

What is Art Music? by Orlando Jacinto Garcia

As we enter the next century the music world can seem a bit confusing. Twenty five years ago what was considered the Western Art music canon consisted of music from either Antiquity or the Renaissance through the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and into the 20th century. The music called by many in the general public "classical" music was relatively well defined in so far as the composers and their works. Today, this repertoire is not the only music deemed as relevant. Especially in post-modern times where categories are being redefined, it is easy for many to assert that a tango, a rock tune, and a Beethoven symphony are all the same except perhaps for the musical parameters that define the style. This can have its positive as well as negative ramifications. The positive perhaps being that all types of music are understood as having similar importance, the negative that everything is considered in many ways as being the same.

Given the current post-modern climate how does one define and/or understand different forms of musical expression. Are questions of style merely enough to describe different types of music? In my view there are much more than just stylistic parameters to consider when trying to understand music in the beginning of the 21st century. What are these additional concerns? I believe that there are differences in function and in the type of experiences that different types of music generate that can be generally understood and discussed. Given the limitations of space, the following are general notions not to be considered as all encompassing or complete but instead as some concepts that may help to clarify the situation.

To begin with, popular, ethnic, commercial, etc., music can be generally understood as being functional (i.e., it has relatively obvious and direct social functions) and some of the music from the Western Art music tradition does not (i.e., it exists primarily for its own sake). Historically functional music has generally been created to communicate with a large number of people while non-functional music has been devised to be consumed by a smaller number often somewhat versed in its musical language. Examples of functional music include (1) songs that recount historical, political, and socio/cultural events, (2) music for celebrations and rituals with or without dance and (3) music written with the express purpose of generating large sums of money. The target audience for this music was and still is usually a large

group of people. Although important, these are simplistic notions and distinctions, that need to be and will be clarified shortly.

Much non-functional music has origins as functional music. A good example of this is Western sacred music which had the task of inspiring worshipers to come close to their deity. Later the main purpose for many of the composers of this music became pleasing the royalty commissioning it (some of whom were musicians themselves). Its value at times increased, based upon the composer's ability to create a more abstract and complex experience for the patron and court. In the past, composers of non-functional music often created functional music as well to supplement their earnings. This phenomena is rarely seen in the 20th century. As the system of patronage more or less ended, the more abstract music was left standing as absolute music, generally speaking, with little if any function except to exist for its own sake. Since it was not understood by or written for the masses it was, for the most part, not economically viable. In the 20th century institutions such as governments and universities became the supporters of this work. This music, heard by smaller numbers, was and is often revered for its potential to elicit powerful reaction by audiences; both for and against it. Similar examples can be found in the other arts.

The simple and limited historical explanations of functional and non-functional music presented above are relatively obvious although often ignored by those discussing music in post-modern times. Although to some extent generalized and simplified, I believe that they raise some important notions that can help understand some of the differences between a tango, a rock tune, and a symphony by Stravinsky. At the same time that they are of importance, these notions are not enough by themselves to help categorize and/or fully understand the music that exists today.

In addition to the differences in the historical functions of music, there is perhaps the more important concept of the experiences that different types of music generate. These differences in the responses they elicit, may best be understood by examining works in the other Arts and the responses which they generate. For example, the experience one has when reading a work by Michael Crichton or Mickey Spillane is not the same as the experience one has when reading James Joyce or Borges. One is not better than the other but their works definitely generate different responses. Novels by the first two writers usually include great story telling and can be quite

enjoyable. The books of the latter two are much more abstract and generate a very different intellectual and emotional experience (pleasurable for some and not so for others). Reading books by the latter several times is often necessary to capture all of the details as well as some of the more abstract concepts presented.

A similar analogy can be made when examining visual art. The experience one has while viewing a fairly representational seascape water color painting by Carolyn Blish is not the same as the experience one has when viewing *Guernica* by Picasso. The water color may be pleasing to the eye and may even make an excellent addition to one's living space. The Picasso however could be very troubling given the abstract imagery and surrealistic depiction of horrific events. Repeated viewing is often necessary to understand it and including it in one's living space may or may not be of interest. As in the first example, these experiences are not better or worse; just different.

A similar case can be made for music. The experience of hearing the music of Michael Jackson, Julio Iglesias, Madonna or a tango by Gardel is not the same as the experience of hearing Stravinsky's *Symphony of the Psalms*, Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, or Ginastera's *Cantata para America Magica*. The first group of works may move one to dance, sing along, or converse with a friend at a bar, while the latter generally does not. With the Stravinsky, Berlioz, and Ginastera works, repeated listening may be required to assimilate and react to the music, while this may not be the case with the first examples. Again one group is not better than the other; rather the responses to the works and the experiences one has are very different.

In general, what do these experiences have in common? The latter in each of the examples is probably more abstract than the former (i.e., more removed from concrete experiences of reality and every day life). Does this necessarily make one experience better than the other? Probably not, since although a more abstract experience might seem more substantive to some it can often create much discomfort. A discomforting response could cause the individual to close out the work that is evoking the experience (a common reaction to the unfamiliar). At the same time having the greatest acceptance by mass audiences does not necessarily mean that something is worthwhile. On the contrary, there are many instances

where mass acceptance implies that what is being accepted is very banal and of little worth.

What is the implication of this view? First, style is not the determining factor when defining what Art music is or is not. Rather to some extent the functionality of the music and more importantly the experiences generated by it are. Some would ask what about jazz? My response would be who do you mean late John Coltrane or any Kenny G, and what kind of experience does their music generate for you? The same for some rock and pop musicians? Do you mean Michael Jackson or Brian Eno? What about the functional music that Mozart, Haydn, et al wrote? Are things black and white? Of course not, and there are plenty of issues to continue to discuss. Some genres and works will be difficult to explain but that is what makes talking about music so interesting.

Lastly, a brief word about the label Art music. While some of the more sensitive find that it demeans other music by implying that one is high art while the other is not, it should be noted that the word Art music comes from the word Art song applied to some of the songs in the 19th century as a way of differentiating them from other songs of the time. The term was also used as a way of separating these songs from the notion of the "Art of Music". This does not mean that it is superior to other music, simply that it is coming from the Art song tradition (analogous to the visual art of the time). While I find that the terms serious or classical music are irrelevant when applied to Art music, I do not have a problem with the terminology that grew out of the notion of Art song. This being said, the nature of mass marketing has made the term "classical music" the term of choice for the general public whether they are talking about Bach or Stravinsky.

What I propose in this brief article is not meant as an iron clad test for categorizing music, but rather an attempt to deal with a phenomenon that in my opinion clearly exists. It is also my desire to give musicians some philosophical concepts to consider when discussing different types of music. As young man I had the great fortune to study philosophy. If I learned anything at all while studying this subject it is that while one can never know the truth, one can try and come close to it. This is what I am attempting to do with the notions put forth in this brief article.