

THE STATE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN THE US AND REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE SPENT IN MUSIC  
Closing Remarks to "Going Behind the Notes" Lecture-Concert Series  
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I recall what Haydn said later in life when he felt fatigue when composing: "There are so few happy and contented people here below; grief and sorrow are always their lot; perhaps (my) labors will be a source from which the careworn, or the man burdened with affairs, can derive a few moments of rest and refreshment."

Classical music has brought rest and refreshment, and far more than that, to so many people since Haydn wrote those words well over 200 years ago.

My heart sinks every time I see another piece of evidence showing that support for live classical music is in decline in America. So many of our concert halls, like houses of worship, were once filled to capacity. Now many are closer to empty than full. It is now a secular, materialistic world.

My heart is saddened that there won't be as many children in the US in the future who could have a one-on-one relationship with an admired musical mentor who can inspire and open doors to the glorious world of classical music like I had. There will always be inspiring teachers available. But will parents be seeking them, and will children abandon their phones long enough to be disciplined in music study?

My heart is encouraged, though, that millions of young people in Asia have yet to experience and discover live classical music and are in the process of doing so. It is ironic that live Western European music is on the rise in Asia, as it moves towards potentially becoming an anachronism in the United States.

Classical music has never been embraced by the masses. But this does not mean it has only been for the affluent. I know of immigrant families which were too poor to ever attend the Metropolitan Opera in their home city of New York, but who put on the Saturday matinee radio broadcasts every week for the family to hear. Classical music had been a part of their society and heritage, and they transmitted it to their children.

Most of you provided your children music lessons. I hope your children are enabling their children to have music lessons and encouraging music in their home. If they are not, perhaps you can be an influence on your grandchildren. I know some grandparents who consistently take their grandchildren to musical events, and in some cases, have helped to subsidize the cost of the grandchildren's music lessons.

It is ironic that, while the quality and quantity of excellent performers increases exponentially, there are fewer and fewer live classical concerts in America's cities and towns to attend. For example, the Midland Symphony, despite playing fantastically, will have only three concerts this season of serious classical music. This is down 50% from their traditional six.

How often have you heard a string quartet performance in the Tri-Cities? There simply have not been many since the Ashmun Chamber Music Series last existed over 30 years ago.

It is interesting, that by my count, this “Going Behind the Notes “ series will have comprised as many exclusively classical music events as will have been presented by the Midland Center for the Arts during this same nine-month time-period.

I am concerned that some presenters and performers are losing faith in the power of great classical music. Presenters today frequently stress that they are presenting “entertainment,” rather than greatness. The lure of presenting unusual music is sometimes taking resources which could be utilized for great music. For example, I have heard of a manager of a concert series who did not want to present music by “dead white males.”

Society has made, and is making, progress in many ways--admirably so in many respects. However, one casualty has been live classical music. Symphony orchestras and other classical music have for two centuries been primary beneficiaries of philanthropic donations. Today there are so many charities competing for funds that music has become a much less frequent recipient.

Classical music has never been a money maker for any organization. In earlier days record companies always lost money on their classical music division. However, they continued providing it as a service to the world and were willing to offset the losses with profits in other areas. Those days are gone. Music presentation now is primarily a business, and the financial bottom line frequently seems to be all that matters.

At times it can be tempting to give up, and just feel resignation when one contemplates the future of live classical music. But it is better to fight for what one believes in. I realized I could share my enthusiasm and experience with you, my friends and neighbors, and that is how this series came to be born. I feel I owe it to music, after all that music has given to me.

One pays an emotional price to be seriously involved with any art. Most people don't realize that most of the time when any serious musician is preparing music, much anguish and frustration are occurring. One continually, mercilessly, berates oneself and the more one knows, the more one perpetually feels dissatisfaction with him or herself.

However, the fulfillment of being on the mountain, always striving to go higher, offsets the sacrifices. It is a very meaningful personal journey which every musician takes.

