

I KNOW WHAT I LIKE — OPINION OR FACT

Various contributors

In the wonderful world of classical music, people have both opinions and strong views; some become irritated when their views are challenged with facts. They retort, “I know what I like and that is all that matters”.

This is a shallow response lacking in both depth and intellect. It is also irrational and not born of sound judgment; it reveals prejudice and a disregard of fact, as well as expressing opinions which are neither sensible nor intelligent – and this is in the wonderful world of classical music!

I know some who state that ‘one man’s truth is another man’s untruth’ and ‘one man’s fact is not another man’s fact’; that is ridiculous – a truth is a truth. Mozart was born in 1756; that is a fact.

Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 4 is very well written for the piano (and the orchestra); that is a fact which anyone who reads music and understands the piano and fine orchestration will confirm. However, if someone does not like this piece, that is an opinion, not a fact and bears no relation either to the value of the piece or the composer’s skill in writing for the piano or the orchestra.

However, the attitude is sometimes adopted with some music “I do not like the piece and, therefore, it is not good music”.

That is shallow, irrational, prejudiced and, frankly, stupid. Some people do not like to have their opinions superseded by facts.

An editor of a classical music website belittles Liszt as a rubbish composer who did not understand the piano and could not write for the instrument. In presenting his case as fact, he is dreadfully wrong and displays irrationality, prejudice and stupidity. If he does not like Liszt, he only has to say so (if he has to say anything) rather than making fictitious and inane excuses or any other like remarks. How can this man be the editor of a classical music site?

If I had composed the Liszt Sonata, I would be content. That it is a great work is born of facts as can be testified by anyone who understands piano writing as well as the skill, form and logic of this piece; it may (or may not!) have bored Brahms but it thrilled and humbled Wagner (who was not easily humbled!).

All objections to facts point to poor judgment and are perverse aberrations and distortions; “I know what I like and that is all that matters” is a trite, stale, hackneyed and totally absurd statement; it may say something of those who trot it out but what one person claims to “like” does not have to “matter” to anyone else.

Take a concert described as a collection of “the very best in classical music. We have Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart...so far, so good, but then there is included in this concert a waltz by Johann Strauss II and a piece by Piazzolla. How can they be included in a concert of the best of classical music? It is an affront to Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart. Johann Strauss II and Piazzolla cannot possibly compare with these musical greats. Strauss II and Piazzolla composed shallow music lacking depth and intellect; it is weak and poor and certainly not the best in classical music! Their work could suit a concert consisting of light music. Piazzolla has his place but it is not in the realm of great

classical music. Johann Strauss II was admired by great composers from Bruckner to Berg and his works conducted by many excellent conductors but that is no evidence that it is great music.

Someone wrote that George Gershwin wrote the best classical piano concerto. It is not classical; it is not really a concerto and the orchestration is often exceptionally vulgar. That is the factual and the consensus of the many pianists who refuse to play it. I remember Shura Cheraassky playing it and Vernon Handley having to conduct this 'load of rubbish'. Conductors are paid to conduct all sorts of things including rubbish!

We are not in any way advocating the banning of these lesser composers; not at all. Nor are we passing judgment upon anyone who enjoys this music. What we are asking people to consider, realise and accept is that there is great music and there is also music of a poor quality even though it may be popular. Some of the so-called great composers composed some faulty and very poor music. Sviatoslav Richter spoke of a Piano Sonata in D by Schubert which has seven minutes of non-stop broken chords and arpeggio figures which are tedious, lazy and uninspired writing. In fact, a lot of Schubert's music is tedious and saturated with repetitions which are wearisome and it is true to say that all his stage works were flops; even today, they are seldom heard.

Does this make Schubert a great composer? As Stravinsky said, "To be thought greatly of does not make a composer great!".

The eminent conductor Sir Adrian Boult and many others spoke of the many faults about Schubert's music and how poor and amateur it often is, including its tedious and excessive repeats. Boult demonstrated this with many music examples in print and also aurally; what he said and demonstrated made complete sense because it was true and entirely factual.

