

Classical Music in a Changing World

Crisis and Vital Signs

Edited by

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Contents

	Foreword	v
	Alberto Nones <i>AEMC and “G. Puccini” Conservatory of Music of Gallarate</i>	
Chapter 1	The state of classical music: a Turkish detour	1
	Özgecan Karadağlı <i>University of Alberta</i>	
Chapter 2	Local music and the classical music of others: misconceptions and possibilities in Colombian musical education	9
	Francisco Castillo <i>FJdC District University – ASAB Bogotá</i>	
Chapter 3	Waxing and waning: musical depictions of cyclicity and fluidity in <i>Moonlight</i>	21
	Hamish Robb <i>Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand</i>	
Chapter 4	Contemporary music theater and the experience of marginalization	31
	Federica Marsico <i>Ca’ Foscari University of Venezia</i>	
Chapter 5	Relevance and meaning: classical music in the present	39
	Natalie Tsaldarakis <i>City, University of London</i>	

Chapter 6	A call for context: historical explanations for our disappearing classical music culture	53
	Amy Damron Kyle <i>Sorbonne University</i>	
Chapter 7	“The hard problem”: classical music and the history of consciousness	63
	Lawrence Kramer <i>Fordham University</i>	
	A Small Postscript: Musical awakenings	79
	I - Lawrence Kramer II - Alberto Nones	
	Authors and Performers	85
	AEMC Scientific Committee	91
	Notes on the Pieces that Appear in the Enclosed CD	93
	Track list	99
	Index	101

Foreword

Alberto Nones

AEMC and “G. Puccini” Conservatory of Music of Gallarate

This volume is the result of the third AEMC Conference on Music, Communication, and Performance, organized by the Associazione Europea di Musica e Comunicazione (AEMC) and held online—due to the COVID-19 pandemic—on June 27–28, 2020. The conference centered on the question “Is Classical Music Dead? Kramer’s Inquiry Revisited.” The contributions in the book examine this subject from a variety of angles. Each of them presents original research while also encouraging new thinking and debate on classical music today. We take “classical music” here to mean art music (not merely commercial or functional music) produced or rooted in the traditions of Western culture. Some chapters refer to the narrower definition of the crucial span from 1750–1820, while others imply a more general definition that can be applied to music that precedes and follows that period. The general premise is that this music has been, and will continue to be, an active force in history and society.

The pandemic and associated lockdowns have had a massive impact on musical performance, music teaching (especially instrumental and vocal lessons), and many other fields of musical activity. The Metropolitan Opera in New York is just one example of a musical institution announcing drastic measures, with all its activities canceled until the 2021–2022 season. The Teatro alla Scala in Milan, on the contrary, resumed its activity before Italy’s second wave of lockdown measures, opening its doors to audiences of maximum 600 people—well below the hall’s capacity of 2000. At the opening concert (featuring Richard Strauss’s *Vier Letzte Lieder* and *Ein Heldenleben*, broadcast by RaiRadio3 for the Euroradio circuit), on September 29, 2020, conductor Zubin Mehta addressed the Italian institutions and public with these words (in Italian):

Congratulations, not only to La Scala, but to Italy. Everywhere, Italy starts making music again. I have given seven concerts in Florence already in June. Why am I saying this? Because in America, throughout America, music is closed: the Metropolitan has ceased the whole season, the Los Angeles Opera too, likewise the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, all closed. A tragedy, really. I don’t criticize them; they have their reasons. But music is important. I went to the

ballet the day before yesterday [in Milan, in a break between the Maestro's own rehearsals], to feel the enthusiasm of the public. I felt it: the audience shows incredible joy ... It made me very happy (Zubin Mehta, interviewed on September 28, 2020 by Gaia Varon for RaiRadio3, my tr.).

Actually, many artists—especially outside the circuits in which Mehta operates—were, during those same days, lamenting the neglect of artistic performance in Italy, where the first general lockdown had been very strict, and where the revival of activities in all fields was subject to rigorous rules and limitations. In any case, soon after Mehta's declarations, theaters closed again as the State had to try to gain control of a new rise of contagion. My position is that this pandemic has made our priorities explicit, with health and safety set above all the rest, including not only culture and leisure, but even work and economic growth. The challenge, it seems to me, is to strike a balance between the many, extremely delicate issues at stake.

