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Art Music, Perfection and Power: Critical Encounters with Classical Music Culture in Contemporary Cinema

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During the last three decades music scholars have provided a growing amount of critical accounts of what they contend is a fundamental conceptual support behind the performance of classical music, namely the belief in aesthetically autonomous and enduring musical works free-standing from any cultural and social context. According to this ontology, the primary obligation of the performer is to present and interpret the musical work, a performance ideal that has been claimed to foster a musical culture obsessed with perfectionism and permeated by problematic relations of power. Such critical assessments have of late migrated beyond the academic discourses of music scholars into the venues of popular culture, a phenomenon evidenced in particular by a variety of recently released feature films. This article argues that current screen media representations of classical musicians are involved in a complex critical dialogue with deep-rooted aesthetic ideologies clustering around classical music and its performance. Although such representations advance a view of classical music culture as being deeply permeated by structural inequalities, performance anxiety and unreasonably high standards of perfection, they do not necessarily reject the notion of the musical work or devalue the high-art status and emancipatory potential traditionally ascribed to classical music.



On 5 November 2019, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto as part of their celebration of the composer's upcoming 250th birthday. In connection with the concert the orchestra's website featured an image of conductor Ricardo Muti with the caption: 'Muti, Kavakos & Beethoven's Violin Concerto'. In the image Muti is depicted in a visionary posture, his arms raised in an almost Christ-like fashion vaguely reminiscent of the famous *Cristo Redentor* in Rio de Janeiro and other similar monuments. Moreover, the conductor's head is tilted slightly backwards, resulting in a conspicuously oracular gaze that appears to be fixed on a point beyond the immediate physical presence of the orchestra and the auditorium. In fact this is one of the most traditional ways of depicting conductors, and this image's message is not difficult to decode: the great musician Ricardo Muti is wholly and deeply absorbed in Beethoven's musical universe. Engaging directly to a deep-seated maestro myth and the concomitant cult of the male genius, the image may even be interpreted as a suggestion that the conductor is here connecting with that marvelous 'spiritual realm of the infinite' (Hoffmann quoted in Ziolkowski, 2018: 48) so cherished by E. T. A. Hoffman and other nineteenth-century romantics.

In addition to this visual presentation of intense musical immersion, the brief text beneath the image informs us in a rather heightened language about the works and performers involved in the concert:

A season-long Beethoven celebration continues with the composer's dazzling Violin Concerto performed by the renowned Leonidas Kavakos, 'the most deeply satisfying violinist performing today' (*Philadelphia Inquirer*). Ricardo Muti conducts this towering work along with a world premiere by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Bernard Rands.

Text and image thus seem to focus on different things: while the text speaks of Beethoven's 'towering work', the image (aside from depicting the conductor-genius in action) constructs a specific kind of musical experience, what might be described as an undiluted immersion in music for its own sake. Taken together the two types of information correspond surprisingly well to the 'two conceptual supports' that, according to Lawrence Kramer, have traditionally played a constitutive role in the construction of classical music as a distinctive genre and cultural category:

One support is the status of a relatively stable whole identifiable as a 'work' in a strong sense of that term. The other is a model of consciousness and attention that is increasingly anachronistic in the posthuman world. (2013: 42–43)

That the concept of the musical work has historically been constitutive of classical music culture – regulating its performance practices and affecting everything from the construction of concert halls to the emergence of an art music canon – was the central thesis in Lydia Goehr’s influential study *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992). Kramer himself divides this first conceptual support into three sub-categories: the music as a ‘quasi-thing’; the musical work as an ‘integrated totality’; and the music as an ‘address to the (...) listener from a distance that creates the possibility of acoustic contemplation’ (Kramer, 2013: 45). As to the ‘model of consciousness and attention’, the second conceptual constituent behind the category of classical music, it is a model that stresses the idea of musical listening as a pursuit characterized by heightened concentration. It is a mode of perception that consists of ‘nothing but listening’ and through which the attentive listener may harvest the delights of pure aesthetic experience, which is exactly what Muti appears to be doing in the featured image. This model also constructs musical listening as active (rather than passive) in so far as it is directed towards an essentially enigmatic musical work ‘prompting interpretation’ (Kramer 2013: 45).

During the last three decades, Kramer’s conceptual supports have been challenged by scholars working in musicology and related research disciplines. In the 1990s several writers, including Kramer himself, variously deconstructed notions of musical autonomy on which the aestheticized musical work, as well as its performance and reception, essentially depended.¹ More recently, Lucy Green has argued that ‘those very characteristics of universality, eternity, complexity, originality and autonomy purportedly possessed by classical music’ amount to an ‘ideological category’ (Green, 2016: 28–29), a category, one might add, that can readily be employed to mask hierarchical structures and relations of domination in classical music culture. This interrogative approach has of late migrated beyond academic discourse into the sphere of popular culture, a phenomenon evidenced in particular by a variety of recently released feature films. Drawing on tropes circulating for a long time in Hollywood cinema – i.e. *The Great Lie* (1941), *Deception* (1946), *Angel Face* (1953), *Svengali* (1954), *The Mephisto Waltz* (1971), *The Money Pit* (1986), *The Prince of Tides* (1991) and *Swimfan* (2002) – but also to some extent in European films – i.e. *The Conductor* (1980), *A Heart in Winter* (1992), *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *The Page Turner* (2006) – these new productions paint a rather dark and sinister picture of classical music culture, which is constructed as being populated by abusive and self-serving characters as well as deeply

¹ Two of the more well-known critiques are McClary (1991) and Cusick (1999).

infested with dysfunctional power relationships and an unhealthy obsessiveness with technical perfection.²

Focusing on a number of recent film productions, this article argues that current screen media representations of classical musicians are engaged in a complex critical dialogue with deep-rooted aesthetic ideologies clustering around classical music as well as the norms, practices and conceptions assumed to govern contemporary classical music culture (cf. Winters, 2014). The complexity here consists in the fact that, although these films advance a view of classical music culture as being deeply permeated by structural inequalities, performance anxiety and unreasonably high standards of perfection, they do not necessarily reject the notion of the musical work or devalue the high-art status and emancipatory potential traditionally ascribed to classical music.

