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***Classical Music Ethnography***

Classical music and its unique sounds are the foundation of all western songs and music. The genre spans roughly the eleven hundreds until the present day and the roots of those early sounds date back to Ancient Greece. It was codified between 1550 and 1990 and in this period the discourse community got its language.

Classical music is like coffee; it can be an acquired taste. Many people in our society hear it for the first time and think it’s a stuffy or a boring genre, and then are not educated or exposed to it much after that. It is a genre that makes so much more sense, and is so much more interesting to listen to if one has an idea of what is going on musically. But regardless if someone enjoys it regularly or not, just about everyone has that *one* piece that they love that happens to be classical whether they know it or not.   
 Although it may seem old fashioned, the genre and community is still as alive as ever, and even if one doesn’t actively listen to or play classical music, it can be heard in film soundtracks, in the background music of doctors’ offices, waiting areas and restaurants. The community is in no way snobby or elite as some stereotypes may portray, as the people who are continuing the life of classical music for the future, are musicians, listeners, and college students, just like I am. It is an easy world to enter; it simply takes a liking for soothing sounds, appreciation for the power it can hold, or a love of acoustic sounds and playing an instrument. To become an expert however takes a long time and dedication towards either their respective instrument of choice, or education on the literature and history of classical music.

The language, like the sound of the music, usually leans towards being grand, as it is used to describe either how to create the music, or how it was performed. For example, an article describing an evening concert of orchestral pieces sounds something like this, “To hear the glorious strains of Wagner in this heavenly setting was both enlightening and humbling. Angland [maestro] led the musicians in a “stringfest” of swirling glory, with the strings and horns blending and taking us to another dimension. The music transformed us from the commonplace into the rare, which is what great music is all about” (Pantano). Words like “glory” and “enlightening” and “transformed” are very common in texts containing reviews of performances or upcoming events.  
 There are however actually three parts to the discourse among the classical music community. And although the discourse can be divided into sheet music notation, Italian lingo and text, each of the components combine to form the overarching classical music discourse community.   
 There is the musical notation which is written as sheet music and scores and used to instruct the musicians which notes to make and how. It consists of a five lined staff for treble and bass clefs (sound register) and on these staffs the notes are written to represent a certain pitch, duration and key. This notation was standardized in the 1600s (Wikipedia) and is now universal among musicians everywhere. This “language” must be mastered if you wish to partake in the community as a player, but is not necessary to be an active listener and aficionado.   
 Then there is the Italian lingo, which is used globally to give instruction on anything from how loud or soft (*forte* or *piano*), what speed or mood the piece should emanate (*presto* or *largo*), when a phrase should get louder (*crescendo*) to a style or composition structure (*aria* or *concerto*). These words and symbols are printed in the sheet music and are a way to ensure that there is some convention on how classical music is played and interpreted. They are also used to name pieces, like for example Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 1 has three movements or sections: *allegro maestoso* which means majestically fast, *romanze – larghetto* which means slow and romantic, and *rondo – vivace* which means vivacious. Rondo is the structure of the last movement. A program for a classical event that one might pick up anywhere in the world will contain these same Italian terms. This language also must be mastered by musicians, but is not necessary for the part of the community that does not. However, the longer one is part of the community for any reason, the more one automatically picks up since it is used in just about everything related to classical music.  
 Then finally there is the written text in the respective language of whatever country you may be in, which is mixed with the Italian lingo, the keys of the pieces and the grand language describing it all. Each language has it’s own ways to describing the parts of the music that are not standard Italian however, like for example in English a piece might have a “first repeat” and a “second repeat” which are sections that will be played again before continuing. A friend of mine had a duet partner from Beijing, and he told her that in Chinese they call it “first house” or “second house” but in the sheet music notation it has the same symbols, so the meaning was the same.