I was giving, at the Conservatory of Music of Gallarate, a course on the history and historiography of music that focused on the philosophy of music, and hence the significance of music, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a course that was proceeding peacefully when, on February 24, 2020, at the news of the first case of coronavirus in Italy, it was abruptly suspended alongside all other activities at Italian schools and universities. Gallarate is near Milan, in Lombardy, at the epicenter of the pandemic in Italy and Europe at that time. I resumed my courses via online teaching soon after, on March 9, one of the first to experiment that modality of teaching in my music institution. Continuing to discuss the relevance of classical music during a dramatic time of great hardship for so many, and seeing the interest and passion for music enduring and even growing in the students, was an experience I will not forget. The commitment of those students is to me the strongest sign of the vitality and importance of music in our lives.¹

When Nietzsche said that without music, life would be an error, he necessarily had live music in mind. There was no real alternative at the time. Our own comfort with sound recording—something that Theodor Adorno, for one, relentlessly criticized—combined with the economics of the music

¹ I wish to mention here my students of that course, and especially two of them: guitarist Nicholas Nebuloni, whom I also invited to present at the online conference a video performance he produced as one of the assignments ("Equinox" by Toru Takemitsu, filmed outdoors at a venue featuring an artistic work by Giò Pomodoro dedicated to the summer solstice); and pianist Andrea Rocchi, who lost his father to COVID-19 on March 29, 2020.

industry, has encouraged us to forget just how essential live music remains to our sense of what music is and of what performance in the flesh contributes to our sense of life. We are urged to rethink what music is in our times, in our lives, and see what experience of music we want to make and offer others. We should reconsider what it means for music as an art form to be vital, be it music of the past or music of the present. And we should reflect on, and act upon, its social function, its importance for human enrichment, its contribution to making us who we are.

If the question of the viability of classical music needed to be asked once again during the pandemic, this book and the conference from which it originated are some of the outcomes. All the contributions that appear here have to do with the questions posed above.² They have been listed in an order that moves from the particular (a social context), to the general (more theoretical), and returns to the particular before the concluding essay. This order reflects a premise: that we are people situated in time and context, who from that context go on to confront ever bigger issues while remaining in a web of social relationships.

Chapter 1 approaches the question of the state of classical music, offering an answer by examining the past 100 years in Turkey. Özgecan Karadağlı first provides a brief history of the function of classical music in the late Ottoman Empire. She then relates it to the early Turkish Republic and its internal and external motivations for adapting Western art music with Turkish folk idioms in the creation of a national music. Using Ahmet Adnan Saygun as example, Karadağlı argues that classical music managed to break down barriers in the past, and arguably continues to do so. The chapter closes by showing how two recent classical concerts in Turkey offer evidence of reciprocal engagements between classical music, people, politics, and power. In Turkey, then, classical music is far from dead.

Chapter 2 explores the extent to which the question of classical music's relevance to society is dependent on the society we are talking about. Francisco Castillo examines the case of Colombia, but also references other countries in his discussion. As in other places, musical activity in Colombia involves a tension between traditional music and Western classical music. Although many musicological positions have tried to ease this tension—Castillo contends—the dominant narrative keeps offering Colombian musicians a binary choice: to either accept European cultural domination, and thereby abandon the connection with one's own national identity, or to reject classical music and contribute to the construction of a national identity. This situation

² I acknowledge content taken from abstracts provided to me by the authors.

has not meant the death of classical music—Castillo continues—but has led music education in Colombia to take a defensive position and portray classical music as a threat to local culture. Castillo’s chapter diagnoses this polarization between “our” music and the music of “others,” and discusses the inaccuracy of the associated dichotomies. The author highlights some of the problems involved in situating classical music as a threat to national values, and proposes new conceptual routes to approach the delicate balance between homogenization under dominant music and extreme relativism.