Perfectionism, Performance and the Musical Work

Scenes featuring performances of classical music go back almost to the beginning of cinema itself. In order to frame my discussion of how musical performance is depicted in contemporary film I will briefly reflect on the centrality of the musical work in classical music culture. A good place to begin is in the realm of Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics as this intellectual tradition can be seen as both emerging from and reinforcing the conceptual foundations of classical music. According to philosopher Nelson Goodman, a musical work is constituted by the (potentially infinite) class of performances exhibiting complete compliance with the musical score (Goodman, 1976: 210). On this account Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the sum of performances that accurately realizes the specifications given in an authorized musical score to the symphony. Regardless of its musical and artistic qualities, a performance that fails to satisfy this criterion is therefore strictly speaking not a performance of the work in question. As Alessandro Giovannelli puts it, for Goodman:

All and only those performances that fully correspond to, or 'comply with', the score count as performances of the work. Even one small mistake on the part of the performer, say, in replacing one note for another, is sufficient to declare that, technically, a different work has been performed. (2017)

The fundamental rationale of classical music performance, as traditionally understood, is precisely the interpretation and presentation of musical works. In the Goodmanian

² In her illuminating discussion of how classical music performance is represented in European and Hollywood cinema, Halfyard (2006) surveys a variety of earlier American films featuring abusive and sociopathic characters that are classical musicians. A more recent example of such a character can be found in Zu Quirkes's horror movie *Nocturne* (2020).

view, however, interpretation presupposes presentation – that is, perfect compliance with the score. This is indeed a very strict conception of the relation between musical work and performance, one that is hardly congruent with the pre-critical intuitions of most professional musicians. Yet, together with so-called Platonist (e.g. Kivy 1993; Dodd 2007; Levinson 2011) and Aristotelian (e.g. Walton 1988) ontologies, Goodman's theory can be seen as the theoretical fine-tuning of a more generalized belief in the existence of musical works, a belief integral to a musical culture in which performance is still very much a question of precision and perfection (cf. Goehr, 1992: 13; Montello, 1999).³ To this can be added another ideal, namely the expectation that performing soloists should play the music 'by heart', which is to say, execute the work entirely from memory and without the help of a score. Such performance values can be experienced by musicians as extraordinarily challenging (Skoogh and Frisk, 2019), at times giving rise to severe stage fright and an acute fear of suffering memory lapses (cf. Matei and Ginsborg, 2017). Such performance anxieties, and the ways they are heightened by professed ideals of technical and musical perfectionism, has been the subject of two recent feature films: the 2013 movie *Grand Piano* (Eugenio Mira) and the Netflix-production *The Perfection* (2019), directed by Richard Shepard. In both films classical music is more or less allegorically constructed as an inherently unsound institution whose obsessive fixation with accuracy, technical mastery and absolute precision has spun out of control.

Mira's Hitchcock-inspired *Grand Piano* follows concert pianist Tom Selznick during a nightmarish comeback performance in Chicago. An internationally renowned musician, Selznick has developed severe stage fright as a result of a traumatic performance a few years earlier, when his attempt to play the virtually unplayable virtuoso piece *La Cinquette* by the (fictional) composer Patrick Godureaux ended in complete failure. Apart from this notorious piece, Godureaux is mainly known for the mysterious disappearance of his enormous fortune in connection with his premature death. Entering the stage, the terrified Selznick takes comfort in the knowledge that his wife is attending the concert. This feeling quickly morphs into its opposite, however, as he finds out that a less sympathetically inclined person is also present in the audience,

³ On the assumption that classical music culture has traditionally tended to construe musical works as abstract entities (see Goehr, 1992, 231) it is perhaps a plausible claim that Platonist conceptions will fit the pre-critical intuitions of most classical musicians better than will Goodman's decidedly nominalist theory. The consequences of these theoretical positions for musical performance are, however, largely the same in that they both imply a more or less meticulous performance conformity to a musical work type (to use the philosophers' jargon) as well as 'an utmost respect for the [musical] text' (Skoogh and Frisk, 2019: 2). Even so, Goodman's theory would theoretically seem to require a stricter adherence to textual fidelity than most Platonist theories, which can accept that a performance counts as an instantiation – or in the philosophical jargon, a token – of a work even in cases when the performer plays some wrong notes (cf. Goehr, 1992: 42).

equipped with a sniper rifle. Completely indifferent to the musical and artistic qualities of the performance, the sniper is there because he has figured out the secret behind Godureaux's missing fortune, a secret inextricably bound up with *La Cinquette*. Concealed deep within the grand piano on which Selznick is performing, a piano built by Godureaux himself, is the key that opens the safe deposit box where the fortune is hidden. But the key will emerge only if *La Cinquette* is performed with complete accuracy. Not a single note may be wrong. As Selznick begins to play the opening piece on the program, the first of many death threats appears. Written all over the score's second page are the words 'PLAY ONE WRONG NOTE AND YOU DIE' [Figure 1].⁴ A few pages later Selznick is instructed to go backstage to pick up an earpiece, which he manages to do during a longer orchestral interlude. Now able to communicate directly with his nemesis, Selznick is told that, contrary to his plans for the evening, he must perform *La Cinquette*. And the performance must be flawless, since only a note-for-note correct rendition of the piece will release the concealed key. Should he miss as much as one note, his wife will be shot. Moreover, having discarded the score to the piece, which was handed to him by a mysterious stranger upon his arrival at the concert hall, Selznick has no other option than to perform it by heart.

