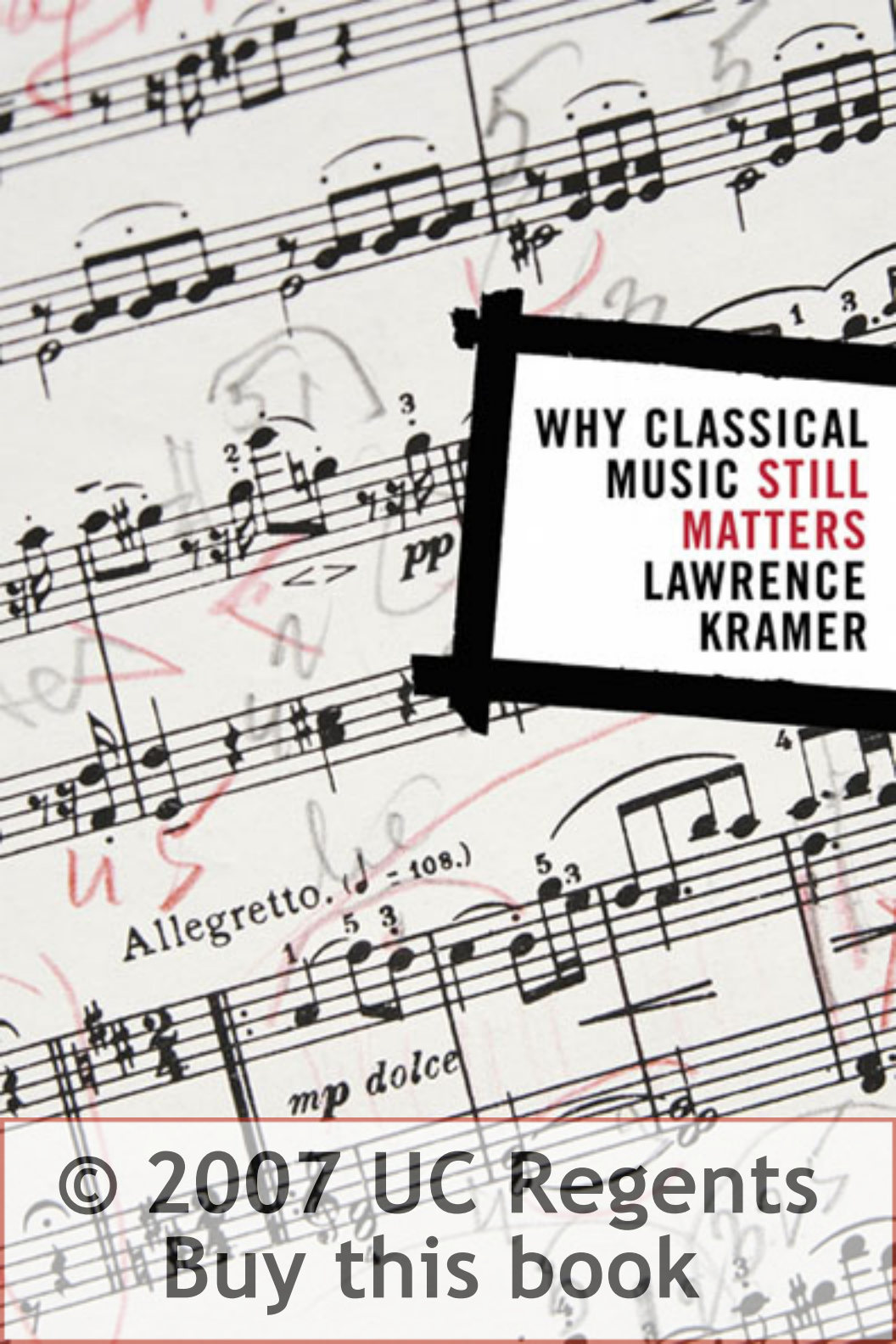

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Classical Music and Its Values

Classical music has people worried. To many it seems on shaky ground in America. For more than a decade the drumbeat of its funeral march has been steady. The signs are rife: a wobbly CD market, symphony orchestras struggling to find money and audiences, the press and the Internet fretting over the music's fever chart. The public radio stations that were once the mainstay of classical music broadcasting have been replacing music of any kind with talk, talk, talk. The recording industry is less and less willing to subsidize classical albums for the sake of status and tradition; it has cut back on new recordings and stuffed the "classical" category with treacly high-toned crossover projects that brilliantly manage to combine the worst of both the classical and popular worlds. And classical music is long, long gone from the television networks that once upon a time maintained their own symphony orchestras and broadcast such fare as Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts—in prime time, no less.

You would never guess that fifty years ago the music was flourishing on the strength of a recent invention, the long-playing record, which made it more available than ever before. You would never guess that a hundred years ago it was the hottest thing going on the cultural scene. People longed for it, argued about it, swooned over it. In those days you heard it live and hot or not at all, and no one had to worry about that musty "classical" label we're now stuck with. The echoes of that musical world were still audible when I was a teenager in New York City in the early 1960s. Some of my most vivid memories of the time involve summer nights in a stadium filled with people from all walks of life, from all over the city. The acoustics were terrible; the pleasure was overflowing; the ovations were long and noisy.

Free concerts in New York's Central Park can still draw crowds, but the cultural atmosphere has distinctly changed. No wonder that when one classical music lover meets another, each heaves a silent sigh of relief: the fear that the music will become extinct creeps down a notch.

The danger of extinction can be exaggerated by these anxious fans. There are statistics that tell a happier story—healthy Internet downloads and a robust increase in concert offerings over earlier decades, with audiences to match. But the feeling of danger is itself a fact to be reckoned with. Something still feels wrong; something still *is* wrong. The problem is perhaps less economic or demographic than it is cultural, less a question of the music's survival than of its role. A small cohort of the population (and it was never much more) may still favor classical music, but the music does not mean what it once did. For what it's worth, my anecdotal impression is that people are generally less knowledgeable about it than they were even a generation ago. People still

listen, but the days when listening to classical music could feel like an integral part of cultural life are long gone. We know, some of us, how to enjoy it, but we don't know what to do with it. In this sense, classical music is indeed on shaky ground in America.