Chapter 3 also points to a specific place in a specific time, here through the cultural lens of cinema. Hamish Robb analyzes the role of music in Barry Jenkins’s 2016 film *Moonlight*. In the film—Robb maintains—meaning is fostered in large part through composer Nicholas Britell’s original classical music score. The film’s primary motifs, identified by Robb as ocean and moonlight, express what he calls notions of cyclicity and fluidity, which in turn nurture the film’s two main themes: the cycle of intergenerational destiny, and the fluid, slippery nature of vulnerability and identity. Robb shows how the articulation, dramatization, and internalization of these themes rely largely on the qualities and approaches associated with the classical music tradition, and argues that the composer creates interstitial sonic spaces for the types of interpretative possibilities that classical music affords. The chapter has an interesting footnote about the use of popular music in the film score, while asserting in the text that the classical music on the soundtrack plays a larger role. This points to the possibly different kinds of cultural work demanded from the different musical genres, a question to which I will turn again at the end of this introduction. As illustrated by the film that Robb examines, the vitality of classical music comes in part from the kind of work it is equipped to do.

Chapter 4 brings us to music theater. Discussing the relevance of contemporary music theater in the frame of classical music’s role in society, Federica Marsico claims that music can and should (but has often struggled to) broaden the horizons of experience by breaking with comfortable social norms. Marsico’s chapter focuses on Sylvano Bussotti, who stood out for his provocative breaking of sexual taboos and for his explicit representation of homoeroticism and diverse gender identities. Through a review of some of Bussotti’s works, Marsico highlights the subversive power of music theater, arguing that classical music can relate experiences of marginalization and challenge discriminatory prejudices.

Chapter 5 orients the discourse toward a broader response to the conference’s question. Natalie Tsaldarakis begins with two remarks: first, 2020 was Beethoven’s 250th anniversary, widely observed despite most of the scheduled events being canceled; and second, the musicologist Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has asserted through social media that “classical music performance has

nothing to say about current concerns” (“current concerns” remaining in need of a more precise contextualization, of course). Tsaldarakis tackles claims that classical music is insular and irrelevant by also considering two of Lawrence Kramer’s writings that present musical works as a mirror of/for its audiences.

In Chapter 6, we close the circle by returning to the discourse on social context. Amy Damron Kyle discusses how classical music has suffered from contradictions and limitations grounded in gender. Kyle takes this now-familiar observation in new directions. She suggests that looking at the past may offer us historical reasons for our disappearing classical music culture today. Because we owe our definition of what classical music is and isn’t largely to a musical canon formed in the late nineteenth century—Kyle maintains—classical music is not seen today as a living and changing art form. School curricula, instrument method books, music education, and even concert program notes often replicate the male-centered canon developed in a distant past. Yet classical music may itself offer a recognition of the biased philosophy surrounding the musical canon and inspire a quest for a broader context of music’s rich and diverse history. Opening a conversation through the notion of collaboration between known (male) geniuses and barely known (female) ones may indeed be one of the possible ways to revitalize classical music.

The last chapter features an essay by Lawrence Kramer, who most notably set the question of the relevance of classical music a few years ago (Kramer, 2007). In the context of the events that recently pushed classical music—together with most other forms of music—into a corner, Kramer rebounds with a compelling provocation: taken for granted, at this point, that classical music is not the culturally authoritative form of music, but one niche addressed to a certain audience, the question to ask ourselves is not whether classical music rises or falls, but what it is, and thus what we need to affirm if we continue to value it. I leave the discussion of what classical music is in Kramer’s perspective to the reading of his essay. I wish to stress here, however, a critical recommendation: in order to offer people the kind of classical music we imagine they will value, we must not entrench ourselves in a fortress, but open the windows and search for new audiences.

On this final point, a few last thoughts. It is generally agreed in the volume that the music can, or even should, be peeled away from the obsolescent cultural apparatus on which much of it still depends, either unthinkingly or for economic reasons, and that when it ceases to represent the modern-day version of the *ancien régime* its appeal to listeners is revitalized. Its rapprochement with popular culture, which was part of the argument in Kramer (2007) and is reflected here for instance in Robb’s chapter, may be part of that story. One might say that the book indeed highlights music’s capacity to travel outside its usual venues (hence Turkey and Colombia, respectively in

Karadağlı's and Castillo's chapters), and at the same time reveals how classical music culture can be reinvigorated in those venues in order to meet the needs of the present (women composers, LGBTQ composers, respectively in Kyle's and Marsico's chapters), and it shows how that can be done.