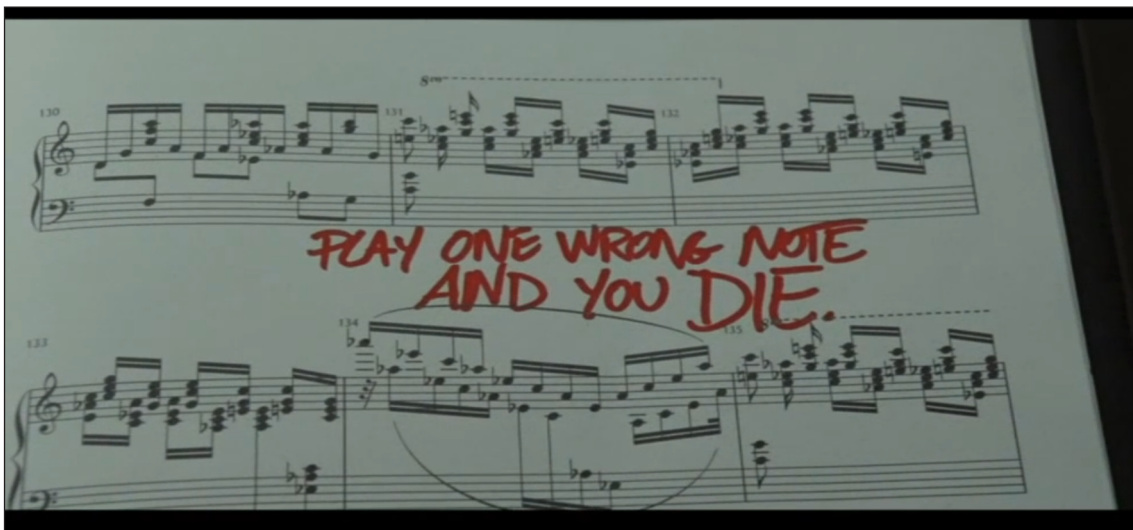


Figure 1: Tom Selznick receives death threat during live performance. Screenshot from *Grand Piano*, directed by Eugenio Mira, 2013.

⁴ The placement of a gunman in the audience in *Grand Piano* draws on a central cue from Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934/1956). In Hitchcock's film, as Ben Winters observes, 'an assassination attempt is timed to a performance of Arthur Benjamin's *Storm Clouds Cantata* in the Royal Albert Hall' (Winters, 2014: 81; see also Wierzbicki, 2003; and Gorbman, 1987: 23–24).

On the surface an action-driven movie (albeit one that plays out over an unusually brief period of time), *Grand Piano* is clearly a film with a broader message. The combination of Selznick's severe stage fright and the catastrophic consequences that will be unleashed should he play as much as a single wrong note raises an issue that many musicians have experienced first-hand, namely that musical performance (especially solo performances of complex pieces), even if not literally a matter of life and death, can occasionally cause a level of anxiety that borders on existential terror (Steptoe, 2001; Williamon and Thompson, 2006).⁵ That *La Cinquette* is widely known as a nearly unplayable piece only strengthens the tension of the situation. For in contrast to such real-world musical works like Brian Ferneyhough's extremely complex *Cassandra's Dream Song* (1970) – a piece for solo flute that explores the very threshold of performability, featuring a score that is explicitly *not* intended as a 'a blueprint of a perfect performance' (Ferneyhough, 1970) – *La Cinquette* is a piece that is meant to be realized in a note-for-note accurate rendition, an expectation without which the film's plot would be essentially pointless. In fact this magnifies the pressure on the performer. For if Ferneyhough's piece in a sense can be understood as entering into a critical discussion with the ideals of musical perfection (cf. Waterman, 1994: 155) and with what the composer calls the 'notation-realization relationship' (Ferneyhough, 1970), the fictional *La Cinquette*, precisely because of its in-principle realizability, is premised on and at the same time feeds back into this ideal.

The idea of the note-for-note perfect performance as an inherently oppressive institution at the heart of classical music culture also surfaces in the recent horror thriller *The Perfection*, though here the punishment takes the form of sexual abuse rather than the threat of downright execution. In the film, former prodigy and cellist Charlotte Willmore returns to the secluded Bachoff, a music academy for exceptionally gifted children, to expose the misconduct going on there. As a small child Charlotte herself had been a victim of this misconduct, which takes the form of a sadistic ritual where the school's three male teachers inflict sexually abusive punishments on young female students for having failed to demonstrate musical perfection. The school's principal, Anton, provides a twisted justification for these abusive acts, saying that they are necessary reprimands serving to remind the girls that they can and ought to always

⁵ The intense anxiety that a musical performance can induce is aptly portrayed in Sérgio Machado's *The Violin Teacher* (2015) where a promising young violinist fails miserably while playing Mozart's Fifth Violin Concerto at an orchestral audition, the humiliation of which is further magnified by the anonymity of playing behind a screen. In the film, the protagonist is incapable of coping with the heightened focus on precision and perfection that characterizes the orchestral audition and as a result has to give up his dreams of being an orchestral musician (although at the end of the film he actually succeeds in passing the audition). A French remake of the film was directed by Rachid Hamid and issued under the title *La Mélodie* in 2017.

work harder, practice more, play better. To gain access to Bachoff, Charlotte puts an elaborate plan into action, which includes letting herself be captured by the vengeful Lizzie (another adult student of Anton whom Charlotte, earlier in the film, has tricked into amputating an arm) and brought as a prisoner to the school. As she arrives, Anton immediately takes her to a music room called 'The Chapel', a small concert venue where only the best students get to perform. Charlotte, who has not played the cello for years, is chained to a chair and ordered by Anton to play a piece by heart [see **Figures 2–3**]. As in *Grand Piano*, a less-than-flawless rendition will result in bad things happening in that a young cello-playing girl in the audience will have to 'pay the price'. Charlotte of course knows that this is a horrendous euphemism for the coarse acts of sexual abuse that await the young girl if she makes even the slightest technical mistake. What she does not know is that she will actually have to pay the price herself.



Figure 2: Charlotte performing at 'The Chapel'. Screenshots from *The Perfection*, directed by Richard Shepard (2019).



Figure 3: Charlotte performing at 'The Chapel'. Screenshots from *The Perfection*, directed by Richard Shepard (2019).

As a highly commercial film *The Perfection* adheres closely to the generic conventions of the horror thriller. Despite the rather conventional narrative, however, it is noticeable how the film's critique of musical flawlessness is bound up with the theme of sexual exploitation. This is hardly a coincidence. Like *The Conductor* (2018), a film that partly explores similar themes and to which I will return in the next section, *The Perfection* was made in the wake of the exceptional impact and spread of the #MeToo movement in autumn 2017.⁶ While the degree of sexual violence and the ferocity of the abusive acts featured in the film obviously cannot be understood as in any way reflecting everyday life in actual music schools and academies, but rather serve the needs of the fictional space, the narrative nevertheless explores a theme that, judging from the many testimonies coming out of the classical music world and other areas of cultural life, is very much a real-life experience for many people in contemporary society.

