Trouble in River City?:

A Response to Estelle R. Jorgensen “Western Classical Music and General Education”

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Estelle Jorgensen’s analysis of “Western Classical Music and General Education” puzzles me. Some of that perplexity is self-inflicted. Because Dr. Jorgensen is a rigorous, cogent analyzer of the meanings, problems, and opportunities associated with music and education, I have come to expect from her substantive intellect a sound philosophical argument. If such an argument resides in this particular essay, however, it is not anxious to be found.

In its stead is advocacy. Not unlike Harold Hill’s proclamation –“O, we’ve got trouble! Right here in River City!”-- Jorgensen’s mantra is that Western classical music is endangered: Trouble with a capital T (Tanglewood) that rhymes with P, and that stands for Populism. The situation is sufficiently alarming that “Music teachers of all stripes urgently need to address this marginalization of Western classical music as a matter of public policy” (p 130).

Such advocacy has its place. Philosophy and advocacy, moreover, inevitably overlap at some junctures. Advocators, however, largely marshal whatever sundry propositions may persuade those open or susceptible to their appeal. Philosophers, by tradition, are obliged to offer a more tightly reasoned explanation of why something may be true. Our currency is a soundly constructed argument whose propositions can withstand logical scrutiny. In the spirit of collegial dialogue, my purpose here is to probe how Dr. Jorgensen’s analysis, as presently constructed, tends not to fill that bill. (1)
The larger framework for Jorgensen’s position is a timely reminder that some sense of preservation or conservation should accompany the transformation of music education. She intimates that an ultimate argument she may, eventually, wish to make is that Western classical music should be the preeminent, if not sole, focus for music education in a democratic society. Such a contention would be an intriguing one. It is my intent here, however, neither to prognosticate nor to analyze the logic of an argument Dr. Jorgensen signals she may want to make. Rather, my more modest aim is to inspect the logic she does offer in this particular essay.

Such inspection begins with her premises. One of the fundamental propositions of Jorgensen’s analysis is that Western classical music is a vanishing and, thus, endangered species. Unfortunately, to put the matter colloquially, this dog won’t hunt.

First, of course, is the problem of definition. What, precisely, is the phenomenon, or perhaps phenomena, here called “Western classical music?” As portrayed in Dr. Jorgensen’s paper, the concept of Western classical music is like a fisherman’s stew. The cook takes stock of the ingredients on hand and keeps adding things until it includes a bit of everything. According to the ever-expanding contours of Western classical music in the course of Jorgensen’s essay, it is (1) not even “Western,” because it has multi-cultural roots and dimensions (p 134); (2) not just classical in an etymological sense, because it also encompasses jazz, rock, country, and gospel (p 135); and (3) not even simply music, because it also admits multimedia possibilities (p 136).

In her recent book, *Transforming Music Education*, Dr. Jorgensen ably describes this music in terms of five images: aesthetic object, symbol, practical activity, experience, and agency. (2) In her essay, these images are conflated and transferred into three basic explanations of why classical music is important: (1) art for art’s sake; (2) intellectual development, which includes musical literacy; and (3) cultural preservation.
That such explanations are not always mutually compatible is okay, given Dr. Jorgensen’s overall dialectical stance. That factor does not trouble me. What does perplex me, in the context of this particular essay, is that these explanations appear to be in search of something to explain. They are homeless in this context because the essay reflects an ongoing, expanding, and not altogether helpful ambiguity about what Western classical music is.

Secondly, why is “Western classical music,” whatever it is, endangered? Specifically, what data inform this presumption? Such queries, of course, spawn several offspring, e.g.: Where, specifically, is Western classical music endangered? Across the whole of human society and its educational agencies, or in specific locations among particular people?

In such respects, the essay appeals primarily to anecdotal conversations and general observations. It is also indebted to certain premises in Julian Johnson’s book Who Needs Classical Music? (3). But such appeals, as presently constructed, appear to me rather long on allusion and rather short on detail.

