

CONDUCTOR ANTHONY MORSS

What Is Classical Culture?

Anthony Morss spoke at the April 7 Schiller Institute conference, representing the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture.

Friedrich Schiller, newly appointed professor of history at Jena University, chose as the topic for his inaugural lecture, “What is—and to what end do we study—Universal History?” My topic this evening is “What is—and to what end do we study—Classical Culture?”

Classical Culture has three meanings:

- (1) Of or pertaining to the culture of ancient Greece and Rome
- (2) Any works of art which by their beauty and shapeliness and perfect proportions remind us of that classical heritage
- (3) Any art so conspicuously magnificent that it sets its own standard for all future judgment.

Rules of thumb for assessing any work of art are well known and essentially universally accepted: The principle of unity in diversity, and the idea that in art of the highest quality, nothing can be added and nothing taken away without diminishing the value of the work.

Greek aesthetics also pointed out that the art work’s size must be proportioned to our ability to perceive, that is, not so small that we cannot perceive the component parts, and not so large that we cannot cognize the totality of it. These last points are just common sense.

Fundamental to the value of the art is that it must be experienced as organic, by which I mean that it must mimic convincingly the organization and functioning of a large, complex organism like a human being, comprising many different organs and support systems like



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Conductor Anthony Morss addressed the question, What is Classical Culture?

the blood, the lymph, the electrochemical activity in the brain—all with the purpose of allowing the person to fulfill his choice of projects.

This system can be called a manifold, and all of us are biological manifolds. But there are mechanical manifolds as well, such as an automobile engine with many ancillary systems all connected to, and empowering, the central motor. On the simplest level, a pipe with several transverse openings is a manifold.

These intricately interconnected systems of supportive activity mirror the organization of the outside world as revealed by

science. The fundamental presupposition of all scientific activity, as defined by Lyndon LaRouche, is that the organizing principles of the universe are coherent with the rational structure of the human brain. That is, we know the universe is governed by scientific laws, some of which we have discovered and many we have not. If we didn’t think there were many scientific laws waiting to be discovered, we wouldn’t go looking for them, which is what scientists spend their lives doing. Mr. LaRouche’s statement is so self-evidently true that it almost amounts to a tautology, yet the words strike one with the force of brilliance.

So we have determined that works of art, inanimate objects as they are, must display the characteristics of complex living organisms, with all their intricate cat’s cradle of inner relationships. How this can work out in practical terms is illustrated by a famous, long conversation between Jan Sibelius and Gustav Mahler, who on

their first meeting took a long walk together and described their artistic ideals. Both composers had written several symphonies and Mahler was, of course, one of the two most famous conductors in the world, the other being Arthur Nikisch.

Sibelius said that what he most admired about symphonic composition was that one started with a very limited amount of thematic material and evolved all the rest of the work from it. Mahler demurred, saying, “No, no, it must be like the whole world—it must embrace everything!” (*Nein, nein, es muss wie die Welt—es muss alles umfassen!*) Sibelius wanted an organic development, while Mahler wanted to throw even the traditional kitchen sink into the brew—formally undisciplined.

At the end of the walk, Mahler graciously asked Sibelius which of his symphonies he would like Mahler to conduct. Astonishingly, especially considering how famous and influential Mahler was, Sibelius replied, “none of them.” He couldn’t imagine Mahler could understand what the Sibelius symphonies were trying to say.

Artists’ skill in imitating (one might almost say “counterfeiting”) nature is essential. There was a classical Greek painter named Appelles of whom it was recounted that he painted a bunch of grapes so realistically that two birds flew into the room and started pecking at the grapes, only to be vexed, as our grandparents used to say, that lunch was not really offered!

But perfect natural copies of objects are not what we demand of painters. Photography will accomplish that. What we require is that painters see and understand and show us beautiful aspects of objects or people that we would not have been able to perceive with our own eyes.

The Breakthroughs We Want

One of my favorite painters in this regard is the venerated Northern Sung Chinese landscape painter Fan Kuan (circa 1000 A.D.) Fan Kuan developed such convincing different brushstrokes to evoke all the different forms of vegetation, branches, pine needles, and such that the commentators ascribed to him the intense creativity of nature itself. Yet look at his masterpiece, “Travelers among Mountains and Streams.” You can see why the Chinese word for a landscape painting is “mountain-water picture.” In this case the grand mountain is not only painted realistically, as any photograph of that district’s topography will show, but the whole

scene is vibrating with mysterious power, pointing toward a profoundly spiritual view of nature. Here painting has surpassed personality and connected with something much grander.

Now, what does the Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture hope to achieve by studying and performing the great works of organic art? More symphonies just like those of Beethoven and Brahms? No, that is not possible because those works, while the results of highly personal individuality, were nonetheless products of the cultural matrix and atmosphere of their time. To write a new Pastoral Symphony like Beethoven’s would be to produce a lifeless, artificial creation. What we are trying for by studying the great works of the past is to be inspired by them to produce something equally organic and alive for our own time.

There is a major historical precedent for this, in the creation of opera in Italy at the very end of the Sixteenth Century. For 30 years a society of poets, musicians, singers, and gentlemen scholars, under the direction of Count Bardi in Florence, had been studying intensely how they might revive ancient Greek drama. Their reading showed them that the plays were at least partly sung and danced, or partially declaimed with music in the background, just as the Homeric sagas had been either sung or declaimed while accompanied by the lyre for centuries in ancient times.

For the dance steps they could get some ideas from vase paintings. Regarding the music they were blocked. There are only about 40 remnants of Ancient Greek music and only one complete sentence with that music. And these gentlemen scholars of the Florentine Camerata (or Confraternity) couldn’t read the music’s clef at all and so couldn’t make any use of the surviving fragments—which, to my mind, turned out to be a great advantage. Ancient Greek music—all unisons or octaves and no harmony whatever—was distinctly inferior to Europe’s own repertory of polyphonic masterpieces of the High Renaissance. So the music trying to re-create Greek drama began with a highly developed musical language, but instead of contrapuntal settings for many voices singing together, the emphasis was on the alternating voices of characters in the drama (though there also were five-voiced madrigals for the Greek choruses).

Thus, aiming for the faithful reproduction of Ancient Greek drama, these gentlemen scholars produced something quite different but equally great—the first operas! That is the kind of breakthrough we in the Foundation are looking for.