

## **Berthold Seliger**

### **Who Still Listens to Classical Music, and Why?**

Anna Netrebko sits naked in the bathtub in TV commercials, warbling her arias; a handsome young Chinese man plays Chopin in the atrium of the “Kaufhaus des Westens,” Europe’s largest department store; pianist Hélène Grimaud supplies her albums with titles like “Credo” and in general presents herself as the woman who runs with the wolves; Sony combines Mozart with Cuban music on “Mozart Meets Cuba,” and the second-rate feature writers cheer: “‘Don Giovanni’ and ‘The Magic Flute’ with Afro-Cuban fire” (Welt Kompakt). It seems the classical music scene joined modern event culture long ago. But if one examines the classical scene more closely, one becomes uncertain, no longer sure whether the protagonists of the culture industry are writing a success story or undertaking acts of desperation because their clientele is dying off. Who still listens to classical music today, and why?

Since 1990, the “Kulturbarometer” published by the Centre for Cultural Research (Zentrum für Kulturforschung, ZfKf) has provided up-to-date public opinion snapshots on fundamental or specific themes of cultural education and cultural policies, based on the results of regular, representative and nationwide surveys. The eighth “Kulturbarometer” came out in 2005 and gives some interesting insights into the state of classical music in Germany. Not surprisingly, the ZfKf states that there has been a slight decline in attendance at classical music concerts in the last 10 years, and in particular a drastic drop among youth — meanwhile, the rock/pop genre has made gains in all age groups. Of those surveyed, 86% did not attend the opera or the ballet in the last 12 months, 87% did not attend the symphony, and 89% did not attend any chamber music, piano or lieder concerts. And the numbers look even more dramatic

when grouped by age: 94% of those under 25 did not attend the opera or the symphony in the past year (for 25- to 49-year-olds the numbers are 88% and 90%, respectively). The earliest signs of this decline in attendance among the young and the middle-aged were already becoming apparent in the 1960s: "Whereas, for example, the proportion of those 40 years old and younger who attended at least one opera a year was still 58% in 1965, today it's just 26%" (ZfKf).

However, two other aspects are also of interest, neither one of which paints a particularly flattering picture of Germany's cultural policies or musical education. First: Frequency of attendance at music events is directly correlated with education level. Of respondents with a "low" level of education, 92% had not attended the opera, the ballet or the symphony during the period in question, whereas the proportion was 71% to 69% for the highly educated. Of less-educated respondents, 77% had never been to the opera in their lives, whereas the same was true of "only" 37% of the highly educated. Second: Frequency of attendance at music events is directly correlated with net household income. To continue with the example of opera and ballet (the results are similar for symphony concerts and chamber music): 89% of respondents with net household incomes below 2000 EUR had not been to the opera in the last 12 months, whereas this was true of just 63% of respondents with net household incomes of 4000 EUR and over. And 69% of those from households with net incomes under 2000 EUR had never been to the opera in their lives, whereas the proportion for those from households with net incomes of 4000 EUR and over was just 35%.

Therefore, it is significant that attendance at the opera and at concerts of classical music is class-specific: the lower the education, and the lower the income, the less often this aspect of culture is experienced. The fact that this divide has opened up in the last few decades is evidence of our society's poverty — in the truest sense of the word. However, it is also interesting that the culture of representation has lodged itself in the heads both of the less educated and of those with low incomes — i.e. the

manipulations of the culture industry have worked perfectly: The vast majority of respondents were in favor of funding for cultural institutions in the big cities, and about half of them also stated the opinion that independent art scenes should be supported as well as "high culture." Even those who have no intention of ever attending the opera, for example, still want the opera to exist as a part of bourgeois culture.

It's also worth taking a closer look at the motives of those who do attend classical concerts and operas. For instance, 67% of respondents stated that the effect of art and artists should be "to entertain, to relax, to make one forget one's work and everyday life" (one of the few results, by the way, where responses differed significantly by region; in the new Federal lands, a full 72% of respondents wanted to be "relaxed and entertained" by art). Fifty-eight percent of respondents wanted art to create something "beautiful, aesthetic, pleasing to the ear, an enriching experience." Only 28% required art to "reflect and represent reality and the world of today." Adorno has described this type of music listener as one who hears music as entertainment and nothing more. Accordingly, he says, the entertainment listener's "psychological peculiarity is a weak ego. ... To criticize the offering is as far from him as to make an effort for its sake. He is skeptical only of what takes self-reflection." Today as 50 years ago, it is most likely this type of listener who fills the classical concert halls and opera houses; his consumption of culture serves a sort of class-specific reassurance, and, "as in music, he will probably conform in reality to any rule that does not patently impair his consumer standard."

But the problem for this sort of high culture is a biological one: The classical entertainment listener is dying out. Even increased life expectancy cannot fill the classical temples of culture in the long run. So how does the culture industry react? Quite as if Adorno had been internalized by the managers of the cultural enterprises. "The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses ... are manufactured more or less according to plan," said Adorno in "Culture Industry Reconsidered,"

originally presented as a radio lecture in 1963. “To the detriment of both,” as Adorno farsightedly noted, the culture industry “forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy.” The culture industry that markets classical music avails itself of the tools of popular culture: The new stars of the classical scene are marketed like pop stars; their concerts are held in huge halls and stadiums with pitiful acoustics; their success is measured in terms of quantity, not quality. In this, the classical music industry, as I wish to call it here, takes advantage of a trend that the culture industry has been cultivating in affluent Western societies since the 1980s, namely, “the concept of one’s entire life as an experiential project,” of “obtaining maximum experiential benefit” from one’s leisure time (Peter Kemper). And so, just as Adorno observed that official musical life draws solely on conventional 19th-century forms of musical practice (“Their aim is to administer accumulated treasures”), the British historian Hugh Cunningham concludes that “there is nothing in the leisure of today which was not visible in 1880.” The event culture drawn upon by today’s culture industry is essentially no different than Roman chariot races and gladiatorial combats — except that today’s culture industry is able to make use of international communications, which allow it to manipulate the masses a great deal more effectively. The fact that fewer and fewer people have had an education capable of giving them “a vague idea that great things happen in great music” (Jan Reichow) is exploited by the culture industry in a more or less chaotic fashion: With its marketing strategies, it is constantly driving new pigs through the media village, while all attempts to truly grapple with music, with culture, are made difficult if not impossible. “The by now universal dictatorship of the pop industry lies in its command of the consciousness of those subjected to it” (Heinz-Klaus Metzger). In that sense, and in its present form, the classical music industry may be understood as a part of this “pop industry.”

Yet art is, after all, “an enemy, in the demands it makes, of reality, of actually existing conditions.” (Metzger). So will this essentially depres-

sing situation engender a salvation as well? The place where classical music is performed is still important — more important than ever, in fact. That moment in which everything about a work of art says to one, “you must change your life” (or you must change the world...) can, for a variety of reasons, only occur at the site of a concert, of a live event. Thus it is imperative to create a new set of sites that enable this state to arise. These could be existing sites of the classical music world, which would ideally be reinterpreted, rededicated—but they also can and should be new sites, sites yet to be discovered, sites that must be appropriated by today’s music. While “machine music whips the people into that state of being that prevails from morning to night” (Günther Anders), the point is to find, to devise utopian sites where a contemporary quality of art is possible, where the manipulations of the culture industry are impossible, where issues can truly be dealt with.

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