

**Classism in Classical Music**

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## Introduction and Definitions

In the world of classical music, the elites have always controlled how classical music was distributed to the lower classes. The upper class funds classical music and thus expects privilege and exclusivity when it comes to classical music events such as concerts or opera productions. When the lower classes are shut out from this process, the upper class engages in a form of discrimination called classism. Through methodical means, the upper class is able to limit what classical music the lower classes can hear if at all. This concept is called *classism and classical music*.

To define terms, *classical music* is the mainstream Western music focused in liturgical and secular traditions from the 9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. – present. Over classical music's history, musical instruments were standardized and thus classical music was played by "standardized" instruments (such as the Violin or Trombone) and the human voice. Singing is identifiable by all humans with a voice and thus classical music had great appeal to large groups of people. It was the first major musical style to be focused on *written* tradition rather than *oral* tradition. Musical notation was created to preserve music and helped classical music live as the longest lasting style of music in history. However, coming with this written notion came education. Generally, the elites were the educated and thus controlled classical music. The layperson was still able to enjoy it and recognize it. The most prime example of classical music is Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The iconic dat-dat-dat-dum opening motive is what every layperson has heard and can identify that "*that* is classical music." But that same layperson was not educated and therefore not rich, ergo was not able to *create* and *sponsor* classical music. This is the crux of the argument for classism in classical music. *Classism*, in the classic sociological definition, is "prejudice and/or discrimination by socioeconomic class." (Macionis, 2009) The socioeconomic

classes are divided into Upper, Middle, and Lower classes, each with their own traits and roles in society. In this case, the upper class, or elites, will discriminate against the lower class.

Logically tying these two terms together, we can come to the conclusion that *classism in classical music* is the upper class' limitation of classical music to the lower class. There are three main mechanisms for the elites' control of classical music. First, the economic pressures of high ticket prices prohibit lower class people to attend concerts. At \$108 a ticket for a first tier seat at Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic, no lower class person or family could spare that amount of money for something as simple as a concert. Leisure is expensive in lower class families and dollars are allocated *very* carefully in regards to leisure. Second, social mores prevent lower classes from attending concerts. Despite the financial burden of a concert, there is also a social one. Lower class people are less educated than upper class people and thus speak differently, dress differently, and act differently than the elites. Being that the elites are the dominant force at concerts, the layperson does not want to attract stares from the rich by going to a concert dressed in clothes not suited for a concert or not practicing proper concert etiquette. Third, being awash with money, the upper class creates exclusivity in classical music institutions through *patronage*, the donation of money in return for certain perks or influence at the institution. For example, Avery Fisher, the wealthy businessman gave the New York Philharmonic an unprecedented grant of \$10.5 million to rebuild Philharmonic Hall. The hall was later renamed "Avery Fisher Hall" in honor of his donation. Lower class people have no chance of gaining notoriety at a music institution because they lack the money to do so. The elites maintain exclusivity over the layperson and thus limit classical music to themselves. The middle class, conversely is a mix. Attendance at concerts and appreciation of classical music in general varies for the middle class depending on sociological mores during history and has not

always been consistent. The upper-middle class often will side with the elites while the lower-middle class will side with the layperson.

### **History of Classism in Classical Music**

To understand classism in classical music, a brief historical account of the why's and how's of classism in classical music in the past is in order. For the purpose of limiting this discussion to the United States and its society, we will focus only on classical music in America starting around the 1850s. New York was the center of the musical world in America much as it remains today. This period of time, just after the Civil War had been won by the North was a time of great change. The Gilded Age was transforming society making the rich even more lavishly richer and the poor more dirtily poorer. This divide was shown in the divide of musical styles at the time: "Classical Music" and "Popular Music." Classical music was called the "high art music," a term imported from Europe where it was enjoyed by the upper class. All classical music was funded by the upper class and little lower class integration was present. Notable examples were the burgeoning Romantic Period composers of Beethoven and Schubert, or more classical names like Handel, Bach or Mozart. Popular music, very much classical music's antithesis, was the "low music" enjoyed by the layperson of the lower class who was shut out of the classical music concerts because of the three aforementioned methods of division. Such music included folk music and community band music like John Philip Sousa's marches or Strauss' Waltzes. New York was the highlight of all this activity and it did not spread for several years, even decades. Few American institutions for music existed outside of New York. All the other major cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington were all devoid of this phenomenon of true "Classical vs. Popular Music" until much later. (Klein, 1910) (Davis, 1980) (Crawford, 2001)

