What Is “Classical” Music?

“Classical” music is perhaps one of the more detested “genres” of music, though it is not really a genre at all. Children grow up associating “classical music” with symphony orchestras, men and women in black and white attire playing large, gleaming instruments made from metal and wood to a crowd of people dressed in similar clothes who sit in polite silence for hours. In fact, for much of my youth this is what I also considered “classical music:” the type of music an orchestra would play. To this day, I still somewhat retain this sentiment, though I have broadened my definition of “classical” music and “classics” in general to include music that has retained value as part of our culture, especially with what I have learned in this class. I feel like some music is timeless; songs that were made several decades ago can still have relevance in today’s world. People label things as “classic rock,” “classic films,” or “classic books” and each is regarded as timeless and important. I do see the reasons for this use of the word, so “classic” has come to mean something different to me than just that image of an orchestral performance.

There are various official meanings for the term “classical.” For one, “classical” can refer to the style of Western art music that has existed since the Middle Ages or, more specifically, the era from approximately 1750 to 1820, known as “Viennese classicism.” In the 19th century, a canon of classical music was compiled, from which we get most of the recognizable “classical music” most people are familiar with today. Additionally, like one of my personal meanings for the term, “classical” can be used as a general term for anything that is a “standard of excellence,” be that a work of literature, film, or music. Each definition is valid in its own right, though none of the three completely encapsulates the meaning of “classical.”

Though many people consider it a genre, “classical music” is too expansive to be a true genre. The term is somewhat ambiguous because it can mean so many things. Is it being used to talk about Western “classical” styles from the Middle Ages to modern day? Is it being used to talk just about the Viennese classical era? The canon might seem helpful at first, but it cherry-picks a handful of pieces and composers from the hundreds of thousands of pieces that have been produced over the years. Perhaps a better term would be “canonical music,” though that is also ambiguous because there are multiple canons for various styles of music. The best solution would probably be to refer to pieces by the era in which they were created, such as “Baroque music” or “Renaissance music.” These periods still span one hundred or more years, but this terminology would somewhat clarify what type of music is being discussed.

The Wikipedia article addresses the issue of ambiguity by defining “classical music” by its various eras (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, etc.) and by differentiating between “classical” music, meaning Western art music, and popular music. According to the article, most popular music styles have a strophic form, while “classical” music does not adhere to this form and also includes concerto, symphony, sonata, and opera styles (Wikipedia). “Classical” music also uses staff notation and does not leave much room for improvisation, which is vital to jazz and blues music (Wikipedia). This is a rather formalist approach to the topic. The article is factual and makes logical sense.

The Naxos article argues that “classical” music is too expansive to be considered a genre because it includes anything from movie themes to Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” (Naxos). Additionally, “classical” music is often associated with the “intellectual elite” (Naxos). The article makes the case that there is too much variety in “classical music” for people to narrow it down to one era or one composer. This makes sense to me, as “classical music” really can’t be considered a genre. What we term “classical music” comes from too many eras and too many areas of the world to be shoved into one box. The article also makes the point that popular music is “clear” in the way it tells a story, whereas “classical” music takes a more lofty approach.

The MPR article focuses on the canon for “classical music,” which explains why the music we call “classical” is from approximately 1750-1820. The article gives the history of the canon, which was established in the 19th century by fans of the Bach to Beethoven era of music (Gabler). The article also addresses the plethora of modern music influenced by “classical” music, including songs by the Beatles and video game scores (Gabler). This article is very straight-forward and “reader-friendly” for everyone, regardless of their musical knowledge. Of the three, I think it is the most integrative of all the definitions of “classical” music.

In Barenboim’s video, he suggests focusing solely on music when one is listening to it (no multi-tasking). Although unspoken, he assumes that everyone has time in their lives to just listen to music, which is not feasible for everyone. Most people listen to music while doing homework, commuting, or exercising because that is when they have time for it. In my opinion, this doesn’t mean they are enjoying it any less. Barenboim also seems to be referring to “classical” music, as opposed to popular music. The appeal of popular music is often the lyrics, but Barenboim makes no mention of lyrics in his recommendations. I think it is a nice treat to be able to just sit back and listen to a piece of music, but it is oftentimes not something I am easily able to do. I think people can enjoy music in any setting, not just complete and attentive silence.

Barenboim introduces the “Moonlight Sonata” as misunderstood by many musicians. Most people play it dreamily, then with a slow march tempo. To him, this interpretation makes it sound like a funeral march. However, Barenboim says, this is only relevant to the first movement. The second and third movements have a much different tempo and style. He points out that Beethoven never called the piece “Moonlight Sonata,” but that much of its interpretation by performers is based on that name. Additionally, the piece is reminiscent of Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” opera, which sounds similar. That piece has a march tempo, which Barenboim seems to think would also fit Beethoven’s piece, including the first movement. Barenboim doesn’t assume his audience knows the history of any of these composers or pieces because he gives a brief explanation of everything he talks about in the video. Regardless, he is still dressed formally and is seated in what appears to be a formal venue. This reinforces the idea of “classical music” as a style for the elite.

I have heard the “Moonlight Sonata” before and I find it to be a very beautiful piece. I do prefer when it is played at a faster tempo than it is usually played. The first movement is iconic and it is my favorite of the three movements. I am not a huge fan of “classical” music, but I do appreciate this song. It is evident that “classical music” is a diverse style of music, so I can’t say that I dislike all of it. This is why it is so vital to be clear in which definition one is using when referring to this style of music.

Works Cited

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