Playing It Smart

More than a decade after the publication of *Classical Music for Dummies*, conductor and co-author Scott Speck ponders the future of our art form.

We are all fond of pointing out that the roots of classical music lie in the popular music of the past. Given that the common folk once clamored for Liszt's latest showpiece and hummed Verdi's hits on the street, it's hard to see how the undisputed masterpieces of music—and the great orchestras that play them—could have become so thoroughly marginalized in today's world. Yet that is what has happened. The former "music of the people" has become the preferred music of a tiny segment of society.

Over ten years ago, faced with an art form that seemed increasingly cliquish and elitist, the publishers of the *"…For Dummies"* series focused their bright yellow spotlight on classical music. They had already attempted to demystify everything from hyper-complex computer software to the impenetrable terrain of red wine, and they approached me, together with co-author David Pogue, to do the same for classical music and opera.

As we prepared to write these books, we set out to determine the state of our art. And two things became clear: First, the love of classical music lies dormant within a huge segment of our population. And second, the greatest obstacle to its awakening, by far, has been the classical music world itself.

A World Apart

To those uninitiated in classical music, a host of questions inevitably comes to mind—when they think about us at all. Why do classical radio announcers over-enunciate their consonants? Why do program books contain so many foreign words? Why does the audience for this music appear so overwhelmingly white—and white-haired? And why on earth do orchestras dress like 19th-century butlers?

A newcomer could be forgiven for thinking that this world exists for a specific few: the affluent, Eurocentric, musically literate, multilingual, and old. Surely that would not have satisfied the great composers, who poured out their hearts for all humanity.

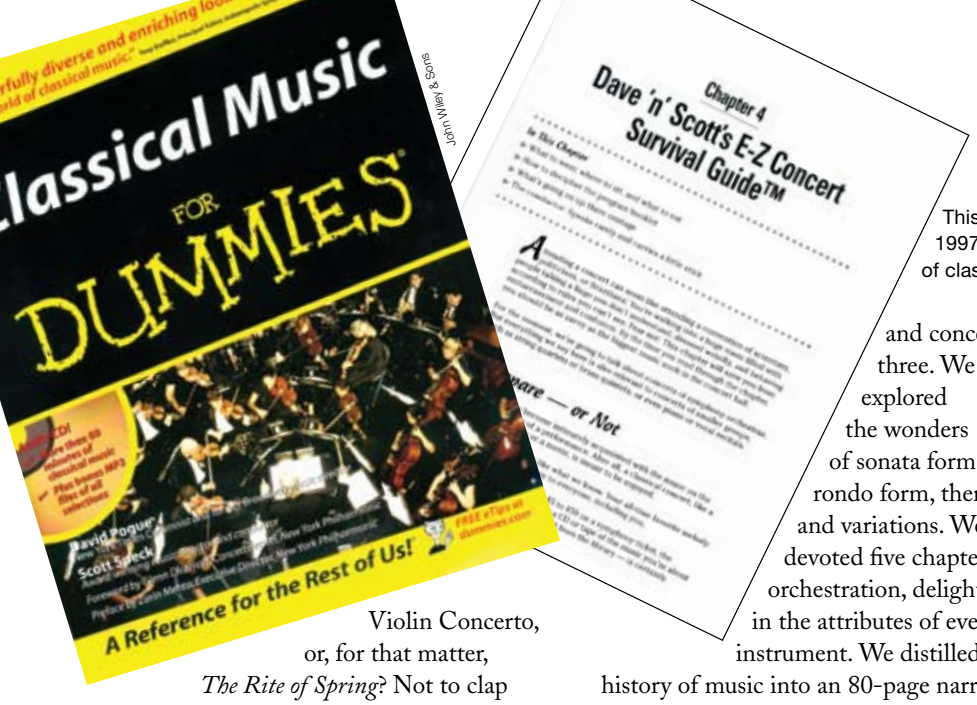
In threatening to overshadow the magnificence of the art form itself, certain conventions stand out more starkly than others. Our black-and-white uniforms, for example. True, tuxes and long black dresses appear refined; they please the old guard, and their sophistication seems to warrant high ticket prices. But are they welcoming to the vast majority of our potential public? To those outside our circle, they smack of exclusivity. They create a distance that the composer never intended. Surely someone can create a uniform that's classy, elegant, modern, welcoming, and chic.