As the Gilded Age reached its peak, so did the height of classism in classical music. In the 1870s, several major institutions for classical music were founded, mostly in New York, that provided the elites with a firm grasp on the repertoires of their respective performers and their box positions. The most significant was the Metropolitan Opera, New York's premier opera house. It established the first solid social scene in New York beyond the New York Academy, a small conservatory in Lower Manhattan. The Met was founded by several rich stockholders who controlled the House as long as they paid the expenses. They designated a grand theater to be built in Midtown Manhattan on 34th Street and Broadway, literally, in the center of town. "The Old Met" as it was called, was designed to highlight the *Diamond Horseshoe*, the first tier of boxes where the stockholders sat during performances. These boxes were sold off at ridiculous prices of \$4500 per annum to fund a first tier box. (\$106,000 in 2008 dollars) As such, these boxes *rarely* changed hands, ergo, were controlled by three rich families: the Vanderbilts, famous for their railroad success at Grand Central, the Morgans, famous for their banking success; and the Astors, the classic old money "Knickerboocracy", a term that referred to rich elites with lengthy ties to old New York or even New Amsterdam. Ronald Davis, in his historical account of music in America, explains the social scene at the Metropolitan Opera:

Social leaders like Mrs. Astor customarily appeared at the opera house promptly at nine o'clock, regardless of what time the performance had started. During the intermission she would receive members of her set, particularly those accompanied by out-of-town or European visitors, but she rarely left her own box. Until World War I the Metropolitan was the focal point of the winter social season, the Ward McAllister's famous Four Hundred sought to be seen as near the Diamond Horseshoe as possible, especially on Monday nights, the most fashionable of all. Attending the opera was a duty for anyone with social aspirations, and the boxes at the Metropolitan were slow to change hands. Daughters were presented to society at the opera, and it was there that prominent young men interviewed candidates for marriage. Henry James, on a visit to his native America in 1907, was amazed by "the general extravagant insistence on the Opera, which plays its part as the great vessel of social salvation." For the wealthy "going to the opera" at the turn of the century was an almost religious ritual, somewhere between being presented at Court and attending High Mass in a grand cathedral... (Davis, *A History of Music in American Life: Volume II*, 1980)

Contrary to the Met was the Manhattan Opera Company founded by Oscar Hammerstein I. He founded the company to compete with The Met appealing to a different audience, the middle and lower classes. While his opera house was still dominated by upper class concertgoers, there were no formal rules and mores to follow allowing the middle and lower classes a chance for them to see opera. However, under stress from The Met's competition, the Manhattan was bought out by The Met after only seven years of existence. No other opera company has outlasted The Met in America to this day. (Klein, 1910) (Davis, 1980) (Crawford, 2001)

The antithesis to Opera was the Symphony Orchestra. The New York Philharmonic, the oldest symphony orchestra in America, was founded in the 1850s by a group of freelance musicians banding together democratically to play for the rich appointees who wanted a secondary social scene other than the opera. Unlike in Europe, America's pride of classical music was the Symphony Orchestra; in no other country has the Symphony Orchestra gained such high status as it has. The New York Symphony was also founded in the 1870s to compete with the Philharmonic. Unlike the Manhattan Opera, the Symphony did not appeal to lower class people but rather competed for the upper-class patrons that funded their concerts. The New York Symphony was thus a major competitor and often regarded as *better* orchestra than the Philharmonic during the Gilded Age. The Boston Symphony Orchestra was founded as the first full-time roster orchestra in America unlike the New York Philharmonic (and Symphony for some time) where participation was "at will" without contract. After World War I and the shift of social norms of the Roaring Twenties, the symphony orchestra became the major ensemble type of American classical music. By 1925, every major city had a symphony orchestra from Chicago, to St. Louis, to Cleveland, to Los Angeles, to Atlanta. (Opera had only *one* permanent company by 1925, the Met in New York.) Boston's model of a "by contract" roster of players

