

# Why We Need Classical Culture

*Anthony Morss is the Music Director and Principal Conductor of the New Jersey Association of Verismo Opera, Inc.*

What I'd like to do is ask three important questions, and provide the best answers that I know to them.

First, why must we restore Classical culture to its former splendor? And why must we do it now? How does

our Summer Music-Science Program (July 28-Aug. 15, 2014) tie in with this purpose?

The value of Classical culture lies in great part within its uplifting and life-giving store of cultural treasures; but also, now especially, we need it to counterbalance the horrifying glorification of violence in our popular culture and entertainment.

Novels and movies have always staged confrontations between good and evil, with some violence at the end of the story when the showdown occurs. But times past presented *nothing like* the current villains and monsters. Many of the latter resemble Tyrannosaurus Rex, and in almost every case the villains are far more memorable than the heroes. The Joker and the Penguin, for example, always walk off with the Batman movies, being repulsively colorful and entertaining in comparison to the drab and laconic Batman. Notice also, that the intellectual level is literally that of comic books, ini-



Schiller Institute

*Conductor Anthony Morss*

tially to be read by children, but now designed for dumbed-down adults as well.

In the Star Wars series, despite some fine imaginative work, especially in the first film with its profound mythical resonance, the impression which stays the longest with the spectator when the series is over is the menacing breathing of Darth Vader. He owns one's memories, easily overbalancing the good characters.

Several movies put us through the end of the world, the terrifyingly realistic sinking of the Titanic, the collapse of multiple Manhattan skyscrapers, and physical attacks by the most savagely insane murderers, to say nothing of vampires, werewolves, and zombies—the last three, very popular these days.

The many video games all create a war zone where the players must kill or be killed. These games are adapted directly from British military training videos designed to remove the slightest vestige of compassion which might make a British soldier hesitate to kill an enemy soldier on the battlefield. These video games figured prominently in the numerous shootings at U.S. schools, in that almost all the shooters were completely addicted to the games. Some of them were even able to acquire highly developed marksmanship using the games. Healthy-minded children can, of course, play the games without becoming warped, but at the very least, one has to admit that the games are not conducive to wholesome attitudes.

All this negativity crushingly weighs down the atmosphere in which our children are growing up. We need to provide them with a healthier view of life; one which includes compassion, loyalty, nobility, love, and beauty. Classical culture does *exactly* that.

### **A Deeply Ordered Universe**

Most interestingly, Classical culture is not limited to positive emotions and events. It deals with negative feelings and tragic situations as well, since it must include the heartbreaks of mankind as much as the joys—indeed, it must speak to the totality of the human condition.

However, it presents these negative situations in a language of beauty, no matter how dark they may appear. Mozart explained this very well when he wrote, in one of his letters, that music can express great tragedy and extreme emotions, but that the expression must never turn ugly itself. The language must remain musically tempered, organic, and logical. Thus Mozart writes an aria for a comic character named Osmin, in his opera the “[Abduction from the] Seraglio,” who is

sputtering and squalling with murderous rage, and the aria certainly embodies all of that, but is, in addition, both very funny, and also beautiful!

In Donizetti's opera “Lucia di Lammermoor,” the heroine, Lucia, is driven mad on her wedding night, having been forced to renounce her engagement to the man she loves and marry a bridegroom politically convenient to her family. The famous “mad scene” depicts Lucia out of her mind with grief and absolutely pitiable. When well-acted, it is extremely moving. But the orchestral accompaniment proceeds mainly in even four-bar phrases, using this rational, organic compositional speech to “redeem” the wildness of overthrown reason. The result is deeply touching, and actually beautiful. A composer outside the Classical tradition would have presented Lucia's aimless staggering with realistic, jagged music, which might have depicted her wretched state convincingly, but at the price of producing no music which is beautiful.

Another example of Classical “redemption” of profoundly negative feelings: Consider Chopin turning the deepest melancholy into liquid loveliness. The Classical tradition allows us to recognize that, despite surface appearances, underneath, the universe is deeply ordered.

### **The Anti-Classical: Stravinsky**

It might help us gain a clearer picture of Classical culture by examining something outside, something opposed to its ideals. A major work, in fact, by common consent *the* most important and influential music of the 20th Century, is Stravinsky's “Rite of Spring” (“Le Sacre du Printemps”). It is a ballet depicting the rites of ancient pagan Russia, leading up to the ritual murder of an innocent young girl as a sacrifice. The sacrifice is offered to the cruel pagan gods, in order to ensure a good harvest.

For society to kill an innocent citizen would be for us, the most repellent act society could commit. But this ballet is set in a far distant time of primitivism and barbarous darkness, untouched by the restraints of modern civilization, and other various religious denominations.

Thus, the sacrifice of this scapegoat is really a sacrifice to the ignorance and fear of the barbarous tribe.

By any standard of ethics, this story should appall us. It is not, however, presented that way at all. The primitive was very much in vogue in Europe at the time this work was composed, 1913, and was widespread in the visual arts, particularly, with Picasso leading the way. The primitive was considered vital, admirable, a

breath of fresh air.

Stravinsky, in “Le Sacre,” created a world of bewitching colors and radically new sonorities, fascinating harmonies, and rhythms never heard before—all designed to lure the listener into the atmosphere of an ancient and awe-inspiring society, conveniently freed from all restraints and individual conscience.

This is mass man in his most repellent form, forced to collaborate with tribal custom, a forebear of all the most horrific forms of mass man as murderous aggressor under the banners of national socialism [Nazism] and communism, later in the same century.

The most daring effect of the whole piece occurs at the end of it, and it concerns rhythm. Now, a slight digression. Rhythm refers to a pattern of stresses which sets up expectation that the pattern will be repeated. The pattern requires exceptions, weak beat accents and off beat accents, called syncopations, to create a variety. Every one of these exceptions, these variations from the expected pattern, energizes the music. The listener requires that the expected pattern can be frequently confirmed, but also that there be enough exceptions to produce energy.

Example: In the great swing bands of the '30s and '40s, my youth, you could see all the sections of the bands with feet and knees bobbing up and down, keeping the beat, while the men were playing constant syncopation against the beat, and thereby creating enormous tension and energy in any lively tempo, and also creating such strong and happy feelings among the listeners that everyone wanted to get up and dance.

By the final section of Stravinsky's *Sacre*, the *danse sacrale*, the sacred dance, the audience is completely under the sway of the rhythms and vibrating with them. But then something unheard-of happens. The ever more powerful rhythms become so irregular that the public cannot feel the beat any more, however much it wants to. All sense of rhythmic expectation and individual control vanishes. We all become helpless prisoners of totally unpredictable rhythms, as the scapegoat dies.

This aesthetic buries individuality, and makes the audience willing collaborators in ritual murder—not just spectators.

Classical culture, by contrast, promotes promotes individual responsibility, and the individual's deepening understanding of the world around them, as opposed to the tyrannically imposed customs, myths, and superstitions of primitive tribal societies.

Thank you.