

WHAT AMAKES A GREAT COMPOSER?

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What makes a great composer?

This might be an unanswerable question and to even attempt to answer it may be folly. I am anxious not to introduce any vitriol or to indicate that I, or anyone else, can adequately answer this question and, while I am aware that people's feeling can run high, I have no wish to be annoying.

I think we have to start with a definition. Is a famous composer a great composer?

Famous means known to very many; it does not imply greatness since greatness is not synonymous with being famous. I regret that some people will balk at what I am about to say... but the murderer Ian Huntley is famous and infamous (well known for something bad), but he is not a great man.

In the realms of creativity, the word great includes highly skilful, accomplished and having a fine technique.

It is suggested that a great composer may be one who has written several great compositions and the majority of the rest of his output is consistently good.

If that is so, what constitutes a great piece of music, a masterpiece?

I have heard it said that such-and-such a work is a masterpiece but it is not... because of mistakes in the work, grammatical errors, a lack of technical skill, poor orchestration, no structure, no memorable material, no purpose and so on.

The word masterpiece is synonymous with a great work whereas its literal meaning means a work that marks the end of the creator's apprentice. BBC announcers and others use the word so freely as to be meaningless. Let me quote one statement made by Barbirolli and seemingly endorsed by others, "All of Elgar's works are masterpieces!"

I have also heard it said that Johann Strauss was as great a composer as J S Bach; that John Lennon was the greatest British song writer of all time; that Elton John is a tremendous pianist and that Robbie Williams is the most perfect singer and entertainer.

Now the issue is that Johann Strauss, John Lennon, Elton John and Robbie Williams may be accomplished and popular in their own fields, but to put them on a level with Bach, Gerald Finzi, a fine composer of songs, John Lill, a magnificent pianist, and Robert Tear, an accomplished tenor, is both absurd and untrue.

And did you know that it has often been asserted that Jimi Hendrix was a greater guitarist than Segovia? Hendrix probably did not class himself on the same high level as Segovia.

It has often been said that Astor Piazzolla is a very great composer and as good as Brahms!

A recent BBC concert was announced as a remarkable event containing music by the world's very greatest composers namely Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Piazzolla...really?

There are some composers who have become National Heroes such as Grieg in Norway and Sibelius in Finland.

I wish to set out below some suggestions as to what makes a great composer and I repeat that they are only suggestions.

1. **Originality.** A great piece of music must not be imitative but new in character and design or, at least, new in something. It must be inventive, creative and not a copy of anything that has gone before. Neither will it be plagiarism. It will be innovative and neither superficial nor academic.

It must follow that a composer's work must be progressive... that is to say constantly developing. If his work shows little or no change throughout his creative span, his music will be merely predictable, 'all the same' and lack development and progress.

Take two examples to identify what I mean. The symphonies of both Sibelius and Vaughan Williams are all different from each other in their respective outputs. These composers never stayed in a rut.

Of course, some composers write variations on existing music but my point refers to the composer's own original scores.

2. **Worthiness.** The music must have purpose, substance and subsequent emotive or intellectual appeal. It will then have a value and give a rewarding return since it will communicate since it will have obvious merit and deserving respect. By contrast, worthless music has neither any real purpose nor value; it will be substandard or merely average or pleasant. However, music written for teaching purposes has a value in the realm of education although it may not be great music.

A great work has substance which speaks of its value. It will probably be profound and penetrating with a depth of content and character. It will be superlative and not superficial.

But even this suggestion falls into trouble. I am aware of a particular work which is praised to the heights, claimed to be a masterpiece and hugely popular. It has its army of supporters and is regarded as worthy. Yet it is full of mistakes; it shows an abject lack of technical skill, the orchestration is awful, the work has no structure but rambles for 47 minutes and its only genuine claim to originality is its overwhelming tedium. This is factual and not my opinion.