greatly improved the quality of musicianship and increased the popularity of classical music to the masses. Philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie funded major concert halls such as Carnegie Hall in New York. Interestingly the lack of two major concert halls for the two major orchestras has been said to lead to the New York Symphony's demise with its merge with the Philharmonic in the late 20s. New York did not *need* two major orchestras, not did it want it. The New York Philharmonic became the sole professional orchestra for New York and has been since. (Crawford, 2001) (Davis, 1981) (Mueller, 1951)

The surge in orchestral music made haste for a new complex of arts institutions to be built in the 1960s. At the urging of John D. Rockefeller III, a new complex of performing arts institutions would be built consolidating the musical institutions of New York into one locale. This complex became known as Lincoln Center. The "Old Met" was torn down in favor of a new Metropolitan Opera House on 65th street. The New York Philharmonic (which had merged with the New York Symphony at that point) left Carnegie Hall to occupy the new Philharmonic Hall (later renamed Avery Fisher Hall). Other institutions included the New York City Ballet and a new building for the Juilliard School of Music. All the buildings were built in the modern architecture style of the 60s specified by the rich patrons who funded the institutions despite the government being the primary backer of the funds for the building of Lincoln Center. These patrons funded music, for the first time, through true endowment, where donated money was given without a stake in the company. In the Old Met, the patrons were literal stockholders in the company and were liable for any debts accumulated after a bad season of opera. With the endowment system, a separate foundation was created to control the money flow into the various institutions and to make sure stipulations on said money would be met. This change made elites, interestingly enough, *less* involved in their ventures in classical music because of their

detachment from them. We will discuss this shift in classes in later. (Crawford, 2001) (Davis, 1981)

### **Elite Aesthetics**

The elite's aesthetics is a complex concept that requires a knowledge of sociological theory to understand *why* elites have the aesthetic policy that they do. Elites control the repertoire of orchestras and opera companies because they control the institutions' money. So due influence by the patrons would be expected. They have controlled the repertoire based on two overarching principles, the concept of "intellectual music" versus the concept of "emotional music" where the former is meant for the few who are educated and can understand the music, and the latter for the masses who are uneducated and can understand the *feelings* behind the music. Unlike one would assume, the rich are not hostile to emotional music; they rather enjoy a good ditty once in a while. But true "intellectual music" is the dominant force in the repertoire and that is influenced very much by their taste and aesthetics.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction*, lays out his theory of taste as follows: the upper class, with more education, prefers intellectual stimulus in music and listens to fascinate the mind; the lower class, with little education, prefers emotional stimulus and listens for aural enjoyment; the middle class *prefers* the emotional aural enjoyment but will embrace the intellectual to keep in competition with the upper class as they are expected to do with the social stratification of America. This leads to a different reason behind aesthetics for each group; they are defined by two types of content directly relating to the overarching concepts for music, emotional content and intellectual content. Emotional content in music is literally, the "spirit" of the music, the ability for music to affect the soul. This coincides with the lower class's aural enjoyment who will ask themselves, "How does this music make me feel?" Conversely,



intellectual content in music is literally the "theory" of music, the ability for music to affect the mind. This coincides with the upper class's intellectual stimulation who will ask themselves, "How does this music make me think?" These two types of content, while diametrically opposed, rarely act alone and often complement each other in a piece of music. But the elites control the repertoire by promoting the intellectual. (Bourdieu, 1984)