One area of the community I observed was the spoken discourse of the classical music community at CCM – the College Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati. It seems to revolve mainly around music, which is not surprising considering that is what the students are studying, but seems to be more extreme than in other parts of UC. In the hallways of CCM, you hear about “Oh I had this gig last night...”, or “my lesson was great” or “my lesson was horrible today”, or “I’m stressing about the concert we have to perform in two weeks”, whereas the rest of the UC population talks more about themselves, and their lives and things unrelated to their specific field of study.   
 This is similar to the discourse of the professionals backstage at Music Hall, home of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Here one hears about rehearsals, or how the performance just went, or what so-and-so thinks of the guest conductor or performers, but it is also more mature and adult, as fitting their age. Musicians will ask about each other’s families, latest trip or other topic in their lives aside from music.  
 I observed a class that taught the International Phonetic Alphabet which enables you to pronounce any language correctly regardless if you speak it or not. This is another universal component to the language of the classical music world, although this applies more to singers than musicians. The students in this class spoke mainly about classical music, their lessons and how the pronunciation they were learning applied to the voice pieces they were studying.

Clearly their love of music and its creation and execution is what brings this community together and through that the various forms of written and spoken discourse come into play. It being a community of continuous creation, the written aspect is more of a description of the pieces, the life of composers, or an article relating to the latest concert or event, or something about an upcoming event. Here it is not necessary to have the knowledge or skills of a musician, but the grand descriptive words start showing themselves, as given in the example above.   
 Another example comes from a review on Cincinnati.com of a performance of Mozart’s Requiem with the May Festival choruses at Music Hall last May that I was a part of, reads like: “the fury of the day of wrath was palpable in their electrifying “Dies Irae”. The chorus seamlessly balanced great choral cries against prayer-like pianissimos in the moving “Lacrimosa” movement, where halting phrases illustrated the day of tears. The singers brought reverent tones to the “Hostias” and glorious sound to the “Hosanna in excelsis”.” (Gelfand) This is a perfect example of how the Italian terms are used in everyday discourse of classical music. *Pianissimo* is Italian for very quiet, so the phrase “prayer-like pianissimos” now has the meaning of “sung quietly like a prayer” or something of that interpretation.  
 Much of the more scholarly writing about classical music is an exploration of composers, their lives, how they created their music, and a decomposition of their pieces. An article attempting to decode Beethoven and how tonality is a key to the meaning of the piece presents a perfect example:

“…the composer "will not literally imitate things, but he will excite in the soul feelings similar to those that it experiences when it sees them."8  
 It appears that Beethoven himself concurred with this last statement, as can be seen in his much-quoted subtitle to the Pastoral Symphony, "Mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei" ("More an expression of feeling (or sentiment) than tone painting"). One of the most important decisions for a composer in Beethoven's time was, in the words of his friend Friedrich Starke, to make "the correct choice of key - so that it fits the pieces expression."9 The anonymous reviewer of the Pastoral Symphony in 1810 captured this point completely when observing that it was far from being a representation of “characteristics of the countryside, but much more a representation of emotions that we experience upon seeing things in the countryside."” (Ellison)

Here the writer shows exploration and study of how important expression was in Beethoven’s time and how placing the piece in the right key set that mood. It is an attempt to get in the mind of the composer to see how they created the masterpieces that they did and is typical of the more scholarly writing, which is done most often as a study of the history of classical music in some way.  
 The discourse of the classical music community is as diverse as the music that is played, with its combination of the main strands of communication of notation, Italian musical jargon and written words. This language is used within the community as well as when reaching out towards the rest of society. But written words are not the only way the community reaches out. Now with technology there are multitudes of videos, recordings and documentaries on, of and about classical music. It helps bring the language of expression of the music to an audience that is more technologically orientated with the simple explanations of the narrator, show host or musician. A very cute example comes from a clip from The Ellen Show from her 8-year-old musical prodigy guest Alma Duetscher, who explains before playing Shubert’s *The Bee* on her violin, that the “violin is playing the buzzing of the bee.” (Flixxy) It is such a simple explanation of how music is used to express just as much as words are. Language in this community is a melting pot of different sources, tongues and notations, but it is meant for everyone and is somehow everywhere. Just listen.

**WORKS CITED**

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