On the other hand, various data conceivably suggest quite the opposite. With respect to Western society at large, for instance, a recent British survey revealed that classical music ticket sales in that nation were almost twice that of premiership football tickets. (4) Desmond Mark cites figures to suggest that in Vienna, Austria, the number of live classical music concerts has increased by at least a factor of 10 compared with that city’s heyday as the cultural center of the Habsburg Empire, even given an overall decline in the city’s population. (5) The Sydney Morning Herald ran a story not long ago lamenting a lack of foresight now evident in the construction of the Sydney Opera House, which, in 1972, was erected in a location that left little room for expanding its size to meet current demands for tickets to its events. In an analysis of a variety of hard data from economic and sociological studies for the American Symphony
Orchestra Institute, Douglas Dempster concludes there is a bull market for classical music. It is, says he, more prevalent today than ever before in its history:

Judging by the popularity and success of classical music, we live in something of a classical golden age. Classical music is more widely heard and available, performed at a higher level of preparation and artistry, both in the US, and I would wager around the world, than it ever has been before…if classical music is in trouble, it is trouble that is simply not evident in tangible measures of its popularity and availability. (6)

Within the specific context of music education, the rather ambiguous definition of Western classical music supplied by Jorgensen’s essay makes it difficult to know what kind of data to seek. However, content analyses of MENC national conventions 1984-2000 show that performances by school ensembles constitutes the second largest percentage of sessions at the those conventions, exceeded only by the category labeled educational clinics, workshops, and lectures. (7) My own informal perusal of those convention books suggests that classical music (I limited my search to compositions by recognized composers in the Euro-centric tradition (8)) easily constitutes the bulk of the repertory in those MENC performances.

With respect to secondary school performance ensembles, I will confine myself to the area I know best: choral music. Fairly recent research investigations of choral literature used in schools indicate, at least indirectly, that compositions by “brand name” Euro-centric composers are still regularly recommended for and regularly performed by secondary school ensembles. (9) This contention is supported by similar listings of desirable repertoire provided by choral methods materials frequently used in university methods courses, and by required festival repertoire lists published by state associations of music educators. (10) The past decade, moreover, has witnessed a veritable explosion of research and interest in sight-reading, (11) as
well as a movement in many quarters to require sight-singing as part of state and regional school choral festivals.

Elementary school music textbooks may be a special case. If classical music is as intricate and complex as Dr. Jorgensen contends, i.e., engaging the intellect and the senses more fully than any other kind of music can, one could hardly expect second graders, for instance, to jump right into formal, full blown analyses or performances of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* or Bizet’s *Carmen*. Still, basic concepts ultimately important to such analyses and performances are, on balance, thoughtfully endorsed in many recently published music textbook series designed for the elementary school level: steady beat, matching pitch, high/low, same/different, loud/soft, melody/harmony, theme/variation, the history and culture of various musics, and on and on. Unless over a generation of scientific studies on how people learn are dead wrong (12), such practice reflects task analysis, sequencing, and spiraling, not some sort of aesthetic corruption or dumbing down. How else are we supposed to go about it?

Desmond Mark raises an interesting point. The audience for classical music worldwide, according to the demographics, is largely gray-haired. But, he says, it “it is a very naïve conclusion that this audience is doomed to banish soon and forever…This is the audience for classical music ..(and it) is renewing itself constantly” (13) He goes on to suggest that “most music educators will agree that for instance Bach’s B-minor mass, Beethoven’s Eroica or Wagner’s Parsifal have not been composed primarily for teenagers from 11-19 as a target group.” (14)

A factor sometimes overlooked by critics who mourn the inclusion of some multi-cultural musics in elementary-school book series is that such musics inevitably appear in score form. Such enscoreing is a westernizing process that subtly censors and re-structures musical
pheneomena by its particular symbol system. (15) By Dr. Jorgensen’s accounting, this system is one of the hallmarks of the Western classical tradition. Even music that originated in more oral non-Western cultures has been, as it were, pasteurized and sanitized by western notation, for convenient consumption via Western lenses of literacy. In this sense, multicultural musics included in these textbooks have been westernized anyway.