One reason why is the loss of a credible way to maintain that people *ought* to listen to this music, that the music is something that should not be missed. Our growing reluctance to impose prescriptive or judgmental *should*s has obscured the power of the *should* that says, "Don't deprive yourself of this pleasure, this astonishment, this conception!" If you don't listen, no one is supposed to mind. No wonder, then, that many culturally literate people who visit museum exhibits and keep up with the latest books, movies, and ideas think nothing of being classical-music illiterates. There is nothing, any more, that one just has to hear.

Meanwhile, the music industry relentlessly pushes its more profitable products out into a soundtracked world where they can't help being heard. Music in general becomes something to get excited about but not to take too seriously. Status accrues, not to music, but to its performers. Bands and singers become temporary demigods and permanent media fodder, their charisma and celebrity usurping the luminosity that music once claimed as its own. Lovers of popular music aren't always gratified by this; many are well aware that "product" tends to be more important than creativity. But the product is what there is. For many people in the first years of the third millennium, the supposedly timeless body of classical music is just irrelevant.

For me it is anything but. I not only love this music but also make my career as an academic writing about it. Like many in both positions, I've often wondered what, if anything, people like me can do to help fix things.

Two efforts, it's seemed very clear, could certainly help make things worse. The first would be to explain patiently that if people would only absorb some technical information, follow the instructions of an expert, and listen for some formal routines, they could come to understand this music and discover that it is not only "great" but also good for them. Virgil Thomson long ago skewered this approach as the "music-appreciation racket." The second bad choice is to try hectoring people into the belief that this music really is good for them by praising it and its composers in extravagantly high-minded terms and generally suggesting that the best people like the best music. The first attitude is condescending and authoritarian, the second pompous and moralistic. If I felt that classical music really supported such attitudes—or rather, needed to support them, since the attitudes themselves have been all too common—I too would run for the nearest exit.

What, then, can someone like me do to help? Well, maybe nothing, but I don't want to believe that. This book is my version of "maybe something; maybe this." It springs from an effort to shed both my long-accustomed assumptions and my professional interests to ask for a simple answer to a simple question: What's in this music for me? In other words, why does classical music still matter?

I like listening to it, of course, but I like listening to some other kinds of music too. With classical music I also like to eavesdrop on myself, to listen in on my own experience. I feel impelled to think about what the music demands and what it offers, what visions it summons and what logic it pursues. These and similar questions seem inseparable from the music, which poses them in the very act of capturing attention and giving pleasure. And they are questions with a wider resonance. This music provides as

much insight as it invites; thinking and writing about it gives me a means of pondering big questions of culture, history, identity, desire, and meaning. The music is full of powerful feelings, but they're feelings that are always pushing beyond their own boundaries to open and refresh these questions. This music stimulates my imagination and my speculative energies while it sharpens my senses and quickens my sense of experience.

Of course all music, whatever its type, is a gift to its devotees. Music enhances life; almost everyone loves some form of it. The real question about classical music is not whether it rewards our attention but how it does—the very thing I've only just begun to suggest. Its rewards, I'm convinced, have nothing to do with the elitism and esotericism too often associated with this music. They are accessible to anyone with open ears and a sense of adventure; they require no mysterious rites of initiation. To find them out it is necessary only to talk about musical experience with confidence and precision.

Here classical music may have a certain advantage in the rich vocabulary available to describe it. This music has historically maintained a prolific dialogue with language, even though, like all music, it is supposed to work, and does work, at levels above or below language, even when the music, being sung, uses language with great expressive power. One of the most remarkable features of classical music is the way it always seems to teeter on the edge of speech. We can never know just what it—almost—says, but we can harmonize our words with its sounds in ways worth hearing.

That's what this book tries to do. My idea for it was to identify some of the distinctive life-enhancing qualities of classical music by using language freely to show them in action. By presenting an example of how one listener enters into a kind of intimate dialogue

with this music, its history, and its values, I might be able to suggest to others that the music really is worth bothering about. Those who already believe in its value might find that the resources of their own dialogues can expand in gratifying, perhaps unexpected ways. At the very least the question could be raised afresh among both the music's friends and its foes. A fresh airing is just what we need at this point. So I decided to share some of my own musical dialogue, built up of listening, thinking, writing, and a bit of lore: not in raw form, of course, but shaped and elaborated to bring out its hidden consistencies, including consistencies previously hidden from the author.

No hectoring, no lectures, no pretense of instruction from on high: just a record of lived and living experience that might strike a chord with the experience of others. The idea is simply to suggest by example how classical music can become a source of pleasure, discovery, and reflection tuned not only to the world of the music, rich though that is, but also to the even richer world beyond the music.

This project involves some risks, including preachiness and pretentiousness. It's pretty awkward when academics pretend to shed their robes to seek a wider audience and end up doing justice neither to the audience they seek nor to their academic friends. But risks, like learning, go with any venture worth trying. So, though mindful of the fabled astronomer who fell in the ditch while looking at the stars, I will trust that my steps have better instincts and hope for an unmuddy outcome.

As an academic, I can imagine several other problems that need to be faced at the outset. These musical remarks, someone is sure to say, are arbitrary, merely subjective, untrustworthy as

knowledge of anything but my whims. Besides, the remarks don't rise much above the level of—dread term!—program notes. They don't go deep enough because you can't go deeply into music without getting into questions of technique that only experts can deal with.

To these imagined charges, I cheerfully plead a qualified "guilty." Art, being formed from imagination and addressed to the imagination, needs to be answered imaginatively. Some learning, of course, is involved; no one's imagination benefits from ignorance. But responses to art neither can nor should be verifiable, only credible, and they achieve credibility by a lucky combination of knowledge, insight, and a feel for playing hunches. Interpretation may inevitably be subjective, but subjectivity is neither arbitrary nor whimsical. We have to learn subjectivity, be taught how to have it and practice it: much of subjectivity is in the public domain. And an idea that begins subjectively does not have to end that way. It can and should be tested, discussed, submitted to evidence, examined for reasonableness. The notion that we can keep reason and imagination in separate compartments, separate cages, does a great disservice to both.

