

Questions of Relevance

I've been working my way through the score for Stephen Stucky and Jeremy Denk's new opera, *The Classical Style*, in which I'll sing the role Beethoven this summer in Aspen. Using a blend of music-theory nerd comedy and playful imagination of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven's life in heaven, the work is in dialog with the timely conversation of classical music's relevance to contemporary life, and the timeless conversation of what constitutes great art and the mutation of taste over time.

Seeking the late musicologist Charles Rosen, author of the book *The Classical Style* that inspired the opera, Beethoven states "It's no longer enough to be great. We need to be relevant." The question of relevance is one I've batted around since rededicating myself to music in 2013. What is the relevance of the classical canon for contemporary life? This in turn, begs the question, what is relevance? Is it a useful measuring stick for art?

I hear relevance, and I think of critical engagement with the forces shaping our world – economic polarization, ecological devastation, the inherited legacies and present realities of racism, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. I imagine a production of *Le Nozze di Figaro* that presents the class distinctions between Count Almaviva, Figaro, and Susanna in terms of the 1%, working poor, and undocumented immigrants. I ask how works, old and new, deepen our individual and collective self-understanding, enable us to make sense of and ethically navigate our relationships with one another and the Earth. Indeed, this is a form of relevance, but to define relevance as realized or potential political value in a work draws a partition between relevance and aesthetic experience.

I began drafting these thoughts in rehearsal for Haydn's *The Creation* – Frank Corliss playing the piano reduction as Helen Zbhing Huang sings **Nun beut die Flur das frische Grün** on the lip the stage. The syncopation of her melismatic passages pulsating through the warm harmonies creates an incredibly potent pleasure – hearing, experiencing the pleasure that well-crafted music induces circumvents the intellectual, perhaps ideological, partition I'd built. Is beauty a form of relevance? Or, perhaps better said – beauty can create relevance. While tastes change, the relevance that emerges from beauty outlives the practical relevance of art.

Perhaps relevance is a flimsy term and a cloudy lens through which to experience art. It is hazardous to aim for relevance as an artist – in its truest form it emerges in the relationship between the individual, community, or culture and the work, often retrospectively. Thoughts?

Genesis Now

Bard shuttered its doors to the winter's first blizzard, and I am taking the time granted me to translate the bass solos in Haydn's *Creation* and read up on its source material, *Genesis*. My preparation to sing the bass role, Raphael, comes as Nina and I lay the conceptual groundwork of *Making Tellus*, which will draw on scientific, mythological, and poetic traditions to trace the advent of the Anthropocene - humanity's emergence as a geologic force - and grapple with the implications of such power.

I flip through the dictionary from Wallfische to Löwe, Tiger, and Hirsch and write whale, lion, tiger, and stag in my score. God commands the Flutenwohner to fill the depths of the seas and der Bewohner der Luft to sing from every branch. Yet without a being to praise his glory, God's work is incomplete, thus he creates man in his own image to complete his Creation.

From an early age, I considered *Genesis* a myth in the sense that it was not based in fact. A militant little atheist, I spent lunch hours in elementary and middle school arguing with classmates that Adam and Eve were made up, asserting that we were the products of evolution. We echoed the prevailing dialog about the role of *Genesis* in contemporary society: a competition of fact and faith. Fixation on the story's veracity, however, does not address the powerful ways in which the explicit and implicit values of *Genesis* shape our society and increasingly the Earth itself.

Whales persist. Hardly a week goes by that I do not see a stag near the forest's edge, fearless in a predator-eradicated landscape. Lions and tigers roam where they are permitted. Upon learning that I would sing Raphael, I half-joked that I ought to rework the text of the aria "Nun scheint in vollem Glanze der Himmel" into the past tense, making "Die Luft erfüllt das leichte Gefieder" more accurately reflect the nature of increasingly biologically impoverished nature of our creation "Die Luft war gefüllt das leichte Gefieder." But, at times, the air is still filled with flocks of birds. While walking to school in Central Pennsylvania's winter mornings, I stood rapt as miles-long writhing flocks of black birds snaked across the sky. They were Starlings, introduced to North America in 1890 by the American Acclimatization Society, which sought to introduce all of the birds that appear in Shakespeare to the "New World."

In 1597 Shakespeare wrote "I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but Mortimer," naming the bird once in *Henry IV Part I*. In 2015, over two hundred million starlings fill the skies of North America. The cultural imaginary gives shape to the ecological fabric of the world. God's first command to man was, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." We follow God's word.

Making Tellus emerges from the recognition that the formative power of mythology extends beyond culture; we write it into the Earth.