

Why teens don't listen to classical music

I wrote this essay for school earlier this year. I had to take (drum roll) Basic Writing at my local community college in order to get my teaching certificate (yes—I also see the irony).

Anyway, here it is. Do I actually believe all this? It's certainly debatable—after all, I was a teen who loved classical music, and many of my students are the exact same way. See what you think:

Why teens don't listen to classical music

When you see a teenager walking down the street, white earbuds firmly implanted, swaying slightly to their own inner groove, you can be pretty much certain that it's not classical music they're listening to. Teenagers I know can enthusiastically rattle off the name of a dozen bands on their current favorite playlist, but ask them if they know who Brahms was and a funny kind of glazed look comes over their eyes. Even my music students, who I'd hope would know better, are astonishingly unknowledgeable about classical music, and if they don't even know the names of these composer, you'd better believe that they don't have an recordings by them.

The numbers for classical music consumption in general are, by any standard, frighteningly low. Only 3% of recordings sold in 2008 were classical, with the average classical music recording selling only 300 copies. And you'll be disappointed if you think that this low figure is made up for in concert attendance—only 3% of concert tickets sold in 2008 were for classical music concerts, the same depressingly low figure as CD sales.

Who's to blame for this incredibly low number? Though schools, television, and video games can all be blamed for the lack of popularity for classical music among teenagers, it really boils down to one reason: it's just plain boring to them.

Now, I know that this doesn't apply to all teens. I have plenty of students that listen to classical music all the time, which is very cool. But they're in the minority! Also, I'm not exactly classical music connoisseur #1 myself—I typically listen for research purposes, while I'm working, or once in a great while for fun. The vast majority of the time I'm listening to bad 80s music (let the tomato throwing begin) or P-Funk-era stuff. I actually listen to music from a vast array of styles—rock, bluegrass, classical, jazz, early music, and more—but my total classical music consumption is probably pretty close to that 3% figure, excluding the listening I do for professional reasons.

Reasons Why Teens Don't Like Classical Music

First of all, the pace and rhythm of classical music, with its many stops and starts, tempo, dynamic and mood changes, and lengthy moments is the exact opposite of what the turbocharged teenage psyche craves. After all, kids talk fast, play fast, and think fast. They also want their music fast. They also have attention spans of about three minutes (if they're lucky!), far too short for a four-movement sonata but perfect for that new pop tune. Pop tunes are also structurally much simpler, kind of like an aural billboard, and quite a contrast to the multi-faceted complexity of classical music. A symphony is something that makes a person want to curl up with next to the fire and, like a good novel, sit and savor. How many teens do you know that like to sit still for an hour and bask in the sublime subtlety of anything, let alone music? I don't know many.

The subject matter of pop music also holds much more appeal to the typical teen than does a wordless, 45 minute symphony by Gustav Mahler. Classical music is incredibly

powerful but not exactly about issues that are immediately relevant to a typical teen. To them, listening to that Mahler symphony is about as exciting as reading the Constitution. Interesting? I suppose. Information-packed? You bet. Exciting? Not on your life.

Finally, the way that teenagers consume music today is vastly different from what generations in the past did. In the nineteenth century, families would gather in the parlor and sing songs together, and the ability to play piano was a treasured thing for a family member to have. The only other opportunity to hear music was an infrequent journey to a concert hall, where one would be dazzled by the novelty of actually hearing many humans making music in tandem. Fast forward many generations and many technological innovations (the record player, radio, electrified instruments, CDs, the Internet) to the present, and music flows across broadband networks with lightening speed, the entire sum recorded music of humanity available just 99 cents and a click away. Also, the musical fabric of a teen's daily life is not exactly symphonic. How many movies, television shows, and video games prominently feature classical music these days? Not many. There is wide speculation as to why or even if there is a downturn in classical music consumption.

According to Douglas Dempster of the Symphony Orchestra Institute, classical music audiences have actually increased in recent years. This may, in fact, be true, but I'll hazard a guess that not many of those new audience members are teenagers. I play concerts for all sorts of classical music ensembles, and no matter how "hip" or edgy" they are in their marketing, I see almost nothing but gray hair when I look out in the crowd. These gray-haired classical music lovers seem to continue to love classical music (there is evidence, according to Dempster, that people are more attracted to classical music in middle age than in their youth), but if you're a teen and your mom and dad love something, chances are good that you'll, if not outright hate it, at least think it's pretty lame.

Some blame the schools for this lack of interest in classical music among teenagers. Writing for *The Guardian*, Tom Service points out that school music programs service significantly fewer children than they did a generation ago, and that schools are ill-equipped in terms of actual instruments and well-qualified teachers to teach them.

Respectfully, I must disagree. The schools I teach in around metropolitan Chicago have first-class facilities packed to capacity with students eager to play classical music in their school band, orchestra, or chorus. They arrive before school to practice. They stay after school to rehearse. They spend their weekends on field trips or traveling to competitions. They love it... but they don't listen to it for fun! The two activities—playing and listening—have become separated, as has the cultural context of what they play in school (old) and what they listen to for fun (new).

There is little discussion of teenage classical music consumption among those looking at trends in classical music, however, and for good reason: listening rates for teens are practically nil. Even my own music students, who practice for hours a day and spend even more hours in music rehearsals, admit (somewhat sheepishly) that they almost never listen to a classical recording unless it's for research purposes like learning a new piece or comparing different interpretations. When they want to relax, it's always pop music. Always.

Author: Jason (blog)

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