As for the program note, it's a fine institution if by it one means a few words offering curious listeners an angle at which to cock their ears, a device to fine-tune their hearing. My remarks do aim to do this. They dwell on what anyone can hear and ask how to hear it well. But they are more conceptually ambitious than most program notes and less wedded to the mystique of musical form. In them I try to reflect both on and with music in contexts abuzz with matters of general importance. And I go into technical detail, with minimal jargon, only far enough to connect the formal language of music with significant measures of pleasure and understanding.

One of the implicit points of this book is that a little such observation can go a long way.

This is not to deny that a lot can go a long way too. I'm trying to write nonacademically here, not antiacademically. But music does not communicate esoterically, or, if it does, it ceases to communicate at all. There is no reason to feel that you don't really understand it if you don't know the code. Musical meaning does not depend on being decoded; it depends on being lived. My remarks here are addressed neither to experts nor to nonexperts but just to you, whoever you are, holding this book and reading these lines because something about the topic matters to you.

If classical music doesn't make sense at this level of human interest, the other, supposedly deeper layers just don't matter much, at least to me. I want to reject the idea that there's a deep musical truth that loose talk about meaning and expression obscures and dumbs down. The meaning and expression are what matters; the rest should just be a way of showing how and why in more detail to those who find the detail compelling. (I do, of course; that's why I write about music for a living.) My aim in this book is to encourage an activity that nonprofessionals think they can't do and professionals feel they shouldn't do. I want to encourage doing things with classical music so that classical music can do things for us. That, even more than the content of my statements—and I care plenty about the content—is the heart of this project.

But how to keep this heart beating? I don't want to string together random musical remarks, but neither do I want to be systematic or professorial. And I want to be able to speak personally at times while also making use of such knowledge as I may have. My problem, in fact, is one I share with classical music

itself. How do you reconcile richness of detail with a guiding thread? How do you find your way, enjoy the passage, and avoid the Minotaur?

My solution here is to keep this book focused on indispensable human concerns, the stuff of real life. Music may sometimes offer us needed relief from life's burdens, but it serves us better, I believe, when it offers us insight, intuition, and empathy. My topics are memory, ecstasy, identity, and war; they are suffering and longing, solitude and community, love and death. I write about these things through classical music—write about them *because* I am writing about this music, and write with the understanding that the music both draws meaning from them and imparts meaning to them.

These topics arise not as abstractions or generic themes but as concrete, historically specific matters of importance that find some of their many voices in this music. Sometimes what these voices convey is challenging; although I always aim to write clearly, I trust the reader to accompany me through the occasional rough patch. There are not many of them. My effort involves stories about how particular works of music can draw the listener into a vital dialogue that is the very opposite of recondite or rarefied. It asks what such music has made it possible to hear and to heed. It seeks to bring out the distinctive alliance of listening, subjective enrichment, and social participation basic to classical music. With no apologies, it treats this music as a gateway to the experience of a primal sympathy between sentience and sound.

The role of classical music in movies is prominent in this book; no modern medium has influenced the history of listening more than the cinema, which is also the locale where classical

music today, if only in bits and pieces, finds its largest audience. The role of performance is prominent, too, since classical music comes into being in the passage from a written score to a sounding performance—a simple and obvious journey that is neither simple nor obvious. But because for most people enjoying music no longer means knowing how to play it, the experience of music making remains in the background. Or rather it acts from the background. I find both a model and an inspiration for this project in my own eager but maladroit piano playing. Like such playing, listening to classical music involves both unselfconscious absorption in the sweep of a piece as a whole and quickened attention to special details. This wavering balance holds the key both to my way of proceeding in this book and to the beliefs that underlie it.

The results are anything but exhaustive. Many composers and compositions I value greatly never come up. They don't have to. The idea is to evoke a frame of reference and a frame of mind in which they might have, in which they might yet, as compellingly as a tune that pops unbidden into your head. My hope is that by doing this I can suggest the wider power of resonance—of sound, thought, feeling, belief, and value—that constitutes the enduring relevance of classical music.

That power comes from the discovery, the development, and the dissemination of a special type of listening. Music is never simply heard; it comes to us through practices of listening that help form our sense of the world. Classical music is a pivotal event in the history of listening, a history that it in part makes possible. Its impact on how we listen, what we listen for, and with what significance will take this whole book to unfold. Meanwhile it is

important to be clear about just what prompts this listening. When I speak of classical music here I am not using the catchall commercial category that takes in some six centuries of very diverse practice, including opera, a theatrical genre with its own quite different set of problems and values. For purposes of this book, the term *classical music* refers to a specific body of nontheatrical music produced since the eighteenth century with one aim in view: to be listened to.

Or perhaps we should say to be listened *into*. All music trains the ear to hear it properly, but classical music trains the ear to hear with a peculiar acuity. It wants to be explored, not just heard. It "trains" the ear in the sense of pointing, seeking: it trains both the body's ear and the mind's to hearken, to attend closely, to listen deeply, as one wants to listen to something not to be missed: a secret disclosed, a voice that enchants or warns or soothes or understands, a faint echo of the music traditionally said to hold the world itself together in a kind of harmony.

This kind of listening is done not with the ear but with the whole person. It is not the result of learning a technique (the stuff of the "music-appreciation racket") but of adopting an attitude. It is not a passive submission to the music but an active engagement with it, a meeting of our ability to become absorbed—sometimes for just a few moments or even less, sometimes for hours on end—with the music's capacity to absorb us. In attending to classical music, we also *tend* it: we tend to it and tend toward it, we adopt and argue with its way of moving and being. We dwell on it by dwelling in it. We don't simply realize something *about* it; we *realize* the music in a more primary sense: we give it realization, as one realizes a plan or vision or a desire. Such listening is even a mental equivalent to the performance of the music as the performer

might feel it while making expressive decisions, shaping, phrasing, pacing, emphasizing, hiding, revealing, conveying. Classical music performance is also a practice of listening.

