

On Appreciation of Music in Long Form

~ JMJohnston

As has been discussed in many a music appreciation class, there appears to be a good deal less bandwidth for the typical person in 21st century America to take in, let alone appreciate and embrace, long-form 'classical'¹ music. Sitting quietly through a piece of music some twenty to sixty minutes long seems like an onerous, if not impossible chore, rather than an enjoyable, meaningful experience – let alone one to be cherished or looked forward to! Many of the reasons for this are obvious, including the proliferation of distractions, a prioritization of rapid, if not instant, gratification, and overall demands placed on our time. Somewhat less obvious, or perhaps a little less 'user-friendly', is the notion that what has come to be known as 'classical' music is less well understood than it may have been at the time of its creation. This latter idea presupposes as an axiom that what is better understood will be better appreciated – or enjoyed. So let's start there:

It may be safe to say that a new and/or current art form is inherently better understood by its intended (and unintended) audience at the time of its creation, simply because the collective focus is on it. Rap, for instance, has, relatively speaking, a very brief history, and we're currently smack dab in the middle of it. Whether you like rap or not, it permeates the culture, and has propagated its own sub-culture(s), thus earning its prominence in world consciousness. This, in turn, stimulates curiosity, generates commerce, and influences other styles and artists outside the sphere of rap itself. The analogue here is that it takes on a meaning and significance of its own, validating itself as a vibrant cultural phenomenon that has enough critical mass to become self-sustaining... For a time.

And here's where I'm going to get a little speculative: Rap may not remain the pervasive musical life-force it is now forever. There may, in fact, come a time when it contracts into a noteworthy past style, and then into a quaint relic. And maybe there's a point relevant to the discussion of long form classical music

¹ Let's stipulate that the term 'classical' is woefully inadequate, and is in fact a misnomer, but that I'm going to use it anyway because of its ubiquity, and because I know you know what I mean ;-)

right here: I propose that there will always be a significant segment of the population that holds rap up as being just as relevant, powerful, and significant as ever, no matter what new craze, or genre has ‘supplanted’ it on whatever passes for Spotify in that no doubt distant future. Such is certainly the case with long form ‘classical’ music (You know what? I’m just going to start calling it **LFCM** from here on in):

Operating on the presumption that appreciation for LFCM might be enhanced – or rescued – through better understanding, here’s some bare-bones background on the elements that I think might support this hypothesis...

- **It’s not as long as you think:** If the primary factor that is off-putting for modern listeners is that LFCM pieces are ‘just too damn long’, then perhaps acquiring the skill of breaking them down as they go by would help: Forming an understanding of LFCM might best begin with the realization that most tonal music of the period follows structural paradigms, which, with practice, can be recognized – in real time!² This is the ‘Form’ in LFCM. Inherent to form is repetition, which, if you think about it, means material is frequently recycled. In much the same way thematic material resurfaces in short forms of music (like popular song, and the granddaddy of them all, the blues), that repetition and reworking is fleshed out into a grander schema, in a fractal kind of way, in LFCM.

Understanding that much of the material one is hearing during any given moment of a performance has an origin point elsewhere in the piece is not only comforting, but deeply satisfying to perceive.

- **Themes & Motifs:** In addition to learning about the various forms used in longer pieces, movements, and more; a coequal facet of musical composition is thematic content. If this were chemistry – or better yet, biology – and notes were molecules, themes and motifs might be thought of as the compounds that start to make stuff happen: Crystalline

² By ‘recognized’ I don’t mean exclusively by the musically trained, but by astute non-musician listeners as well – in short, the ‘audience’. This, in turn, presupposes that the composers’ intent is that their music be a.) listened to by humans, and b.) enjoyed by said humans – or at least by as many of them as possible. This is worth mentioning because a good deal of ‘music’ has apparently been created well outside that paradigm.

structures, genes, that sort of thing. Interfaced with a form, the composer then can start using these structures to build an organically cohesive (hopefully) entity that will become a living, breathing piece of LFCM.