Then there's the question of applause. Thousands around the country routinely experience the same embarrassment I felt at my first classical concert as a small child, when the glorious, triumphant rush of the orchestra at a movement's conclusion caused such surprisingly new, potent, untapped emotions to well up in me that I erupted into rapturous applause—only to be scolded for clapping between movements. "What a stupid custom," I thought to myself at the time, and still do.

Can you show me a piece that ends more excitingly than the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh, or Tchaikovsky's

Classical Music for Dummies co-author Scott Speck rehearsing the Mobile Symphony Orchestra

Ben Harper



This title in the "for Dummies" series was published in 1997, with the aim of demystifying the culture and rituals of classical music.

Violin Concerto, or, for that matter, *The Rite of Spring*? Not to clap at such exhilarating endings is simply embarrassing. We all know very well the feeling of stifled silence (with coughing obbligato) that accompanies such moments. Let people show their elation instead; maybe they'll come back.

Ancient, prudish, elitist, irrelevant. How can outsiders possibly come to any other conclusion about the trappings of our art? Yet the music itself is another story entirely. So fresh, so riveting, so meaningful, so moving, so thrilling!

All they need is a way in.

The Books

The overarching purpose of *Classical Music For Dummies* and *Opera For Dummies* was to provide that point of entry and win more friends and enthusiasts to our cause. To that end, we recognized that our first task was to strip away the distractions, and we did our best to explain (or at least describe) the sacraments surrounding our music. We prepared the reader for the concert world's anachronistic attire and insane no-clap policy. We wrote about the tuning process, the rituals within each section of the orchestra, the mysteries of bowing (and *bowing*), and what a concertmaster does. We presented some typical orchestra seating arrangements. We even depicted what goes on backstage.

Having stripped away the preconceptions surrounding the concert experience, we were free to focus on the glories of the music itself. We discussed the basic forms of classical music, explaining why symphonies often have four movements and concertos three. We explored the wonders of sonata form, rondo form, themes and variations. We devoted five chapters to orchestration, delighting in the attributes of every instrument. We distilled the history of music into an 80-page narrative, revealing how the very real personalities of the great composers found expression in their music. We wrote humorous but thorough chapters on rhythm and harmony, showing that the old masters used the same notes, meters, and chords as the popular artists of today. We included a chapter on dynamics and interpretation. We offered listening lists for all levels of adventurousness. And using an enclosed CD, we took the reader through a dozen of the greatest musical masterpieces, moment by moment.

The overarching purpose of *Classical Music For Dummies* and *Opera For Dummies* was to provide a point of entry and win more friends and enthusiasts to our cause.

The success of the books has been gratifying. Among the bestselling classical music books both here and abroad, they have been published in 20 languages and are available around the world. They've found their way into both local and national bookstores, and also into orchestra gift shops from the Berlin Philharmonic to Covent Garden.

Over the years we have received hundreds of letters from people all over the world who had an inkling they might enjoy classical music, but needed that point of entry. We heard from an inner-city woman whose discovery through the book of inexpensive open rehearsals led to a love affair with orchestral music. We heard from a man who fell for Verdi's operas and, taking the book's advice, auditioned for his local opera chorus. We heard from a ten-year-old boy who, inspired by the book's play-by-play description of Beethoven's Fifth, saved up his allowance for six months to buy a complete set of the Beethoven symphonies.

Part of the success of the books, and the series itself, is due to a distinctly populist climate, especially in this country. We Americans are certainly not shy about admitting what we don't know. Other countries have been slower to reach this point: In the first German edition of the series, the word *Dumme* on the cover was literally crossed out and replaced with *Anfänger* (beginners). It may say something about cultural change in Germany that the latest edition proudly calls itself *Klassik Für Dummies.*

Ten Years Later

In the decade since the books were published, a few things have changed all-pervasively in the orchestra world. While we certainly can't credit our books for any of them, these developments have been marvelous tools for bringing the audience closer to the music.

