

Spring 2015

# Why Classical Music Still Matters

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis argues that Western Art Music (more commonly known as “classical music”) should still matter to the modern person, because it has the ability to add specific aesthetic and scientific value to one’s life. The goal is to make classical music enjoyable and accessible to all people, by making it understandable and breaking down the barrier of perceived elitism. Firstly, the current dilemmas facing Western Art Music today are outlined, including the lack of discussion surrounding classical music, the lack of knowledge of how to listen to classical music, the barrier of perceived elitism, and the issues classical music faces in the current American educational system. The thesis argues that Western Art Music matters because: 1) It is scientifically proven to enhance cognitive performance; 2) It is derived from the natural laws of the universe; 3) It connects humanity through time; 4) There is much emotional depth to be found in it; and 5) It is aesthetically evocative. Suggestions for listening and appreciation are given in the concluding section, including recommendations for the educational system, as well as suggestions for personal listening and enjoyment.

**Why Classical Music Still Matters:  
The Aesthetics and Science Behind the Value of Western Art Music**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors**

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## Introduction

What is classical music, and does it matter? When someone who is unfamiliar with the genre hears the term “classical music,” what usually comes to mind is any purely instrumental music written before the 1950s. What other terms typically come to mind? In my experience, young peoples’ connotation of classical music is something along the lines of “old fashioned”, “irrelevant”, and “boring.” In this thesis I aim to persuade the general public, specifically young adults, that “classical music” is not irrelevant, and it still matters because it has the ability to add aesthetic and emotional value to the human experience. Before delving into the details of the argument, however, let us first define the terms “classical music” and “popular music.”

As one musicologist puts it, the definition of music is “the organization of sound towards beauty,”<sup>1</sup> meaning beauty for both the creator and the listener. All pieces of music contain a melody, a phrase that has purpose and direction. A purposeful phrase may be thought of as a compilation of varied notes, which ascend and descend in a precise order, for the purpose of creating a melodic contour. This may seem a simplistic definition of what constitutes music, but the aim of this thesis is not to get into a complicated discussion of the exact definitions of music. Most people will agree that in order to be musical, a phrase must be meaningful. However, as far as what constitutes classical music in particular, the definition is a bit simpler.

When people refer to “classical” music, they are unknowingly referring to a specific time period in music history. Strictly speaking, the Classical Period lasted from

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Spaeth, *The Importance of Music* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1963), 85.

about 1750 to 1830. There are several other periods of music that people unknowingly group under this “classical” umbrella, though, including music of the Renaissance (1450 – 1600), the Baroque (1600 – 1750), and the Romantic periods (1830 – 1920).<sup>2</sup> A more correct term when speaking about music from 1400 – 1920 is “Western Art Music,” as most of the music we are speaking about is from Europe, and later, the United States, all of which are countries that can be grouped into a Western philosophy or worldview. However, henceforth in this thesis, the terms *classical music* and *Western Art Music* will be used interchangeably.

Lawrence Kramer furthers this definition of Western Art Music, saying that it is “a specific body of nontheatrical music . . .with one aim in view: to be listened to.”<sup>3</sup> Julian Johnson’s definition is that classical music is that which “function as art,” as opposed to entertainment.<sup>4</sup> What he means is that classical music aims to act as art (for art’s aesthetic and intrinsic value), whereas popular music (at least after the 1960s) aims to entertain its audience. However, I would not completely agree with this distinction. I will argue later that classical music can indeed be enjoyed as entertainment, and part of its value lies in the fact that it can be simultaneously entertaining, emotional, and aesthetically valuable. For now, understand that when I refer to *classical music* or *Western Art Music*, I am generally referring to music written before the 1900s, whereas *popular music* refers to music from about 1850 onwards.

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<sup>2</sup> Naxos Digital Services, Ltd, s.v. “History of Classical Music.”

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 6.

This distinction is made because of the invention of recording devices and the first instance of widely available sheet music around 1850. These changes led to the widespread popularity of folk music, songs like “Oh Susanna.” Popular music generally contains lyrics, and its chief purpose is to entertain audiences. Although popular music was written before 1880, and Western Art Music has been written after 1900, this distinction makes it easier to place pieces in a particular style, based on the year it was written.

The point is not that classical music is somehow better than popular music. The two types of music each have their own distinct purpose. As will be discussed later, one of the main problems that classical music faces, which prevents the music’s popularity in this day and age, is that so many well-meaning people place classical music on a pedestal, purporting that it is better than popular music without being able to explain why. This leads to the alienation of those who have never been trained in or exposed to classical music. In this thesis, I work to break down the claim that classical music is boring, irrelevant, and highbrow. I propose that each music has its own purpose, and that while classical music does have a great deal of specific value, as a whole, it is not necessarily better or worse than popular music. My goal is to make classical music enjoyable and accessible to everyone, through making it understandable and breaking down the barrier of elitism.

In this way, I have joined “the long line of well-meaning but generally doomed folks who have tried to explain the unique phenomenon of human reaction to organized

sound.”<sup>5</sup> My passion for classical music thrives, and I wish I could simply give the meaning of the experience to others; but ultimately, finding meaning is a journey that each of us must undertake ourselves. The meaning gathered relates to the meaning of *quality*, something philosophers have been arguing about for millennia. The important thing is that each of us finds meaning, and thus are able to carry on a fruitful discussion of classical music, and why it matters to us individually and collectively. In this thesis, I will firstly outline the current dilemma facing classical music, how and why it has become so irrelevant to so many people today. I will then delve into the main argument of the thesis, that Western Art Music still matters, and give reasons why and how it adds value to the human experience. I will then conclude the discussion with proposing solutions to “save” classical music, and suggestions for how everyone can learn, appreciate, and (most importantly) enjoy it.

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<sup>5</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 11.

## Current Dilemmas Facing Western Art Music

There are at least five main reasons why classical music seems irrelevant to the general public, especially in comparison to popular music: 1) People are not discussing classical music as much as they have previously; 2) People do not know how to listen to classical music and are hesitant to learn; 3) Classical music is seen as stuffy, elitist and old fashioned, and thus does not add value to a modern person's life; 4) Classical music faces issues of relevance in the educational system, as well as the modern lifestyle; and 5) Popular music is big business and big money, whereas classical music is not.