As I contemplate the classical music scene today in America I try and apply Wordsworth's advice: “We will grieve not, rather find strength in what lies behind.” We each have our memories of what music has done for us. For me, it is not merely the meaningful quest and perpetual struggles at the piano. It is also the mentors whom I have had the privilege of experiencing. Had I even not learned anything of music from them, just the association with such special human beings would have been a treasure in itself.

At my Indiana University doctoral audition, the faculty asked me which of my teachers had been the “best.” I quickly responded that I owed “everything” to my first teacher, Willis Bennett, who is the

reason I am in music. He gave me, from the age of 6 to 18, everything he had--with multiple hours of gratis time every week in my last 4 years of high school. He not only gave me a strong musical foundation, including a deep love for the production of beautiful tone. He provided a personal model for life, and I would not be who I am as a person without Willis Bennett.

It was Jack Radunsky who salvaged and resurrected my love of the piano when I was at a low ebb and ready to give up the piano at age 20.

It was Howard Karp who provided the model of a profound performer and teacher who was dedicated to a vision of music which consciously sought the depth behind every note.

It was Menahem Pressler, who continues to this day, at age 97, to provide the supreme example to the world of how to play the piano truly beautifully and how to pass on to others what music is really about through teaching.

It was Frank Mannheimer who not only pulled the best out of every person he taught, but also imparted a spiritual approach to music and to life.

It was Freda Rosenblatt who helped me to play again, after a dozen years of injury-caused inability to play during the 1980's.

It was Igor Kipnis whose ears, and mind, and encouraging temperament nurtured a 50-year-old who needed and valued what he had to give.

It was Dorothy Payne who demonstrated to an impressionable young undergrad that music theory was indeed music itself.

No person with a bigger heart ever stood at the front of a classroom than theorist and composer Pete De Lone at Indiana University.

Joseph Rezits at Indiana University shared his scholarship and encouragement in a very meaningful way and continued researching and performing for residents in his retirement community in Bloomington, until recently passing away at the age of 94.

All the above people except Menahem Pressler are gone physically. But they are part of me every day of my life.

Of course, without the encouragement and financial support of my parents, I would not have had the above experiences. They were not initially music lovers. They simply wanted to encourage the interests of their son, as so many of you have nurtured your children's interests. I must pay a special tribute to my father, who though making a living as a civil servant in Washington, DC, was a lifelong student of philosophy, religion, and history, and provided an example of utilizing the past as a guide to living today.

However, it is not only the mentors I have had which are the reward of a life in music. It is more rewarding to give than to receive and sharing one's love of music with others is the most fulfilling way to

experience music. The life-long internationally touring pianist and teacher, Menahem Pressler, has stated that if he could only have kept his playing or his teaching, he would have retained his teaching.

One also learns through teaching, and Pressler was fond of quoting an old Hebrew proverb: "One learns much from one's books, one learns much from one's teachers, but one learns the most from one's students." And one not only learns from one's students. A student becomes one's family and life-time dear friend. I am touched that many of you, dear friends, are here today. My students and friends have supported me in so many ways, and are deeply meaningful treasures of a life in music.

Most of all, I am grateful for the most meaningful treasure of all – my wife, Susan, who has been my musical and life partner for the last 45 years. Everything either of us has done has always been a joint effort, and sharing the sacrifices and joys of making music, hearing music and teaching music has resulted in the most extraordinary journey together.

My hope is that each of you will continue to make music an important part of your life. I hope that even if you do not share Liszt's philosophy of music as a "bridge from Heaven to earth," that you will benefit from Haydn's view of music as providing "rest and refreshment."

I would like to conclude this series with something that so many of us can relate to—the words written by one of Schubert's friends, which Schubert then set to immortal music in his song "An die Musik":

You, noble Art, in how many grey  
hours,  
When life's mad tumult wraps  
around me,  
Have you kindled my heart to  
warm love,  
Have you transported me into a  
better world. . . .

Often has a sigh flowing out from your  
harp,  
A sweet, divine harmony from you  
Unlocked to me the heaven of better  
times,  
You, noble Art, I thank you for it,  
You, noble Art, I thank you!

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