First, much more new music is being performed. This can be attributed primarily to one factor: New music is gorgeous again. The sound of a symphony written yesterday is all the more beautiful for exceeding expectations; the sight of the composer onstage does wonders to remind the audience that music is a living thing.

Second, in the last ten years the prospect of a female or minority conductor (or president of the United States) has gone from strangely curious to practically normal—and the audition screen has further leveled the playing field for female and minority musicians in major orchestras as well. Orchestras are finally beginning to look more like the rest of the world.

Kim Morley conducts public school students in the weekly Beginner/Junior Strings Workshop provided by the Mobile Symphony Orchestra, of which writer Scott Speck is music director.

Ben Harper

Third, many orchestras have begun programming thematically: grouping the works on a program, or the programs on a series, according to a common theme—and naming the concert or series after that theme. Once the purview of smaller, more nimble orchestras, this practice has spread to many more, creating instant associations for the audience among the pieces on the program. And of course, thematic programming is a marketer's dream. But it is not yet universally accepted, especially in the larger orchestras.

Finally, performers have begun talking to the audience from the stage. Even the most engaged listeners don't always read the program book. As a conductor, I now speak at least once per concert, welcoming the audience and commenting on the history and structure of a complex work, sometimes having the orchestra demonstrate with examples. We always take care to respect the listeners, approaching them at the level of the music. But to be honest, I've never found any explanation to be unwelcome. Even in the most "enlightened" communities, a few words from the podium don't hurt a bit.

If we were writing our books now, we would certainly acknowledge these wonderful trends, which provide a point of departure for both new and experienced listeners. But unfortunately, with the exception of a few groundbreaking orchestras, just about everything else about the classical concert experience in America has remained the same over the past decade. For that matter, it's remained the same over the past *century*.

The concert as picture in a gilded frame, painted on a canvas of silence, can be a stunningly beautiful thing. But even 90 years ago, the presentation of classical music, with its excessive reverence for the frame rather than the picture, appeared hopelessly antiquated to many. As Alex Ross pointed out in *The New Yorker* last December, composers in the 1920s dreamed of "bringing down the walls that had risen around classical institutions," whose conventional concerts they derided as "orgies of inbreeding."

Ours, in fact, is the only art form that is still presented in essentially the same way as it was one hundred years ago. We musicians often say that we don't want the symphonic world to end up as a museum. Actually, we should be so lucky: With their stunning new exhibits and interactive displays, many of today's museums are far more innovative than most orchestras. Opera and theater companies mount imaginative new productions of old masterworks; ballet companies commission tons of new choreography and new music. No doubt about it—compared to the presenters of opera, dance, theater, and visual art, the typical American orchestra still lags far behind.

A New Edition

In a future printing of our books, we will celebrate the vital and moving performances that regularly grace our stages. But we will also pose a question to orchestras and audiences alike: Do we sincerely want a concertgoing public that looks like our communities, or not?

We do have to admit that our music will always attract some people more than others. But contrary to what we often assume, there is no particular demographic that is afraid of the concert hall itself. That illusion has been dispelled by the enormous success of Video Games Live—a sampling of video game images set to lush and dramatic (and overly amplified) orchestral music—which has filled classical concert halls to the brim throughout the country, with hardly a gray hair in sight. The same goes for *The Lord of the Rings* Symphony, complete with full orchestra and 200-voice chorus, which sold out multiple performances in prominent classical venues.

A new edition of our book will point out how closely the soundtracks of today's movies and video games resemble the German Late Romantics—and the fact that young audiences love this music. The visuals get them in the door, but it's the music that makes their pulses race. Could it be that those who have fallen for *The Return of the King* (one of the films in the *Lord of the Rings* series) or the *World of Warcraft* online video game could come to crave Brünnhilde's immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung*—with appropriate visuals?

