



by David Srebnik | photo by Michael Zirkle

NO DEGREE NEEDED

THE BIGGEST FOUR-LETTER WORD IN CLASSICAL MUSIC IS SPELLED “MUSIC EDUCATION.”

Classical music’s mostly failing grade for the execution of music education and classical music awareness means there have been too many music lovers and potential music lovers left behind.

And lately, this musical miscarriage has been partially extended to something called “Adult Music Education.” Of course, there are some notable exceptions that have kept adult music education from becoming an epidemic, and I urge you to read the truly inspiring and encouraging stories and programs within these pages.

Sharing that often failing grade is my industry – classical music radio. Here, classical music education has not always translated well. Regrettably, we’ve fallen into several schools of music education on the radio. The most destructive of them being,

1. The Pipe-Smoking, Port-Drinking, Talking-Down-to-the-Uneducated school.
2. The If-Only-You-Could-Hear-MY-Favorite-(OBSCURE) Music-I-Know-You-Will-Love-it-as-Much-as-I-Do school. (There’s a reason Haydn’s Baryton Trios are unknown, obscure and forgotten.)

Now, a very important disclaimer: this is not a sin committed by all radio stations. There are stations in North Carolina and other states doing smart and fun things that provide you an opening to hear and enjoy classical music. And, classical music

radio does not hold sole ownership of these and other damaging or not-so-effective classical music presentation styles. Hint: when was the last time you felt welcome – or maybe not so welcome – at a classical music concert?

So here’s the real deal – some of us who love classical music and some of the classical zealots among us have led you astray. We’ve made classical music too academic, too elite, too removed from everyday life and everyday people and too hip for its own good.

We’ve made you feel that you need a degree to enjoy or “get” the music. We’ve convinced you that you need to know something about classical music – that you must understand it – in order to really enjoy it and appreciate it.

No. Wrong.

If you understood how a sunset worked, would you enjoy and appreciate a sunset any more?

If you knew more how painter Richard Diebenkorn mixed his color chart to create the signature Diebenkorn blue, would you love and admire his paintings any more? If you knew how sausages were made, would you...never mind.

Here’s what I know and believe about music education. If you know what you like, and you like it a lot, you know everything you need to know about classical music.

Really.

Really! If you know what you like, and you like it a lot, you know everything you need to know about classical music.

How do you know what you like – or what to like? Simply listen. Listen a lot.

I know this sounds too good and too simple to be true. But it is true. My academic music degrees and my performing experiences pale in relation to what I’ve gained from the millions of moments I have spent listening to music.

These listening moments are the moments I learned the most, felt the most, developed my tastes and preferences and received endless classical music joy, entertainment and musical fulfillment. And the only tools I needed were my ears and the time I spent listening – nothing more.

I did not need experts to tell me what to listen for; I did it on my own – something you can do too and something that music professionals should realize and stop complicating.

Two miraculous things always happen when you listen. The more you listen, the more details you start to hear. More notes, more harmony, more expression, more passion, more beauty, more humor. More. It’s incredible.

Simple, repeated listening will lead you to develop your own personal tastes and favorites. Your ears and heart will tell you if you like Baroque music (Bach, Handel and Vivaldi) more than Impressionism

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(Debussy and Ravel). You will find out whether you like chamber music (a string quartet or piano trio) more than music for large orchestra (Beethoven and Mozart symphonies, for example).

These will be your tastes and your unchallengeable opinions that are always right – because after all, they are your tastes. Remember: if you know what you like, and you like it a lot, you know everything you need to know about classical music.

What would be so bad about classical music going away? Music speaks for itself, so the music – and regular listening – answers that question most effectively. But the times we live in have made the need for classical music even greater.

It's no secret our world has become a more pressurized and claustrophobic place. (So much for the benefits of the global community and technology bringing us closer together.) For many, music has been our reliable solace, our stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off resource. Along with family, our own spiritual choices and *The Daily Show*, music has become a revived center and source for something calming, healing, restorative and even distracting.

But you already knew that about music. Maybe you've forgotten, but more likely, we in the industry haven't made the music available enough to remind you more often and more powerfully.

Why do we need classical music and an effective and appealing form of classical

music advocacy awareness whether we call it music education or something else?

As classical music becomes less inviting and harder to find and hear, it will become even further marginalized on a shelf; hidden even further back in the music closet now dominated by other forms. And that means music lovers, and potential music lovers, will have even less access to classical music and its ability to give us a glimpse of something bigger than ourselves, to give us an idea of what's possible, of the beauty that exists beyond the asphalt jungle, the office cubicle, the board room, city hall or our traffic-laden roads.

I look back on some of my remarks here, and regret the harsh tone, and feel an obligation to be a part of the solution. It would be irresponsible to drop all this venom and not have a suggestion or two.

We need to make the arts case with our local, state and federal government: the people we elect need to know that a thriving and well-funded arts scene benefits a city's heart, soul and bottom line. According to Americans for the Arts, their *Arts & Economic Prosperity III* report reveals "the nonprofit arts industry generates \$166.2 billion in economic activity every year, resulting in \$29.6 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues." This is just one of several credible reports on art's economic impact. Let's add arts funding to our politicians' to-do list.

Performing arts organizations and institutions should not resent or resist

putting the proven masterworks that have stood the test of time in the forefront of what they offer their customers, new, old and the yet to be born. Of course, there should be a balance of new and old, and we do want to invest in discovering the next Mozart. But shying away from the music that has brought classical music from the 1600's to the 21st century should never happen.

In addition to dropping the "I'm the master and you're not" presentation style, classical music radio stations need to get over their Pachelbel Canon complex – that phobia of playing beautiful music that many people enjoy. Some radio station personnel hold their collective nostrils when they play this popular listener favorite and others – if they play them at all. This form of elitist snobbery does nothing for the art and artists that any institution believes they uphold.

It's okay that classical music is not hip. Let's not try to make it so. It's more than good enough as is. Maybe less hype, less hip-ness and fewer gimmicks in the concert hall and on the air will make the music easier to find and easier to hear.

Conductor Ivan Fischer is the founder and Music Director of the Budapest Festival Orchestra and is the recently named Principal Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC. I asked him how he made the case for classical music with arts benefactors, government officials,

arts management and most importantly – the world at large.

"You don't need to be trained to enjoy music. It's good if you are knowledgeable and if you know something about music and then you can develop that knowledge. But I've experienced many times that people listen to classical masterpieces who have never heard anything like it before and they immediately feel the beauty of it and they immediately feel that it is about them. It's not about belonging to a certain class or being knowledgeable or trained. It can happen to all of us, and any of us – that hearing the music is the experience of a lifetime."

The best thing we can do for you and for classical music, whether we call it music or "music education" – is to get it out there – to get it to you easily and honestly. That must be our industry's mission, and it must be something we achieve not just for classical music but for something much larger.



David Srebnik has directed classical music programming for Public Radio stations in Texas, Michigan, New Orleans, Florida and North Carolina. He also programmed the music heard on NPR's Performance Today. He currently produces Virtuoso Voices (www.virtuosovoices.org), an interview service heard on Public Radio stations nationwide and writes about classical music for the Wilmington Star-News.

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