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VOX HUMANA: The end of music, Part II

By now, the phones lines are lit, the e-mails are humming, the mail carrier's pouch grows heavier on its way to 475 Riverside Drive. How dare this journal suggest that the musical art for which it stands, through which its constituents express their talents, by which the same garner a living (in varying degrees) is dead!

Relax, dear friends. Polemical discourse persistently respects not only outlying opinion, but provocative assertion. After all, the death of God, so loudly trumpeted about 40 years ago by scholarly and popular presses alike, only led to countless new variations on Godliness itself. The whole of the Evangelical Right gained power, legitimacy, and prominence since. Rome reasserted its orthodoxy. Humans advanced new gods in consumerism, self-help, spirituality, and easy relativism. All of these reactions have, in turn, flourished, and maybe even sputtered.

So, if we can accept the impudent suggestion that music did die (as hypothesized here last month), we might also accept the premise that we can invent our own "isms" to fill the void, or, at least, take the advice of the perennial funeral preacher. Music can never die as long as it lives in blessed memory. Like good people, good art must have its living legacy.

One part of musical legacy is the very technology that brought about its demise. Memory fades. Digital information cannot. With the digitization of vast amounts of material, physical deterioration should no longer cause us to lose touch with the past. The very transportability of the medium also insures survival in ways that stacks of 78 rpm records in garages could not. Those could break, rot, be lost, disintegrate..

Consider this. One downloads a file of an historic performance of, say, Helmut Walcha playing Bach, from some music site. It's meant for the iPod, but it's downloaded at the office (theoretically a breach of corporate technology policies, but there is a reason that the Monday after Thanksgiving is called "cyber Monday" – you don't really believe that everyone did all that on-line shopping from home after 5 p.m., do you?). That Walcha file sits on the computer for some time until it arrives at its iPod destination. Meanwhile, every night after midnight, the IT people automatically back up the network drives. Now comes World War III, or worse, apathy and passage of time. The artifacts disappear – the master tapes, the LP's, the iPods, the sites from which we downloaded the performances. But, all the while, these unintentional clones (in theory, at least, perfect duplicates of the original) have scattered through cyberspace. Walcha lives in an unintended legacy.

Another key in music-post-music is the cultural backlog. Just as the death of God never signaled the end of churches, nor unusual numbers of theologians in unemployment lines (in fact, it may have been good business for scholars who were suddenly thrust into the public debate), so the death of music as we know it does not categorically leave musicians on the streets or cause the world's stages to go silent. There is a considerable volume of the world's music still sitting awaiting periodic performance by individuals and groups committed to "anachronism," the preservation of old things. Art Deco died, but we

never completely tore it down (and fie on us for having bulldozed that which we did) and considerable numbers of us still marvel at the experience of seeing a film or catching a train in a Deco palace. Put otherwise, Beethoven is just too much a part of the Canon to disappear.

More evidence. We build and buy the artifacts. About 20 million Americans play the piano and the piano industry grosses about \$800 million a year selling pianos, a dollar figure that includes the revenues on 32,000 new grands. Only a fool would suggest that Beethoven sonatas will never again see the light of day. Things are a slight bit different for organs. Professor Robert Ebert of Baldwin-Wallace College, an economist and organist, produces an industry analysis each year for the American Institute of Organ Builders. He's reported a fairly consistent output of about 110 or so organs a year in North America. That's a hundredth of the number of pianos made, but it does signify that, in some places at least, audiences will still have some chance of hearing Bach and Franck and Messiaen for some time to come.

But, the looming advantage of legacy is simple imitation. Ask any music student whose first semester harmony class is founded on the classic imitation of the practice of Bach chorales. We found our new musical expressions on older ones and mastery of older ones. At the risk of seemingly contradicting the basis of this whole discussion – older music is dead, i.e., discontinuous with anything current – some deeper digging is in order. The issue of imitation and foundational basis lives nowhere better than in the Middle Ages in the old order, and Hip Hop in the new. The technique of the Middle Ages easily borrowed older sources for a cantus firmus, in order for composers to lay new lines above. How different is this from the harmony student realizing a bass from a line by Handel or, more dramatically, from the record scratcher laying down a track or two from a preexisting source for someone to bust a lyric or two over?

The whole question, it would seem, is less about the living or dying of music as we know and love it than about who steps in to fill the void and what will emerge as the music of the future. That was the question with which we began last month, and the question that remains. But the question far outflanks its answer. It matters very little if one predominant style, or a constellation of dissimilar styles become the future. What matters is that we consider the question, create the debate, support the young, and lay down the infrastructure.

- Haig Mardirosian