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The Los Angeles Philharmonic put this question to the test in 2004 with the stunning *Tristan Project*. They paired Wagner's opera score with a slow-moving video backdrop, artfully designed to illuminate and intensify (rather than

distract from) the drama of the music. Performances in L.A. and New York sold out to young audiences and rapturous reviews. And yet—most important whenever video is involved—the listeners never forgot that this was live music-making.

In the last century, Stokowski and Karajan experimented with every medium, using technology to enhance the art form. We should follow their example. We are a visual society, and we're becoming more so. There is no question that the next several decades will bring more video into the concert hall—creating a marvelous new edition of the symphony orchestra for the modern world.

The Truest Solution

Of course, ours primarily is a medium of sound. If everyone had a thorough understanding of why sounds matter, our books would be unnecessary. Nothing would thrill me more.

We all know that the answer is education. Children eagerly embrace what we have to offer; they haven't yet been told that this stuff is uncool. Having conducted hundreds of children's concerts around the country, I can honestly say that I have never met a young child who didn't love classical music. Yet with such a rich opportunity at hand, it's surprising how many orchestras still pay lip service to education. It's the first thing touted to raise money, and often the first thing cut when the money is short. Other well-meaning orchestras use their education budgets to reach a wide swath of the population: "Young people's concerts for every fourth grader, every year!" Sounds impressive—until you consider what this means for each student: one symphony concert in his or her lifetime.

What I'm talking about—and what would render our books gloriously obsolete—is a true, life-changing attention to music education. We're talking at least fifteen to twenty years of sustained involvement, committing a substantial portion of our resources.

Here are two examples from my orchestras, where the demystification of orchestra music is taking place from within. In West Michigan, where instrumental music is still taught in some public schools, the West Shore Symphony has participated for four years in Carnegie Hall's excellent LinkUP! program, along with nine other orchestras across the country. This program creates ongoing contact between orchestra musicians and students, bringing soloists and ensembles into the schools all year long and teaching every student to play an instrument (the recorder) with daily lessons. The program culminates in concerts in which all the students perform together with the full professional orchestra. The hunger for this program is evident—we're in 47

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Concerts like the wildly successful *Lord of the Rings* Symphony, performed here by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra led by composer Howard Shore, get new audiences in the door.

