

Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value. By Julian Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 140 p. \$39.95. ISBN 0-1951-4681-6

Even the optimists among us have to acknowledge that the classical music industry is currently in major turmoil. We hear about it every day, from the cuts to elementary school music education, to the decline in record sales, to the latest orchestra that has declared bankruptcy. Times are not very good, and it should give pause to us all to ask what has led to this situation. These questions and much more are also at the heart of Julian Johnson's provocative and important new book, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value*.

The author wastes no time in establishing his agenda. In fact, it is stated in the opening sentences of the introduction: "This book is about the value of classical music. More particularly, it is about how and why it is devalued today and the consequences for classical music and our society overall by this legitimization crisis" (p. 3). A little later in the introduction Johnson presents some challenging questions. What is the significance of our musical choices? What cultural values do those choices exhibit? Do the cultural values we hold as musical consumers equate with the values with which we align ourselves in other areas, such as education or politics? And finally, what is it about classical music that makes it so marginal and about popular music that makes it so central, to contemporary society?

Although it is not indicated in the table of contents, the book can be seen to

fall into two parts. The central questions from the introduction are addressed in the first two chapters, entitled "Musical Values" and "Uses and Abuses." The remaining four chapters—"Music as Art," "Understanding Music," "The Old, The New, and the Contemporary," and "Cultural Choices"—contain, in turn, further elaboration of the ideas from the first two chapters.

One of Johnson's arguments is that classical music—which he defines as music that functions as art, as opposed to music which serves other functions (for instance, entertainment)—is distinguished from popular music by a "self-conscious attention to its own musical language. Its claim to function as art derives from its peculiar concern with its own materials and their formal patterning, aside from any considerations about its audience or its social use" (p. 3). To establish this line of thinking, Johnson begins with a critique of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, as set out in his 1979 book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Johnson's concern with deconstructionist theories such as Bourdieu's, which state that cultural practices represent sign systems for class distinctions and that there is no such thing as intrinsic aesthetic meaning in art, is that they fall short. His unease with such theories is that they are much more concerned with the role of art in society rather than with how music may be potentially used. He argues that we fail art and, ultimately, ourselves, by only superficially engaging art—i.e., by

only discussing music as social practice instead of music as an aesthetic text. The change in outlook is profound: instead of simply describing what music is—in other words, to define it solely in terms of its use—Johnson takes a bolder and more challenging perspective of what art might achieve for us as an expression of humanity.

Through Johnson's different focus, a number of interesting perspectives emerge as regards the means by which classical music has evolved to its current social position. Consider, for instance, his discussion of the transformation of how we experience music during the past two hundred years. Primary is the alteration from music as community to music as object. Johnson correctly notes that our objectification of music began in the nineteenth century with the widespread expansion of commercial music printing for amateur performers. What printed music did is remove music from its social setting of live performance and turn it into a tangible object much like a book. In short, as a material object, music became less of a communal experience and gradually a private possession, one where both the demands of the composer and the work itself could be placed entirely within the pleasure (at best) or whim (at worst) of the owner. As much as the printed music objectified our conception of music, however, these changes were minuscule compared with how music recordings in the twentieth century have fundamentally altered music into an object (e.g., an LP, cassette, or CD) for private consumption. While it could be claimed that it is still possible to listen to a recording with the same degree of engagement as a live social concert,

Johnson argues that this is in fact not true. Sound recordings, by their very nature, do not make any demands upon us to enter the temporal process of a composition. Possibly the most extreme outcome of music-as-object is that it has leveled the playing field, so to speak, in a free market: all recordings look and are priced approximately the same. The upshot is that the sonic experiences contained within these silver discs are now considered similar, and the choice of styles (e.g., classical, pop, dance, rap) is based upon the mood of the listener at any given moment in time. As problematic as this scenario is, to be frank, I feel that Johnson overstates the dilemma. Although recordings have played a role in objectifying music in our culture, they have also had an enormous benefit. The intimate understanding of a real orchestral score (as opposed to a piano transcription) is just one example. This is a point that Johnson, given his background as a composer, seems surprisingly not to have considered.

Johnson astutely identifies a major factor as to why classical music fares so poorly in today's cultural environment: it needs to engage the mind of the listener through temporal designs that constitute its very fabric, yet are no longer recognized as relevant today. Put another way, the discursive features that characterize classical music suffer because the listener must now take on these attributes within physical and temporal spaces intended chiefly for popular music. The small percentage of works from the canon that have proven commercially successful today suggest some degree of immediacy—for instance, the three-and-a-half minute

eighteenth-century operatic aria or the forty-five second excerpt from the opening of a work such as *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Ironically, however, when these passages are decontextualized from their respective sources, their success comes at the expense of suppressing or even eliminating many of the sophisticated elements which have made these works valued treasures for centuries. In short, we are left with the proverbial square-peg-in-a-round-hole scenario: while the music has not changed, the way that it is used and the value system it engenders have.

Although well-written and cogently argued, Johnson's prose does occasionally border on the evangelical. Consider, for instance, his apprehension that present-day society seems to be minimally engaged in challenging the mind and spirit intellectually. "Why," he asks, "are we so concerned about food additives, the presence of genetically modified crops, or the lives of battery hens and yet so utterly unconcerned about the content of the cultural products with which we feed our minds?" (p. 121). Yet such questions do go to the heart of his argument that society as a whole has largely abandoned any attempt at connecting with art, music or literature beyond an elementary level. Despite this lack of commitment, however, even more challenging for Johnson—and, as he outlines, one with far-reaching implications—is that both the problems that have led to the general public's pervasive apathy towards an involvement with challenging, intellectual activities as well as potential

solutions to this dilemma are not at all being seriously debated even within academic circles, much less at government and legislative levels.

There are two categories of readers for *Who Needs Classical Music?* The first group is the converted—that is, those for whom Leonin to Ligeti represents an all-consuming passion. Johnson's book provides insight into how and why this beloved music is so much on the periphery today. But, as Johnson notes, the members of this group have also been remarkably inefficient and largely disinterested in identifying how and why such art is vital not just for their lives as individuals, but for society as a whole. Let us hope that, if nothing else, this book will stimulate thought and ideas to counteract such apathy. The second and much larger group has rarely listened or thought about classical music. I would even like to believe that the stimulating title of Johnson's book might fool some of these readers into believing that this is another cultural study out to prove the irrelevance of classical music. Good: perhaps Johnson's valuable book will give them pause to think deeply about the ailments facing not just classical music, but culture and society in general.

Who needs classical music? We all do, for to engage with music that aspires to be more than it is, is to ultimately transcend who we are as individuals and collectively our society.

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