*People are not discussing classical music as much as they used to*

Classical music used to have the ability to spark widespread argument and discussion, like popular music does today, because at that time, it was contemporary. The fact that many no longer discuss Western Art Music indicates that the genre is not as valued as when it was contemporary. Not surprisingly, people tend to discuss only those topics that are important to them.<sup>6</sup> When classical music was contemporary, and therefore popular, people used to take great pleasure in discussing the music's form, meaning, and other elements. It was common to discuss a composer's style and wonder what their next publication would be like.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, partially due to the limited availability of classical music composed to today (due to CDs, instant streaming, etc.), the anticipation and discourse made classical music exciting. Further, when one had the chance to listen to classical music, it was only

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

through live performance. Because the opportunity was so fleeting, people felt they had to relish the opportunity, and pay attention in order to discern meaning. They also had to remember what they had heard in great enough detail to be able to discuss it with others. Because current day popular music is so easily available, it is not necessary to listen for remembrance, which promotes an entirely different style of listening that is more passive than active.

Julian Johnson believes that the “discourse about music and music theory used to be a way of thinking about the world that music mediated ideas of the world, reflecting on our conditions in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Music was our way of connecting with other human beings, in discussing its meaning in relation to our lives, and our place in the universe. Humans were able to have these rich discussions surrounding classical music because they were adept in listening to and discussing it. While popular music is often still discussed today, the fact that the general population is no longer discussing classical music is a sign that we can no longer find meaning in it, or perhaps just the fact that we do not know how to find meaning in it.

Furthermore, many people are turned away from classical music because they have not learned about it. If they do try it out, many classical enthusiasts are unable to answer their most basic questions, such as ‘why is that theme beautiful’ or ‘what is the meaning of that phrase.’ As I mentioned in the Introduction, there is no concrete answer for what makes a specific piece or phrase within the piece valuable or meaningful, everyone must define and find their own definition of its quality. This aspect of finding

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 14.

value is the most challenging part of classical music. The best way to alleviate this challenge is by having an open and questioning mind.

*People do not know how to listen to classical music, and are hesitant to learn*

Some would also argue that one needs at least a basic education in music to be able to truly understand, and thus enjoy, classical music. Julian Johnson argues that because they can hear, people automatically assume they can understand music. In reality, just because someone can see does not mean they can read, and just because they can read does not mean they understand the works of Aristotle. This analogy is a strong basis for his argument that people believe that they do not need to be taught how to listen to music. Consequently, when one encounters a piece that they do not understand, they automatically reject it. In general, people do not want to treat music as something requiring work.<sup>9</sup> I both agree and disagree with Johnson's argument.

If one has an open mind and the ability to think openly and critically, they probably do not need formal education in music. However, even if one possesses these attributes, at least some explanation or education would likely be useful in learning to enjoy classical music. Suggestions for how to begin listening to art music for enjoyment are addressed in the section titled "Suggestions for Listening and Appreciation." As Charles Hughes says, "the first requirement in listening to music is to value music. The second is to give oneself up to the music."<sup>10</sup> Hughes further states that "musical understanding depends on one of two approaches, the intuitive and the analytic. Many

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Hughes, *The Human Side of Music* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1948), xvi.

elements aren't understood by intellectual analysis, but by intuitive experience."<sup>11</sup> Certainly one cannot enjoy classical music if they go into the experience with prejudice, refusing to believe it might have any value. Thus, if one has an open mind and is open to the fact that classical music has value, the music can make its meaning clear to the self-sufficient listener. However, if one has a closed mind and goes into a listening experience denying that classical music might have value, they would need a more formal explanation of the music's form, and why one can find meaning in it. Prejudice opinions of classical music do not come out of nowhere, though, it is a common belief that classical music is elitist, and thus, cannot add any value to one's life.

*Classical music is seen as stuffy, elitist, and old fashioned, and many do not believe it can add any value to a modern person's life*

Likely the biggest problem facing classical music today is the general public's opinion of it. Lawrence Kramer puts it well when he says that classical music "seems stuffy and outdated to too many people because we insist on walking on eggshells in its vicinity. We don't want solemnness from music, we want life!"<sup>12</sup> Classical music is too often seen as a bourgeoisie activity that does not relate to the majority of the people. The problem with this belief is that all people can indeed relate to and find value in Western Art Music, but because of the stigma surrounding it, many are afraid to attempt the experience. There is truth in the fact that music used to be primarily enjoyed by the upper class, but it does not have to be this way anymore.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>12</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 78.

Indeed, art in general once represented wealth and power because it was primarily the upper classes that had the time or opportunity to enjoy it. However, because of the modern economic concept of division of labor, many more people now have leisure time to spend as they choose. Further, because of technological advancements, it is no longer necessary to buy a ticket to attend a concert in order to hear classical music, one can enjoy it from the comfort of one's own home. Although all these advancements should have made classical music exceedingly popular, Hughes explains that: "Just as the newspaper and cheap books have failed to make wisdom universal, so the wide availability of music has not made us all discriminating music lovers."<sup>13</sup> Because classical music was once the possession of the elite, a stigma has remained attached to it, no matter how easily distributable it has become. Too many people are under the impression that it is still reserved for the wealthy, and that it could not possibly have an impact on the life of an ordinary person.

Because classical music is not immediately or easily understood (requiring attention and thought) people usually assume that it is exclusive. Popular music, on the other hand, is widely available and easily understood. The lyrics generally spell out everything that one needs to understand about the song. Also, the appeal of popular music is mainly derived from the charismatic appearance of the performer. Less emphasis is often placed on the music than the artist performing it. Julian Johnson's analogy is that just because something like math or language is difficult to understand does not make it

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<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *The Human Side of Music*, xiii.

elitist, because it still adds practical value to our lives.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, classical music may be difficult to understand but is certainly not highbrow because of its ability to add some value to everyone's lives, not just the lives of the wealthy or intellectual.

*Classical music faces issues in the educational system, as well as the modern lifestyle*

Sigmund Spaeth purports that “over 90% of Americans are comparatively untouched by the world's great music.”<sup>15</sup> Based on research and observations, I would concur with this statistic, and would expand on it by saying that this is partially due to the American educational system (kindergarten through college), and the typical American lifestyle. Firstly, many students in the educational system are not being given the opportunity to learn and enjoy music, an issue founded both in our culture and in funding issues.

The research collected by Oxford Music Online concerning statistics in musical education paints a dire picture of the state of musical education in America today, especially in comparison to the past 100 years. In 1919, only 24% of American schools had a music program that included a band, but by 1930, nearly 100% of schools had incorporated one. In the 1940s, musical ensembles and music appreciation courses were offered in nearly all school districts in the United States.<sup>16</sup> In the 1950s, the focus shifted from performance classes to classes devoted to the development of musicality.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 85.