- **Program:** In LFCM, especially orchestral³ LFCM, overall enjoyment might be enhanced by the presence of (and listener knowledge of) what is known in music as a 'program'. The term 'Program Music' refers to music that is built around a non-musical theme, idea, character, or story. A classic example would be Gustav Holst's *The Planets* which depicts seven of the planets, explicitly entitled by the composer:

Mars, the Bringer of War; *Venus*, the Bringer of Peace; *Mercury*, the Winged Messenger; *Jupiter*, the Bringer of Jollity; *Saturn*, the Bringer of Old Age; *Uranus*, the Magician; and *Neptune*, the Mystic.⁴

While a discussion of how well, or how literally, the depictions of subject matter in a given piece of program music are executed is beyond our scope here, I'll simply state that the existence of such a program may enhance listener enjoyment by increasing the piece's accessibility.

³ I make this distinction because of the symphonic orchestra's relatively unique ability to provide, at a moment's notice, a near infinite variety of sonic color, articulation, and texture.

⁴ This iconic suite is THE red-letter example of program music. [A terrific presentation of it is here](#). Each movement directly invokes the subject matter both obviously and elegantly. This is a 'must-listen'. If you need to pick and choose, try Mars ; -)

NOTE: Once you hear this, you'll never listen to John Williams in quite the same way again. [Esp. at 7:25 - OMG!]

This music precedes *A New Hope* by well over half a century.

- It's important to note that a piece having a 'program' associated with it rarely means the program functions as a 'script', in which specific moments can be pinpointed where a singular happenstance is 'portrayed'⁵. Rather, program music generally evokes a feeling or 'ethos'. Coupled with the idea of themes and motifs, characters, events, and scenes can additionally be endowed with thematic materials – not just the atmospheric 'quality' of the music in general.
- **Development** is common to almost all LFCM. This is the thorough digestion and processing of thematic material, and is characteristically exhaustive⁶ in LFCM. Put metaphorically: 'development' in popular song might be thought of as thematic material passing through the digestive system of a goose – a pretty straight shot; whereas a sonata-allegro form symphonic movement's digestive tract might closer approximate that of a human being's, with all of the twists and turns and other complexities that entails (or entrails). Once again, part of the joy of listening to such music is the recognition of thematic material, and how the composer has manipulated it. This is not to say that sheer intellectual mangling of musical fodder is the goal. To be sure, such complex working-out, no matter how mathematically pristine and cerebrally impressive, is meaningless in the absence of a compelling emotional or artistic justification. Another way of saying that mouthful is to simply ask if the development in question is 'musical'. Again, the attainment of a certain level of skill in 'picking out' thematic material and how it's being processed, in real time, can only help increase the enjoyment of the music in which that material is embedded.

⁵ There are notable exceptions: A favorite of mine is *spoiler alert* the title character's execution by hanging (complete with his march to the gallows, pleas for mercy (E ♭ clarinet), rope drop (Trombone/Tuba major seventh drop @ 14:11), & soul ascending thereafter) in *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* [here](#).

⁶ There are, of course, exceptions. The development section of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* 1st mov't is quite literally the among shortest possible developments – meeting the bare minimum requirements of starting on the V. chord where the exposition leaves off, restating a couple of the themes, and leading back to the original key as quickly as possible – all of 20 measures [1 minute and 20 seconds, give or take]. By contrast, Brahms' Symphony No. 2's 1st mov't development is 122 measures [over 3 minutes], and is by no means considered 'long' for its period.

Other factors that might help...