Grand Piano and *The Perfection* use their narratives to highlight and problematize what both films, on a more or less allegorical level, portray as a harmful normative ideal within classical music culture. But the films' critique of musical perfectionism also raises larger questions about the negative consequences of a culture obsessed with ideals of perfection. For while the threats leveled at the characters are evidently exaggerated, there is a growing awareness that excessive ideals of perfection (and not just those of classical music culture) are a real enough threat to the mental and physical well-being of many people today. According to a recent study by psychologists Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, the fixation on personal perfection spreading throughout contemporary culture and society can to a large extent be seen as a product of an ever more hegemonic neoliberal ideology exclusively concerned with the individual and her successes and failures. They describe this kind of perfectionism as 'a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations' (Curran and Hill, 2019: 410). That the two films focus on classical music in their critiques of contemporary ideals of perfection is hardly surprising, since the impeccable, note-for-note performance of a complex and technically demanding musical work can arguably be viewed as a paradigmatic instance of human perfection and mastery. In both *Grand Piano* and *The Perfection* the combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations are put in the spotlight metaphorically, in so far as the main characters face demands that are virtually impossible to live up to, yet nevertheless take on the task of realizing them. And even though Tom Selznick miraculously manages to produce a technically flawless rendering of *La Cinquette*, his performance

⁶ As reported by Julie Bloom in a *New York Times* review, the creators have explicitly acknowledged the importance of the #MeToo movement for the film's design (see Bloom 2019). However, the way the film builds on #MeToo-related issues has also been much criticized, as for example by Aja Romano in *Vox* (Romano 2019).

is carried through with such intense agony that we may plausibly imagine him never playing another concert again. It is also significant that these demands of perfection are exclusively preoccupied with technical perfection; the emotional authenticity of the performance, that which would constitute the performer's self-expression as a distinctive interpreter and a unique individual, does not count.⁷ In the fictional worlds of these films, classical musical culture is above all driven by dehumanizing ideals of perfection, ideals closely bound up with chastisement and retaliatory dominance.

Music, Gender, Power and Knowledge

In *The Perfection* the atrocious and perverted punishment following the failure to live up to unattainable demands of technical and musical excellence involves extremely violent acts of sexual abuse. A more realistic picture of how sexual harassment and abuse can be part of classical music culture is given in Maria Peters's *The Conductor* (*De dirigent*, 2018), a film that also takes issue with the prejudices and gender stereotyping that have been an intrinsic part of the classical music scene since its inception. The film is based on the life of conductor and pianist Antonia Brico (1902–1989), and the narrative revolves around the massive resistance and the unfounded biases – about women's musicality, musicianship and suitability to function as musical leaders – that she encounters throughout her professional career as she navigates a male-dominated world. In one of the film's pivotal scenes, the problem of male sexual abuse is faced head on. The scene depicts a situation that seems to be all too familiar to many women artists and musicians (and that, in Sweden at least, gained much attention during the 2017 #MeToo campaign), namely what can happen when a young female student is left alone with an older male teacher. Having worked hard to enter the music conservatory at the University of California, Berkeley, Antonia is having a lesson with one of her male teachers. Sitting beside him at a grand piano, Antonia plays a piece that she has prepared for this particular occasion. Her teacher, however, is less interested in her musical skills than in the possibility of taking advantage of their physical closeness. As he continuously tries to steer the conversation towards more intimate and erotic subjects, Antonia does her best to keep their discussion focused on the music. But the situation escalates and ultimately gets completely out of hand: unable or unwilling to control himself, the teacher begins passionately kissing and caressing, and eventually assaulting, his young female student, completely indifferent to the fact that she is not consenting [see **Figures 4–6**].

⁷ In Lydia Goehr's terminology such demands are indicative of 'the perfect performance of music' rather than 'the perfect musical performance' (Goehr, 2002: 141–142 and 151–152).



Figure 4: Antonia Brico is abused by her teacher during a piano lesson. Screenshots from *The Conductor*, directed by Maria Peters, 2018.

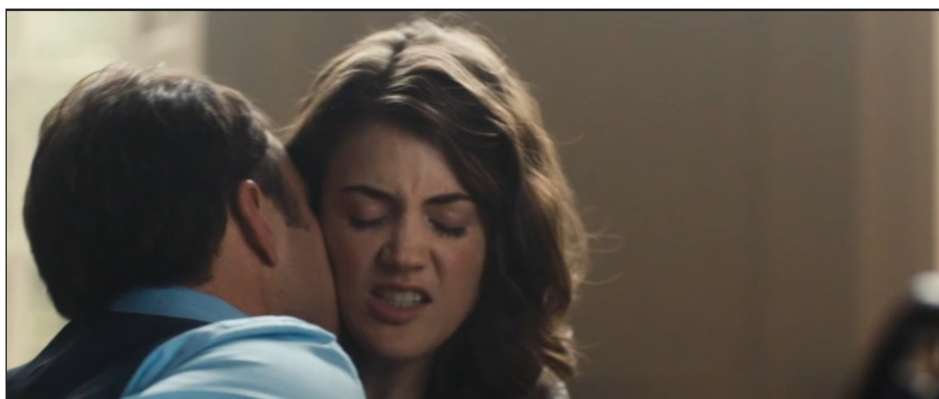


Figure 5: Antonia Brico is abused by her teacher during a piano lesson. Screenshots from *The Conductor*, directed by Maria Peters, 2018.



Figure 6: Antonia Brico is abused by her teacher during a piano lesson. Screenshots from *The Conductor*, directed by Maria Peters, 2018.