<sup>15</sup> Spaeth, *The Importance of Music*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Colwell, et al, “Music education,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* (Oxford University Press accessed April 27, 2014), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2242324>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

However, criticisms of music as part of compulsory education also developed in the 1950s and 60s. These criticisms, spearheaded by musicologist Claude V. Palisca of Yale University, alleged that the kind of music education being taught was inadequate, and should be expanded. A few years later, Charles Leonhard and Abraham A. Schwadron (both music educators) made an impassioned and convincing case to the International Society of Music Education that music has aesthetic purpose, and that students can derive meaning through education in quality music. Unfortunately, their argument never gained enough steam to make it to the general public, so the tussle between music education supporters and critics has raged on ever since.<sup>18</sup>

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that in 1982 there were about twelve million students enrolled in American schools (specifically, elementary, middle, and high school), and of those only three million (about 25%) were enrolled in music courses. In 2008, they reported that there were approximately fifteen million students, of which four million (26%) participated in music education courses. This shows the significant decline from nearly 100% of schools having a music program in the 1930s. This also illustrates that despite population growth and advances in the educational system, the percentage of students with access to music courses has remained constant.

2009 research shows that only 40% of American high school students have access to public music education.<sup>19</sup> Julian Johnson puts it well when he says that “by failing to provide classical music in education, we are ensuring that only those children

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

from upper class families will learn music, or ever appreciate it!”<sup>20</sup> Daniel Asia supports this argument, saying that the modern day student generally cannot make a distinction between music written for the business sphere (popular music), and music written as art music.<sup>21</sup> For a modern day student, music is music, with the only differentiating factor being their level of interest, not necessarily the inherent quality of the different types of music. This is due in part to the fact that public education surrounding Western Art Music is so lacking, and generally only students with means are exposed to art music. How can we ever expect the stigma of elitism to dissolve if only upper class children have access to classical music from a young age?

The music education system is set up for failure in this regard. Music educators insist that it has value and should be available to all students but are overruled by budget cuts and overall ignorance of the value of music. Too often when school budgets are reduced, music and art programs are the first to go. Spaeth explains this mindset when he says “some claim that if such a study is honestly enjoyable, it cannot have any real education value.”<sup>22</sup> This claim is inherently flawed, however. Many students have a favorite subject, but just because they find enjoyment in studying it does not diminish its merit! Furthermore, scientific studies have actually proven the educational and cognitive benefits of music education, which will be discussed in a later section.

The statistics above show that many of the people making the decisions about what programs to cut (namely superintendents and school boards) lack a musical

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 88.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Asia, "Diminuendo: Classical Music and the Academy," *Academic Questions* 23, no. 2 (June 2010), 191.

<sup>22</sup> Spaeth, *The Importance of Music*, 159.

education themselves, and thus, likely lack an appreciation of what musical education can bring to a child's life. They see it as an enjoyable, but not necessarily worthy or necessary pursuit. As the value of classical music is not always understood, music education is often the first program to go when budget cuts must be made. In addition to its lack of support in the educational system, the enjoyment of classical music faces obstacles because of the modern lifestyle as well.

In our fast-paced environment of constant stimulation and movement, it is hard for people to sit still and just listen. Daniel Asia explains that, "Whereas in previous generations people had to seek out music, one now has to seek out, and occasionally demand, silence."<sup>23</sup> There are so many choices and distractions that constantly surround the average person, our attention spans have become too short to sit and focus on listening. However, this is exactly what classical music demands of us: unwavering attention. In order to have any chance at appreciating or enjoying Western Art Music, one must give the piece their undivided attention. Julian Johnson's insight puts much into perspective when he says: "Art is an irritant, its silent insistence on something other challenges our passive acquiescence to a life of filling of vacant spaces left to us between work hours. *Art forces us to ask ourselves who we are when we stop doing these things so busily.*"<sup>24</sup> Our infatuation with popular music seems, in part, due to the fact that the pieces are so short and easily digestible, whereas art music demands much more of our attention and critical thinking. The attractiveness of popular music is also due to the fact that it equates a big business, and opportunity for making money.

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<sup>23</sup> Asia, "Diminuendo: Classical Music and the Academy," 188.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 122. Emphasis added.

*Popular music is big business and big money, whereas classical music is not*

The final reason which helps explain the decline in the popularity of Western Art Music is that the popular music industry has so much more money invested in it than the classical music industry. Essentially, classical music is produced for aesthetic value, not for profit, which is why it is so hard to compete with the popular music industry, where making money is the primary objective. Charles Hughes purports that, in the modern world, music is no longer just an art. It is also a commodity, which can be bought and sold to the highest bidder, just like any other commodity.<sup>25</sup> Further, the images marketed by the popular music industry often overshadow the quality of the music itself. Countless dollars are spent every year advertising the newest recording of Taylor Swift or Imagine Dragons or Queen. All this money is being spent to convince consumers that the music is already popular, and is good because it is popular, and thus, they should buy those records too. This in turn makes more money for the record label and artist. As Hughes puts it:

Lots of money is invested in the popular music pursuit, so of course no stone is left unturned in the effort to convince the public that the given song is a good one, one that must be heard. These efforts rest on the view that what is a good song is one that makes money.<sup>26</sup>

Prior to about 1850, a piece would be performed, and it would then await the public's verdict of whether or not it was good. After the invention of recordings, though, the public has been coaxed, even coerced, into rendering the desired verdict by every device that a clever publicist can come up with.

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<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *The Human Side of Music*, 207.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

Julian Johnson believes that “music value has been reduced to: Music sells because it is popular, it is popular because it has sold.”<sup>27</sup> He wants the public to put pressure on this commercial system of valuation, though, and force us to ask ourselves if this is really the best way to rate and value music. He points out that young people spend more time and money on music than any other sector of society. This overwhelming economic pressure of the youth guarantees the popularity of whatever music they believe is good, simply by commercial saturation.

Essentially, the perfect storm has been created for classical music to become irrelevant. Fewer young people are exposed to art music in their early years of education, people are not discussing and do not know how to listen to classical music, and overall, classical music is seen as elitist and without relevance. Furthermore, the popular music industry is so invested in publicizing its own artists that again, young people are overwhelmed by the popular music choices, and completely underwhelmed by the possible classical choices. Classical music has become a symbol of irrelevance in the greater musical and societal tide, where the actual value of products matters less than their symbolism of the contemporary, the new, and the fleetingly popular. With all of these factors involved, there can be no surprise that Western Art Music has fallen by the wayside. However, regardless of its current lack of popularity, classical music still has value, and should be recognized accordingly.

