



Classical Music: Expect the Unexpected. By Kent Nagano with Inge Kloepfer. Translated from German by Hans-Christian Oeser. Montreal, QC; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 238 pp. ISBN 9780773556348.

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Seeing the author's name as Kent Nagano, the illustrious conductor, a reader might expect this book to be basically an autobiography, but the word "unexpected" was put into the title. Certainly there are interesting autobiographical chapters, but the main issue of this book is classical music, which Nagano asserts "can foster social cohesion and

enhance our quality of life" (p. 79). Moreover, he argues that we need to transform "'the crisis of classical music' into 'classical music for a time of crisis'" (p. 83).

A part of his argument is that classical music is not an elitist art form. Nagano begins by recalling his own introduction to music as a child. This took place in the small village of Morro Bay, California, where his mother began teaching music to each of her children from the age of four. However, in 1957 when Nagano was age six, the Georgian musician Wachtang "Botso" Korisheli arrived in the village and, in Nagano's words, transformed the elementary school "into a kind of musical laboratory" (p. 9). Korisheli insisted on aural training and music reading for those in the band and soon had a full-fledged orchestra in operation. On weekends he coached numerous chamber ensembles in his home, often encouraging parents of the children involved to become teaching assistants. Nagano summarizes Korisheli's impact as follows: "He metamorphosed Morro Bay into a village of sound where music helped overcome the numerous conflicts that would flare up again and again in a community of immigrants from very different ethnic backgrounds" (p. 15).

That positive experience undoubtedly formed the basis for Nagano's belief in the value and need for classical music by each and every person. Chapter 2 reviews the decline in the support for classical music in primary and secondary schools and by the media, not only in North America but



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broadly in Europe, where the bulk of Western classical music originated. Nagano pinpoints the initial link in the decline to the belief that “serious music is nice to have, but by no means essential” (p. 47) and refers to the bankruptcy of the Oakland Symphony Orchestra in 1986. He summarizes this crisis as a version of capitalism adopted throughout the Western world. Its premise assumes the only worthwhile life is that of being immediately profitable rather than being involved in social responsibilities and individual charitable experiences.

To argue that classical music can in large part fill this vacuum Nagano sets about exploring how the power of music can unfold and what it evokes. He refers to various writers and theorists in the process, but highlights the relevance of Northrop Frye’s essay, “The Educated Imagination” (1964).¹ Frye argues that the importance of the arts lies in their ability to strengthen our imaginative powers. Thus, one can envision the kind of society one wishes to live in through meaningful involvement in the arts and, in Nagano’s argument, through serious music in particular.

Nagano does admit that some popular music achieves a high standard, such as “Imagine” by John Lennon (p. 170). However, the type of music that Nagano feels a person needs to hear and experience to really develop one’s imagination is more complex. Chapter 5 is largely a report of his discussions with Daniel Levitin concerning the areas of the brain impacted by music. Nagano argues that listening to a work such as Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony or Messiaen’s *Éclairs sur l’Au-Delà* produces a powerful effect upon the brain. In Levitin’s opinion, this is unique to music, which has a stronger impact than any of the other arts.

Among the fascinating autobiographical sections of this book are the chapters dealing with Messiaen, whose works Nagano began to program in 1978 with the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra. The composer was so impressed with the recordings of subsequent performances sent to him by Nagano that he and his wife travelled to Berkeley for the final concert in the Messiaen cycle. In the early 1980s Nagano was invited to stay at the Messiaen apartment in Paris. In Nagano’s words, Messiaen and his wife, Yvonne Loriod, introduced him “to a European way of life and to a European appreciation of art” (p. 140).

Another strong influence upon Nagano was his friendship with Leonard Bernstein. With him, Nagano frequently discussed the music of Charles Ives and in particular what made Ives’s music so “American,” compared with the works of composers such as Copland or Sessions. But regardless of whether it was music by European or North American composers, when he became conductor of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra Nagano set himself the goal of enticing more young people to experience the power of “serious” music. At the beginning of his tenure, in 2006, there were no subscribers under the age of thirty-five. Nagano determined that orchestral music must be brought to Montrealers wherever they were, including parks and arenas. Programming was another important factor, such as pairing *Ein Heldenleben* with a new composition celebrating hockey heroes, or including Beethoven on a concert featuring Frank Zappa’s orchestral works. With these

1. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

initiatives, over one thousand subscribers under the age of thirty-four have been attracted to these symphonic concerts. In addition, beginning in 2016, Nagano headed up a project to create a musical kindergarten in an underprivileged area of Montréal-Nord, where there is ethnic/cultural diversity similar to Nagano's experience in Morro Bay (p. 128).

Nagano drives home the power of listening to and understanding serious music through the final chapter where diverse individuals expound on the power of music in their lives. The interviewees include politician Helmut Schmidt, Hollywood film director William Friedkin, basketball player Dirk Nowitzki, novelist Yann Martel, and scientist/astronaut and now Governor General of Canada Julie Payette.

Classical music for Nagano consists of the Western canon. But what about the power of art musics in non-European cultures? Some research about the impact of Carnatic and Hindustani musics upon the brain has been undertaken in the 21st century.² These musical cultures are not referred to in the book, although Nagano does refer to Japanese Noh theatre and Balinese gamelan along with classical Indian musics having a major impact on Messiaen. For persons exposed to these non-Western musical cultures, the evidence so far seems to indicate that it can have a powerful impact upon a listener. Is it similar to that for which Nagano is arguing with regard to works of the Western canon?

There is one reference in the book to Nagano experiencing a non-Western Indigenous culture, and that is in connection with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra's journey to the Canadian North. For that tour, a new composition by Alexina Louie, *Take the Dog Sled*, had been commissioned and it incorporated two Inuit women singers performing throat singing. Nagano admits: "Only, in the course of time, when I got used to the sounds and heard how people imitated nature in their singing did those sounds become a song for me" (p. 164). That experience made him realize what music is. "Music, physically nothing more than an acoustic stimulus, whether a single chord, an arrangement of tones, an entire symphony or an Inuit song, basically originates in our own head and then spreads all the more powerfully within us" (p. 165). The key then, it seems to this reviewer, is that a person has exposure to a wide range of types of music to fully be impacted in the way for which Nagano argues.

2. See Satish Kumar, Pavana Krishnamoorthy, Shwetha Rao, and Santhosh Kumar. "A Study on Effect of Indian Classical Music on Brain Activity Using EEG Signals," *Journal of Medical Science and Clinical Research* 5 (May 2017): 21702-6; Ram K. Nawasalkar and Pradeep K. Butey, "Analytical and Comparative Study on Effect of Indian Classical Music on Human Body Using EEG Based Signals," *International Journal of Modern Engineering Research* 2, no. 5 (Sept-Oct, 2017): 3289-91; and Sravanti L. Sanivarapu, "India's Rich Musical Heritage Has a Lot to Offer to Modern Psychiatry," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 57, no. 2 (Apr-Jun, 2015): 210-13.