

CULTURAL CONSERVATION (A mission statement by Dr. Mark Evans)

Cultural Conservation is a foundation dedicated to the principle that just as a nation should preserve its natural resources, so a society should conserve its cultural resources.

1. THE PROBLEM: Preserving Our Cultural Resources Against the Onslaught of Ignorance

In 1963 Stewart L. Udall, then Secretary of the Interior, wrote in *The Quiet Crisis* that our nation must recognize the need for conservation. He said that “We stand today poised on a pinnacle of wealth and power, yet we live in a land of vanishing beauty, of increasing ugliness, of shrinking open space, and of an overall environment that is diminished daily by pollution, noise, and blight.” Udall was talking about the need for conservation of natural resources, but today, his words ring true in a description of a popular culture which often achieves goals of the marketplace while reflecting a spiritual bankruptcy. A hollow crown of gross profits is a poor excuse for a paucity of inspiration. Turn on your television or radio, go see the latest multi-million dollar masterpiece at the neighborhood theater, visit the local museum, check the best-seller list. You will likely discover the work of geniuses of little talent, imagination, or creativity. What you will find is the work of geniuses of self-promotion.

This is especially true in the world of music. In the world of popular music, we are treated daily to a parade of “superstars” whose voices and musical skills are an embarrassment; in former times, their caterwauling would have earned them the hook on Major Bowes’ amateur hour; today, they earn gold records and the adulation of the crowd. Nor is the situation more encouraging in the world of “classical” or “art” music. The tortured dissonances of the self-proclaimed avant-garde are manifested in the assorted beeps and squeaks which proclaim the future but make one long instantly for the past.

While adoring critics praise today’s talentless wonders as the voices of tomorrow, our society gradually loses interest (and awareness) of the most talented contributors to our culture. Today’s college music departments are likely to produce graduates who may be blissfully unaware of the identities of most major American musical figures, including those key pioneers of jazz, musical theater, motion picture scores, and the concert repertory. William F.

Buckley, Jr. writes of a poll of students unable to identify a single twentieth century composer. (Among their answers are Beethoven, Pavarotti, and a rock musician). Says Buckley, "It requires dogged resolution to avoid coming across the name of Gershwin." New York City recently resumed musical instruction in the public schools after more than 22 years of absence. What are we to expect from several generations of students who have been liberated from any knowledge of real music? They are like the clerk in a record store who responded to a request for some Cole Porter recordings with a puzzled inquiry, "Is he new?" Nor is the problem limited to music, or those outside the worlds of the arts, or even popular culture. Frequently, those most ignorant of our culture are those who spend their lives and careers determining what will be commercially distributed and critically and financially supported.

Steve Allen, in his book "Dumbth", tells of a young disc jockey who spends his life immersed in recordings who failed to recognize a photograph of Benny Goodman. Allen also writes of a story conference in which a television producer responds to a proposed tribute to legendary comedian Sid Caesar by asking "Who's he?" An equally befuddled television producer, this time, a young woman, tries to conceal her ignorance of the prominent male television writer Paddy Chayefsky by declaring, "Patty Chayefsky, she was great, wasn't she?" Writer Harlan Ellison suggested to one of his editors a parody of James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon" and its film adaptation starring Ronald Colman. The editor had never heard of either the book or the motion picture. A freelance writer reveals his enthusiasm when offered a chance to interview the distinguished actor-playwright Peter Ustinov, only to discover his editors have no interest in buying an interview with anyone who isn't "young and with it", whatever "it" is supposed to represent. Confusing "new" with "improved" reflects an attitude described by Ken Jowitt, professor political science at UC-Berkeley, when he says, "We live in a world with no sense of boundaries, no distinction between past, present, and future. We have no memory, no discipline of the past, no comparative reference. Everything is now."

When the eminent film composer Hugo Friedhofer died, his friend Gene Lees contacted the Arts & Entertainment editor at a major New York paper to offer anecdotes and assistance in preparing a tribute. The editor had no idea who Friedhofer was. André Previn had a similar experience when a powerful Hollywood producer Jeffrey Katzenberg, told him the only music

that would survive the twentieth century was composed by the Beatles. Katzenberg added that he had never heard a piece of twentieth century classical music that would “knock my socks off”. There is a litany of such stories. The significance of such tales is more than anecdotal. The student who is blissfully unaware of anything but the latest television shows, recordings, and video games grows up to be the executive who determines the very content of popular culture. One day, the ignorant teenager will be an adult asked to support the opera, the symphony, the ballet, the legitimate Broadway musical theater, not to mention the local library or museum. What support can be expected from someone who has evolved from a culturally illiterate student into a mature ignoramus?