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 16.

## **Western Art Music Matters to Everyday People and Adds Value to the Human Experience**

Those born in or around the 1990s have generally been scared away from classical music. They too often see it as stuffy and elitist, and as well they should! For too long, people have pronounced the superiority of classical music without stopping to explain its value. It sometimes seems like a club, where those who did not grow up in its tradition are hesitant to join, not because they are not welcome, but because hardly anyone will take the time to stop and explain to them what in the world is going on, or why it matters.

Some of the reasons Western Art Music still matters include: 1) Because it is scientifically proven to enhance cognitive performance; 2) Because it is in our core, being derived from the natural laws of the universe; 3) Because it connects humanity through time; 4) Because it is intricate and complex, and there is so much emotional depth to be found in it; and 5) Because it is aesthetically evocative.

### *Because it is scientifically proven to benefit the brain*

The first study that indicated that classical music has a positive impact on cognitive performance was conducted in 1993 by F. Rauscher, G. Shaw, and K. Ky. Their study demonstrated that after listening to a piece by Mozart (a classical composer) for ten minutes, the test subjects performed significantly better in tests of spatial reasoning than

those who did not listen to any music.<sup>28</sup> The ability of classical music (specifically, the music of Mozart) to make one “smarter” was quickly dubbed the *Mozart effect*. In the two decades that have since passed, several variations and reproductions of the original study have been performed. Several of these studies strengthened the claim of the Mozart effect, while others aimed to disprove or weaken it. However, the overwhelming majority of similar studies have shown that classical music does have a positive impact on the brain.

For example, between 1997, 1998, and 1999, three separate studies were conducted that mapped the physical impact on music on the brain, using positron emission tomography and functional magnetic resonance scanning. These types of brain imaging techniques measure blood flow to different areas of the brain. When subjects listened to classical music, their auditory cortex lit up, indicating that listening to music affects mood. Many other regions of the brain also lit up, though, primarily those that are important to spatial reasoning abilities. This fact indicates that music does more than affect mood, it also functionally and systematically improves one’s spatial reasoning skills.<sup>29</sup>

In 1997, a study was published on the long-term effects on the brain of listening to classical music. A group of young children were given piano lessons for six months and taught to play simple melodies of Mozart and Beethoven (both classical composers). Another group received lessons in computer skills, and a third group received no lessons at all. At the end of six months, the children who had taken classical piano lessons

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<sup>28</sup> John Jenkins, “The Mozart effect.” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 94 (4) (April 2001), 171.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

performed about 30% better than their peers in tests of spatial-temporal reasoning. This study was continued, and it was later extrapolated that students who received classical music training received significantly higher scores in advanced mathematics in their later years than individuals who did not receive classical music training.<sup>30</sup>

Another study, conducted by John Hughes, indicated that people with epilepsy experienced a decrease in the severity of epileptic episodes when Mozart was played during their seizures. A long term study was also conducted that indicated that daily exposure to Mozart's music decreased the number of epileptic seizures that patients experienced.<sup>31</sup> Although most readers of this thesis are not epileptics, the culmination of these studies indicates an important fact: listening to classical music improves brain functioning and activity, a benefit which all people can experience in some way.

*Because Western Art Music is in our core and is derived from the natural laws of the universe*

The questions of “where does melody come from” and “why does that particular phrase sound good” are elusive, and require a deep knowledge of both physics and aesthetics to understand. Aestheticians have been arguing about this for centuries, and every philosopher has a different answer as to what gives something value. The reason that our ears are drawn to some sounds and not others is simple – it is mathematically derived, through a unique phenomenon that is called *overtones*, or *the harmonic series*.

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<sup>30</sup> Judy M. Taylor and Beverly J. Rowe, "The "Mozart Effect" and the Mathematical Connection," *Journal Of College Reading And Learning* 42, no. 2 (March 2012), 59.

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, "The Mozart effect," 171.

To put it simply, when the ear hears a pitch, the ear is not only hearing that particular note, but several simultaneous pitches.

In his lecture series at Harvard University, Leonard Bernstein did a talk about the harmonic series, explaining that it is the reason particular notes sound “nice,” and further, that entire phrases are attractive to the ear. In his studies, Bernstein discovered that the pitches of the children’s teasing chant, “Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah” (same tune as “Little Sally Walker”) are universal, that nearly every culture across the world has some song with this same combination of pitches, this same *melody*. Why these pitches in this particular order, though? The answer lies in overtones.

To illustrate, imagine the string of a violin or a piano. According to mathematical laws, any such straight line is infinitely divisible. The smaller the segments become, the faster they vibrate, which in turn produces an increasingly higher tone. These higher vibrations are called *overtones*. They explain why a lower note sounds richer, because there is more room to divide the string. Thus, lower tones produce more overtones, making the overall sound much fuller than higher notes. The sequence of overtones is preordained by natural mathematical laws, too complex to delve into here. Together, these simultaneous pitches comprise the note that the ear actually hears. This brief explanation can be explained in much more detail using physics, and for anyone that is confused, I urge them to watch Bernstein’s first lecture at Harvard, as he does a marvelous job of explaining the harmonic series in common terms. The reason all of this is important, though, is because overtones are the answer to why some melodies sound nice, and others do not.

In the common Western diatonic scale, there are seven pitches used, with the first pitch being used again at the end of the scale. These eight notes span what is called an *octave*, and in every octave, there are many other intervals between the notes, usually denoted by Roman numerals (I, II, III, etc.). However, in every octave, there are actually not just eight notes, in reality, there are over 1,000 distinct tones, or *cents*. Why is it that Western Art Music uses just these particular eight notes then? Again, the answer lies in the harmonic series.

To reiterate, when one hears a note, they are hearing not only that one pitch, but you are simultaneously hearing a multitude of notes, preordained by nature and determined by universal physical laws. The order of the overtones is strictly mathematical, nonetheless, observable. The first overtone is a perfect octave, the second is a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> (V). Once these two tones are in our ear (and they are as soon as a single note is played) the entire Western tonal system is available to us. An enormous amount of classical music is based simply off the progression between the I, V, and VIII chords (the *dominant* and *octave* intervals). Western Art Music does not stop there, however, it continues along the harmonic series until we have a complete octave of intervals. The third overtone is the interval of IV, the fourth overtone is the III interval. Here we have the basis for the majority of Western Art Music. The IV chord is often used as dissonance in order to resolve back to the consonant V or I chord. Further, the I, III, and V chords make up what is known as the *triad*, the basis for nearly all harmonizing in art music. As we ascend the harmonic series, we can account for six and seven note scales (which are primarily used in non-western cultures). Using the harmonic series, we can account for

all 12 notes in the chromatic scale, yet all these connections are contained in a single note. In fact, all these connections are contained in every single note.