Another problem in some classical music is when a composer gets 'into a rut', by which we mean that all or most of his work tends to sound 'the same'. Some composers write music that is 'all show and no substance'. Chopin falls into this category with many irritating features including his predilection for the top of the piano and pointless cascades and decorations. It will be of little importance to most people but his musical grammar is shockingly bad.

Take the Polonaise-Fantasy Op. 61 as published by Wessel and Company. The first bars are in 3/4 time. Yet the first bar is 26/4 plus a minim rest with a fermata making it 28/4. Subsequent bars are the same. I accept that most of the notes have smaller heads as if it may be a cadenza but he should have written *senza tempo* here. Take the Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31. The middle section calls for a slower tempo which pianists adopt, but Chopin does not put this in the score. In another work, which he sets out in flats, he has sections where he does not alter the key signature but almost every other note is a sharp. His writing for the orchestra is feeble; orchestras at first performances, such as that of the Krakowiak Op. 14, had to correct a legion of mistakes.

The majority of Chopin's piano music is salon music, music usually for a small drawing room for wealthy patrons; it is usually short and, to some extent, showy. Chopin wrote many waltzes, nocturnes, mazurkas and polonaises that fall into this category; some regard it as inconsequential music of no real significance. Chaminade is another such example.

Those who admire Chopin will object to this, but all that is written here is factual and therefore true.

It has been truly said 'Why have second best when you can have the best?'

We accept that Liszt wrote some 'showy' music but it usually had depth and purpose. Some composers wrote piano music which is almost exclusively showy, but is it great music? Some have transformed Strauss waltzes into virtuoso works for piano, but is this for musical purposes or just cleverness?

For reasons that I do not understand, Elgar is venerated in the UK and Barbirolli claimed that he was the greatest composer of all time and that everything he wrote was perfection. But his music is seriously flawed.

Take, for example, his metronome marks. In the Violin Concerto, the opening movement is marked allegro, crotchet = 100. That is not an allegro. The standard allegro begins at crotchet equals 120 - 132. Listen to an allegro in a Haydn symphony to discover what a true allegro is.

Elgar's orchestration is often rightly described as thick and turgid. Take figure 3 in the opening movement of the Symphony No. 1 where all the instruments are playing. What is the chance of the oboes and bassoons being heard? I realise that many other composers have this weakness but Elgar does this a lot of the time. If, for example, I was an oboist I would not play in these tuttis as it would serve no purpose.

It is often said that much of Elgar's music is dull, tedious and inactive and his metronome markings make this clear. The standard metronome markings are Largo, crotchet/dotted crotchet = 48, Andante, crotchet/dotted crotchet = c.72 - 100, Allegretto, crotchet/dotted crotchet equals 100 - 119, Allegro starts at crotchet/dotted crotchet = 120 - 132 and Presto, crotchet/dotted crotchet = c.154,

Take Elgar's Symphony No. 2 which starts at Allegro vivace and nobilmente, crotchet = 100, as later stated in the score; that is an Andante or Moderato. Under this general tempi we have Impetuoso, crotchet = 104.

The third movement is marked presto, dotted crotchet = 108 whereas presto starts at dotted crotchet = 154. Elgar's presto is a mere Allegretto. The finale is marked Moderato and nobilmente, crotchet equals 72 and that is a slow andante. It is not moderato.

The Dream of Gerontius opens Andante, crotchet = 48. That is not an andante but a largo. It proceeds to allegretto, dotted crotchet = 76. That is an andante.

Some famous conductors have said that Elgar could not write an allegro!

Only an ignoramus would disagree that Elgar's music is pompous. He knew this and so invented the word nobilmente for music that is pompous and ostentatious with a display of self-importance and personal pride. It is also pretentious, meaning that it is an attempt to impress, being assumptions of self-importance that are undeserved and of personal pride that have no merit in fact. He is on record as saying that the day will come when any letter from any source addressed 'Elgar, England' would reach him without any problems.

