

The United States needs a movement for a National Conservatory of Music

by Dennis Speed

“Behold, an inexorable harm visits all Athens: / To vile slavery is she swiftly progressed.”—Solon of Athens

“It is not true, as one usually hears the claim made, that the audience degrades art; the artist degrades the audience, and at all times when art degenerated, it fell because of the artists.”—Friedrich Schiller, *On the Employment of the Chorus in Tragedy*.

The concert and conference held in Washington, D.C. on May 27-28 to launch a movement for a National Conservatory of Music in the United States, exactly 100 years after Antonin Dvořák, Harry Burleigh, and others were defeated in an earlier, similar effort, intervenes in what is no less than an existential crisis in western civilization.

Today, if one reads virtually any copy of the daily newspaper, one is confronted with the astounding, yet inevitable, realization that the entire educational system of what have been termed the “advanced sector nations” of the United States, and western (and eastern) Europe, has abjectly failed, not only to promote the highest level of thinking among youth, but to even provide them with a semblance of civilization. A *New York Times* story of Monday, May 15, described the crime of rape committed by two male children, aged seven and eight, against a girl of six. The story went on to report, that the parents of the two boys, who were placed in a detention home, were ordered to remove all of the X-rated tapes from their house, a measure that pathetically underscores the meaning of the phrase, “too little, too late.”

Surrounded by every form of obscenity, drowning in a sea of banality, we smugly, stupidly look at our children—when we are not bovinely gazing at our X-rated tapes—and ask, “where did they learn all of this?” Are we “too little,” as well as “too late,” to save the morally collapsed civilizations dominant in the world today? If so, this would summarily disprove our pretensions to learning, and educating. For, if our knowledge does not equip us to uplift mankind, such that mankind might survive, grow, and develop, of what use is this generation, and to what destiny might this generation condemn generations to follow?

It seems that we have muddled our way into the lamentable state of Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “I have of late, though

wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth. . . . this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.”

Remember that, in Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet is a most “educated” individual, who, not unlike Faust, has sadly realized that his knowledge does not encompass a single creative idea. Hamlet cannot love Ophelia, as Faust cannot love Gretchen. It may be said of both, that they are men “who lack music in their souls.” The consequence? The collapse of the state of Denmark, for which Hamlet’s personal collapse is both metaphor, and efficient cause.

Shakespeare has warned us, through the character of Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, about what to expect from such men:

“The man who has no music in his soul, / Nor is not mov’d with concord of sweet sounds, / Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; / The motions of his spirit are dull as night, / And his affections dark as Erebus: / Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.”

(To understand our children, and the culture which has produced them, look, metaphorically, at “what a long way we’ve come.” Compare the image of President John F. Kennedy, in the 1960s, introducing Marian Anderson to Germany’s leader Konrad Adenauer, with Jimmy Carter’s cameo appearance, in the 1970s, at an Allman Brothers concert, or George Bush “jamming,” in the 1980s, with the late Lee Atwater and their cherished “country ’n’ western” friends. Compare the children of each era, in educational level, and moral resilience. In each decade we can document a downward-ratcheting, a recessive “dumbing down” of our posterity. Have we seen any improvement in our nation, and its leaders, in this cultural pattern, in the 1990s?)

Yet, in the same speech just cited, character Hamlet paradoxically sings:

“What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! . . . in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the

paragon of animals!"

Our "public entertainment media" would be surprised to hear Hamlet say that. For them, man is the lowest of animals, and this creed is reinforced virtually 24 hours a day, on what now threaten to become several hundred channels of (available) television viewing. Our children are easy prey for this "one-eyed Satan"; this is their teacher, their schoolroom.

We all know the stories of cutbacks on music programs in the public schools. Many of us have been exposed to the "Clockwork Orange"-like experience of being asked by 16-year-olds in a public high school, "Who is Haydn?" or "Who is Marian Anderson?" At an elementary school, you may be asked, "Who is Beethoven? Do you mean the dog?"—referring to a recent canine movie by that name.