Just before the assault, and almost as a psychological build-up to it, the teacher deprecatingly dismisses Antonia's expressed ambition to become a professional conductor. He declares that 'women cannot become conductors' because 'they can't lead, only follow'. Throughout the film Antonia has to deal with the undermining of her talent and later, after she has become a professional conductor, of her authority. Here the film takes up issues that have been a focus of attention for women scholars for several decades. In an article from 1984, conductor and music scholar Mary Brown Hinely noted that during the twentieth century:

Performing and teaching careers presented women with perplexing problems and slow progress toward recognition, but conducting was an even less obtainable career goal. The highest hurdle for women in music was the one up to the conductor's podium. (1984: 42)

Brown Hinely goes on to say that even at the time of writing, in 1984, 'many inhibiting attitudes remain intact' (1984: 45). Indeed, as evidenced by Christina Scharff in her excellent recent study on the classical music profession, these 'inhibiting attitudes' seem to be well and alive today. Summing up her findings, Scharff concludes that

... female musicians have to negotiate a range of gendered challenges when engaging in the practice [of self-promotion], including accusations of lacking modesty, fears of not being taken seriously as an artist, and difficulties associated with 'selling yourself' in a wider, sexualized context. (2018: 195)

At the same time, these challenges are continuously downplayed and disarticulated through 'a range of rhetorical tools, including disclaimers, trivialization, and normalization' (ibid.).⁸ As to *The Conductor*, the film makes a similar statement about present-day classical music culture. For even though the film can be understood fundamentally as a critical depiction of the specific *historical* conditions and frameworks (political, ideological and structural) under which women conductors have worked, at the very end of the film we are provided with some rather discouraging information about the status of women conductors today, for instance that a list of the fifty most prominent conductors of all time published by the classical music journal *Gramophone* in 2018 does not include a single woman.⁹ Still, as Antonia works her way up 'to the

⁸ It should be noted that Scharff's focus is the performing musician rather than the orchestral conductor.

⁹ See *Gramophone*, September 1, 2018 <<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/other/article/50-great-conductors>> [Last accessed 3 February 2021].

conductor's podium' she manages bit by bit to conquer a position that, at least among some people, gains her the recognition and respect she deserves.¹⁰

The situation is quite different for the twenty-year-old Katarina in Lisa Langseth's *Till det som är vackert* (*Pure*, 2010).¹¹ In contrast to Brico's musical literacy and determined effort to secure a place for herself as a respected musician and orchestral conductor, Katarina, who has grown up in a run-down suburb of the Swedish city of Gothenburg, discovers the world of classical music more or less accidentally. Stumbling over a clip of Mozart's *Requiem* on YouTube, she immediately develops a deep affection for the piece and for classical music more broadly. What she lacks, however, is the cultural capital required to navigate the social norms, codes and expected behaviors inextricably bound up with the world of art music, a world, it will turn out, with which she is decidedly ill-prepared to cope. When she takes a job as a receptionist at the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Katarina soon becomes easy prey for Adam, the celebrated and charismatic music director of the orchestra. Right from the beginning the relationship between the two is characterized by a deep inequality that rests not only on their very different positions in the social hierarchy, but also on the natural authority with which Adam lays claim to the world of classical music. Katarina is clearly the more compassionate of the two, and her love of classical music runs much deeper than Adam's self-approving, ownership-oriented attitude to the masterpieces of musical high-culture. But this only amplifies the inequality of their relationship, as Adam allows himself to take advantage of Katarina's sensitivity to musical beauty, utilizing her respect for him as a classical musician to initiate an exploitative and increasingly destructive sexual relationship. Like the professionally trained Antonia, Katarina's affection for classical music is met with nothing but indifference and contempt; in the eyes of the powerful representatives of the all-male classical music establishment Antonia and Katarina are little more than beautiful bodies in the service of male heterosexual fantasies and desire.

Cinematic portrayals of the classical music scene as imbued with relations of power and domination need not, however, be as explicit as in *The Conductor* and *Till det som är vackert*. Some recent films focus instead on the relation between musical knowledge, artistic discourse and the exercise of power. In Paavo Westerberg's *The Violin Player* (2018), former star violinist Karin travels with her young student (and lover) Antti to Copenhagen, where Antti is scheduled to perform Felix Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. Björn, the charismatic conductor of the orchestra, however, expresses doubts about whether the young violinist is ready for

¹⁰ In a remarkable scene, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt personally intervenes to support the New York Women's Symphony Orchestra that Brico had founded in 1934.

¹¹ A literal translation of the Swedish title would be 'to that which is beautiful'.

such a demanding assignment, and requires all three of them to spend a few days before the performance to rework and develop Antti's understanding of the concerto. In an extended scene towards the middle of the film, the strained relationship between maestro and student as they work towards an improved interpretation of the piece is examined in detail. Switching back and forth between the violin student and the star conductor, the camera reveals an atmosphere marked by progressively increasing frustration and antagonism reminiscent of Damien Chazelle's 2014 film *Whiplash* with its terrifying jazz maestro Terence Fletcher. However, while Björn's frustration is all about the music and the lack of artistic passion he perceives in the young student's playing, Antti's mounting anger is connected with a feeling of being treated unfairly. The problem for Antti is that he is not in a position to express his anger, since in this context of artistic work such feelings are deemed strictly irrelevant and would only testify to his inability to take advice from a more experienced musician. What the scene thus captures is how the exercising of power, despite being experienced as deeply oppressive by those who are its 'targets', becomes naturalized and legitimized, as it is practiced under the aegis of artistic knowledge and aesthetic discourse. All Antti can do in response to Björn's merciless dissection of his violin playing – and, indirectly, of himself as a person – is to stare hatefully back at the conductor. While Björn, coming dangerously close to a cinematic stereotype rather than a convincing portrait of a real-life conductor, waves his arms around and emits verbal outbursts – 'Come on! More! More love!' – Antti is rendered mute [see **Figures 7–9**]. Under these circumstances, there is no legitimate way for Antti to express his experience of being unfairly treated; the only language of relevance to the situation, the film seems to say, is the music-aesthetic discourse belonging to the established conductor as the privileged subject of knowledge.

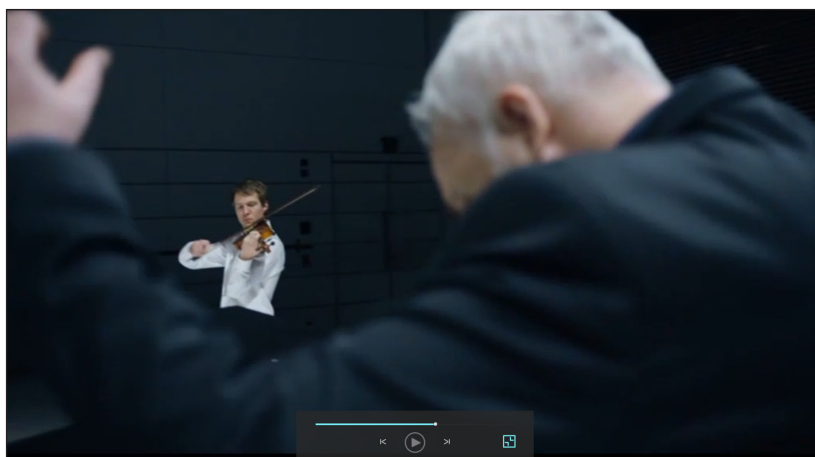


Figure 7: Björn and Antti rehearsing Felix Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor. Screenshots from *The Violin Player*, directed by Paavo Westerberg, 2018.