In his book *The American Symphony Orchestra*, American sociologist John Mueller makes the case for the elites controlling the repertoire. He indicates that intellectual content is preferred over "aesthetic relaxation" or the emotional content:

It should also be remembered that a large proportion of an audience actually desires a program a little above its heads. To such listeners the symphony concert is more than mere musical delight; it is ritual and ceremony of which all the social trappings and even the intellectual affections are a part. To many patrons, concerts are a fashion in which prestige of participation takes priority over spontaneous aesthetic relaxation. Concerts are often "bought" like hats - more for style than beauty. But it *is*, nevertheless, the taste of that audience. There are various types of listeners in the heterogeneous audience, ranging from the lighthearted to the intellectual and studious extreme to whom every new composition is a puzzle which they delight in solving. It is a semantic question whether this whole range of audition should be included in the concept of aesthetic. But its diversity does go far in explaining the variety of attitudes to the items in the repertoire. (Mueller, 1951)

The two types of content are evident across the entire repertoire in varying degrees to satiate the "heterogeneous audience." Mueller points out that pieces that were both intellectually and emotionally satisfying were the longest surviving compositions in the repertoire. According to Mueller, only two composers have ever reached that status in the orchestra: Beethoven and Brahms. Beethoven's symphonies control over 15% of the repertoire in American Symphony Orchestras today, an enormous feat for any *single* composer. They satisfy the intellectual by being theoretically complex with counterpoint and orchestration but are also very pleasant to listen to regardless of the intellectual content. This is a probable reason why Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most popular piece of classical music in history, because it appeals to an extremely wide audience, the intellectual content for the upper class and the emotional content

for the lower class. In the extremes of the spectrum, we see pieces that are purely emotional and purely intellectual. Strauss' waltzes like "The Blue Danube" or Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" are examples of such extremes, respectively. These pieces are not played as much as Beethoven's symphonies, but are still played more than, say, Sousa's marches. It should be noted though that since the surge of orchestras in the 1920s, Strauss' waltzes have fallen into obscurity as "popular classical" or "light classical" music and are seldom, if ever, played at serious concerts today. On the other hand, Stravinsky's works have been played *more* in recent times. This shows the intensification of elite's control of the repertoire through their aesthetic of preference to intellectual music. (Mueller, 1951) (Davis, 1981)

### **Classism Today**

Today, classism in classical music has taken several interesting turns. The most significant was the changing definition of the term "popular music." The 1930s and 40s saw Jazz overtake marches and waltzes as the "popular music" enjoyed by the masses. With the introduction of Rock and Roll in the 1950s, popular music was even more distanced from classical completely changing venues and instrumentation. Wide adoption of the phonograph and other recorded music made live concerts less necessary for the enjoyment of music in general and greatly influenced *who* could listen to music. Today, even Jazz has fallen into obscurity as Pop and Rock music have dominated the music market for the masses more than any other genre has. With the clever business strategy of appealing to the lower class' emotional aesthetics directly, popular music today is *very* emotionally based and essentially completely devoid of intellectual content. Critics of today's popular music often call it "simple" and "watered-down" and "boring" because there is no intellectual stimulation. The music is very musically simple

made to emphasize the feeling of the music appealing *directly* to the lower and middle classes, their biggest buyers.

Conversely, classical music has taken an equally important turn, albeit far less apparent and drastic. The modernist movement in the 1940s initiated the "purely intellectual" period of classical music where pieces were devoid of any type of emotional connection or connotation. Schoenberg's twelve-tone rows and serialism rejected the tonal systems of music outright removing all connotations to emotions. However, since the end of the modern period, the postmodern period has taken hold of classical music and brought back *some*, but not all emotion. This subtle change from modernism to postmodernism brought the middle class back into the concert hall.<sup>1</sup> Appeal to emotional content *and* intellectual content attracts both the upper class and the middle class, however, the middle class' primary listening preference is still popular music. Indeed though, the middle class enjoys *both* classical and popular music, ironically though, often unknowingly. Film scores, for example, are covertly classical music despite their identifier as "film music." Most middle class people will be able to quote the Star Wars Theme even though it is classical music. This covert classical music is sometimes seen in popular music as well and vice versa. Pieces like Bernstein's "Cool Fugue" from his musical *West Side Story* use Jazz elements in a classical piece while pop songs like Vitamin C's "The Graduation Song" base their whole premise on major classical pieces, in this case Pachelbel's "Canon in D." This mixture is sometimes attributed to the newfound availability of music today.