If Dr. Jorgensen’s concern is the conservation of musical integrity and heritage, why consider that issue from only one side of the street? To contend that Western classical music is marginalized by the simple presence of multicultural musics in curricular materials, while simultaneously ignoring the colonialization and co-opting of non-Western musics by the Western classical tradition in those same materials, seems a bit myopic. But it may underscore and serve as a clue to the contours of some other dynamics reflected in this paper.

Dr. Jorgensen asserts that the Tanglewood Symposium “contributed to a populist stance…diminishing the role and presence of Western classical music and highlighting popular and vernacular musics at MENC conferences and in the elementary and secondary schools in the United States” (p 131). Given, however, (1) that a case can likely be made for an undiminished presence of classical music, and (2) Dr. Jorgensen’s apparent view that the presence of popular and vernacular musics (again, definitions would be helpful) somehow are undesirable in music education, could it be that “populism,” and, even perhaps, “popularity” are the operative villains here?

Julian Johnson’s main thesis is that classical music must necessarily engage in a culture war with so-called popular musics, hence the second part of his book’s title: *Cultural Choice and Musical Values*. Some classical music devotees tend to insist that this music have pride of place, even if that place be gained by deposing a straw man. Perhaps such is to be expected with an “art
for art’s sake” perspective that simultaneously claims to be in but not of this world. Simplistically put, classical music framed primarily with an Enlightenment construct of a transcendental aesthetic can afford neither to be too popular nor placed on an equal footing with other musics, lest its ultimate grounding in “good taste” be suspect. (Interestingly, Kant’s initial title for his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, was *The Critique of Taste*) (16)

Dr. Jorgensen, I suggest, has to some degree uncritically bought into and appropriated for music education that stance as framed by Julius Johnson. In so doing, she appears to contend not simply that classical music per se requires preservation, but also that a privileged position for classical music is warranted. Dr. Jorgensen, in fact, comes very close to claiming reverse discrimination: because other musics now have been admitted to North American music education, Western classical music is thereby disadvantaged. Unfortunately, in appealing to differences between the Yale Seminar and the Tanglewood Symposium to make that case, she overstates, and perhaps misreads, the conclusions of both.

Sound arguments can be offered to suggest that Yale did not rally against popular music and that Tanglewood did not necessarily devalue classical music. Claude Palisca, in speaking for the Yalies, in fact pointed out that music education had neglected popular and folk musics, and that it needed to correct that oversight forthwith. His argument was against “pseudo-music,” the stuff that students of my generation experienced in elementary music classes along with their *Adventures of Dick and Jane*. His main argument was not against including popular and vernacular musics in the curriculum. Indeed, the final Seminar report states that music education repertory “should be more representative than it is, not only of our Western musical heritage at its best, but also of jazz and folk music, and of non-Western cultures.” (17)
The Tangies, on the other hand, basically argued that citizens of a democratic society deserved good music period, regardless of that music’s class affiliations. This stance, while arguably anti-elitist, can hardly be considered anti-intellectual. Dr. Jorgensen’s paper, however, curiously overlooks such nuances in favor of highlighting the political differences that surrounded the two symposia.

Is there trouble in River City? Possibly. But the particular logic of Jorgensen’s essay, as presently structured, has not made that case. (18)

Indeed, prior to investing in bandwagon uniforms for the agenda Dr. Jorgensen proposes, let me suggest that at least two of the remedies she entertains deserve careful scrutiny, lest they be uncritically embraced. One proposal is that we lobby for alternative teacher certification procedures for musicians who have not graduated from music education programs, in order “to attract practicing musicians to elementary and secondary education” (p 138). Frankly, I find that to be the most astonishing statement in the entire paper. The point seems to be that present certification curricula allow insufficient time for development as a musician (something we may indeed need to examine in certain parts of the country). But it rests to some extent on an unvoiced assumption, i.e., that musicians are pretty much capable teachers by nature.