Although this explanation is basic, the harmonic series can help us make an important leap in understanding why some notes sound better in a certain sequence than do others. To return to the earlier children's taunting song, the notes used are simply the first four overtones of the series, with the tonic (original note) omitted. This represents but one example of the universality of music, that even though different cultures are more attracted to certain tones in the harmonic series than others, the basis for all world scales and thus, all world music, is the same. Cultures throughout the world have picked up on different tones contained within the harmonic series to create unique scales. The natural laws of the universe, the laws that govern all things, have predetermined in what order notes are most pleasing to the ear, and thus are a guide for composers and listeners alike.

*Because classical music connects humanity through time*

One of the most popular forms in Western Art Music, the *sonata form*, is characterized by an introductory section (*exposition*), a contrasting section (*development*), and a restating of the first section (*recapitulation*). This ABA format seems so basic and familiar to us because it is literally the story of existence, the story of birth, life, and death. The life cycle, the fact that all things return to whence they came, makes this form exponentially useful in showing how connected we all are on such a basic level. This cyclical-ness does not end with the sonata form, though, it is found in a plethora of other places in classical music, such as its "typical" chord structure. Most

tonal pieces start on the I chord (the *tonic*), move to the V chord (the *dominant*), and then resolve back to the I chord. Essentially what this means is that the exact notes that comprise the melody and harmony are specific to each chord, moving from I to V back to I. A less structural reason that classical music connects us through time is that music is an aesthetic, spiritual, and emotional experience, and these experiences are what make us all human.

Although its theory goes back to the ancient Greeks, music of the Western Art tradition originated almost exclusively in the Catholic Church. This is logical because at its most basic level, spirituality consists of an attempt to be in harmony with the unseen order of things in a chaotic world, to seek out something greater than oneself, and to ease the “existential angst that pesters the human condition.”<sup>32</sup> Music of all types is essentially an aesthetic experience, in that it does not necessarily serve any practical function, but it is useful because it adds emotional value to our lives. The aesthetic and spiritual power of music is something that all humans can feel, and thus, something that connects all of humanity, past, present, and future. Music can help us understand history and the human experience through time.

To hear a piece of music written centuries ago is really an intimate experience. It allows the listener to glimpse the culture and social condition of that time period, as well as the composer’s personal emotions. This level of closeness between two specific beings, composer and listener, is one of the reasons that music connects us through time. Further, composers write about the social conditions and cultural feelings of the times.

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Cantz, “A psychodynamic inquiry into the spiritually evocative potential of music,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 22, no. 2 (June 2013), 70.

This is yet another way that a modern day listener can learn about history through music. For example, when Beethoven wrote his 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony (*The Eroica*), it was a time of great social upheaval and change in Europe. It was the era of the Napoleonic wars, and specifically, Napoleon's occupation of Vienna, where Beethoven lived and worked. In fact, the original name of the *Eroica* was the *Bonaparte Symphony*, as Beethoven had dedicated the symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte. After Napoleon's controversial and drastic reforms, Beethoven ripped up the original title page, and renamed the symphony the *Eroica*. One does not even need to listen very closely to the 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony in order to discern the feelings of tumultuous upheaval and marked uncertainty, interrupted by only brief respites of love and faith in humanity. In listening to this historical symphony, one can connect personally to the culture's feeling of uncertainty and resistance to violent change, while in other sections also hear and connect with Beethoven's attempt to restore faith in humanity.

Julian Johnson believes that art music can accelerate or slow down the passage of time, because it can force one to recall past events or dwell on future events as if they were currently present. This is a powerful link to the subjective human experience, mirroring the way that we define our identity through time. Johnson explains that "We experience in music what we cannot outside of it. This reformulation of time and identity, the crossing of boundaries impossible in everyday life, is one of the most significant values of music."<sup>33</sup> Like classical music, our essential self remains the same over the

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 66.

years, but some details of our personalities morph as we progress through our lives, as we adapt to changes in our lives and in the greater world.

This power to bring history alive, and connect human emotions across the centuries is something that Western Art Music gives us. It makes us feel less alone in the universe, that someone, somewhere, once felt the way that we do today, and gives us faith that despite the hardships, humanity has triumphed on. To expand on this reasoning, performances of classical pieces allow us to glimpse the feelings of the past, while connecting them to the present feelings.

A primary difference that Lawrence Kramer found when comparing classical and popular styles of music is that unlike popular performers, classical performers partly recompose the music in the act of playing it. Performance is not a simple act of repetition, but an act of reanimation. “The consequence of this is that performing the same score in different ways and under different circumstances approximates the feeling of living in and through time.”<sup>34</sup> Kramer sees this differentiation as one source of the quality of classical music.

In popular performances, the chords played and lyrics sung remain exactly the same, although a section of improvisation from performance to performance in genres like jazz. In classical performances, though, despite the fact that every note is clearly written, there is rarely written guidance to instruct the performers on how exactly to interpret the music. Thus, the meaning of a popular piece remains largely the same through time, whereas the meaning of a classical piece is a blend of the notes written

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<sup>34</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 74.

(what the composer intended the feeling to be), and a current interpretation of the notes, based on the disposition of the performer, conductor, and current culture. Composer Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) explains this phenomenon when he says, “it is no longer an orchestra one hears, it is no longer music, but rather the tumultuous voice of the heavens blended with uproar of the earthly ones . . . This is terrifying, it makes one shudder, the illusion is complete.”<sup>35</sup> Classical pieces renew and transform their meaning to meet each new circumstance that it encounters.

An example that Kramer gave was the popular Bach G Major cello suite, and its use in several popular movies. The movies that this cello piece appears in are countless, but Kramer picks just three to focus on, *The Pianist*, *Master and Commander*, and an episode of the TV show *The West Wing*. He goes into great detail explaining how each story specifically uses and shapes the piece to fit its purposes, but let us suffice to say that while the notes played by the cellist remain the same, the meaning in each instance is naturally and easily adapted to fit the unique circumstances. Kramer explains this meaning quite concisely when he says, “classical music still matters because we can realize that performance is a way to live with music, and even a little to live through music.”<sup>36</sup>

Music connects humanity through time in a meaningful way. The structure of most classical pieces is characteristic of the human life cycle, music and spirituality both urge us to reach for the unknown, and classical music contains an important historical aspect. Through it, we can connect with those who lived hundreds of years ago, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 87.

engage a display of culture and history. The connective power that music provides is unlike any other way of documenting the past, because it is inherently interactive. Thus, classical music gives us the power to connect humanity through the ages.