The project to build a National Conservatory Movement is unlike anything else that is occurring in America today. It aims to answer nothing less than the life-and-death crisis of our civilization, by basing the idea of a new, global intellectual Renaissance on the principle of composition contained in the art-song, or lied. This project is not, really, an attempt to simply reintroduce the idea of Jeanette Thurber, who launched the National Conservatory in the 1890s, or even the ideas of Antonin Dvořák alone. It seeks to restore the concept of an Academy, like the Academy movement of Plato, to our time.

It was the Academy of Plato, organized by him in the aftermath of the assassination of his mentor, Socrates, by the democratic party of Athens, which founded the educational tradition of western civilization on the *Platonic dialogue*. Plato was a dramatist, a creative artist as well as statesman and teacher. His dialogues seek to dramatize how individuals, through the Socratic method of questioning assumptions, and forming hypotheses, might apply the "dialogue principle" imbedded in the great artistic tradition of Greek drama. Thus, the living theater of the marketplace, and government, is transformed through an *aesthetic* principle that educates the citizen to the nature of truth. Through Beauty, one proceeds to Truth, and, therefore, to Freedom. In the dialogues, this method is spoken to the reader-audience through the personage, and literary device, of the figure Socrates.

The dialogue principle reaches its highest expression in the musical works of Classical composition of the late 18th and early 19th century, of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. These works are, in turn, based on the revolution in the well-tempered system exemplified in the compositions of J.S. Bach. But Bach's work reflects, among other things, the high point of a tradition of improvisation, that had existed in the Renaissance of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, transmitted to Europe via the Islamic Renaissance and the writings of al-Farabi and others, in which figures such as Leonardo da Vinci had played a leading role. (Leonardo said that music is the *figurazione delle cose invisibili*—"the shaping of invisible things." He was a virtuoso at improv-

ing on the *lira da braccio*, a bowed, stringed ancestor of the violin, as well as being an excellent singer).

Music equally affected mathematics. Music was part of the Quadrivium of the Classical classroom, along with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. It is not properly considered a "liberal art." Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz stated, "Music is the pleasure that the soul experiences in counting, without being aware that it is counting."

It is the "without-being-aware" part, that is, the willful access to seemingly spontaneous preconscious thought, which was reflected in the improvisation tradition of the Renaissance and in the keyboard performances of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and others, up to the work of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms.

The universality of Classical composition

Yet that same "spark" of creativity is at the core of all great music, *whether authored by a great composer or not*. And, sometimes, great music—which is a distillation of the seed-crystal of *any* creative idea, which is poetic—is spoken, by an ingenious individual who is not a professional composer. There are lawful, rigorous reasons for this. The spirituals are the most important musical production of America, precisely because they demonstrate the universality of Classical compositional method. But they do this, not because the writers of the spirituals set out to do so. The writers of the spirituals faced the greatest of adversities, and responded to unspeakable indignities, with an almost-inexpressible dignity.

Almost inexpressible. Edgar Allan Poe explains, in his essay, "The Poetic Principle": "Inspired by an ecstatic pre-science of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. . . . It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty." The authors of the spirituals demonstrate to us the essence of Christianity, and creativity. The "mystery" of the human soul's sublime triumph over suffering, lies at the boundaries of expression, in the realm of "unthought-like thoughts which are the souls of thought." This is the quality of thought, of song, which every composer who experiences a moment of greatness, no matter how brief, or how untutored, enjoys.

That is how the human spirit is composed, to soar over adversity. Beyond the boundary of the seemingly expressible, all souls will discover, necessarily, *the principles of classical composition*.

Let us recall the story from Roland Hayes about his great-grandfather's composition of the Spiritual, "Crucifixion." Hayes tells us: "My great-grandfather, on my mother's side, was a pure native of the Ivory Coast. He was ambushed, and brought to this country, where he learned about Christ.

The story was told to him of the struggle and the death of Jesus on the cross. It impressed him very much. He finally turned [out] to be a minister of the Gospel."

Now listen to Brahms's composition student Gustav Jenner recount Brahms's compositional method: "Whenever he discussed a song with me, the first order of the day was to investigate whether its musical form corresponded to the text *throughout*. . . . Brahms's first requirement was that the composer know his text in detail. By this he also meant that he should be completely clear about the poem's structure and meter. Then he would recommend that before composing a poem, I should carry it around in my head for a long time and should frequently recite it to myself aloud, paying careful attention to declamation."

