

**Who Needs Classical
Music?
Cultural Choice and
Musical Value**

Julian Johnson

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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FOR BEN AND SAM

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK IS the result of over twenty years spent playing music, writing music, listening to music, thinking about music, talking about music, and reading and writing about music. In that time, my musical experiences and my thoughts about music have been shaped by more significant encounters than I could begin to list. For two decades of rich music-making and vivid intellectual inquiry, I owe many debts of gratitude to my teachers, colleagues, students, family, and friends.

In an effort to keep my text as clear as possible, I have omitted the usual academic practice of referencing other writers by means of footnotes. A bibliography lists works that were helpful to me, directly or indirectly, in writing my own. It is offered as an idiosyncratic set of suggestions for further reading. While my own text avoids direct engagement even with these authors, readers with a knowledge of musical aesthetics will recognize the almost constant presence of Theodor W. Adorno. Although I have deliberately avoided dealing with his writings explicitly, the broad thrust of his ideas is evident throughout, and I acknowledge here my profound intellectual debt to his work.

But my single most important influence here, and the person to whom my final acknowledgment is made, is Simon Johnson—conductor, chorus master, teacher, and my father. At his death in 1993, he left unfinished a manuscript for a book on music he intended to call “The Capacity of Wonder.” I have never seen the manuscript, but the title aptly sums up his life as a musician and as a teacher and goes to the heart of what he bequeathed to those who came into contact with him: a vision of music that develops our capacity to exceed the boundaries of our mundane lives and revivifies our sense of being part of a greater reality. His approach to music informs the core of this book.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS about the value of classical music. More particularly, it is about its apparent devaluation today and the consequences of its current legitimization crisis. But this is merely the starting point for examining classical music's claim to a distinctive value and assessing the relevance that claim retains for our postmodern, plural, and multicultural world. It addresses questions not just about music but about the nature of contemporary culture, because changing perceptions of classical music have less to do with the music itself than with changes in other cultural practices, values, and attitudes. To ask questions about the status of classical music today is inevitably to ask questions about cultural choices more generally. What is the significance of our musical choices? What cultural values do those choices exhibit? Do the cultural values we hold as musical consumers equate with the values with which we align ourselves in other areas, such as education or politics? What is it about classical music that makes it so marginal and about popular music that makes it so central to contemporary society?

But my concern is with classical music, not with popular culture. I have largely avoided the labyrinthine arguments about their competing claims to value because my main point is that while some classical music can and does function as popular culture, its distinctive value lies elsewhere. It makes a claim to a distinctive value because it lends itself to functions that, on the whole, popular music does not, just as popular music lends itself to functions that, on the whole, classical music does not. This different potential of musical types arises not just from how people approach different kinds of music but from the objective differences between musical pieces and musical styles themselves. Central to my argument is the idea that classical music is distinguished by a self-conscious attention to its own musical language. Its claim to function *as art* derives from its peculiar concern with its own materials and their formal patterning, aside from any considerations about its audience or its social use.

In this, my approach differs from studies based in sociology or cultural studies. From these perspectives, music is almost always discussed in terms of its social use and the meanings that are attributed to it in specific social contexts. While this is certainly an important area, it tends to exclude considerations of the music itself. While not ignoring the question of social use, my concern is rather to bring such outward facts of everyday life into tension with a discussion of the music itself. My argument is that musical objects themselves suggest a degree of elaboration and richness of meaning that not only exceeds our habitual use of them but also implies an opposition to the uses to which they are often put.

My use of the term “value” is therefore not neutral. I am not primarily interested in the way value is conferred on music through the local, evaluative practices that are the proper concern of sociology. My question is not why different people find different music valuable, but rather how different musics themselves articulate different values and the extent to which these correlate with or contradict the values we espouse in other areas, both individually and collectively. In other words, I begin with a rejection of the supposed neutrality of music implied by an approach that deals with music only as an empty sign for other things. Such an approach is possible only if one perversely refuses to engage with music on its own terms, as an internally elaborated and highly structured discourse.

A sociological inquiry into when and where a certain music becomes meaningful, and for whom, while valid and important, may tell us little about the music itself. One could imagine a sociological study of drugs proceeding along similar lines. But such a partial study would remain limited in its scope and application if it were not understood in relation to a medical analysis of the drugs in question and to an assessment of their physiological effects. Some might feel that the study would still be incomplete without a discussion of the problems and merits of different drugs and the ethical dimensions of the whole question of drug use. Such expectations do not apply in sociological studies of music use, because clearly one cannot talk objectively about the effects of music in any comparable way. Nevertheless, studies of musical meaning that completely ignore the music itself are clearly inadequate.

My approach here equally rejects the neutrality implied by the marketplace. Contemporary society may indeed be characterized by multiplicity and plurality, but the cultural products and positions that it throws up in bewildering proximity are not interchangeable choices and options, like so many different brands of a single product (music). We attach great importance to the sheer variety of music available to us, yet we lack even the most basic vocabulary for discussing when, how, and why different musics

can offer us genuinely different things. The paradox of music in a commercial context is that, for all the appearance of difference, musics that derive from quite different functions lose their distinctiveness because they are assumed to serve the same function as all the others. Classical music is shaped by different functional expectations than popular music, a fact all but lost today because of the dominance of the functional expectations of popular culture.

To argue that classical music, like art more generally, makes a claim to types of functions and meanings distinct from those of popular culture is to risk the charge of elitism. I address this question at several points, arguing that dominant uses of that term today, far from defending the idea of democracy, undermine the most fundamental aspirations enshrined within it. The charge of elitism should be leveled at those forces in society that hinder the development and opportunity of all of its members. So why is it today so often the sign of entrenchment, a refusal of opportunity, a denial of cultural or intellectual expressions of the aspiration that we might—individually and collectively—realize our greater human potential?

This question is critical because it relates to a central claim of classical music, one that distinguishes it from popular culture. Classical music, like all art, has always been based on a paradoxical claim: that it relates to the immediacy of everyday life but not immediately. That is to say, it takes aspects of our immediate experience and reworks them, reflecting them back in altered form. In this way, it creates for itself a distance from the everyday while preserving a relation to it. Talking about music and art, which has always been a slightly suspect activity, becomes particularly suspect today because in attempting to highlight art's quality of separation from the everyday, it refuses the popular demand that art should be as immediate as everything else. To insist on art's difference, its distance from everyday life, comes dangerously close to an antipopulist position.

Art's critical attitude toward the everyday arouses suspicion not only within popular culture but also within academic theory that deals with popular culture. The influential theory of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, as set out in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), has at its center the idea that cultural practices (from art and sport to food and holidays) function entirely as sign systems for class distinctions and that the idea of intrinsic aesthetic value or meaning is completely bogus. The majority of recent writing on music and society, particularly that which deals principally with popular culture, is written from a similar sociological perspective. Its prime focus is empirical, and its concern is with how music is actually used rather than how it may potentially be used. Its concern with music as a social *practice* rather than as an aesthetic