Pride is a dangerous thing and can wreck lives and reputations. It is shaking a fist in someone else's face. It may also carry with it the odious problem of class distinction.

I once asked Malcolm Arnold what he considered was his best work. He replied that he had not written it yet and never would. Edmund Rubbra said the same.

When I commented on some splendid passage in a work of Liszt, Humphrey Searle would go to the piano and demonstrate some magnificent moment in Bach, Beethoven or some other great.

It is sometimes difficult to separate the man and his life style from his music. Elgar was a very nasty person who, for example, insisted that every female in the choir or orchestra performing his music wore navy blue knickers. He was hateful to many composers and insulted Hindemith without mercy. He was a predator around young women and all of this is evidenced in scholarly books written about him and eye-witness accounts. Holst said that Elgar's music was the most effective cure for constipation. Vaughan Williams said that Elgar's music was akin to receiving an important letter but the handwriting was so awful that you could not read it; Boult said, "if Elgar's music is played badly, you blame the orchestra; if it is played well, you blame Elgar." One of the world's greatest cellists played the Elgar Cello Concerto and his performance was condemned as it was not pompous or Elgarian!

The BBC gave 220 performances of Elgar in the year 2014 and explained that this was a legitimate editorial decision, so the absence of broadcasts of Hamilton, ApIvor, Fricker and very many other British composers were also legitimate editorial decisions by the BBC. We call this prejudice!

I have read a list of the greatest masterpieces in classical music which include the Blue Danube Waltz, Elgar's Dream of Gerontius and Paderewski's Minuet in G!!!

In the world of music, other than classical music, there is often a nauseating promotion of some artistes. Sunday Night at the Palladium advertised Olly Murs as the singing sensation. Who is Olly Murs? How is he sensational? Elton John was described as a brilliant pianist. Really? A brilliant pianist is someone who could, for example, play Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto. Jimi Hendrix was said to be the world's greatest guitarist. Greater than Segovia?

We have a singing talent competition on the television called the X Factor and, often, one of the judges called Simon Cowell comments on singers who are incredibly good, excellent singers but these singers shout, bawl, speak, screech, have awful intonation and cannot sing in tune. He is also rude about others recently called one girl an asshole.

He does not know what singing is!

A serious composer, Wilfrid Mellers, said that the Beatles were as good as Bach!

Of course, people will say that these people have or had a different style of music and cannot be compared with the greats in classical music and it is unfair to attempt to do so. This point is taken and accepted. But if Elton John is a great pianist, what was Horowitz? If the works of Johann Strauss II, Gershwin and Piazzolla are great music, what is Beethoven?

We realise only too well that articles on this site often speak about the composers mentioned in this essay, and we are sorry if it annoys anyone, but the information is correct and therefore not biased.

We accept, of course, that everyone is entitled to like or dislike any composer's work, but it is wrong to say that a composer is great when serious flaws exist in his work. It is also wrong to say that a composer you like and admire is great just because of your opinion. For the record, Dr. Wright is fond of some music which is certainly far from being great music but he does not call it great music.

We come back to the opening question. Is the expression, "I know what I like and that is all that matters" a valid and justifiable comment? If these comments extol Johann Strauss on a par with Rachmaninoff, Bach or Beethoven, is this fair?

Of course, personal taste does apply and that is everybody's right, but to even suggest or imply that personal views eliminate both facts and the truth is utterly ridiculous.

The BBC is somewhat to blame in what they do and do not broadcast and how they define concerts and recitals. Take, as an example, the 2015 Proms, a concert series described by the BBC as the greatest festival of classical music in the world, yet in the 2015 Proms had pop groups, Frank Sinatra songs, The Sound of Music and the like, but none of this is classical music.

Are we likely to have a future Prom concert with the ghastly theme music from EastEnders?

(2561)

© COPYRIGHT Wrightmusic.net 2015 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.