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Music History III – Research Paper

**The Legitimacy of Classical-Crossover**

The term “classical-crossover” may not be one that is familiar to you, however, the music and artists associated with it I am sure are ones you have heard of; some of the most well-known classical-crossover include: Andrea Bocelli, Sarah Brightman, Josh Groban, The Three Tenors, and The Piano Guys. The term refers to an artist who “crosses over” either from or to classical music.[[1]](#footnote-1) Often, “classical-crossover” refers specifically to musicians who crossover from classical to pop or vice-versa. Basically, the genre has found a way to popularize music that incorporates various aspects of classical music. However, the genre is often met with large amounts of criticism and disdain from strong supporters of classical music. Originally, the hope was that classical-crossover would be the “gateway drug” to bring new and young listeners to classical music.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, this is most definitely not the case and, because of this, many performers who decide to go into the genre are seen as “sell outs.” I believe classical-crossover not only deserves more respect from more traditional classical artists, but more respect from music conservatories and schools as well. However, before we dive too deep into this topic, I shall first address the history and origins of the genre.

It is hard to say exactly when classical crossover began and who was the first to do it. Some of the most noteworthy trend setters of the genre go back as early as the 1940s where opera singers such as Mario Lanza and Eileen Farrell were recording pop songs.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, the genre took off and owes its current popularity to the immense success of the Three Tenors.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Three Tenors was the stage name given to a group comprised of three singers: Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, and Luciano Pavarotti. In the 1970s and 1980s these three opera tenors were some of, if not, the biggest opera stars of the time. After Carreras near death experience with leukemia, he recommended the three join together for a benefit concert for Carrera’s newly founded leukemia foundation. This concert was held at the end of the 1990 World Cup in Rome and was a massive success. The group then went on to hold more concerts and record a few albums until Pavarotti’s retirement in 2004.[[5]](#footnote-5) Still, a genre was born. After the Three Tenors demonstrated that “classical” music still had a potential to sell on a mass scale, numerous other groups and solo artists followed suit as well as other operatic-esque singers such as Bocelli, Groban, and the Canadian Tenors. The roots of the genre in instrumental music can be traced back to the Kronos Quartet performing Jimi Hendrix’s Purple Haze.3 It did not take long for other instrumentalists such as 2Cellos, The Piano Guys, and Lindsey Stirling to incorporate aspects of classical music into main stream media. It is the explosion of success that has arguably led to the criticism often associated with the genre.

Anton Keurti, a successful Canadian pianist, occasionally writes musical articles. In one he wrote that the Three Tenors “are the most outrageous manifestation of the unspeakable greed of so many famous musicians and their agents.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Keurti believes that it is unjust of the Three Tenors to request large amounts of money in order for them to perform. My issue with this is that the reason for these high demands is because of their tremendous popularity. If one of the “struggling” orchestras that Keurti talks about in his article became popular enough to the point where they could sell out each concert and increase the cost of each seat by $100 they would be foolish not to.6 These superstars tried something different and obtained a popularity unrivaled by traditional classical musicians. This success pushed them into mainstream media which gave them the popularity that allows them to charge more. Following a similar train of thought, many people criticize these artists for “doing it for the money.” Many of these earlier crossover artists performed classical as well as crossover music. It is not often you hear the great classical musicians being criticized for composing and playing music that “pays the bills.” As is taught in Music History I and II, musicians of the baroque and classical periods often took positions as court musicians and church musicians, composing and performing the music that was asked of them. These musicians are often referred to as smart for their ability to play the system of the time, while modern musicians are seen as being greedy. However, money is not the only argument that is held against classical-crossover musicians.

As David Thurmaier, Chair of Composition at University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance, states in his summary of Joseph Horowitz’s book, “Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall,” the vapid spectacles such as the Three Tenors and the decline of public funding have “left classical music organizations in a precarious position, dependent on doing anything to ensure their survival.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The claim here is that these earlier crossover artists abandoned classical music for their pursuit of this new crossover genre. However, as a stated earlier, these earlier crossover artists often worked in classical as well as crossover music and are often at least partly attributed to small growths in specific classical audiences such as the growth in opera audiences around the time of the Three Tenors.[[8]](#footnote-8) The reason I keep mentioning earlier crossover artists is because the argument does not always apply to modern-day crossover artists.

While it is true that there are some modern-day classical-crossover artists, such as Garðar Thór Cortes and Andrea Bocelli, whose repertoire is comprised by a fair amount of classical music, the large majority fall into a different category. Many of the newer generation of classical-crossover artists, such as David Garret and the Piano Guys incorporate smaller amounts of classical music and more generally incorporate their classical training rather than actual classical music itself. However, these artists are not artists who achieved fame from their performances of classical repertoire. Their fame arose from their ability to blend both classical and pop music together in an appealing way. While classical-crossover was originally hoped to be a way to draw in larger audiences to classical music, like Tristan Jakob-Hoff states in his article for The Guardian “classical crossover has become a genre unto itself.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Musicians are not entering the classical-crossover genre so they can draw listeners to classical music, they are doing it because they enjoy the new blend of styles that is a genre of its own. Much in the way that rock and roll combined elements of gospel, rhythm and blues, swing, and jazz to eventually become its own independent entity[[10]](#footnote-10), classical-crossover has done the same. However, just because classical-crossover no longer has as strong a focus in classical music as it used to, does not mean it does not have any educational value.

When it comes to conservatories and classically-based music schools, there often is not an excessive amount of wiggle room with what you can and cannot perform. Teachers might frown upon you for wanting to sing musical theatre or peers might criticize you for wanting to do something that is more in the field of commercial music than it is classical music. Part of this stems from the rigid standards set by organizations such as the National Association of Schools of Music and part of it is from the traditions passed down by our predecessors who had even less experience and knowledge of these newer genres than we have ourselves. This is a mindset that I believe needs to change. Especially when it comes to these crossover arrangements, many can still be used to work on the same techniques students would be working on anyways. A vocalist can work on tone and proper vocal technique on one of Andrea Bocelli’s hits in the same way that they would on an art song by Haydn. Since Bocelli sings in an operatic style, the student still needs to raise their soft palette, breathe using appoggio, and connect their phrases with a smooth and legato line. These arrangements can even be extremely technically demanding. I think it would be very hard to argue that Jarrod Radnich’s arrangement of the Pirates of the Carribean theme does not compete with some classical works in terms of technical difficulty. Still, despite the possibilities that there are for people interested in these more commercial genres of music, they are often seen as being “lesser” than their classical counterparts.

Classical-crossover has become a genre of its own that has been criticized over and over again for numerous reasons. However, the genre is being criticized for impractical reasons and has spent too long with a bad reputation, especially when it comes to the classical community. Although it is true that not the entire classical community shares this belief, maybe not even the majority of it, however, I still believe the community of people who do feel this way is larger enough to the point where it needs to be addressed. Classical-crossover is not “just a sell out,” but is now a genre that has its own traits and fans and it has more to offer the educational community than I think it is currently believed to.

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