Such listening is perhaps particularly important at this historical moment, the very moment that seems to be most in danger of losing it. In a world that moves at digital speed, a world increasingly crowded by people, ideas, and agendas, a maelstrom of technological change, ecological danger, and cultural conflicts that are often virulent even when they manage, ever more narrowly, to avoid violence, the ability to listen deeply, to open the labyrinths of the ear and be sounded out by the voices that address us, may be the very ability we want the most.

Want in both senses: lack and desire. This want shows up revealingly in connection with another of classical music's present troubles. It is often said that the music is fading because contemporary composers have lost or spurned their audiences and left only a museum culture behind, something that may be monumental but that, like any monument, is the sign of something dead. The complaint about contemporary composition has some truth to it, although not the whole truth; today's classical scene is full of moving and exciting new music, some of which we will touch on. But the museum metaphor is misguided. It gives too little credit to museums. Classical music should only be so lucky as to have a museum culture. Museums have become more popular than ever just as classical music has been floundering.

This is a result partly of clever marketing, but partly of the discovery that museums can offer a space that permits cultivation without requiring stuffiness. Unlike the traditional concert hall, the museum has become an animated space by affording opportunities to combine sociability, informality, and the enjoyment of

art. Concert producers sorely need to find a way to do the same. But beyond these incitements, the museum has become a desirable space precisely because it is shaped for unhurried reflection in a world where unhurried reflection is the rarest of commodities. It is a space outside the hurly-burly of the world from which it is possible, in imagination, in fantasy, in symbol, to reconstitute the world in relation to human desire. The art on exhibit may be tragic, ironic, even brutal, without interdicting this temporary world-making. But it would be disingenuous to deny that another thing museums do is exhibit art that preserves the traditional measures of human desire side by side with the images of tragedy and brutality. So in a certain sense the museum is not only a space of world-making but an institution of human hope.

Classical music, I would like to say, is the same kind of thing: a living museum, living precisely because it is a kind of museum, and, like a museum, a place that exhibits new works as well as old. But just as the museum focuses the eye not only through the art seen but through the ways of seeing that the museum affords, so classical music trains the ear to hearken not only through the music heard but through the ways of listening that the music institutes.

A concern for the values made available by attentive listening and threatened by its erosion in contemporary society is something I share with another recent writer on this topic. The writer, as it happens, is British—proof that the malaise of classical music is not just an American problem. In *Who Needs Classical Music?* Julian Johnson invokes the traditional distinction between art and entertainment to argue that classical music, music as art, is something we all need. Such music distances us

from the distracting immediacy of everyday life. It gives us a vision of authentic subjectivity. Listening to its quasi-autonomous unfolding thus becomes both a social act and an ethical act. It is a social act in that it resists the relentless pressures of consumerism and the culture industry, the bread and circuses of the contemporary world. It is an ethical act in that it enables us to affirm our humanity more fully against the ideological and economic administration of our lives by forces that do not govern us by our true consent. Johnson is not averse to saying that classical music is redemptive. Listened to closely, its form gives us an ideal vision of what we may be.

I have no wish to quarrel with this position. Part of me is in sympathy with it. But part of me is disturbed by its implicit revival of the idea that an absorption in high culture, "the best that has been thought and said," can make us better people. I do not think that classical music has a patent on authenticity or idealism or an immunity from practical interests. Nor do I think that music, any music, can redemptively disentangle us from our worldly destinies. Its power, rather, is to entangle us with those destinies in ways that can be profoundly important.

Classical music is exceptionally good at this for the very reasons that Johnson and many others think it does the contrary. This music does draw close attention to the course of its unfolding; it does insist on its own presence above and beyond the event of its performance and the force of its expression. But in doing so classical music draws closer to the texture of experience, not further away from it. Just how this happens we will hear as this book unfolds. Suffice it for now to say that although becoming absorbed in the logic and play, the movement and the texture, of this music offers extraordinary possibilities of pleasure,

this absorption does not involve ignoring everything but the music. It does not foster what has sometimes been called "structural listening," either as an ideal or as a practical likelihood. We always listen with worldly ears, enveloped with fragments of language, imagery, memory, and fantasy that embed this music, and any music, in the very world from which we've been told to think of it as abstracted and told we're not listening well unless we think so.

We've been told wrong. For most of the nineteenth century, classical music gave most of its listeners what felt like open access to the life of feeling. For part of the twentieth century, it continued to do so to ever-widening audiences created by the development of radio and sound recording—which, however, also created the mass audience for popular music. Caught out by a formidable rival on one hand and a loss of participants on the other, classical music lost part of its emotional transparency as the century progressed. Music that once seemed utterly available now seemed to harbor secrets. Newly composed music became harder to hear, more, perhaps, because of this change in aural perspective than because some modern music (though by no means all) is difficult. A defensive reaction was inevitable. After a while, the friends of classical music began to take cultural isolation as its natural and desirable condition. Listening to it gradually turned from something that anyone could do enjoyably into a disciplined procedure that required training by experts.

These developments were not entirely negative. They spurred musical innovation and encouraged hard thinking about musical aesthetics and musical form. Their net effect, however, was damaging and alienating. The culture of classical music came to seem, not without justice, mandarin and out of touch, ripe for

obsolescence. As I said at the start, my motive in this book is to give a tug in the other direction. The energies of this music are still vital; its value is still inestimable. The trick is to unlock the energies and recover the value. What's needed for that is a way to refresh listening: to reconnect the listener with a community and culture of listening, and to do so as far as possible without anxiety or defensiveness.

One proof that this project is not merely quixotic came amid the shock and horror following the events of September 11, 2001. For many people trying to come to terms with the cataclysm, classical music provided a perhaps unexpected, perhaps momentary, but nonetheless real resource, consoling in both an emotional and something like a metaphysical sense. And also a communal sense, for this was a matter not just of listening but of listening together—something that recording technologies often obscure but that all listening ought in some sense to be. In New York the Philharmonic gave a benefit concert featuring Brahms's *German Requiem;* the Metropolitan Opera staged a benefit performance of segments from three Verdi operas and projected it onto an outdoor screen overlooking the plaza at Lincoln Center.