I should stress, however, that highlighting classical music's relevance in/to popular culture is not the only way forward. With some of the musical festivals I have directed, I too have experimented with placing classical music in settings other than concert halls—such as at dawns and sunsets in the mountains and riverbanks—trying (and often succeeding) to engage new audiences more accustomed to pop concerts, also thanks to programs that included crowd favorites or compositions endowed with popular resonances. But I've always also noted that something special happens when classical music is performed in traditional concert halls, supported by the kinds of rites that belong to them: the concentration, the silent waiting, the composure, the demands on the listener in terms of length, and complexity of the pieces performed—all of which still make classical music special. Classical music can be proud of its difference, in this sense. And this is a remark that most of us, and certainly the author of the last essay, may agree with.

The book is accompanied by a CD of some of the music presented and discussed at the conference,³ with short notes on each of the tracks. Some of this music too may be seen as presenting instances of the possible interplay with “pop culture” introduced above. On the one end of the spectrum, we have pieces like Kopecký's *Ritorni*, which testifies, to me at least, the typical pride of a contemporary classical music that stubbornly goes its own way, without appealing to the taste of a general public formed elsewhere. And I can acknowledge that this piece, performed live by the same Trio Aperto in a concert hall within one of the festivals I direct (it was the last concert I organized in Porto Recanati, Italy, in February 2020, before the lockdown), impressed the audience in its own right—maybe also because it was balanced within a program including eighteenth-century compositions, which is of course another tried-and-true approach to programming. Included in the CD is also the world premiere of the latest string quartet by Lawrence Kramer himself, a piece that reminds me of a somewhat similar alliance between classical forms, modern languages, and freedom of imagination that is at play

³ The audio (and video) recording of Lawrence Kramer's quartet by Eurasia Quartet, produced at the Kerani Music Studio in the Netherlands in June 2020, has been fully sponsored by the AEMC from an idea of mine as part of the first prize awarded to the quartet at the second AEMC International Chamber Music Competition. The other recordings, with the exception of Animo's, are home recordings / live performances primarily intended for presentation at the conference.

in Schoenberg's Fourth Quartet Op. 37 (a work put in dialog by Schoenberg, in turn, with Beethoven's Op. 132).⁴ Another piece I wish to highlight is Lukas Piel's "The Journey of Alan Kurdi," which likewise received its online premiere at the third AEMC conference. This may arguably be seen as an example of contemporary classical music that somehow winks to pop music (and film music). But it is a most positive example of such an interplay, still presenting structure, demands on the performers, and artistic unity, as well as a profound involvement with history and society. Indeed, the composition, as the title suggests, evokes the picture of the body of a 3-year-old Syrian boy on a shore, which raised a wave of emotion throughout the world in 2015, before the sea returned to stillness. Is classical music dead? My impression is that it is not. Despite 2020.⁵

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⁴ This dialog between Schoenberg and Beethoven, recalled by Enzo Restagno (2014: 276), was shown in 1937 at the Royce Hall of the University of Los Angeles, where the composer programmed his four Quartets within a four-day concert in which they were performed, respectively, next to Beethoven's Op. 127, Op. 130-133, Op. 131, and Op. 132, thereby aiming to show a continuity. Interestingly, Restagno notes how an "art of memory" (2014: 278) features in the utilization of the material in Schönberg's Fourth Quartet, which is something that echoes in both Kramer's Quartet (starting from the very subtitle, *Reflections and Memories*), and in the argument that Kramer makes about the centrality of memory in classical music in Chapter 7, through his example of Schubert's Op. 100.

⁵ A big thanks to my friend Alessandro Stella, who helped me compile the audio files that appear in the attached CD; Hamish Robb, who proofread the text and assisted me in other steps of the editorial process; and Larry Kramer, who first accepted my invitation to give the keynote at the third AEMC conference, and then embraced my proposal to co-edit this work with me, contributing a great deal to the coming into existence of this book as it is. Thanks also to Ellisa Anslow and Argiris Legatos of Vernon Press for their continued support, and to Gabrielle Curran for creating the Index and a consistent text, in terms of punctuation and formatting, from a diversity of contributors.