3. **Emotive and Intellectual.** One would hope that the originality and worthiness of a piece would produce an emotive and/or intellectual response. Bland, boring, sentimental, predictable and pompous music will produce responses such as tedium, frustration and anger. The reaction of the intellect is not intended to suggest qualifications held, or upbringing enjoyed, but the mind's prudent use of honesty, reasoning and correct knowledge which arrives at what is called 'taste' or appreciation. Great music has the power to arouse intense and constructive feelings but, if it is only emotional, that response may be short-lived. A genuine intellectual response is a lasting one. Emotive response without intellect is not enough. Norman Del Mar was right when he said that pomposity and vanity has no place in great music or in any of its performance.
4. **Inspiration.** A great composer must, therefore, inspire and continue to do so. In the first place, of course, the composer must be stimulated to be both creative and original and in such a way that his music proves to be worthy. On the other hand, the listener must be convinced with the certainty of the evident qualities that confirms that the piece is outstanding. Inspired music is neither mechanical nor academic.
5. **Craftsmanship and Technique.** A composer must know how to compose and achieve what he wants to write. Composition is an occupation demanding the highest levels of skill. The work must be competent, structurally sound, harmonically interesting and polished. It must be well

written for the medium, yet, if it is merely academic (by which is meant trammelled by convention or regimented to archaic text books or theoretical correctness), it may not be great music.

6. Durability. A great work will last and not wear out with repeated hearings and will continue to give the profound satisfaction its greatness proves, and reveal its ability to continue to impress. Durability varies from listener to listener. What is over long and tedious to one person is not to another.
7. Coherence. This suggestion, from the ten I am making, is that the work must make sense having direction, form and, of course, have something definite and worthwhile to say. It must connect logically and not ramble or meander. In other words, it will not be 'stop and start' music. It will not be episodic suffering from such stutterings since that could relegate the music to merely being incidental and of less value. If, for example, a movement is marked allegro it is to be merry, quick and lively for that is what the word means. There are composers who state that allegro can be crotchet equals 69!

We can all identify movements that are marked allegro which are not merry, quick and lively.

On another issue, the title of a piece must be both coherent and relevant. Take, for example, Debussy's piano piece Feux d'artifice which means fireworks. The piece does not sound anything like fireworks. But in saying this, I am not decrying the piece.

8. Contrast. All great music should probably have contrast within it. By contrast, I do not necessarily mean changes of tempo within a movement, but a variety of tone and colour and/or diverse themes clearly stated and musically argued. A long piece of slow, uneventful music could be tedious because of the lack of contrast.
9. Length. Music that is too long will lose its effectiveness, if it has any, as will music that is too repetitious, over-blown, over-stated and long-winded. It will be irksome and, therefore, not great music. Long-winded is defined as of tedious length; over-stated refers to exaggeration; over-blown indicates 'too open or 'too much' being overdone, excessive and consequently tiresome. Length has to make sense. Wagner's Tristan and Isolde would not work at a mere 20 minutes and someone has said that some pieces of Scriabin are so short as to be meaningless.

Pompous music also proves to be a very serious weakness. Pompous means foolishly dignified, self important and foolishly grand in style and, remember foolish means very silly, unwise and absurd. Therefore, there are some composers who are very silly, unwise and absurd. Absurd means obviously senseless and illogical. Pompous music is poor and vanity does not make a good composer let alone a great one as already stated.

10. Content. Great music must have memorable content but that does not necessarily mean a melody or a tune that can be easily called to mind or whistled in the street. It may mean moments of magical orchestration, unexpected and effective modulations or an overall impression even though specific detail may not be remembered. There are those who will claim that certain works have no memorable content as such and may quote Berg's Piano Sonata. It may not have a whistleable tune but it has originality, atmosphere and an inventiveness which, in itself is memorable to the unprejudiced listener.

These suggestions are valid but the general public may not agree. They reply, "I know what I like and that is all that matters!"

Many also believe that their favourite composers are great composers and they will vehemently fight for their beliefs to the point of being ridiculous.

When one proves that a favourite and popular work is very badly written and does not merit its success, the supporters of that work can become very unpleasant and make the person who supplied the unassailable evidence to be an enemy.

