

Is classical music still relevant for the youth in modern day society?

In a world in which many of the teens and young people in our population want the instantaneous gratification that comes from listening to a piece of “popular” music, is there still a place for classical music? And is this music still relevant in modern day society? With “classical” now being a term covering the entire spectrum of music from Renaissance through to Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Modern and everything in between, it is easy to see where “classical” music and composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Brahms continue to be influential in modern day life as well as modern day music.

Many classical pieces were not successful or popular even at the time in which they were written (take the premier of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” as an example. One of the most famous classical music riots in history in which half of the spectators were so revolted by the obscurity of the music that they began fighting those who were enjoying it in the very theatre...the classical audience is not always as placid as you might think!) However, relevance does not necessarily mean successful or popular. Relevance is defined as “having direct bearing on the matter in hand” and if this is the case, then yes; classical music is relevant in modern day society whether or not many people consciously understand its impact.

There is a common misconception that classical and “popular” music are the antithesis of each other however this is an incorrect presumption. The metered, un-pitched vocals of rap seem to be a modern invention. In fact these techniques were used 100 years ago by Schoenberg. All modern, polyphonic music and the rules of three and four part harmonisation were well established by the 1700s and unmistakably utilised by Bach. Improvisation, a technique often used in Jazz, was a recognized form of virtuoso playing in the cadenzas found in the concertos of all of the major composers (although very few performers still improvise their cadenzas). And the continuo part often played by the harpsichord during the Baroque era was interpreted from a chart similar to those used for chords in the backing tracks of today. We, as the youth of today, often think we are modern, unconventional and inventive but perhaps we need to think again.

If this is the case, then why the lack of popularity today? Classical music is often seen as an elitist art form which only a certain type of person is able to enjoy. It is the music of intellectuals. Rather than the immediate understanding and enjoyment which comes from an easy-to-follow and often repetitive piece of “popular” music based on the tonic and dominant chords, classical is exceedingly more intricate thus taking longer to understand. There are layers of melody and harmony; themes which are repeated often with a subtle change or surprising transformation; modulations; codas; cadenzas and unanticipated instrumental vagaries. It is an art which can create a glorious experience for its listeners and takes a huge amount of devotion to portray at a high level but even the most aurally (as well as physically) difficult piece of Bach’s fugal writing can be enjoyed by all on some level; whether this is a musical academic reading into the mathematics of the composition or an amateur listener appreciating the sheer beauty of the sounds created by the performer.

With this in mind, maybe the question should be “is classical music *accessible*” rather than whether it is relevant, particularly for the younger audience. This issue of accessibility and approachability can stem from the same matter of elitism. The stereotypical audience seen at a classical concert are the elderly and greying end of the population and not teenagers and young people. Similarly, there are more grey haired performers in a symphony orchestra than any other colour. This image prevents a younger audience from feeling that it is the right place for them to be seen at. Nowadays in concerts of “popular” music, the music is only one element of the experience. It is also about the lighting, the people and the overall atmosphere. For classical music to become more accessible to the younger audience, this may need to be

the case here as well. As soon as you reverse this increasingly elderly image, with performers such as Lang Lang, the audience changes. Instead of just a musician, Lang Lang has become a world-famous celebrity who primarily people go to *watch* rather than only to *hear*. After the concert, queues of young people will wait for hours to meet him. Similarly, a group I worked with in Hannover over the summer takes music to new audiences. A strobe-lit, underground area full of youths is not a normal place for Haydn to be played but the atmosphere created was one which these people enjoyed and it answered the accessibility problem. In this recital there were no condescending looks from veteran-classical-snobs when a neophyte-listener clapped in between movements or wore the wrong clothing. For people to realise the relevance of classical music in modern day society, the music itself needs to be accessible for all audiences.

As Sergei Rachmaninoff (pianist and composer) once said, “Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music.” Therefore, maybe even if much of today’s youth do not realise it now, classical music could one day become an important part of their lives.