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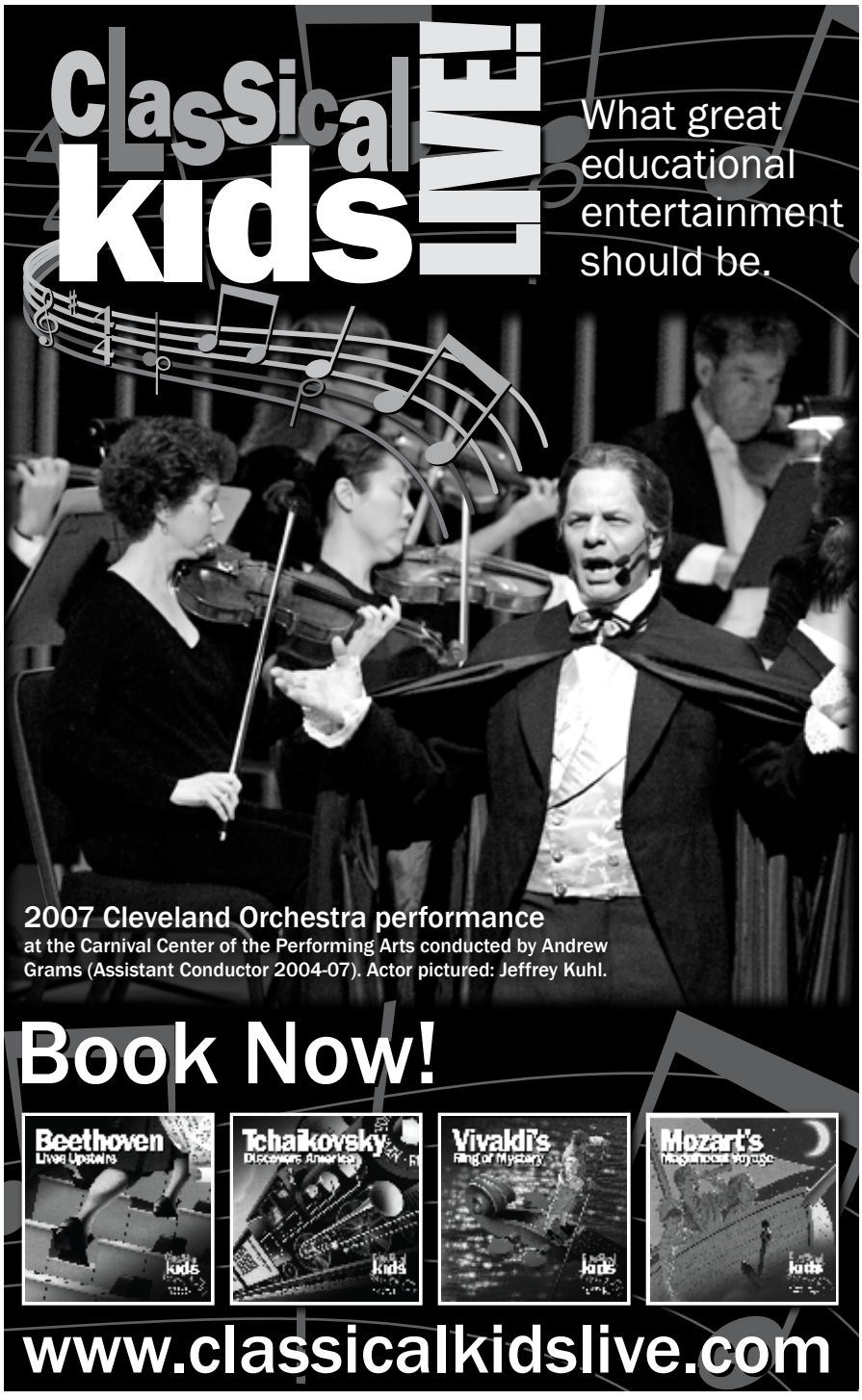

Music Director, Cape Ann Symphony Orchestra
Music Director, Melrose Symphony Orchestra
Music Director, Quincy Symphony Orchestra
Conducting Faculty, The Boston Conservatory

tel 617.821.4641
email: Email@yoichiudagawa.com
website: www.yoichiudagawa.com

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schools so far, and the waiting list goes on and on.

In Mobile, Alabama, the situation was much more dire: Public school music education had been cut for nearly a generation. Even the parents and teachers didn't have music education; and for the first time, kids had nobody to tell them what they were missing. At the Mobile Symphony we attacked the problem head-on, making education central to our mission and committing nearly 20 percent of the budget to direct musical involvement with young people. Ten years ago the orchestra began a partnership with the public schools, sending musicians into classes every week. First and second graders learn basic music skills. Third through fifth graders receive violin and cello lessons, with instruments and scholarships provided to any child unable to pay. In middle school, these same students join our after-school string ensembles at different levels. From there they can graduate to our youth orchestra or our all-ages community orchestra.

This year the Mobile Symphony was one of two orchestras in the country (along with the Los Angeles Philharmonic) honored with a Bank of America Award for Excellence in Orchestra Education. And the program continues to grow—along with our audience. Through strong partnerships and constant contact, we make sure that classical music is always a part of these young lives.

Yes, our art form has become marginalized. But there's no reason it has to stay that way. Programs like these are cropping up in more and more orchestras across the country. They have the potential to bring us back into the mainstream—by bringing the mainstream to us. When orchestras make a commitment like this, we can become the "music of the people" once again.

SCOTT SPECK is music director of the Mobile Symphony Orchestra, West Shore Symphony Orchestra, and Washington Ballet. He is the co-author of *Classical Music For Dummies, Opera For Dummies,* and *Ballet For Dummies.*