

Taking a Fresh Look at Classical Music

Hear the term classical music and an image that comes to mind for some people is old men in wigs who wrote music hundreds of years ago. Missing in that picture is the fact that classical music is relevant in culture, even in the 21st century. September is Classical Music Month, and along with that is a chance to get a fresh perspective on an important musical art form.

A starting point in better understanding classical music is knowing what it is, as well as what it is not. "Traditionally, it involves a specific composer or group of composers who had been asked by a patron to compose a certain piece of music," says Dr. Randall Speer, a professor of music at Randolph College. "Strictly speaking, the term classical is more limited to the historical period of composers like Beethoven and Bach."

By comparison, Speer says classical music is not characterized by popular elements of the modern music industry. "Many popular music idioms have repeating rhythms or melodies," says Speer. He notes that it is a form of music that is easily grasped by listeners and is more immediately gratifying. "Classical

differs most significantly in that it does not have the same type of repetition," says Speer. He says a 40-minute symphony might leave listeners with some tunes in their mind, but not the entire symphony.

Speer says the scope of most classical music pieces is much larger than someone would typically find in popular music. He says one example is a short segment of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliette* that is used in movies. "It takes a lot of music to lead up to that segment," he says. "Taken in context, that small section produces a much greater impact." Speer says hearing only a small portion of a larger symphony would be like seeing only a small clip out of a movie and not having the full experience of the entire work.

Classical music has had a significant influence on today's music. "The impact on modern society and modern musical art cannot be underestimated," says Speer. "What we hear in popular idioms often comes from classical, such as Duke Ellington's orchestra, the Beatles, and film scores like the shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

"The popular assumption is that classical is a museum approach,"

Speer says. Instead, he says modern composers are still following the same professional tradition of writing commissioned music, although it might not be in the same musical style one might associate with classical music. "Things we write today might be influenced by jazz or rock," says Speer. "Classical music and composition is very much alive and active." In addition, he says including classical in the mix of music styles enables society to find voices that represent a broad spectrum of composers and time periods.

Speer says classical music is a way for society to take a break from a pattern of brevity. "We are living in a world of sound bites and memes, and short and small ideas that are thrown at us," he says. He notes that classical music can help provide meaning in a deeper context where listeners can absorb the larger experience.

"Classical music can provide a different perspective to our lives and a chance to slow down what we are taking in," Speer says. "We should allow the sound to wash over us or ride it like a tidal wave that is cleansing and deeply meaningful."