Figure 8: Björn and Antti rehearsing Felix Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor. Screenshots from *The Violin Player*, directed by Paavo Westerberg, 2018.

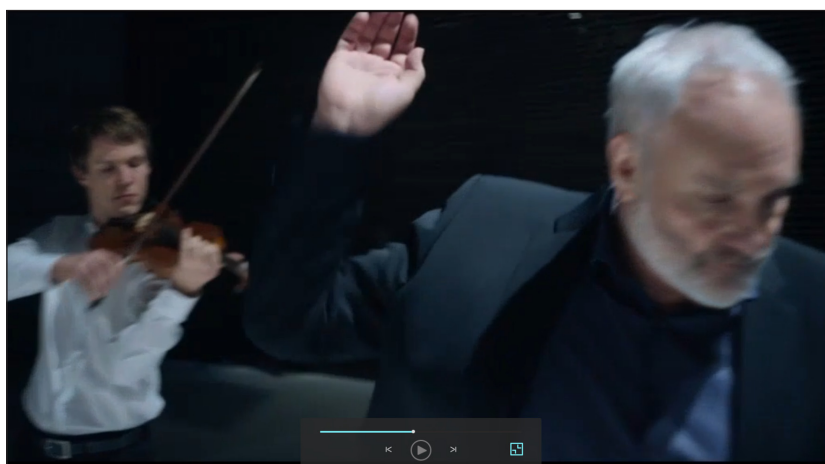


Figure 9: Björn and Antti rehearsing Felix Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor. Screenshots from *The Violin Player*, directed by Paavo Westerberg, 2018.

In a follow-up scene a few minutes later, the situation goes from bad to worse. In contrast to the scene described above (where the only people present are Antti, Björn, Karin and the accompanying pianist), this scene shows a rehearsal with the whole orchestra. With an insistence bordering on persecution, Björn makes Antti repeat a cadential passage over and over again while the members of the orchestra witness the whole thing with a growing sense of unease. Even so, none of the musicians try to object to this visibly humiliating situation.¹² When Antti finally gets the passage right,

¹² This public humiliation of the young violinist is taken to even greater extremes in a scene towards the end of the film, where Björn makes Antti repeat a passage from the concerto no less than twenty-four times in front of the whole orchestra.

Björn changes tactics and starts talking about the expressive markings heading the movement. He asks Antti what these are, a question to which Antti is unable to answer, further prolonging the humiliating situation in that the young violin student is now forced to reveal a lack of basic knowledge about the piece, a lack that makes him appear musically immature. Björn stares him down and then tells him that the expressive designation for the concerto's first movement is *Allegro molto appassionato*. Apparently still dissatisfied with Antti's playing he continues: 'It is not *Allegro. Molto. Appassionato*. Nor is it *Allegro Molto. Appassionato*. It is: *ALLEGRO MOLTO APPASSIONATO!*'¹³ These last words are shouted out at the top of his voice, and while Björn's intention is obviously to provide a verbal illustration of the passion that he thinks should be in the music (and in Antti's playing), the atmosphere is charged with a sense of verbally enacted abuse and a more or less raw exercise of power.

A Critical Encounter with Classical Music Culture

The world of classical music, as depicted in recent European and American screen media fictions, is a world saturated by fear, inequality, misconduct and prejudice. In this regard, as noted earlier, contemporary cinema reproduces many of the tropes about classical music performance and classical musicians found in both the Hollywood cinema of the 1940s and -50s and in later American mainstream cinema. Conversely, there is very little in the way of the celebratory portrayals found in many composer biopics, where one of the main stereotypes is that of the troubled (male) musical genius who conquers the hardships of life in heroic acts of compositional creativity, from which emerges an oeuvre of immortal musical works.¹⁴ Furthermore, the strong equation of art music (especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach) with subjective authenticity and spiritual truth that can be found in the cinema of art house directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky, is also largely lacking in the films discussed on the above pages.¹⁵ Even more than their critical forerunners, these new films adopt what can best be described as a profoundly distrustful, even interrogative,

¹³ In fact, the actor (an on the whole very convincing Kim Bodnia) mispronounces the movement's title, stating that it is *Allegro molto appasionata* (with an 'a' at the end of the last word instead of an 'o'). While this may be unintentional, it nevertheless creates an ironic twist: the self-confident conductor can be understood as revealing a similar lack of knowledge to that he exposes in the young student, even if strictly speaking it is likely the filmmaker's lack of knowledge that is revealed here (cf. Winters, 2014: 47–68).

¹⁴ A fairly recent and at the same time representative example would be Agnieszka Holland's *Copying Beethoven* (2006). On Mozart biopics, see Heldt (2009); on composer biopics more generally, see Heldt (2021).

¹⁵ Duncan (2003: 138) discusses Bergman's near-religious reverence for Bach's music, and Pontara (2020: 154–156) does the same with Tarkovsky. For a general overview of how classical music is used in art cinema, see Lack (1997: 296–310).

approach to the practices and norms depicted as permeating classical music culture. In this capacity they should not just be regarded as cinematic constructions of classical music and classical musicians, but rather should also be seen as embodying a form of social critique that seeks to transform our conceptions of contemporary classical music culture. For example, we might understand several of the films as engaging in a critical inquiry the aim of which is to demonstrate how ‘gender- and sexuality-coded norms’ (Alm et al., 2016: 61; my translation) penetrate deep into classical music culture and the ways such norms have traditionally regulated and structured the career paths open to men and women respectively. This type of norm-critical inquiry is clearly at work in *The Conductor* (a film centrally concerned with how gender stereotypes linked to conceptions of artistic genius and classical music’s high art status have historically worked against the interests of women musicians), but is to some extent also detectable in *The Perfection* and *Till det som är vackert*. Furthermore, some of the productions can be seen to develop a ‘cinematic argumentation’ (Biderman, 2014: 49) that is concerned explicitly with disclosing how musical expertise and authority cluster around certain subject-positions, such as the celebrated star-conductor. Understood in this way, we may read them as narratively mediated accounts of how such allocations of cultural, artistic and aesthetic capital function, in Michel Foucault’s words, as a ‘dividing practice’ (1982) that distinguishes those who have the privilege to know and talk about the music from those who do not (cf. Pontara, 2008). The most obvious examples here are *The Violin Player* and *Till det som är vackert*, both of which contain scenes that purport to show explicitly how power relations reach deeply into the culture of classical music by being built into the aesthetic discourses and conceptual regimes that, in the perspectives of these films at least, constitute the art form.

