

ISN'T LIVE MUSIC OBSOLETE?

Okay, so maybe now you're convinced that art is really important for your well-being and for the well-being of society, and you want to immerse yourself in art music. Shouldn't you just run out and buy a stack of CDs? Why bother going to a concert? Thanks to recordings, there are now more people listening to art music than ever before. But has electronic reproduction made live music obsolete?

Some of us say no, there are important qualities unique to live performance. We want to preserve those important qualities. Well, what are they? Here's a list to get a discussion started:

- The *special energy* of a concert: the crackle of present-tense excitement, focussed attention, and concentration. Feeling the attentiveness and responsiveness of the audience. Watching the musicians sweat and frown and smile and move.
- *Shared experience* with other human beings: we can reaffirm our connection to other people by sharing music together. As a member of the audience, you are part of the performance. You contribute to the music and influence it, instead of just observing.
- *Acoustical immediacy*: hearing the actual sound of strings and metal and wood and vocal chords, unmediated by wiring or speakers.
- The *uniqueness* of this event: these sounds will never happen quite this way again. Even tomorrow night's performance of the same music will be different.
- *Multisensory experience*: concerts are visual as well as auditory. (In some traditions, there's incense, too.)

Oddly enough, some concerts today seem to be designed to *minimize* these qualities! It's almost as though such concerts were trying to imitate recordings. Performers strive to be consistent instead of surprising; audiences are respectful instead of participatory; auditoriums separate performers from audiences instead of bringing them together; the music is far away instead of up close and personal; auditoriums are visually bland instead of exciting.

People who are familiar with the conventions surrounding concert music have no trouble ignoring these barriers. An experienced listener can still have a great time at a concert. But for someone unfamiliar with concert halls and concert ritual, a conventional concert can be baffling, off-putting, vague, and remote. A CD would seem much more appealing: immediate, vivid, and powerful. And a CD has another advantage: it is less threatening, because the listener can control it.

If you've grown up with the amplified sound of music that is designed to power past your ears and go straight to your internal organs, then acoustic sound can seem distant and weak. If you've grown up with the passion and frenzy of rock concerts, then the emotions in acoustic music can seem bland. Even the shocking opening chords of *Don Giovanni* will seem, relatively speaking, like white bread. If you're used to concerts where

everybody dances in the aisles, it's going to be hard to figure out how a string quartet recital, with the audience just *sitting* there, could be any fun at all.

How can we help people retune their hearing and their emotional receptors to experience the thrill of a live unamplified concert? Can we help people learn to reach out to acoustic sound, learn to find the varied emotions in it, and learn to amplify the experience for themselves?

THAT CHANNEL IS NOT OPEN, SIR

For most Americans these days, there is an abundant supply of music that can touch their feelings powerfully without the listener needing to expend any effort. (In my house in Pasadena, with all the doors and windows shut, I can sometimes get feelings from music playing inside a car half a block away.) Faced with art music -- which, according to my definition, requires attention and involvement -- such people don't know how to find any feelings, and they resent the implication that they have to *do* something -- the music won't just reach out and grab them.

Live art music may be great, but from a typical American vantage point, that greatness is almost completely hidden from view. We need to make what's special a little more obvious. Perhaps we need a completely new kind of event to make the pleasures of live music more obvious, more accessible, and more enjoyable.

Composer John Deak, bassist with the New York Philharmonic, has said, "Painting was challenged late in the 19th century by photography the way musicians are challenged now. Photography suddenly made many of the functions of painters obsolete. But did painting die? No, it immediately branched off into amazing creative directions." ²