PAGES MISSING
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Index

A

- Adam, Adolphe, 60
Adorno, Theodor W., vi, 72
AEMC Conference on Music,
 Communication and
 Performance, v, xi, 63, 93
Agamben, Giorgio, 67, 76
Agawu, Kofi, 12, 18
Amidei, Romano, 33
Andalusian folk music, 94–95
Associazione Europea di Musica e
 Comunicazione (AEMC), v, x–xi,
 63, 86–88, 91, 93
Atakoğlu, Fahir, 6
Atatürk, Mustafa Kemal, 3, 6–7
Augustine, St., 70–71, 76
autobiography (in music theater),
 34
authenticity, and performance,
 40–41, 43

B

- Bach, J. S., 15, 24, 40, 47, 49–50, 80
Baroque, 15, 47, 85, 87, 94
Bartók, Béla, 4, 8
Beethoven, Ludwig van, viii, xi, 2,
 14–15, 24, 39–40, 45–46, 49–51,
 54, 57, 60, 62, 68–69, 71, 72, 74–
 75, 80–81
Berberian, Cathy, 32
Berio, Luciano, 33, 37
Berlioz, Hector, 54, 57, 59
Beusen, Paul, 32
Bohlman, Philip, 15, 18
Born, Georgina, 12, 18
Brahms, Johannes, 13, 44, 49, 54

- Braibanti, Aldo, 34, 36
Britell, Nicholas, viii, 21, 24, 27–28
Bullock, Julia, 79–81
Bussotti Opera Ballet, 34
Bussotti, Sylvano, viii, 31–38
Butler, Judith, 70, 77

C

- Cage, John, 32
Castil (Castil-Blaze), Francois
 Henri Joseph, 57
Chalmers, David, 68, 70, 77
Chaminade, Cecile, 57
Chopin, Frédéric, 65, 80, 82, 87
“chopped and screwed”, 26–28
Colombia, vii–ix, 9–19
colonialism, 9–10, 12–13, 16
competitions, musical, x, 42, 47–
 48, 86, 88, 96
Concord Mass., 1840–1860 Sonata
 no. 2, 47
Conrad, Sebastian, 17–18
Conservatory of Music of
 Gallarate, v–vi, 91
Constantinople, 2, 7
Cook, Nicholas, 17–18, 40–42, 50
COVID-19, v–vi, 5, 40, 82
cultural context, 13, 32

D

- d’Ortigue, Joseph, 57
Debussy, Claude, 96, 99
de Goncourt, Jules and Edmond,
 58
de Staël, Germaine, 58
Deleuze, Gilles, 66, 77

Desiring Progress (blog), 51
 dichotomies, viii, 2, 4, 9–10, 13–15
 Diderot, Denis, 58, 62
 District University in Bogotá, 9–10, 85
 Donizetti, Giuseppe, 2, 7, 83

E

Eastern Roman Empire, 2
 Eastern Orthodox Church, 2
 education, viii–ix, 3, 9–19, 43, 53, 56, 61, 76, 85–86
 elitism, and classical music, 6, 76
 Emre, Yunus, 4, 8, 86
 Enlightenment, European, 8, 70, 75
 Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip, 6
Erlkönig (Schubert), 44
 ethnicity, 4
 Eurocentrism, 17
 Euroradio, v

F

Fabian, Dorottya, 40
 Faulks, Sebastian, 68, 70, 77
 Fleuret, Maurice, 32
folklore imaginaire, 95
 French Revolution; effects on women's rights, 58
 Franco, Efraim, 16, 18

G

gatekeepers, musical, 47
 Geertz, Clifford, 11, 18
 Genet, Jean, 34
 George of Trebizond, 2
 Glasgow, Ellen, 80–81, 84
 Gloag, Kenneth, 12, 18
 Gluck, Christoph Willibald, 59, 62

Gluck: *Orphée*, 59
 Gökalp, Ziya, 3
 Guattari, Félix, 66, 77
 Graham, Lindsey, 6