Unreasonably high standards of perfection, sexual harassment and abuse, gendered-based prejudices about and stereotyping of women musicians, and the unequal distribution of power between differently positioned subjects in the aesthetic and musical discourses constitutive of classical music culture – these are all issues that are put in the spotlight in contemporary films about classical music. But does this mean that these films fundamentally reject the values and beliefs traditionally associated with classical music, such as the aesthetic autonomy and everlasting artistic excellence of ‘towering’ musical works, the contemplative character of concentrated musical listening and the transfigurative power of aesthetic experience? Put another way, are the two conceptual supports identified by Kramer thematized to any greater extent in these films? And if they are, do the films endorse these conceptual supports or represent them as objectionable ideological constructs?

The two most uncomplicated films in this regard are *Grand Piano* and *The Perfection*. In both, the depictions of classical music culture are unequivocally negative, at times even giving the impression that the genre is deliberately demonized for purely commercial purposes. But however we want to characterise the basic impulses behind these films, especially the extent to which they can be seen as allegorical assessments of a musical perfectionism, they are relentless in their criticism of the classical music performances central to their narratives.

This is also, however, an indirect critique of the notion of the musical work, since this elusive entity can be understood as the basic rationale behind the paradigm of the note-for-note, flawless performance. *The Perfection* also advances a strongly negative view of Kramer's second conceptual support (i.e. the 'model of consciousness and attention' that constructs musical listening as highly focused and music-directed), something that becomes apparent in the film's final scene where the overpowered and heavily mutilated Anton is forced to listen to Charlotte and Lizzie's joint performance. In this scene, concentrated musical listening – the idea of classical music 'as something to be listened to in an activity of nothing but listening' (Kramer, 2013, 45) – is not only depicted as a genuinely disagreeable activity. Inasmuch as the image of the arm- and legless Anton can be understood as an allegory of the immobile listener in the concert hall concentrated listening is here also portrayed in a way that brings to mind another of Foucault's notions, namely the exercise and internalization of disciplinary power as a central force in the production of docile bodies.¹⁶ This negative assessment of concentrated listening is completely at odds with traditional conceptions of contemplative musical listening – variously expressed by Romantic writers like Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, and by nineteenth-century formalists like Eduard Hanslick – as an act that releases the emancipatory potentials of aesthetic experience. In *The Perfection*, musical works, and especially their performance and reception, are depicted not as promoting human liberation and flourishing, but rather as fostering a deeply unhealthy musical culture permeated by violence, abuse and excessive acts of self-discipline. Even so, there is also another, more clichéd side to this film that complicates its overall and, admittedly, highly exaggerated negative portrayal of classical music culture. For in depicting its main character as a cellist, *The Perfection* participates in a long tradition of films that connect women musicians with

¹⁶ Foucault's most comprehensive account of disciplinary power can be found in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1991). See Pontara (2007: 219-224) for an argument that connects the ideal of concentrated aestheticized listening with the Foucauldian notion of the disciplining of the body.

this particular instrument.¹⁷ Viewed from this perspective the film takes on a rather more conservative appearance, being visibly involved in a specific kind of cinematic stereotyping in which gender, in Judith Butler's words, is constructed as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990: 33). In the case of *The Perfection*, it is primarily the conventionalized narrative structures of mainstream Anglo-American cinema that constitute the 'regulatory frame' within which women's classical musicianship has almost become synonymous with the playing of the cello. To the extent that male cellists do appear in American screen fictions they tend either to suffer from some kind of physical or mental ailment (i.e. Nathaniel Ayers in *The Soloist*, 2009) or to be inherently unlikeable (i.e. Andrew Walsh in *Mozart in the Jungle*, 2014–2018).¹⁸

While *The Perfection* demonstrates both a hypercritical treatment of classical music culture and a certain adherence to narrative clichés, some of the other films discussed in this article are rather more ambivalent to Kramer's conceptual supports, negotiating between a critical evaluation of musical culture and an acknowledgement of classical music's allegedly inherent artistic, aesthetic and emotional values.¹⁹ *The Conductor*, *The Violin Player* and *Till det som är vackert* all contain scenes in which the experience of listening to or performing musical works is represented as intrinsically meaningful and intensely rewarding. In one of the very first scenes of *The Conductor* Antonia, employed as a seat host assistant at a big concert hall in New York, locks herself into one of the building's restrooms during a performance of Gustav Mahler's First Symphony. Pursuing what appears to be an almost compulsory need to express herself musically, Antonia energetically waves her arms in perfect synchronization with the distant sound of the performing orchestra. As she engages in this act of solitary conducting her face expresses a distinctive mixture of deep concentration, rapture and elevated joy that can be understood as embodying the very essence of aestheticized musical experience.

¹⁷ Cello-playing female characters can be found in such films and TV series as *Humoresque* (1946), *The Living Daylights* (1987), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Wilder Napalm* (1993), *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *Swimfan* (2002), *August Rush* (2007), *If I Stay* (2014), *Ghostbusters* (2016), *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014–2018) and *Earthquake Bird* (2019), amongst others. See also Adam Whittaker's article 'Sounding Jacqueline du Pré through Ballet: Classical Music and *The Cellist* (2020)' in this collection.

¹⁸ In contrast, the good-natured male cello player in the Czech film *Kolya* (1996) would be a virtually unthinkable character in American mainstream cinema.

¹⁹ A complicating factor is that there is probably room for arguing that the film *intentionally* employs the cliché of cello-playing young women in order to further its critique of the objectified and sexualized female body. Under this reading, letting Charlotte and Lizzie play the cello can be seen as part of the film's interrogative strategy and its deconstruction of what Laura Mulvey has famously called the male gaze (Mulvey 1975).