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<sup>1</sup> In very recent history (late 1990s to the present), there has been a theorized "post-postmodernism" movement in classical music where composers are returning to the fundamentals of the Romantic Period with its high levels of emotional content. The movement is too early in its infancy to establish whether it is a full-fledged movement or just a sub-movement rejecting the ideas of postmodernism. Some assert the recent explosion of middle class concert-goers to this post-postmodern theory though no major sociological studies have been done in this musical realm as of yet.

With the invention of new technologies such as recorded music and the internet, music has been made more available to more people than ever before. People of all classes can gain access to all types of music for less money than in past years. This melding of class lines has helped more people enjoy classical music than in years past. Classical music listeners has risen sharply over the last fifty years with radio and records recording music for people to listen to in their own homes; people of all classes no longer had to pay for live concerts. This has eliminated the financial hindrances for the middle and lower classes to obtain classical music and enjoy it. However, because of the drastic difference of popular music's emotional appeal versus classical music's still predominantly intellectual appeal, popular music sales still greatly outnumber those of classical music with the middle *and* lower classes buying popular music more readily due to their aesthetic appeals.

Finally, economically, classical music has shown the least change. The upper class elites still control classical music and are the major funder of it to this day. Institutions are still funded by endowment by the upper class and have never been higher. For example, New York Philharmonic, in its 2007-2008 season report indicated that out of \$247 million in total assets, over \$194 million was in endowment or 78% of the total income per annum. (Eisner LLP, 2008) The upper class still controls the classical music institutions. Despite this, the middle class is, ironically, the primary market for concert ticket sales. The upper class attendance at concerts has actually *dropped* over the last fifty years. There are no solid theories behind this shift of classes, only speculation.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, interest in classical music in the middle class is higher than ever before seen in America.

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<sup>2</sup> Current speculations include: 1) since the older upper class audiences are baby boomers or even pre-baby boomers, the audience is literally dying out; 2) upper class indifference to classical music; 3) the increased availability of classical music has encouraged more middle class attendance and discouraged upper class attendance; and 4) the rigorous attempts by major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, in increasing incentives for concert

## Conclusion

Classism has a functional purpose in classical music where the upper class *must* control the lower class for it to truly be called "*classical* music." Should this line meld to the point of breaking, then classical music will likely die out simply due to a lack of funding. Classical music, by its nature, is a very expensive endeavor to play and to record. With the rich elites funding the classical music institutions, classical music remains alive. However, once this source of income is removed, classical music would no longer be able to compete with popular music without a radical shift in aesthetics; this shift could either happen in the music itself with a dramatic shift to emotional content over intellectual, or in the audience with a dramatic shift to intellectual content preference over emotional. Since a class's aesthetics are slow to change, it is the music that must be changed. It is the writer's opinion that classical music composers must pay close attention to their audience and adjust their compositional output as necessary to ensure that they will still have an audience. Should this classism cease to exist, the audience will no longer be able to support classical music and the intellectual content will be without an ear to hear it. In summary, classism in classical music will always exist because of and *in spite of* the upper class that controls it. While the class lines may have melded recently, they must not meld to the point of breaking, lest their absence cause classical music to be destroyed altogether.

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going by the education of children and young adults in classical music, lowering of ticket prices, and more programming of "informal" concert settings. The latter attacks the three elite classism methods indicated above and is believed by the writer to be the most influential hypothesis.

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