Hayes's father, who was executed for teaching slaves to read, was clearly familiar with the material of his song. How many times must he have turned the Crucifixion story over and over in his head! How many times must he have re-enacted it, before he felt spiritually ready to "sing" it. Brahms, or any Classical composer, is more advanced than this, only insofar as, free to refine this creative act into a principle of self-conscious and regular composition, his life becomes devoted to the *infinite re-enactment of this creative process*.

The process itself, however, is universal, and, being universal, is "equivalent" (though not identical) in each individual, including the listener, whose creative processes are made conscious by the songs of the composers. It was this equivalence of which Dvořák must have spoken, when he remarked to Harry Burleigh, after the latter sang "Go Down, Moses," "Burleigh, that is as great as a Beethoven theme!"

Epistemological standards of the movement

Singers, and researchers, would do well to compare the work done by Dvořák and Burleigh in 1893-94; the writing by Dvořák of his Biblical Songs of 1894, in America; Brahms's 1893 encouragement of Dvořák's interest in the spirituals and his editing of the scores of the Ninth Symphony and other Dvořák compositions for European publication; Brahms's own 1893-94 work on, and publishing, of 49 Volkslieder, with predominantly original themes, but set in the Classical method of strophic and through-composition known as *Motivführung*; and Brahms's 1897 "Four Serious Songs." From the standpoint of the "Four Serious Songs," one appropriately reflects on the act of composition of "Crucifixion" by Hayes's great-grandfather, the "slave."

Another exercise, for performers, would be to compare Roland Hayes's renditions of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (a cappella), and Bach's "Bist du bei mir." Not only are each Classical performances—in Hayes's readings, they take on "equivalent" characteristics. The performer should try to reproduce this principle of equivalence, through the use of *bel canto* singing methods. Then one should try composing

such a spiritual, or setting spirituals, as did Hall Johnson, according to rigorous principles of Classical compositional method, studying Brahms's Volkslieder as a point of reference.

Only such rigorous study positions one to appreciate the standard of work from which one must judge the requirements for a proper course on Classical composition, that should take place in today's musical conservatories. The application of Classical composition is then proven, as composers have in the past, to apply to the spiritual, the Volkslied, or to any other song or song-idiom. Further, since song is the basis for instrumental composition, one gains insight into the true importance of Beethoven's work on Welsh, Scottish, and other themes, in both sung and instrumental settings (e.g., the variations for flute and piano on various national themes, Op. 107). This gives a proper insight into the principles which should underly composition for instruments, based on the human voice tuned at C=256 cycles (its natural tuning), using *bel canto* technique. Now a true dialogue with the composers of Classical form can begin, a dialogue which would have made Plato proud.

That is the task of the National Conservatory Movement—to understand, master, and communicate this Classical compositional method. If the principles of Classical education are restored to our classrooms, and places of worship, we need not wonder whether our society's most notable, and perhaps even most valuable, contribution to history will appear to our descendants to have been our increasingly rapid self-destruction. The hope must be, that what Dvořák called "a great and noble school of music" will arise on these shores, and will spearhead the transformation of our society in a way that nothing else, at this late date, can.

No social program, no "neighborhood cleanup," no "national research study," will remove from our society—except, perhaps by execution—"kiddie killers" and child-rapists. In the frescoed and sculptured figures of the *bel canto* singing youth of Florence, we see reflected the destiny of the whole human race, if we but choose to educate the world's children to "think like Beethoven"—or like Hayes's great-grandfather.

The poet Schiller in *The Artists* admonishes us that "The dignity of man is in your hands—protect it! With you it sinks—with you it shall ascend." From the grave of the Renaissances of the past, ten thousand voices resonate this refrain. From the yawning maw of our own self-destruction, it echoes forth. The question is: Are our souls deaf to this exhortation?

The nearly deaf Beethoven, in his Heiligenstadt Testament, gave the answer that eluded Hamlet, and should not elude us: "I will not submit, I will take fate by the throat. It shall not overcome me. I shall have the courage of my endurance. Where my body fails, my spirit will dominate, my heart will create. I shall speak out of my silence. I shall shout! I shall sing. Man, help yourself, for you are able."