

# The Unchanging Face of Classical Music: A Reflective Perspective on Diversity & Access

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## Abstract.

*The Guardian's* Stephen Moss once described the demographic of the average classical music audience as being “getting on in years, retired, white, middle class.”<sup>1</sup> The legitimacy of this character, remarkably unchanged throughout history, has often been challenged academically with regards to gender and class, with thinkers such as Susan McClary and Pierre Bourdieu presenting varying understandings of them in music and society. Race, however, has largely been avoided in the academic forum, often left to the media to question and dispute. With statement such as the aforementioned by Moss and headlines such as ‘Why are our orchestras so white?’<sup>2</sup>, the conversation often takes the destructive tone of a critique of classical music’s elitism and exclusivity as opposed to constructive reviews of how this tradition can be more effectively integrated into our ever-changing contemporary society.

By bringing together research I, other musicologists, sociologists and philosophers have conducted and by offering my reflections of working in the music education as evidence, I would like to offer an alternative approach to this issue of classical music’s lack of access and diversity by deconstructing it as being an issue. Basing my reflection not solely on empirical research or sociological assumption but on organic, in situ observations, I hope to discuss the challenges in changing classical music’s current demographic whilst suggesting a new narrative on what the next generation of classical musicians could look like and why.

## Introduction.

The visible demographic of the classical music orchestra has remained largely unchanged over the last 300 years in the UK. The same cannot, however, be said of the ethnic make-up of the UK’s population which – through migration, immigration and asylum – has become one of the most diverse in the world. In particular, London has seen the ethnic minority population rise to 40.2%<sup>3</sup> - making up almost half of the capital’s residents. Unsurprisingly, many of these nationalities lack representation within

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Moss, “Who is in the audience at a classical concert?” *The Guardian* [online], October 5, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/oct/05/classicalmusicandopera1>.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Day, “Why are our orchestras so white?” *The Observer* [online], September 14, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/sep/14/music.classicalmusicandopera>.

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, *2011 Census: Key and Quick Statistics for London and England & Wales*, [computer file], downloaded from: <http://data.london.gov.uk/census/summary>.

the classical music industry and perhaps relationally, seldom engage with the classical music genre at all. With public funding supporting the work of many of the industry's major organisations, their lack of attention to such a large portion of this public is questionable.

It should be noted however, that this observation is not exclusive to classical music and can be seen in several cultures where music or certain genres of music are revered as part of their historical traditions. Examples can be found in traditional African drumming and Balinese gamelan where there are noticeably very few musicians outside of these cultures participating at a professional level in their respective countries/continents.

Where the concern lies in the context of multicultural UK cities such as London, is that it appears that as new generations adapt to being 'British', an important part of Western and indeed British historical tradition is not being retained as part of the culture. In turn, this has caused a disjoint between the classical music industry and the continuously evolving population that has seemingly led to classical music appearing ethnically exclusive and inaccessible.

This paper will explore just two of the numerous contributing factors to this perception of classical music with primary focus on issues of taste and of culture in relation to London's multi-cultural society and its relationship to classical music. By combining academic research and theory with personal observations of music education and ethnic minorities, I will present some of my own initial considerations on this topic.

## **'I don't like classical music' – Issues of Taste**

Classical music, for hundreds of years has assumed a position of being at the height of good musical taste. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this has proven to be to its detriment as now, more than ever, this view is not shared by the masses. To the obliviousness of many of its practitioners, advocates and general supporters, classical music has excluded itself from popularity merely by operating on the assumption that it should be liked.

In a recent article in the Guardian, Candace Allen, who has written extensively on classical music and race, made this very assumption. Stating in reference to classical music: "You can't fall in love with a music if you've never heard it or known that you've been hearing it (behind films, adverts, classic cartoons). If you don't come from an environment where western classical music is played and/or revered, where are you to learn of it, save from outside influences?"<sup>4</sup> this opinion appears to be underpinned by the assumption that classical music is good.

Although otherwise an incredibly valid and insightful observation, it operates solely on the supposition that exposure to classical music would automatic generates a positive reaction in listeners. Although increasing exposure and furthering education can indeed give more opportunity for someone to 'fall in love' with classical music, it could

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<sup>4</sup> Candace Allen, "Class, race and classical music," *The Guardian* [online], April 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2014/apr/04/class-race-and-classical-music-candace-allen>.

also incite the opposite effect. Exposure must still compete with intrinsic factors such as musical taste, in the choice of musical preference – making taste an important variable to consider.

This ‘classical music superiority complex’ somewhat ignores musical taste and is likely to have translated from the social class distinctions that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Derek B. Scott suggests the reason for this as being that ‘The increase in urban populations and rise of the bourgeoisie brought a need for public demonstration of social standing, since it was no longer common knowledge who was important. Attending concerts was a means of displaying status.’<sup>5</sup> It was during this period that musical activities and social standing began to converge, with a person’s social status determining what musical activities they would participate in, and consequently musical activities becoming the signification of a person’s class. Thus, the introduction of this new type of class distinction, which separated the bourgeoisie from the lower classes, ultimately led to a similar process in music culture.

Whereas, beforehand a "general taste" was considered the taste of the public, this slowly eroded<sup>6</sup> to the superior view of the bourgeoisie and their superior highbrow music. Although many in the classical music industry would like to believe that this mentality has changed, it would appear that the practice of revering classical music to a status above other genres is still happen in the present day.