*Because it's intricate and complex and there is much emotional value to be found in it*

This section, more so than any other, will explore how classical music's value is different from popular music's. I do not believe that either type of music is inherently more valuable than the other. Both musics have distinctive value, and both are useful in different ways and at different times. My argument is that classical music serves different purposes, and as such, people should allow the music enough time and attention to give it the chance to make its unique impact on them.

Because of its complex nature, classical music demands our attention when listening to it. One will likely not get much out of a classical piece if they put it on as background music, the music must be the only activity in order for it to have its full impact. The fact that one must stop what they are doing and really listen to it is part of the reason for Western Art Music's current decline in popularity. Active listening is not a commonly taught or practiced skill in our society, largely due to technological advances, and as such, our attention spans have suffered.

Classical music invites us, and in fact demands our participation in a special kind of thought and activity, that of active listening and reflection. As Julian Johnson tells us, classical music "invites us to participate in a special kind of thinking that brings together

the emotional and intellectual in a uniquely intense and sophisticated manner.”<sup>37</sup> This combination of the emotional and intellectual is nowhere more present than in classical music. To understand and enjoy a piece, one must grasp its emotion, but also the meaning of its form. Popular music combines both of these elements, but typically not as intricately as classical music does.

Whereas it is relatively easy to listen to the lyrics of a popular song while you’re cooking or driving and understand the meaning, classical music demands more from the listener. Not only are classical pieces generally longer in duration than popular pieces, because of its complex form, classical music requires that the listener pay close attention to it from the beginning to the end in order to glean its comprehensive meaning. This is especially true for those unfamiliar with this type of music. This is not to say that those unlearned in classical music cannot find meaning in it. In my mind, the only requirement to find value in classical music is to give it the time and attention to speak for itself. A further differentiation between classical and popular music is where the emphasis is placed, on the performance, or on the music itself.

Whereas a good deal of popular music is about the lyrics and the appearance of the artist, classical music is primarily about the score, the music itself, and how it is interpreted. With popular music, the audience is generally fixated on the appearance of the performer and the meaning of their lyrics. They typically care less about the originality of the chord structure or lyrics. The image of pop artists is generally much more important than in Western Art Music. This relates to the fact that popular music is

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 60.

big business and big money. People in publishing and marketing will employ any strategy necessary in order to convince the public that the artist is popular and needs to be bought. Classical music seems to have remained more musically pure, because its artists are generally more concerned with musical quality than appearance and showy production.

One of the reasons that classical music has stood the test of time is that it has remained focused on its inherently intricate nature. In general, classical performers are not as concerned with their appearance as the quality of sound that they produce, and whether or not they are accurately conveying emotions to the audience. There is a lot of value to be found in popular music, but one need not be nearly as focused to discern it as they must be when it comes to Western Art Music. If the listener gives a piece of classical music their concentrated attention, they are rewarded with emotional complexity. Engaging a work requires following the unfolding and subtle differences in the melody and harmony, and thus, following the changes in the mood, harmony and pace.<sup>38</sup> When one does this, it offers an “antidote to distractions of complex world. We often need something slower and more resonant” in our lives.<sup>39</sup> Classical music does what we are all capable of doing, spiritualizing the material elements of the world in order that others may listen to and understand the story. Because classical music generally does not use words, it is harder to discern meaning from it, but there is much meaning in doing so.

In part because of its complex forms, Western Art Music has inherent emotional power. Lawrence Kramer proposes that classical music has two specific emotional

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<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 64.

<sup>39</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 224.

powers. Firstly, it makes emotions tangible, and secondly, it is independent from circumstances. The chord structure and harmonies used in some classical pieces are so complex that they can produce a sound that is capable of producing a specific emotion, sometimes one that cannot otherwise be felt. A cello professor at Regis recently expressed his opinion that there are certain chords in specific classical pieces that make him feel a way that he is incapable of feeling except in that very moment. All the music leading up to that chord and that moment itself result in the culmination of a feeling that cannot be reproduced, except at that very moment in that specific piece.<sup>40</sup>

I believe these moments can be found in many classical pieces. Of course there are pieces that inherently feel cheerful, melancholy, or mournful. In many pieces, it is easy to put a name to what one feels while listening to it. However, there are also many pieces that stretch the limits of emotional capability, because they make one feel in such a way that cannot be described in words, they must simply be felt with the heart. This is where I find the most value in Western Art Music, in its ability to evoke complex emotions that cannot be put into words. The art of classical music lies in its ability to force us to transcend ordinary emotions, to delve deeper and produce profound emotional reactions. One of the ways this is accomplished is by demanding different reactions from the listener as the piece progresses.

Just as in classical music, emotion is inherent in popular music, however, the difference lies in the range of emotion that one song produces. Because of the focus on lyrics, popular songs focus almost exclusively on a single emotion, whereas the length

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Lee, personal interview with Erica Getz (Denver, CO: 15 September 2014).

and complexity of classical pieces leads to experiencing a range of emotions in a single piece. As Kramer puts it, “vernacular music urges us to focus on one emotion at a time, classical music invites us to explore, and find fulfillment by going beyond emotion without losing or diluting it.”<sup>41</sup> Vernacular music is restricted by its very definition. Because vocabulary is inherently limited, vocal music is likewise inherently restricted. This freedom from vocabulary that classical music enjoys adds value because it forces a heightened form of focused listening, which leads to deeper feelings, and greater understanding.

Classical music pushes us to feel more deeply, to experience life on a heightened emotional level. For all of its fast paced glamor, modern day society generally urges us to numb our deepest feelings by completely immersing us in repetitive themes and repetitive surface level emotions. Classical music urges us to think, urges us to be lifelong learners, and urges us to explore the more complex emotions that it knows we are capable of. Popular music demands compliance from society, classical music urges us to find the *magis* in our emotional capabilities by forcing us to examine our own emotions, rather than telling us what to feel. Classical music sounds the way complex emotions feel – one cannot fully explain them, one can only experience them.

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<sup>41</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 30.

