.

Though supported by the Board of Directors, the General Manager was assailed from every other angle, and resigned.

Eventually, the Board of Directors also resigned.

Then Maestro Fischer-Dieskau began to lobby his supporters through the media, culminating with a public rally that was better attended than most of the orchestra's classical concerts.

At the rally, Fischer-Dieskau took the high road and, rather than denouncing the management as he had in the media, he spoke of returning to the purity of the music.

He spoke of “the love” that he wanted to bring back to the community through this music, and he presented himself as the hero who should be in charge because he was so well connected to this music, which is so great.

He received a thunderous ovation.

That was when I became more concerned with what was happening in the community than what was happening within the orchestra.

The orchestra’s problems seemed small compared to the problems of an uncritical public.

In the eyes of the conductor’s supporters, the greatness of European music – especially German music – trumped everything.

Our own music and culture, our own methods of artistic administration and our own common sense were all a distant second compared to those high ideals embodied by the European masterpieces.

According to members of my own community, we were still a European colony; the sons and daughters of a great motherland, and the masterpieces from that grand past should still be our guiding anthems.

To disagree was to deny the love and joy that this son of that great land might bring to us again.

The community was duped by the charms of the Old World.

They felt that the Old World was our own world.

So they stood on their feet and cheered the Maestro.

Fischer-Dieskau was eventually defeated by a new Board of Directors, which was still harshly divided.

He likely won’t conduct the orchestra again.

But the orchestra and the community were badly traumatized, so management jettisoned most of the progressive developments that they’d built in the six years before Fischer-Dieskau was appointed.



Though the orchestra has recovered now, in those three years the orchestra went from being one of the great cultural success stories because of its careful innovations, to being one of the worst workplaces in the country.

The community in Kitchener wanted the orchestra to return to its Old World self.

And it did.

~ ~ ~

Canada was founded by loyalists.

And we're still loyal to the Old World even though that loyalty works against us when we try to build a strong cultural voice of our own.

After all this, and in spite of a handful of composer/orchestra success stories (including my own), I'm convinced that the symphony orchestra is not the place where the best Canadian music will be born.