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VOX HUMANA: The end of music, Part I

All those bearded prophets who have predicted the end of the world have had one thing in common: they have been wrong – dead wrong. The world has not ended. It has somehow survived the tests, the threat of nuclear conflagration, global warming, plague, pandemics, and Tsunamis alike. That may be a good thing for those of us not prepared to head to the mountains after a hairy sage garbed in grubby white robes, but the *things* of the earth are another matter.

Will music end? That is, *our* music. Has it died already? The business people, the economists, the marketers, have been chattering over the demise of the art for a while. Somewhere between Napster and RIAA, someone concluded that the digital age – meaning replication ad nauseam with all the pitfalls of the genetic engineering possible through the shifting a few ones and zeros – combined with the demise of intellectual ownership as we have always known it – “ripping” and “Xeroxing” have de facto impoverished the concept of individual intellectual and creative property just as self publishing and give-away downloads have devastated the critical filters – have seen to it that today’s musical residue is just a big, squashy, blob. Anybody can replicate anything, no matter how unskilled or unaware, in any place, for anybody, from any source, at any price. We can download free scores, free mp3’s, and music of thousands of composers whose names are known mainly from their own Web pages – and we get what we pay for.

But the demise of the structural undergirding isn’t the real question here. Is music *itself* finished? This question has dogged us before. What dared follow European monophonic music in the Middle Ages? Was there any future in the chaotic dawn of polyphony? What came after Wagner? Could chromatic harmony have endured another sharp or flat? Atonality should have ended music. Was there room for another pitch in the dense *klängen* of Stockhausen or Boulez? And after all was finished, what did we do? We moved right back to the sweetness of Romanticism - time for one more sweetly soaring melody. And were that to fail, we had stasis enough from the heirs of Cage, Glass, or Reich.

So, the question is dusty-old and won’t go away. Have we found an answer?

One of the marks of living art is the ability to project it into the future – imagining what will come next. In fact, the quietly chaotic times at the dawn of this century simply beg us to contemplate that. For the first time in a century and a half, there are few clues about what will happen next. In addition to the great destabilization put in our laps by technology, the other musical truisms have been challenged. Symphony orchestras, pipe organs, acoustical pianos, musical notation, musical literacy, historical continuity, music education, music broadcasting, record labels are all elements, concepts, or institutions enduring serious confrontation. And technology is neither the villain nor the sole motivating force. Culture no longer accepts any givens. In our own community, the adversarial pipe organ and digital organ builders have both witnessed some of their biggest customers slip away as mega churches erect new worship centers devoid of *any* organ at

all. If this is an accurate harbinger (and statistically the sample is still small), the organ will be an obsolete device by some indeterminate, but certainly conceivable date.

Each year in Washington, DC, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts honors leaders in music, film, dance, theatre, or literature with a gala event eventually broadcast on network television. Each year, the Kennedy Center Honors list includes classical dancers, actors, and musicians. In 2005, the honored musicians were Tony Bennett and Tina Turner. Not a Yo Yo Ma or Wynton Marsalis in sight.

The musical world grows ever smaller. Theories abound. One pundit prognosticated that classical music was doomed the moment it left commercialism behind and became the domain of public television. We all know where that has led. Other observers have blamed the bankrupt ideas of new composers, the rediscovery of old music, the extraordinary cost of live musicians, orchestras, or opera companies. Some have complained that schools have let us down, that children are distracted, rush into drugs, sex, and rock and roll, that parents have neglected their young and not held the line on culture. More than one sage has commented on the gap between composers and audiences, just as others contend that audiences are no longer challenged. The optimists argue that we need to make classical music fresh and exciting to new audiences (though practically all stop short of suggesting just how we do that). The social commentators decry cultural elitism.

Some critics, like Norman Lebrecht (*Who Killed Classical Music?*) blame it on money. The three tenors, the Irish tenors, the ten tenors and their ilk just milked us dry.

Amid this clamor, has anyone simply stopped to ask the simpler question? Has the art form just fallen into cardiac arrest? Has it been a glorious ride that quietly ended? Something to remember about music is that much of it has been purpose built. Bach never composed cantatas for the abstract love of scriptural themes of the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity. And when composers didn't compose in captivity for the church or the court, they had entrepreneurial managers and publishers to keep them at work. Why? Because entertainment and art were, for the heyday of Classical music, one and the same; amusement and high aesthetic purposes saw no divide.

As tragic as it is, accepting the death of the art does explain so many of the phenomena with which we grapple. It puts the "organist shortage" into perspective. It answers the nagging question of why audiences stay away from organ recitals. It explains the deficits of programming high art in worship.

An elderly colleague disappeared about a year ago. He sold all of his belongings, his house, his car, then took his entire music library, the proof and toolkit of a long career in music, and threw it into a dumpster. He moved to parts unknown in Central America. Word just got back. He died. That's one way of handling it.

Next month: the living legacy.

- Haig Mardirosian