Such music proliferated around the country. In New Orleans, for example, as reported by the *New York Times:*

> The [Louisiana Philharmonic] is trying to help people deal with the jumble of emotions that welled up after this month's stunning wave of terror. At its opening night concert, just two days after the attacks on New York and Washington, the program was changed to include the contemplative adagio movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 9.

> Over the days that followed, members of the orchestra formed small groups to play in lobbies of office buildings. They distributed copies of a statement pledging "to redouble our effort to keep beauty and harmony and music in our beloved community."
>
> Crowds of people stopped to watch and listen. Tears glistened in more than a few eyes.
>
> "When people left our opening night concert, you could see they had shed so much of their weight," [said Sharon Litwin, the orchestra's executive director]. . . . "I think everyone who heard our musicians this week came away with a deep appreciation for the intrinsic power of music. It did what music is supposed to do: it touched your soul, it soothed, it calmed."

Music, of course, is supposed to do more than soothe and calm. There are also those *other* three movements of Beethoven's Ninth, full of violence, exuberance, and rapture. But the language of "beauty and harmony" was what people needed in these difficult weeks, and music, in this case classical music above all, could justify that language and seem to speak it. The "intrinsic power" of this music was not the specific power to soothe and calm but the power to do what music is supposed to do, precisely that, whatever it may be: to give what is needed, give what is asked for, without qualification or stint. The music, in doing that, gave not only consolation but also the sense of community without which the consolation itself would scarcely have been possible.

This perhaps explains part of my own experience at the time. I found it impossible to listen to music (any music, really, but I mean classical music) in isolation; the CD player in my study was silenced. Without support from fellow listeners, I found the very consolations of the music, the architecture of sound, the

channeling of energy, the spectrum of goodhearted feelings, almost impossible to bear. They seemed discredited, rendered glib and foolish by the enormity of events.

There is something to be said for this impression, as there is something to be said for the critical, questioning, obstreperous side of the music to which I was temporarily deaf and that the darkness of the time had made it necessary to put in abeyance. At some time I would need to ask music to give that back, not as a way of opposing the effects of beauty and harmony but as a way of securing them, justifying them, making them credible again. For the time being, the best I could do on my own was not to listen passively but to listen at the piano, listen by playing: playing, as I usually do, pieces a shade or two harder than I can play well, or at full tempo, or with full confidence. As long as I had to struggle to grasp the music in an affirmative spirit, the spirit would not wholly elude my grasp. Perhaps it was the shared element of struggle that made listening in the company of others so powerful a source of solace in the time of crisis.

But just what is it that this listening heeded? What makes classical music the special thing I claim it is? The remainder of this first chapter is devoted to these questions. It will suggest some answers by looking first more closely at focused listening, then at the nature and meaning of classical composition, and finally at the emotional makeup of classical music. These considerations will bring us to some preliminary conclusions that the book as a whole will test and develop.

As I said earlier, classical music developed with a single aim: to be listened to. Listened to, that is, rather than heard as part of some other activity, usually a social or religious ritual. As noted

earlier, too, this sort of listening involves both focused attention and active involvement. Its attention is a form of attending; it is not just a hearing but a hearkening. To practice it is to presuppose that listening is a discrete form of activity, of interest in itself independent of what is heard. Listening so conceived is capable of sustaining personal, social, and spiritual values depending on how it goes, and when, and for whom. Such listening quickly develops the ambition to get beyond the quicksilver transitory character of hearing in the moment. It seeks to embody itself in forms that can endure and so become the "classics" on which a culture of heightened listening depends.

Classical music invented listening in this sense. The invention went along with the eighteenth century's epoch-making concern with freedom of thought and feeling. It flourished along with the political and philosophical "discovery" that human beings are grounded in deep inner selves, that each of us has a private core of being to call our own. This inner person is important in a host of ways. It is as that person that I have mental freedom, political liberty, and human rights. It is the inner self that guarantees our uniqueness to each of us; it is the basis of identity in the modern world. Most important for present purposes, when we listen intently to music, it is the inner self that hears.

The experience of this inner self defines the sphere of subjectivity. The term has already come up in the everyday sense that refers to personal belief and sensation as opposed to fact. But *subjectivity* may also be used to designate the full range of mental and physical states that compose the inner life of human beings. The person understood in relation to subjectivity in this sense is accordingly termed the subject. It will often be necessary to refer to subjects and subjectivity, their qualities and their histories, in

this book because music is directly concerned with them. One way to grasp the singularity of classical music is to understand how it addresses, and influences, and expresses subjects and their subjectivities.

We might as well start now. A key feature of the modern subject—the modern person with an inner self—is that the inner core of self is both absolutely one's own and yet mysterious. We know it better than anything else, yet it defies full understanding. By heightened listening, or so people came to feel, that remote and mysterious inner being could be brought to life and both enjoyed and comprehended. Classical music was in part devised for that purpose. When we enjoin someone to "listen" to an utterance—that is, to heed it—we usually think of the message conveyed by its words. What classical music helped its listeners to discover was that the act of listening intently could become both meaningful in its own right and a source of wider meaning. There is, or so the music made people feel, a truth in listening that touches on the fundamental truths of subjective existence. The listening may in part have created the depths it was felt to reveal, but that it could do so, that music could do so, was a remarkable discovery in its own right.

This is the music of the self that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a sometime musician as well as a philosopher, proclaimed on the first page of his *Confessions* of 1764: "The man I portray will be myself. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike anyone I have ever met." This is the music sought out by such a self when, rich in feeling but baffled by some inner enigma, it needs to grasp itself as a whole, however fleetingly. This is the music, too, of the self invoked in Kant's majestic formulation of the moral law as a categorical

imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."