Until classical music is presented by the industry as being equal to, and not better than, other genres of music, it is unlikely that perceptions of it will become more favourable from those outside of it’s audience.

Further to this, the connection of social class to race is often overlooked, therefore eliminating possible conclusions that could be made in relation to lack of engagement. With the social status of class being perhaps the most explored variables in the direction of a person’s musical taste and preference, large amounts of research suggest a correlation. With sociologists such as Bourdieu suggesting that “Nothing more clearly affirms one’s “class”, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music,”<sup>7</sup> the dichotomy of class and taste is one that cannot be ignored in discussion of classical music’s accessibility.

If a person’s class is a contributing factor to their musical taste (or visa versa as Bourdieu suggests) then any attempts to redefine or widen a person’s musical taste must consider this. As engagement statistics demonstrate, removing the financial barrier from classical music may not be enough to encourage participation if social class is overriding taste. Having observed this first hand through attempting (with difficulty) to fill free places with new ‘access’ audiences, I definitely believe this to be one of the key contributing barriers that, if not addressed, will lead to the continued historical tradition of limited diversity of musicians.

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<sup>5</sup>Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris and Vienna* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 85.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 93

<sup>7</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 10.

## **‘What is classical music?’ – Issues of Culture**

A conflict of cultural heritages can also be seen as a major barrier to classical music’s accessibility and diversity. With its European origins, classical music’s relationships to cultures outside of this region vary astoundingly. It can go from having an integral position in culture, as it does in parts of East Asia, to being completely unknown, as it is in remote parts of South America. It is, therefore, a reasonable expectation for classical music orchestras to reflect these trends racially. Furthermore, although many will be aware of the existence of classical music, they may be unfamiliar with it as it is not a tradition of their origins. This may particularly be the case with those who have recently immigrated to the UK. When combined with the conflict of adapting to a new cultural and fear of losing the cultural identity of their origin, this can act as a further contributing factor to low engagement.

There are also, however, many British born ethnic minorities who are culturally ‘British’ and merely have no wish to engage with classical music. Besides from the already discussed issues of taste, lack of knowledge and understanding has often been stated as a contributing factor for people not engaging. Julian Johnson suggests that classical music appears unappealing to many because they do not fully understand it. He states that although ‘expert knowledge certainly does not equate with intensity of experience’ (Johnson, 2002; 75), presenting people ‘with musical styles in which they are not literate is...like presenting them with poems in languages they do not speak’ (Johnson, 2002; 74). Though this may be a slight exaggeration, the sentiment of not relishing in what is not understood is valid. In addition to this, the diversity of music classified under the genre of ‘classical music’ has meant that for those without, what Johnson call’s ‘musical literacy’, it can be difficult to identify exactly what classical music is, thus further isolating it from this audience. However, music is often seen as an art that transcend mental barriers, and value can be found in engagement that is merely for aesthetic appreciation over intellectual comprehension.

One of the most successful examples I have observed that has managed to achieve this balance is the RCM Sparks Lunchtime Concert for Schools – an introductory classical music concert series for key stage 2 children. Whilst maintaining the integrity of often complex classical repertoire, it has successfully managed to translate classic music into interesting, and perhaps more importantly, understandable content.

What makes this model especially successful is that a pre-concert workshop is also offered to selected schools (primarily with high free school meal or pupil premium rates) which, using several techniques provide the young listeners with the tools needed to appreciate a music they often do not understand and are not familiar with. These include instrument demonstrations (both aurally and visibly), which work to enhance a physical association to the sound. Converting melodic and rhythmic fragments into easily memorised songs/sound bites also helps with identifying musical elements within complex pieces. Creative composition/music making related to themes and motifs of the piece further aid their understanding of musical effect. In just 90-minutes, the young listeners are equipped with valuable aural techniques, have had classical music

somewhat demystified and are able to better understand what they will hear at the concert.

In attendance of the concert, I have observed a marked difference in concentration and general enjoyment of the children who have had a pre-concert workshop and those who have not. Whilst those without the workshops are excited by the whole experience – the visual stimulus of the orchestra, the aural stimulus of the new and unfamiliar music – there is a disjoint in their understanding as they are not actively listening.

For those who have had the workshops, there is an excitement in their recognition of the instruments and members of orchestra (who have often led the workshops) and of the musical elements, which they often sing along to. The works explored in the concert are not popular classics and vary from full orchestra to small ensembles, thus giving a varied experience of classical music. Although the techniques used to aid education are simplified, the works are not, thus demonstrating the possibility of successfully introducing classical music to an “illiterate” audience with the stimulus for continued engagement.

## **Conclusion.**

To conclude, there are many complex variables that must be considered in the discussion of changing the demographic of classical music. Having briefly touched on just two of several factors, it is apparent how difficult this task is, particularly since it means altering a tradition that has operated in such a way for hundreds of years. As society develops, it is likely to become a social requirement for classical music to diversify their musicians and audiences. If the industry does not actively seek to encourage and enable this, it may see itself being further isolated from the masses. Ultimately, all that the classical music industry can hope for is that they become a legitimate and desired selection for listeners in a world where technology has massively increased choice. The emphasis in this dilemma should not be in presenting classical music as better but as equal, thus increasing the opportunity to easily access it on all levels of engagement.

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