Permit me an autobiographical parable. Many years ago, under that very assumption, I began what turned out to be a lifelong career and love affair with music education. On reflection, however, I am obliged to offer a “bah humbug,” lest the profession begin to yearn naively for the mistakes of yesteryear. I found myself in an inner city junior high school armed with an undergraduate degree in applied voice, a certificate in performance from a German conservatory, and what I was encouraged to believe was a fair shot at a career as a recitalist.
Musically, I was likely as formally equipped as a person my age could be equipped. But I never pursued courses in music pedagogy. Nor did I have any student teaching experience.

So what did musicianship equip me to do that first semester with those 90 eighth graders in my first period chorus (only two of whom, by the way, had actually signed up for the class, and all of whom were economically and academically disadvantaged by any and all measures)? I had them prepare a performance of the first half of Handel’s *Messiah*. I kid you not. Changing voices? (What are those?) Sequencing instruction? (Never heard of it.) Addressing various styles of learning? (There’s more than one?) You haven’t eaten today? (Well, let me offer you this aesthetic and intellectual experience).

Long story short: Wonderful faculty colleagues showed me the ropes. I was blessed beyond measure with students who more or less patiently endured those first two years. They taught me far more, about music and about life, than I taught them. But, overall, it was way too much on the job training., and patently unfair to my students, my colleagues, and to me.

Secondly, Dr. Jorgensen’s suggestion that notational literacy be expected of every elementary, secondary, college and university student is becoming, simply from the perspective of utility, increasingly unnecessary. At the very least, it is no longer nearly as revolutionary or as complicated as she might think. The same technological developments that contribute to making classical music today both more accessible and less privileged, appear poised to render many aspects of traditional approaches to notational literacy superfluous. (18) Today, for instance, it is possible for students to compose, enscore, and hear music without any prior recourse whatsoever to “Every Good Boy Does Fine” or mastering key signatures or rhythmic dictation.

It is also quite possible for computers to color code and display themes, motives, developments, recapitulations, and other elements of formal analyses as larger works are being
heard. Any future focus on literacy needs to take into account such technological developments, and to equip students in the best use of such technology. Why should students in general education, i.e., those who have no interest in performing, be required to master the intricate symbol system that is western notation before getting to “the good stuff,” i.e., the music itself? Is Western notation a means, or is it an end in itself? More importantly, who gets to decide?

Estelle Jorgensen raises interesting and, sometimes, provocative ideas in her essay. I thank her for that. I thank her as well for her continuing dedication to pushing the envelope in the philosophy of music education, and for the privilege of being her (I hope, not too annoying) gadfly in this forum.

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NOTES

(1) Let me be clear: My acknowledged role in this forum is to engage Dr. Jorgensen in dialogue. Such cordial engagement is part of the traditional and necessary work of philosophical criticism. In that capacity, however, I am not obliged to make a full, formal argument to counter hers. Nor do I claim to do so. She has done the hard work. My modest task is to inspect, as it were, the soundness of her architectural blueprints. Should one or more premises be weak, the conclusions that follow may not necessarily be true, and thus, according to traditional canons of logic, her argument, though perhaps valid, would not be sound. Dr. Jorgensen, of course, is free to restructure or discard certain parts of her argument, or she may ignore my assessment altogether.


(8) N.B. I would not want to see this procedure turned into a definition of Western classical music. It is simply a matter of convenience, given the one-dimensional character of these particular sources (lists of performed repertoire found in MENC conference books, which were examined because Dr. Jorgensen suggested that Western classical music had a “diminished” presence in such venues). However, it does raise some interesting issues not fully addressed by Jorgensen’s essay. Which ultimately defines “Western classical music” –the composer, the performers, the audience, the venue, the score, the quality or character of the performance, its experienced Gestalt, society, recognized experts, all of the above?


(13) Desmond Mark, op cit, 12.

(14) Desmond Mark, ibid., 12.


(17) In Michael L. Mark, 250.

(18) How one defines ‘River City’ could be an operative variable. Jorgensen’s essay appears at some times to refer primarily the United States, at other junctures to Western society at large, and at least once to the state of Indiana. By the law of averages, Western classical music may indeed be in trouble in state $x$, school district $y$, or region $z$. But I have addressed Jorgensen’s position as she chiefly expressed it, i.e., in more global rather than more particular terms.