Similarly, in *Till det som är vackert* we witness the transfigurative and emotionally near-cataclysmic experience undergone by Katarina as she listens to a live performance of Mozart's *Requiem* with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra [see **Figure 10**].²⁰ As regards *The Violin Player*, the final scene, depicting Antti's successful performance of the Mendelssohn concerto, in fact comes close to relinquishing the film's critical stance in favor of a more didactic tale of hard-won musical fulfillment, that of the suffering hero who overcomes all obstacles on his way to eventual artistic triumph. The film therefore aligns with a narrative trope iterated in numerous stories about composers, artists and writers (cinematic as well as literary), a trope exploited more or less explicitly in such sentimental feel-good movies as Scott Hicks's *Shine* (1996) and Kay Pollak's *Såsom i himmelen* (2004).

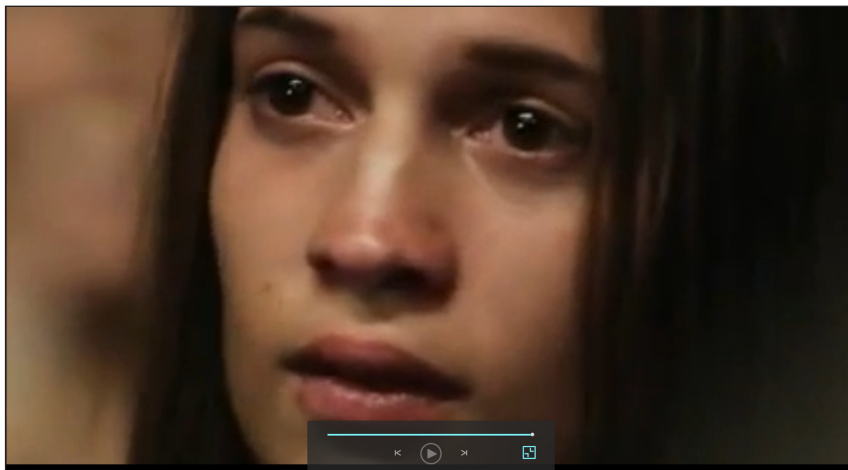


Figure 10: Katarina listening to Mozart's *Requiem*. Screenshot from *Till det som är vackert*, directed by Lisa Langseth, 2010.

In the context of the aforementioned films' ambivalence towards the conceptual enablers of classical music and classical music culture we must also finally mention the Amazon-produced TV-series *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014–2018), which, despite criticizing in a humorous way many of the ideals, norms and practices allegedly at the heart of classical music culture and performance, fully embraces the fundamental conceptual pillars of classical music.²¹ To be sure, the charming and upbeat Rodrigo De Souza (loosely modeled after the real-world conductor Gustavo Dudamel) is anything

²⁰ Referring to Michael Long, Ben Winters (2014, 100) aptly describes shots like this one as invoking a 'register of the aesthetic sublime' (although he does not mention Langseth's film).

²¹ The four-season series is based on former professional oboist Blair Tindall's rather more critical book *Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs, and Classical Music* from 2006.

but a typical maestro. However, when he stands in front of his orchestra, there is no mistaking his profound respect and love for Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler and other ‘towering’ composers, and the depth of his knowledge about them. A belief in the emancipatory potentials of musical listening and experience is perhaps most clearly expressed in the seventh episode of the third season, which is produced in documentary style and shows Rodrigo and his orchestra playing for the enthusiastic, enraptured even, inmates at the Eric M. Taylor Center on Rikers Island. Further confirmation that the series embraces a traditional high-art perspective on classical music comes from the ‘numerous cameos by real-life classical stars, including Joshua Bell, Emanuel Ax, [Lang Lang] and Los Angeles Philharmonic music director Gustavo Dudamel’ (Wren, 2017).

Conclusion

Even though there are obvious differences in perspective and emphasis in the films discussed in this article, what unites them is the strongly skeptical approach they take towards classical music culture in particular and, to some extent, contemporary (Western) civilization in general. In our modern mediatised world this ongoing critical probing of a supposedly dysfunctional musical culture coexist with a rather different type of mediatic constructions of classical music, one found in the promotion and sales discourses of international record companies and concert institutions. Over and above the obvious goal of producing high quality recordings and performances, these companies and institutions operate largely within the confines of a market economy where records and tickets must be sold and profit should ideally be maximized. Consequently, discussions of power, misconduct, performance anxieties and harmful stereotypes is hardly at the centre of such discourses (though these things might of course be taken seriously *within* the various institutions). The only significant talk about classical music is talk about the music itself, the rewards of musical experience and the artistic and personal qualities of the performing musicians.²² In contrast to these industry representations, current screen productions about classical music have joined a broader critical discourse flourishing in the media and on the internet, of which the accounts of the misconduct and malfeasance of the late conductor James Levine and El Sistema-affiliated Bruno Campo are just a few examples.²³ This broader discourse can in turn be seen as a continuation of a scholarly tradition that runs from Theodor Adorno’s interrogative analyses of the social and ideological dimension of musical structures, to

²² Regarding the staging of musicians’ public personae, Christina Scharff draws attention to the self-promotional and entrepreneurial aspect of this phenomenon. As Scharff sees it, the classical music profession is permeated by neoliberal norms and ideals that construct ‘individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life’ (Scharff 2018: 5).

²³ Articles and blogs on these two cases are easy to find on the internet, so I will not provide any references here.

the cultural and gendered interpretations of 'New' musicologists like Susan McClary and Rose Subotnik, and further to the ethnomusicological accounts of classical music culture of Henry Kingsbury and Bruno Nettl.²⁴ On the other hand, it would be a mistake to completely overlook the economic drivers of the film industry itself, where depictions of dysfunctional musical cultures is not only fully consistent with commercial imperatives but may often be the main determinant behind a film's commercial and critical success (as evidenced by films like *Whiplash*). Even so, it is perhaps plausible to speak of a scholarly-mediatic-cinematic tradition of critical inquiry, one that stands in a somewhat antithetical relation to the discursive constructions of the classical music industry, an industry that, for both ideological and commercial reasons, is unlikely to overhaul its representations of classical music, musicians, conductors and composers any time soon.

²⁴ See, for example, Adorno (2001), McClary (1993), Subotnik (1995), Kingsbury (1988) and Nettl (1995).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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