

Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall. By Joseph Horowitz. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. \$39.95. 606 pp., ill. (hardcover) ISBN 0-393-05717-8

The title of this book sound alarms for the classical music devotee. It invites skepticism and denial. No one wishes to believe that this great musical passion has fallen. On the contrary, the mere suggestion invites a call to arms in its defence.

Fortunately, from the outset, Joseph Horowitz not only utilizes his extensive association with musical life in America to validate his claims, but unfolds his argument with skill. Having written several previous books dealing with musical Americana, and having served as an impresario in New York, Horowitz has the credentials to tackle the topic.

Classical Music in America is really two books. Part I, “Queen of the Arts: Birth and Growth,” chronicles the “rise,” while Part II consists of “Great Performances: Decline and Fall.” Also included is an Apologia (rather than an introduction or preface), endnotes, complementary photographs and illustrations, and an index. In typical Norton fashion, it is handsomely and sturdily bound.

Part I places two preeminent American cultural centers, Boston and New York, in relief. The extended discussion of the evolution of the Boston Symphony Orchestra interpolates colorful stories of important businessmen, conductors, composers and performers. For example, the discussion of Arthur Nikisch’s interpretation of Beethoven’s Fifth juxtaposes the reactions of several prominent music reviewers at the time (1889). This not

only provides the necessary historical context, it gives a good sense of the lively public debate over classical music.

By contrast, the discussion about music in New York begins with opera (which is only addressed in the Boston segment in a minor way), before moving to the history of the New York Philharmonic. Horowitz uses this underlying dichotomy in the cultural life of the two cities to address musical trends that emerged elsewhere in the country. The inclusion of other important centers and orchestras (specifically Chicago and Philadelphia) helps to broaden the perspective.

The two sections of Part II, first “The Culture of Performance,” then “Offstage Participants,” flow naturally from Part I and lead up to current times. Here again, Horowitz examines how various individuals lived and worked, with insightful analysis of their contributions, in what becomes not just an historical but a sociological discussion. Key conductors are discussed at length, as are solo performers, and the horizon expands to include other important centers of musical activity.

One of Horowitz’s themes is that many of the most influential performers in America were not home-grown, and dissemination of classical music for large periods of the last century was by foreigners (“immigrants” is perhaps the better euphemism). Only with the “offstage” producers and composers does the discussion shift to many who were American-born.

Another theme is the struggle to create a particularly American music. Horowitz's thesis is that music in America is essentially a "culture of performance." A sense of nationalism, at least in the musicological sense, was never really acquired. This emphasis on colossal performers is convincingly supported by the evidence.

The opening Apologia is pivotal to understanding the author's approach. Horowitz takes a realistic and pragmatic stand by debunking the notion that all things musically "American" are perforce superior and unsurpassable. His writing does not defend or elevate the facts into mythical proportions. The occasional bits of romantic nostalgia that are included give a sense of contemporaneous opinions, and are not intended as chauvinism.

Thus Horowitz's writing rings with authority. The scholarship is excellent, with generous endnotes to allow for further investigation; although there is no bibliography provided, the citations are sufficiently thorough to allow for consequent research. Horowitz has a

fluid, intelligent writing style, with energetic vocabulary that enlivens the historical content.

Even the best of authors have difficulty in conveying musical sound via the written word. I happened to hear Horowitz present his ideas on public radio in the US, and benefited greatly from being able to hear the musical examples firsthand, such as the idiosyncratic nature of Nikisch's performance. If there is a weakness to the utility of this book, it is that there is not much reference to the availability of older recorded music, which can be found, but not easily, if one scours the Internet; a companion CD would have been a good idea. Otherwise this is an outstanding work. In the tradition of Harold Schonberg's *The Lives of the Great Composers*, another Norton achievement, Joseph Horowitz's scholarship will serve as an important point of reference for future generations, and it deserves a place in every music collection.

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