H

Hagia Sophia, 7
 Halbreich, Harry, 32
 Hanslick, Eduard, 13
 Harari, Yuval Noah, 17–18
 Hekman, Susan, 82, 84
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 71, 74–76
 Herder, Johann Gottfried, 67
 historically informed performance, 40
 Hobsbawm, Eric, 13, 18
 Homer, 95, 99
 homosexuality, 29, 31, 33–37
 Howard, Keith homophobia, 17–18

I

Illari, Bernardo, 17–18
 identity, vii–viii, 2–4, 9–17, 21, 23–24, 28, 35, 82, 84, 86, 95
 imagetext, 67–68
 imagined community, 2, 7

J

Janissaries, 3
 Jenkins, Barry, viii, 21, 29
 Jidenna, 28

K

Kavakos, Leonidas, 39, 49–50
 Kivy, Peter, 43, 50
 Kopatchinskaja, Patricia, 48
 Kopecký, Pavel, 88, 96

Kramer, Lawrence, v, ix–xi, 5, 8, 12, 18, 21, 28–29, 39–40, 44–45, 48, 50, 63–77, 79–81, 86–87, 91, 94, 99
 Kurdi, Alan (Aylan Shenu), xi, 93, 99

L

Lacan, Jacques, symbolic order, 74
 Leclère, Arthur Justin Léon, 79
 Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel, viii, 39–51
 Lewis, Barbara, 29
 Liszt, Franz, 44–45, 54, 60, 62
 Lowinsky, Edward, 57, 62

M

Ma, YoYo, 5
 Maderna, Bruno, 33
 Mahler, Gustav, 65
 Mallarmé, Stéphane, 33, 37
 Maurras, Charles, 58
 Mazzini, Giuseppe, 82–84
 Mehmet the Conqueror, 2
 Mehta, Zubin, v–vi, xi
 Metropolitan Opera House, v
 Miñana, Carlos, 13, 18
 Monti, Vincenzo, 33
Moonlight (2016), viii, 21–29
 Moreux, Serge, 95
 Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 15, 23–24, 54, 60, 69, 72, 77
 Murtomäki, Veijo, 16, 18

N

Nancy, Jean-Luc, 65, 77
 nationalism, 1–3, 7–8, 14–17, 86
 nation-state, 2–3
 Nono, Luigi, 33

nostalgia, 2, 6, 29, 64
 Novákovo Trio, 97

O

Onay, Gülsin, 5
 oratory, and Beethoven, 45, 50
Orphée (Christoph Willibald Gluck), 59
 otherness, 2, 4, 9, 70

P

Pamuk, Orhan, 2–3, 8
 Pace, Ian, 43, 48, 51, 89
 Piel, Lukas, xi, 93, 99
 postmodernism, 8, 12, 17–18, 43
 Poulet, Gaston, 96

Q

Quaglia, Rocco, 34

R

Rancière, Jacques, 66, 77
 Restall, Matthew, 11, 19
 Roca, Maria Elvira, 11, 19
 RaiRadio3, v–vi, xi
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 57, 62, 68

S

Sand, George, 55, 58
 Say, Fazıl, 6
 Saygun, Ahmet Adnan, vii, 1, 4–5, 8, 86
 Schippers, Huib, 13, 19
 Schoenberg, Arnold, xi, 83–84
 Schopenhauer, Arthur, 13
 Schubert, Franz, xi, 44, 51, 73–74
 Schumann, Clara, 51, 60

Shenu, Aylan (Alan Kurdi), xi, 93,
99
Shepherd, John, 13, 19
Spataro, Giovanni, 57
Strauss, Richard, v
Subotnik, Rose Rosengard, 4, 8,
44–45, 51

T

Taruskin, Richard, 40, 42
Teatro alla Scala, v
Turkey, modern, vii, ix, 1–8, 86;
Ottoman, vii, 1–8, 86
Turkish Five, The, 4
Tokumaru, Yosihiko, 16, 19
transculturation, 2–3
Tudor, David, 32
Turkish music, 1–8
Turina, Joaquín, 94–95, 99
Twain, Mark, 1

V

Varon, Gaia, vi, xi
Viardot-Garcia, Pauline, 54, 58–62,
87
Volksgeist, 73
Volland, Sophie, 58

W

Westernization, 3, 17
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 64
Work, musical, as mirror, ix, 40–51