- **Focus:** This is not intended in any sort of pejorative way, but rather to point out that our present reality makes the type of singular, long-term focus required to fully appreciate LFCM extremely difficult, if not downright impossible. That said, we can give it a fighting chance by intentionally removing as many distractions as possible, and giving over as much of our full attention as we can to the music. This also means clearing enough time for the entirety of the piece in question - a serious challenge in its own right!
- **Critical listening** is a skill. It embodies the engagement of intellect while listening, as opposed to simply letting the music 'wash over' us. This is where we attempt to pick out thematic material, form, and artistic intent from the music, endowing it with structure in our perception. Of course listening analytically does require a vocabulary of things to listen for, so there's a bit of an initial learning curve involved. Using LFCM as 'background music' is great! It can often function as a calming, even intentionally distracting, 'soundtrack'⁷ to life. This is not that!
- **Immersion** is my favorite tactic for enhancement of musical appreciation - particularly of LFCM. As a performing orchestral musician, I've been blessed with the ultimate immersive experience - not only playing in the orchestra that's making the music, but rehearsing that music - often for weeks at a time! While not everyone can have that experience, the obvious next-best-thing is to see and hear as much music as possible in a live setting. It's useful to realize that all music created prior to the very late 1800s was created on the assumption that it would be, for obvious reasons, experienced in person. If a live performance isn't available, then video works. When choosing video performances, I strongly recommend picking those in which the performing ensemble is actually seen playing (as opposed to those where you're simply staring at a static image or two while the music plays in the background). Our minds respond to all the cues they receive, so the goal here is to maximize input with as real and complete an experience

⁷ Do a YouTube search for 'classical music' and you'll invariably come across playlists for 'music to study by', or 'music to sleep to'...

as possible. And that brings us to volume: Wherever possible, I encourage everyone to listen to music at a realistic volume. While it doesn't have to be 'crazy loud', it should be heard at the level it would have been if heard live - at least!⁸

Finally, under the heading of immersion, if you are interested in a particular piece, GO TO A REHEARSAL of that piece! Most professional symphony orchestras schedule 'open rehearsals' where the public can see the orchestra at work. There may be no better way to apprehend the true enormity and meaning of an orchestral piece.

⁸ DISCLAIMER: Excessive volume, especially in headphones/earbuds can, and often does, cause hearing loss. I am NOT advocating inappropriately loud listening.

- **Ease into it!** A step-by-step approach could be very helpful in building the awareness to better appreciate LFCM – ironically by starting with shorter, or ‘less dense’ pieces. Here’s an off-the-top-of-my-head curated list starting simple and building to a kind of middle-of-the-road in complexity:
 1. The aforementioned 1st mov’t of Mozart’s [*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*](#)
 2. [*Beethoven Symphony No. 1*](#), 1st mov’t (longish slow intro – check out the applied dominant (V of IV!) it starts on! Then, fast sonata allegro ensues.)
 3. Dvořák [*New World Symphony, Finale*](#) (I chose this one because of its insanely awesome theme(s))
 4. [*Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 5*](#) (Arguably my all-time favorite LFCM. See if you can take in all four movements! The conductor will look familiar – the inimitable Semyon Bychkov, who was our conductor at Mannes College of Music, ca. 1977)

Finally, be kind to yourself! LFCM is NOT for everybody. Period.

There’s also personal preference to take into account. Bear in mind that among works that are considered by today’s ‘experts’ to constitute ‘great music’ are pieces the premieres of which were [*lambasted*](#) mercilessly by some if not all critics.⁹

Similarly, as I’ve said many times, you’d be hard-pressed to locate enough money to pay me to go to a piano recital unless I know the pianist, or wrote one of the pieces, even though I am obviously someone with a vested interest in promoting the appreciation of such things¹⁰. Does that invalidate my existence as a musician? I sure hope not; just as not ‘liking’, or ‘getting’ a specific piece of music in no way invalidates the worthiness of the listener.

⁹ In a review of the world premiere of our friend Richard Strauss’ opera *Salome*, a critic famously wrote:

“There is not a whiff of fresh and healthy air blowing through *Salome* except that which exhales from the cistern. ... The orchestra shrieked its final horror and left the listeners staring at each other with smarting eyeballs and wrecked nerves.”

¹⁰ Similarly, I would much rather read a collection of short stories or essays than a novel – any day of the week.

Every note of every piece of music ever heard was, is, or will be a personal event, uniquely perceived and understood - there for the taking - or the leaving.

That said, I hope some of the strategies and thoughts I've laid out here give you a leg up on increasing your enjoyment of LFCM and other forms and genres of music - even if it's just by a little bit!

Aloha!

~ JMJ