The modern subject addressed by this music experiences its divided existence as exhilarating in some respects, disturbing in others. How could it do otherwise? This ambivalence is as fundamental a part of the modern self-concept as the ideas of freedom, authenticity, and depth. The subject achieves its rich inner life only in return for a surrender of full self-knowledge. The exchange brings a self-estrangement that has to be embraced rather than resisted, a task, to put it mildly, that is not always easy. The luminosity of the inner self somewhere contains a hard nub of opacity, a kind of inner sunspot. This darkness on the core provokes constant symbolization while eluding all final determination by symbol, law, or force. In its positive guise, this inner excess is felt as a continual refreshment of the sense of identity, a reservoir of meaningful being; its darkness is fecund. In its negative guise, the same excess harbors the darkness of enigma. It continually troubles, disturbs, betrays, and deceives us and distorts our perception of ourselves and others.

Classical music involves both the rewards and the risks of this model, which it does not merely reflect but historically helped create, support, and develop. In part the fortunes of the music are staked on the fortunes of this self-concept. And the concept is hardly without its faults and mutations. People today may no longer be automatically guided by it, either because they regard it as out of date or because they feel that the conditions of contemporary life make it unattainable. Yet as long as people are susceptible to the ideal of a free, rich subjectivity, as long as they feel that this subjectivity has a dimension of depth that, if

plumbed, can yield both pleasure and knowledge, the music will retain the power to move and enlighten them. It may even retain the power to frighten and disturb, to speak to and for the parts of our subjectivity we cannot hope to command or master. For that, too, it should be welcome. The ideas behind this music still have life in them, a life by turns surprising, reassuring, nostalgic, and uncanny. Even at the dawn of an era in which information technology threatens many of their core assumptions, even in the bleak light of an era in which civic and intellectual liberties are under mounting siege worldwide, these ideas continue to pervade the way we think and speak about people and societies.

We might say, then, that the gift of classical music is listening itself. The music attuned itself to previously unheard and unheard-of potentialities of listening and made them available to be given. The recipient is the modern self, which has to listen differently, as it has to live differently, from its forebears. This music gives subjectivity ears. The next step is to ask what they listen to.

Classical music differs from many other kinds in being fully composed. In most pieces, allowing for limited, historically specific exceptions (the figured bass, the concerto cadenza), every detail of design has been attended to. Every pitch, rhythm, and instrumental color is predetermined and notated. As a result, the details tend to do far more than support and enrich an expressive totality. In the course of doing that (and sometimes undoing it), they act out independent dramas, form rivalries, find and lose meanings, pursue affinities and antagonisms. Everything that happens, even the smallest thing, can matter, and matter a lot. Details add up to processes that take on a life of their own under the broad umbrella of the whole.

This is not to say either that everything matters equally in classical pieces or that details in other genres are insignificant. Details in fully composed music vary greatly in their dramatic force and depth of implication. They vary both with the design of a piece and with the understanding on which a piece is heard. Improvised or partly composed music may also be rich in important details, but with a difference. With jazz improvisation, say, or popular song, the referent of the details is a particular performance or recording rather than an ideal object projected through notation. Songs are written to be arranged and rearranged at will, and they don't lose their essential identity no matter what a performer does with them. Jazz improvisation, like classical composition, is, on the contrary, committed to uniqueness, but the uniqueness is that of an occasion, a specific exercise of creative energy that can be reheard but never reexperienced in its original form.

Classical pieces have no "original" form. They cannot be represented by the event of any single performance. They are, as I said, ideal objects, approximately realized through repeated performances that may vary widely in some respects but must still respect the limits imposed by the score. This description, of course, is itself ideal. The exact meaning of its mandate has varied over time. The rule of realization does not apply to transcriptions and arrangements on the one hand or to many avant-garde experiments on the other, and it is complicated by scores in different versions and editions and by the former practice of "retouching" orchestration. But every time a classical piece is played from score, the ideal is reinstated. Any performance from score realizes—performs—the ideal as well as the music. In a perfectly literally sense, a classical composition is one that we can listen to repeatedly but never actually hear.

The disparity between the performance or recording of a classical piece and its purely ideal or virtual existence is not just a neutral or theoretically interesting fact. It actively affects the experience of listening by creating a metaphorical space that the music and the listener can occupy together. Because we always hear the music in transition between its ideal and its actual sound, everything we hear is full of a specific potentiality that the music makes actual as it goes along. The details of classical music are composed to be heard in this environment, where they are highly exposed. They enter into highly articulated dramas, scenarios, processes, rituals, and the like, lines of musical action that return with each new performance to be reinterpreted by both the players and the listener. Music that has a "real" existence because it is partly composed in being performed affects us differently. Its most salient details are not interpretations but creative interventions meant to sustain or diversify a compelling musical effect. These are the details that complete the music through its performance. Classical music cannot be completed in the same way; it cannot really be completed at all.

This incompletion is a creative medium, and the details that animate classical music thrive on it. They do not assume their significance as elements of form, and even less as the fine points to be noticed by a refined taste. They act as what Wallace Stevens called parts of a world. They are occasions of insight, understanding, pleasure, feeling, and even revelation that come, and come often, to the attentive listener or absorbed performer, to the one who hearkens. As one adopts an attitude of openness toward the music, the music opens to the possibilities of experience and expression. Its details assume a luminosity drawn from and extending to the full texture of experience. The meanings that thus become per-

ceptible are not somehow contained in the music or simply revealed by it. They are made available to, and by, the listening subject, who must in part create them to experience them. The music offers the opportunity to shape the activity of listening in the current and contour of such meanings, to take pleasure and find insight in a rendition of the texture of our historical being.

It is this process, I believe, and not the traditional retinue of aesthetic criteria—unity, structure, coherence, complexity, formal or narrative tension and resolution—that accounts for the power and durability of classical pieces and repertoires. Many forgotten or little-esteemed works meet all the criteria with little or no effect. The truth is that meeting aesthetic criteria is easy. Many much-beloved works do not bother to do it, or do it as a matter of routine while going about their more vital business. I am working here toward a different ideal, one based on the belief that something distinctive and particular, something arresting in its special and often unforeseen pertinence, must happen in, through, by, or about a piece of music to make it live.

