

On the history of music education (continued)

[continued]

So what is so bad about letting music education be based around the Romantic ideals of spectacle and performance? Surely the fee-paying public have a right to be satisfied?

The problem is that it is easy to define what a spectacular performance is. The same problem applies to the modern ideal of novelty in music. It is really easy to judge a piece of music and say: This piece of music breaks new ground, therefore it is good.

Why is this a problem?

The simple reason is that nature tends to rebel against systems with no inherent limiting factor. If making music more spectacular is making it better, then Messiaen's Turangalila Symphony...

<http://youtu.be/4reSBqOhSGY>

...must be better than von Bingen's Chant...

<http://youtu.be/wGPZWUNwLG0>

...(I must stress at this point that I am in no way making value judgement here, what I am pointing out is the absurdity of attempting to make value judgement based on the raw scope or spectacle of a musical performance).

The same sort of comparison can be made for the prowess of the performer. Does it make sense to say that Yuja Wang...

http://youtu.be/8alxBofd_eQ

...is a better pianist than Rosalyn Turek?

http://youtu.be/YDMJZ2s_drA

Clearly that would be a mad conclusion to draw.

Again, we can ask if the music of Brian Ferneyhough...

<http://youtu.be/Y71cx8Vj15Q>

...is to be considered superior to that of Arvo Pärt...

http://youtu.be/B8qg_0P9L6c

...because it is more complex and innovative?

There are two problems here: Firstly our "simple criteria" for evaluating music has turned out to be quite useless for describing what we find to be "good" in music. Secondly, even if that were that were not the case, it turns out to be extremely easy to run into limits for such simple criteria. As Jarred Diamond pointed out in his book "Collapse", the Easter Island civilisation didn't die out because they were no longer capable of building large stone statues, but **because** they were building large stone statues to stave off catastrophe (presumably instead of doing something worthwhile instead).

Is it really possible (or feasible) to have much more monumental music than the Turangalila? To push the human capacity for speed that much faster than Wang? To make music more intricate than Ferneyhough's? Is music a sport? Or is it an art?

So when the music exam system rewards and awards those who can play more intricate music, faster and with greater dynamic flourish we have to ask ourselves: What has any of this got to do with training our youth to play music?

The problem isn't testing people's ability to play fast or complicated music. The problem is with equating that with a test of musical ability. I would have no objection to calling such exams "technical exams", but calling them "music exams" puts it in the minds of the examiner and candidates alike that there is some universally accepted standard for what "good" is in music, and by extension that the examiner knows what that entails.

I am not arguing for a relativistic approach either, I believe that there is an absolute objective aesthetic reality. But I don't believe that we as the human race knows, or can hope to know conclusively, just what that reality is. I also believe that all exams (not just music exams) must take this truth into account.

We must either test for "goodness" in music, properly defined instead using some arbitrary proxy, or we must test for technical proficiency. Mixing the two is a recipe for irrelevance of the classical exam structure in broader culture.