People are not interested in such proofs. Their objective is to be subjective. Put another way, their aim is to adhere to their emotions and prejudices.

There more issues to consider.

To deceitfully prove a point some invent scurrilous lies such as Lewis Foreman and Paul Jackson, whoever he is, who state that Sir William Glock prevented broadcasts of some composers. This is untrue, character assassination and blatant lies (See my article on Glock and the Proms)

It is extraordinary how people condemn “modern” music such as Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, Bartok, Wolfgang Rihm, Bruno Maderna and others as rubbish, yet become incensed if any early music is said to be rubbish. Is this prejudice or hypocrisy or both?

As already said, there are also groups of people who condemn music that has no tune in it and yet adore the piano music of Debussy, for example, some of which does not have tunes either. Again, I am not rubbishing Debussy.

Someone wrote to say that Bach and Johann Strauss are both great and on an equal level. Can this possibly be true?

We have mentioned personal taste, but our personal taste is not the criterion for greatness. Just because you adore Archibald Crump's Symphony no 6 does not mean it is a great piece.

And the piece we referred to earlier, 47 minutes worth of music which is very popular and highly regarded, does not mean that it is great music. The soloist at the first performance said it was 46 minutes and 60 seconds too long!

Does the verdict of senior professionals count for anything? The brilliant cellist Lynn Harrell said that there are only two really great cello concertos namely those by Dvorak and Henri Dutilleux. This he said in the interval of a promenade Concerto when he played the Dutilleux.

Sir Adrian Boult loathed the music of a famous British composer (I have him on tape saying this) although he often conducted his music.

Let us come to the problem of repetition in music. Do the Symphonies of Cesar Franck and Borodin's Symphony no. 2 do their main tune to death by constant repetition?

Another consideration is the state of mind of the composer. We have supplied evidence of the sad and lamentable mental conditions of Chopin and Scriabin. Does this mean that because of their illness they may have written substandard works? I am only posing the question in this essay and I have to say that some fine works were written by composers when they were ill or dying!

It is true that all of Schubert's stage and theatrical works were flops and, even today, they are seldom, if ever, performed. Does this mean that Schubert was not a great composer, or that he was not a great composer when it came to stage works? Does that mean that he had an inadequate technique or lack of skill? I only pose the question, nothing more.

What is worrying is that some poor music (poor for obvious factual and musical reasons) is elevated to be great and some great music is totally ignored.

There are those who write CD reviews and articles about both music and composers who do not know what they are talking about. One wrote that Liszt was a rubbish composer who did not understand the piano, that Josef Holbrooke wrote the greatest piano concerto ever, that Dvorak was influenced by Britten and that Mozart was born in 1756 and died in 1689!

But, for most people, it does not matter whether a piece of music is original, worthy, emotive and intellectual, inspired and inspiring, having good craftsmanship and sound technique and whether it is coherent, durable, with contrast and has the right length and coherence.

This ‘ I know what I like and that’s all that matters ‘ is a very shallow response which dismisses sincerity and serious thought. It is also injustice since it can make poor music to be rightly called a sham since it is not genuinely good and therefore not the fine work it is claimed to be.

However, some music can only be appreciated by scholars and experts. That may sound divisive or judgemental but it is not intended to be. I spent happy hours studying a difficult modern work and, in this time, I discovered what an amazing work it was, and is. It is seldom played at concerts, which is a pity, and this leads me to another question, if people were educated, would they appreciate some of these obscure works?

But there will be those who advocate that no one should need to be educated to like a particular piece.

It is true what Copland wrote. A professional musician hears music in a different way to a sincere music lover who may not read music and, to some extent, he is unable to make an intelligent judgment of the music other than he likes it or does not like it. There is an editor of a classical music site who would not know a semibreve if he sat on one and he does not know the difference between atonal and serial music and his comments on baroque music are absurd. How can he be the editor of a music site?

I wish to repeat that what I have written are suggestions and factual observations but I believe them to be at least worthy of serious consideration.

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