The detail that matters may or may not take part in some grand aesthetic synthesis, but the synthesis is itself only another sort of detail. It is neither the reason the detail matters nor, above all, the thing that really matters about the detail. Musical detail matters because it animates the details of which our lives—our lives in particular, not in general—are made. Classical music makes this process its deepest concern.

Of course neither this music nor any other has some kind of simple one-to-one relationship to experience, any more than it has a simple one-to-one relationship with the words through which we describe it. Musical meaning comes about when a spark leaps up between some musical detail and an idea or image,

a metaphor or turn of phrase, a movement or a gesture, a perception or a memory. It does not matter whether this process starts or ends with the music, whether it occurs when we respond to the music we hear or when we respond with music to some other thing. Either way, we bring the music close to some worldly circumstance in the faith that the closeness is something recognized, not something concocted. The meanings that arise in this proximity belong to the music as much as to the circumstances; they are both made and discovered at the same time. The music is their matrix of possibility. It is a kind of antechamber in which they wait to be realized, to become what they are.

We can illustrate this mysterious but immediately felt process in the way two recent films deal with the same work, the Prelude to Johann Sebastian Bach's Suite for Unaccompanied Cello in G Major. This is music of great lyric energy that combines the strength of the cello's sonority with the fragility of a solitary utterance. It flows continuously, connecting spacious arpeggios—chords played as if on a harp, one note at a time, in rising, falling, or wavelike patterns—with runs of increasing breadth and animation. The primary common chords, the tonic and dominant, evoke a sense of acoustic space that the music fills and fills until it brims over.

In *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), a naval saga of the Napoleonic wars, the Prelude forms an evocation of unspoiled, undiscovered nature. The scene is the Galapagos Islands, where (as we know, but the characters do not) Charles Darwin will voyage a few years later on the *Beagle* and find the pageant of evolution unrolling before his eyes.

Heard twice nearly in its entirety, the Prelude anticipates the thrill of that discovery in a manner far removed from the infa-

mous "nature red in tooth and claw"—and from the violence of the battles at sea to which the island stopover is merely an interlude. The music's proliferation of arpeggios and scales conveys the prolific vitality of nature, the thrill of evolutionary movement as embodied in the sight of aquatic birds and mammals at their gambols, the utterly benign proliferation (or so it seems, here in this island paradise) of living forms. The music evolves like nature and flows like water. It represents a mode of singularity that transcends the delicate, uncertain balance represented by the violin-cello duets played elsewhere in the narrative by the friends, the ship's captain and ship's doctor, who are its heroes. The duets are Mozart transcriptions in which the give-and-take of the instrumental voices can almost, but not quite, reconcile the conflicting agendas of a man of science and a man of war.

The Pianist (2002) retells the true story of the Polish pianist Wladic Szpilman, a Jew who survived the Holocaust by a combination of sheer chance and the kindness of strangers. Hiding from the Nazis in the apartment of a cellist friend and her husband, he wakes one morning to the disembodied sounds of the G-Major Prelude. As he, and we, discover his friend playing the piece to herself in another room, the music appears introspective, withdrawn. It sounds like a solitary effort to hold the self together for a few extra moments before the world falls apart.

But the effort is not exactly solitary. The cellist is pregnant; to play the Prelude for herself is also to wrap her unborn child in its resonance on the instrument as close to her womb as the child is. The music's contemplative energy, tranquility set in motion, becomes the sign of a maternal and cultural symbiosis that is both eternal and fragile. We can see as well as hear these qualities when Szpilman first awakens and the camera tracks his gaze

to a flower-filled vase of glass, symbolically set at the center of a table. Here the exaltation of common chords does not so much embody the harmony of nature as create a safe cultural space, a haven like the mother's body for the child. The music forms a metaphorical safe house doubling the literal ones where Szpilman takes refuge. It is, not by chance, a remnant of Germany's cultural heritage that the Nazis have not yet succeeded in corrupting, or so the film asks us to believe. The Prelude is the only place left in which it is still possible to believe in beauty, in culture, in the future, while atrocity rages outside.

In their use of this music, these films provide a model of creative listening, listening with both music and meaning in mind. The films realize the meanings that lie like seeds in the music, eager to be disseminated. All it takes to release them is the "application" of the music to the dramatic situation. In this case the effect extends to the composer as well as to the music. The films continue a long tradition of treating Bach as "classical," which is strictly speaking an anachronism. (We will return to this point late in the book, where the Bach G-Major Suite will meet us again in a similar context.) The point to dwell on here is the power of this anachronism to support, to merge with, both emotional and conceptual truths: to make its own fiction a kind of truth.

The results are vivid because they are utterly concrete. But their concreteness should mislead no one; its creation is confined neither to these films nor to the film medium. *Master and Commander* and *The Pianist* simply do what anyone can do, and do without necessarily invoking a specific story or a specific image. Anyone can hear the force of vital proliferation in the Bach suite, the energy of nature sounding and resounding in the elaboration of the common chords and their majestic final return. And any-

one can hear the quality of introspection in the same music, the thoughtful reconsideration of phrases and ideas in a continuous flow both powerful and fragile. All we have to do is trust our ears and our words, knowing that they derive their authority from the dialogue between an inevitably creative intelligence and an inevitably meaningful world.

We might say, then, that when we listen creatively to a classical work, as these films do, we travel in a long arc that begins and ends in feeling, transforming and interpreting what we feel as we go. So another way to get at the particularity of classical music is by examining its relationship to the emotional power that has generally been celebrated as the most distinctive thing about music in general.

When we say that music "expresses" emotion we don't mean either that it signifies emotion (it's more immediate than that) or that it arouses emotion (it does, but it is scarcely unique in doing so). Music has two specific emotional powers at which it is, if not unrivaled, unsurpassed. First, it renders emotion tangible, giving a sensuous, reproducible form to something otherwise transient and interior. And it does so without sacrificing the force and plasticity of feeling; it does not objectify, but extends subjectivity beyond the boundaries of the nominal self. Second, music detaches emotion from specific motives and circumstances, giving it an independence that is also a form of pleasure, even when the emotions involved are dark or disturbing. And it does so without giving an effect of abstraction; the feelings involved always seem specific, not generic.