*Because it's aesthetically evocative*

Music is in itself a language, and while it is not very good at describing itself, it is extremely good at conveying emotions. Music has the power to expand our idea of what language is. While the language of music contains no words of its own, it still has the power to articulate meaning. To really understand music, one must speak the language of music. This is achieved not by translating the music into a dialect one already knows, but by thinking in terms of music, in terms of emotions. While getting into a deep discussion of aesthetics would lead us away from the overall focus of this paper, before we can explore how it relates to music and why that matters, we must first find a coherent definition of the term *aesthetic*.

The word *aesthetic* is derived from the Greek word *aisthesthai*, which means ‘to perceive.’ The Germans were the first to define this word with being ‘concerned with beauty,’ although this derivation and use was controversial until the late 1800s. Stated simply, aesthetic means “designed to give pleasure through beauty.”<sup>42</sup> To expand on this somewhat limited definition, Julian Johnson points out that the most central idea of aesthetics is the fact that art has no immediate, definable function, but it is valuable because it has other uses besides pure functionality.<sup>43</sup> For example, a violin has specific value because it has the ability to produce music. However, the music itself does not have such a concrete function, and thus, it can be said to have aesthetic value. Even though it is hard to find words to describe the exact value of music, we know that it indeed has value because we can feel and hear its power. Kramer notes that “if we can hear it, it must be

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<sup>42</sup> *Oxford Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Aesthetic.”

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?* 39.

real.”<sup>44</sup> Wilson Coker furthers this concept when he says “what we are interested in, have feelings about, has *value*. Value belongs to the significance of the act and is the significance of it.”<sup>45</sup> Essentially, emotional power cannot be impersonated, and thus, if classical music makes us feel anything at all, it has real and valuable power. How we define what has aesthetic value in music, though, is a bit more complicated.

When examining classical music over the centuries, there are thousands of composers but only a handful whose music have stood the test of time. What gives aesthetic value to these specific composers, what defines this genius? Julian Johnson supposes that the works we value the most are those that balance the need for coherence with the element of the unexpected and unexplainable. Leonard Bernstein uses Beethoven as an example, explaining that what makes him great is his inexplicable ability to know what the next note “has to be,” and his power to make you feel at the conclusion of the piece that “something is right in the world, something we can trust, that will never let us down.”<sup>46</sup> This principle of *inevitability*, balancing a coherent form with the inexplicable dedication to the ‘right notes’ is inexplicable, but is what defines genius and aesthetic value in classical music.

When analyzing Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> symphony, one realizes that the rhythms and themes used are really not that complex or original. The first movement is essentially the same four-note rhythm repeated over and over, on different pitches (and of course with harmonic support). This is the mystery of a great composer:

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<sup>44</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson Coker, *Music & Meaning: A Theoretical Introduction to Musical Aesthetics* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), 33.

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, *The Joy of Music*, 28.

For reasons unknown to him or anyone else, he will give away his energies just to make sure one note follows the other inevitably. But at the end, the listener is left with the feeling that something is right with the world.<sup>47</sup>

What makes it special, what makes it genius, is that Beethoven found the perfect combination and ordering of the right notes at the exact right moments, and at the end of the piece the listener is left with the feeling that if he would have chosen any other combination, the meaning would not be the same.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 93.

## Conclusion

This is why classical music still matters, and should be listened to and appreciated. Firstly, it matters because there have been many studies done, namely, the *Mozart effect*, which show the positive impacts of classical music on the human brain. The structure and rules of classical music have been derived from, and can be explained by, the natural laws of the universe, meaning that music is in our core. Because it is universal, timeless, historical, and cultural, it connects humanity through time, and because of its complexity, it lends itself to understanding similarly complex human emotions. Finally, Western Art Music has aesthetic value. Lawrence Kramer explains that:

It matters because it has made discoveries we are far from done with and that are far from done with us. It has imagined forms of experience that become substantial realities in being thus imagined. Music of all kinds invokes this bonding: classical music dramatizes and reflects on it in the act of invocation. The power to do this is tangible and exhilarating. It is the power by which we make the world meaningful. Other music has things to say to us, but no other music tells us the things that this music does. It makes us richer, and also different.<sup>48</sup>

Because it is an experience that matters, that makes us think, that gets under our skin, classical music challenges us to rise to its occasion, by demanding a more focused listening experience.

Classical music will give back to the listener what the listener invests in it. One must learn to be still, to really listen, and to think critically about what is going on in order to appreciate classical music. However, if one puts in the effort, the rewards are astounding. The range of emotions that are possible from listening to classical music simply cannot be found in everyday occurrences. True, it is a challenge to be focused on

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<sup>48</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 34.

a piece with no lyrics, with no explicit meaning, but this also makes it a freeing experience. The music does not tell you what to believe or how to feel, it invites the listener to mentally participate in it, to engage with the themes and ideas being presented, and to then reflect upon and discern their own meaning from it. The feeling of independence and timeless interconnectedness is one that cannot be replicated in many (if any) other art forms.

This is the value of classical music as I see it. I hope to encourage the reader to give classical music a chance. However, for someone new to classical music to go out and randomly select a piece in which they will hopefully find meaning is likely a terrifying concept. The next section will give suggestions for how to begin listening to and appreciating Western Art Music.

## Suggestions for Listening and Appreciation

The lack of popularity of classical music in our times is unfortunate. Many of these problems stem from our educational system, while others arise from our inability to engage with long pieces of music. Most of all, though, the issue lies in the fact that people simply do not know how to listen to classical music. This section will give some suggestions for the place of music in the educational system, for making classical music more enjoyable to the average person, and thus, for saving it from irrelevance.

The biggest hurdle that classical music faces today is that people don't know how to listen to it. Further, it is becoming increasingly rare for it to be taught in a meaningful way in schools. Sigmund Spaeth believes that "Music is as important to the human race as is literature and should be placed on the same level in our education system."<sup>49</sup> In order to foster appreciation, children must be exposed to music from an early age. Moira Szabo suggests many ways to accomplish this. Her research shows the benefits of informally exposing children to classical music. When children listen to it in casual environments (where they are not being evaluated) long lasting positive effects on the child's future music listening habits have been observed. People who did not receive much, if any, formal music training still found enjoyment in classical music later in life because "music was just there at various times in their young lives – there was no pressure to learn it."<sup>50</sup> Thus, Szabo suggests that while careful listening and analysis are

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<sup>49</sup> Spaeth, *The Importance of Music*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Moira Szabo, "Avenues of Entry into the World of Western Art Music: Exposing Students to Western Art Music Informally Is One Way to Promote Appreciation for This Music," *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (September 2005), 38.

important, so are opportunities for students to experience art music without the need to dwell on its formal and technical aspects.

One school district in British Columbia is making enormous and important strides in this area. They have implemented a music-listening program in their elementary schools where at a specific point during the day, the PA system plays a specific classical piece which lasts less than five minutes. The children must be quiet and focus on listening during this time. The piece is repeated each day for five days, and each day a different excerpt accompanies it that enhances the historical context, specific aspects, or meaning of the piece. Over the entire school year, the children are exposed to about 30 pieces of Western Art Music. The teachers, students, and parents have generally indicated positive responses to this program. The students are also more likely to continue listening to classical music throughout their young adult and adult lives than those not exposed to classical music in primary school.

This relaxed listening environment can be fostered by Hanley's model for listening. When listening to classical music, people are encouraged to think about 3 questions: 1) What do I hear?; 2) What do I see?; 3) What do I feel? The intention of this model is to help "students gradually expand their understanding of themselves and their world by engaging them in different and increasingly more complex listening experiences."<sup>51</sup> I believe this is a good model for all people to utilize in their listening, though, not just children.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 39.

Moira Szabo gives many other suggestions in order to immerse children in classical music. She says that adding appropriate music to the telling of a story can enhance its dramatic effect, and increase how long the children remember key points. She also suggests that adding classical music to the study of other subjects (like literature and history) can enrich the entire learning experience. Also, she advises teachers to seek out opportunities for students to experience live music, because of the combined impact of the auditory and visual experience. Szabo believes that:

Young people are capable of responding to Western art music. All they need is the opportunity to hear it. Play it for them. Discuss it with them. Communicate your love of it to them. School music programs can nurture a love of music that lasts a lifetime. Such appreciation can lead students to deeper study and lifelong support of music in school and the community. The first step in this process is for teachers to give students a chance to listen to it, talk about it, and enjoy it.<sup>52</sup>

There are many solutions for getting young children interested in classical music. However, what about college aged students and beyond? Obviously it is a little late for most of us to be exposed to a Western art music program in school. What can we then do to foster our own appreciation and enjoyment?

The easiest way for most people to become involved in the listening of classical music is to find expressive pieces, pieces that they can connect to. Although all Western art music has value, it is much generally much easier to experience meaning in a piece of the Romantic era than the Baroque. I find that Romantic pieces are often more direct in the emotions portrayed. So, once one determines a piece to listen to, the next step must be actually listening to it. As I mentioned before, most people assume that because they can

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 39.

hear, they can understand classical music. This is simply not the case. Listening must be the activity in itself.

Although formal training or exposure is not necessary for enjoyment, what is necessary is an open mind and to the willingness to engage with the piece. One cannot put classical music on as background music and expect to find much meaning in it. Especially for new or unfamiliar pieces, the listener must stop everything else and fully engage. One must sit quietly and listen, and allow the mind to follow the music. As Charles Hughes puts it, “The first requirement in listening to music is to value music. The second is to give oneself up to the music during a performance simply and completely.”<sup>53</sup>

While listening, ask yourself the following questions: What do I hear? What do I see (in the mind’s eye)? What do I feel? If focused on, these basic questions will allow the listener to engage with and find meaning in just about any piece. If this concept of solitary listening seems daunting, Kramer points out that one “does not always need to listen to a piece with full attention, what matters is that you sometimes do, and will again.”<sup>54</sup> Especially when pieces become more familiar, it is possible to enjoy them while doing other tasks.

A second suggestion is to listen to pieces repeatedly. Because of their inherently complex nature, classical pieces cannot be listened to once and understood. This is one of the most striking differences between it and popular, music. In vernacular music, the lyrics make it easier to determine the song’s meaning. To uncover the deep meaning that lies under the surface of every classical piece, though, repeated listening is a necessity.

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<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *The Human Side of Music*, xviii.

<sup>54</sup> Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 86.

What I want to especially impress upon the reader is that classical music *is* for everyone. Although more knowledge never hurts, one does not need an understanding of classical music's form and subtleties to enjoy it and to find meaning in it. All one needs is patience and openness to new experiences and ideas. At the conclusion of this paper I have made a list of pieces of art music that I find especially meaningful. I chose these pieces because I believe their expression is more obvious and easier for the beginner to grasp. This is by no means an all-inclusive list of the "best" of Western art music. Rather, I hope for it to be a starting point for those new to classical music. The first four pieces listed are those I am playing in my violin recital. The rest of the pieces were chosen because of their engaging nature and popularity in the music world.

I sincerely hope that the reader will come away from this thesis with a better understanding of what makes classical music great. We have explored the issues that classical music currently faces, and countered these problems with possible solutions for increasing the popularity of classical music. More than anything, though, I hope I have impressed upon the reader *why* classical music still has value, and why we should all still care about it. Classical music has the ability to add aesthetic and emotional value to the human experience. This is not just something that I believe; classical music's value is inherent, because of its complex form, its history, and its emotional aspects.

## Suggestions for Listening

### *Recital pieces:*

Johann Sebastian Bach – Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor  
Béla Bartók – Romanian Folk Dances (arranged for solo violin)  
Ludwig van Beethoven – Romance in G Major, Op. 40  
Max Bruch – Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 26

### *Other suggestions:*

Johann Sebastian Bach – *Chaconne* from the Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor  
Johann Sebastian Bach – Mass in B Minor, BWV 232  
Hector Berlioz – *Symphonie Fantastique*  
Ludwig van Beethoven – Symphony No. 7, second movement  
Ludwig van Beethoven – Symphony No. 9, fourth movement  
Ludwig van Beethoven – Violin Concerto in D Major, second movement  
Frédéric Chopin – "Raindrop" Prelude, Op 28, No. 15  
Claude Debussy - Suite bergamasque: III. Clair de lune  
Antonin Dvorak – Symphony No. 9, "New World Symphony"  
Edward Elgar – Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85  
Edvard Grieg - Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46  
Gustav Holst – The Planets, Op. 32, fourth movement Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity  
Franz Liszt – La Campanella  
Gustav Mahler – Symphony No. 5  
Felix Mendelssohn – Violin Concerto in E minor  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Concerto for flute, harp & orchestra in C major, second movement  
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart - Requiem Mass in D minor (K. 626)  
Modest Mussorgsky – Night on Bald Mountain  
Sergei Rachmaninoff – Piano Concerto No. 2  
Ottorino Respighi – Pines of Rome  
Bedřich Smetana – "The Moldau" from Ma Vlast  
Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky – Symphony No. 6, Pathétique, fourth movement  
John Williams – Theme from Schindler's List

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