How do these expressive qualities reach us, and to what end? According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who grew up in Vienna in a

house visited regularly by the likes of Brahms and Mahler, we understand expression in music the way we understand the expression on a face. Wittgenstein's point was that we grasp the feeling in the hearing of it; we don't decode it or puzzle it out. The analogy captures the point perfectly and feels right besides, but it doesn't quite catch the feeling of musical feeling. To do that, we need to add something. We understand expression in music the way we understand the expression on the face of someone we care about, sympathize with, perhaps even love. This additional element is what bonds us to the music and opens us to its affective powers. The special value we place on song in part comes from this bond, of which the singing voice is the tangible linking thread. As Rousseau remarked, when I hear singing I immediately recognize the presence of another mind, a fellow being, who calls me with an affective tone not necessarily present in speech.

All of these effects, again, belong to music in general, at least in its Western forms. Classical music becomes distinctive by taking its own expressiveness as a beginning and not an end, an opening out and not a closing in. Stretching Wittgenstein's analogy can also be helpful here. The tendency in more vernacular musics is to suggest fulfillment in the fullness of emotion, often a single emotion. The face most popular songs present to us is like the face in a photograph or portrait, or even a snapshot. Like such images, the song may be anything but superficial—a song like the Gershwins' "The Man I Love" is virtually a psychological case study—but it still remains centered on the emotion it explores. In contrast, the tendency in classical music is to seek fulfillment by going beyond emotion without losing or diluting it. The face the classical work presents to us is like the face in a theatrical per-

formance or a film. We can witness its expression changing, often in subtle and fluid ways, as the feelings involved assume a history, a context, a past, a future. And because of that we are invited to grasp what the expression on a face reveals in addition to feeling: the attitudes, judgments, decisions, and interpretations, the strivings and yieldings, perplexities and insights that form and dissolve amid changing circumstances until some end is reached. Classical music is drama without stage or actors. Before cinema was invented, classical music was acoustic cinema.

Of course these distinctions are not hard and fast, and of course other types of music—I'm thinking of jazz in particular—like to show changing faces. And of course we would not want to be without both emotional tendencies. Still and moving images each give us things the others can't, and so do the types of music that correspond to them. Yet it's more than a little odd that a culture such as ours, so saturated by the forms of the moving image combined with music, is so inclined to forget the musical moving image in favor of musical stills. My point here is simply that if we want to enjoy and understand the dramas of emotional life, and the bearing those dramas have on experience and vice versa, then classical music is an invaluable resource we should not squander.

The modernist art historian Carl Einstein wrote in 1929 that "[t]he pictorial image is a condensation, a defense against fugitive time and thus against death. One could call it a distillation of dreams." One could say the same thing about musical "pictures," especially popular songs. That may be why songs have such power of nostalgia. But classical music is rarely at ease with nostalgia; it operates with a different sense of time. To get a sense of what it offers, of what it is, try a reversal of Einstein's statement: classical music, the acoustic moving image, is an expansion, an

immersion in fugitive time that is mindful of mortal limits. One could call it an aggregation of dreams.

The classical way of making music with luminous detail and dramatic change is the way I like best. My preference, though, is not very important. Nothing I have to say requires the denigration of other kinds of music; unlike Julian Johnson, I have no interest in making popular music the target of a futile attack. Questions of aesthetic rank have been nothing but harmful to classical music, some of whose devotees have tarred it with unreasonable pretensions to supremacy and universality. My purpose here is not to hold a beauty contest among the musics. It is to explore some of the distinctive things that classical music can do and that can be done with classical music—all things, to my mind, that are very much worth doing. I want to sound this music out so that it can sound out better.

There's no point in denying that classical music demands a bit more effort from the listener than many others: stricter attention, a little technical know-how, a little historical perspective. I sometimes wish that the music had the almost magical capacity of jazz to translate its technical sophistication into immediate musical pleasure. It's also true that classical music can be misused in socially troublesome ways, and I will not shrink from talking about some of these. But from the day that I first accidentally heard a Beethoven overture (someone bought the record by mistake) rocking through the chilly, lifeless suburban "family room" of my early teens with simply unbelievable vehemence, I've been convinced that the music is worth the bother, and more.

It's nearly impossible to compress the reasons why into a formula. I found that out the hard way when working on this book.

People I told about it would ask the obvious question: "Well, why *does* classical music still matter?" Here is what I could glean from my often tongue-tied replies.

It is no good mincing words or hiding behind a false sense of sophistication. This music still matters for the same reason that Greek drama or Renaissance painting or modernist fiction matters: because it made discoveries we are far from done with and that are far from done with us. It has imagined forms of experience that became substantial realities in being thus imagined: forms of being, becoming, sensing, witnessing, remembering, desiring, hoping, suffering, and more.

By making such things audible, classical music enlarges the capacity of all music to attach itself, and us, more closely to whatever we care about. The tradition that tells us to listen to classical works for their own sake alone is an inadvertent betrayal of that care. Music is our premier embodiment of the drive for attachment. It works, it grips or grasps us, almost with the electricity of touch, resonant, perhaps, with the primary experiences of bonding that tie us to each other and the world. Music of all kinds invokes this bonding; classical music dramatizes and reflects on it in the act of invocation.

The power to do this is tangible and exhilarating. It is the power by which we make the world meaningful. Its felt presence is the reason why we keep coming back to the works and styles through which that power runs: coming back to them as sources of pleasure and puzzlement, of self-discovery and self-bafflement. Other music also has things to say to us; there is no doubt about that. But no other music tells us the things that this music does. The Western world is not only the richer for preserving Sophocles' *Antigone* or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but different. At

one time the difference was available only to a small minority, but technology has long since taken care of that. This music now belongs to anyone who cares to listen. Its fusion of knowledge and power can be demanding, even disturbing. Contrary to the tiresome slogan, classical music does *not* relax you. But it can transfix you, perhaps even transform you. How and why are my subjects in these pages.