For too long we have taken the best of our culture for granted. Now as we witness the transfer of cultural judgments to a second (and coming third) generation raised on rock music, can we be surprised that musical ignorance is not only bliss, it is ever present. One reason for this problem is clearly that critics, writers, and historians, eager to avoid premature condemnation of the next Wagner or Debussy, tend to assume that to be radical is to be brilliant, to be revolutionary is divine. Yet a look at history tells us that such a perspective is fatally flawed. When asked about his own work, the eminent composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco wrote, “ As far as theories are concerned, I do not believe in theories. I have never believed in modernism, or in neo-”classicism, or in any other isms. I believe music is a form of language capable of progress and renewal(and I myself believe that I have a feeling for the contemporary, and therefore, am sufficiently modern). Yet music should not discard what was contributed by preceding generations. Every means of expression can be useful and just, if it used at the opportune moment (through inner necessity rather than through caprice or fashion).” The wise words of Castelnuovo-Tedesco have been echoed by others. Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote “I do not have much heart-felt sympathy with music that is experimental, your so-called “modern music.” Yet thought I myself could not learn to write or love such music, I can respect the artistic aims of the composer if he arrives at his so-called modern idiom after an intensive period of preparation. Too much radical music sheer sham, because the composer has set about revolutionizing the laws of music before he has even mastered them himself.” And Maurice Ravel declared, “ I am not a “modern composer” in the strictest sense of the term, because my music, far from being” revolution” is rather “evolution” Although I have always been open

minded to new ideas in music (one of my violin sonatas contains a “Blues” movement,) I have never attempted in it to overthrow the accepted rules of harmony and composition. On the contrary. I have always drawn liberally from the masters for my inspiration(I have never ceased studying Mozart!), and my music, for the most part, is built upon the traditions of the past and in an outgrowth of it.” Today the new composer who holds to these ideals is apt to be dismissed as “old-fashioned”, the ultimate dismissal of those who follow fads and fashions, and who seek to become what Roy Harris, another eminent composer used to call “ savants of the avant.”

A recent book on film music by an active composer of motion picture and television scores included an interview with a Hollywood agent who gave his opinion on what it takes to be successful. The agent, whose musical qualification to provide this advice were mysteriously ignored, declared “ you have to be able to write a “now sound.” As opposed to what, we might ask, a “then” sound? Of course, anyone with a knowledge of contemporary music knows precisely what the agent is talking about. He is reminding us in a not particularly subtle way that to be successful, as he sees the term, one must emulate whatever someone sold yesterday. Bernard Herrmann, the brilliant, uncompromising, irascible composer of the finest film scores, once said, “There are no new sounds, only old sounds put together in new ways”. The question we should be asking about film scores (or operas or ballets) is not whether or not they are *modern*, but whether are not they are *good*.

Those who revere music of the past and criticize some music of the present are invariably characterized as curators, collectors, museum pieces mired in a sentimental nostalgia, Scarlett O’Haras yearning for that society which has gone with the Hollywood or Madison Avenue wind. In fact, composers today who seek to celebrate (rather than ignore) our musical heritage are apt to find their work unfunded by “peer panels” of arts agencies who regard such cultural standards as culturally (if not politically) incorrect.

No one has expressed outrage over the neglect of the arts (especially those of serious and noble purpose) than Norman Corwin. Corwin, along with Orson Welles, one of the two great figures of radio drama, has written for stage, screen television, and published everything from opera librettos to poetry. In his book, *Holes in a Stained Glass Window*, Corwin relates two tales of distinguished friends, composers, who devoted years to their art. One, whose violin concerto was performed by Jascha Heifetz and the New York

Philharmonic and Dallas Symphony, received payments of \$50. and \$75. for these performances. The other composer spent part of a lifetime devoted to an opera, spent thousands of dollars of his own money copying and binding the score, won the praise of some of the world's greatest conductors for his work, but was unable to secure a performance of the work during the last thirty years of his life. (It was finally performed in its entirety after his death.) Sadly, the experience of Corwin's friends, both of whom were very famous and prominent men, was not unique. Aaron Copland was once asked what advice he could offer a young composer thinking about writing an American opera. Copland was straight to the point: " Plan on never hearing it performed." Corwin bristles, "So what incentive is there for a practicing composer to write serious new works? He may wait 30 years for a performance, or have none at all. the appreciation of posterity makes mighty thin soup, assuming posterity will ever be interested at all." Corwin goes on, " I believe a man who has and exercise a rare, but not especially marketable talent is a national treasure, and should be treated as such." National treasures? That is hardly the way our most creative artists are treated, especially if they eschew revolutionary and rebellious approaches to their art. A few years ago, only one article followed the untimely death of Calvin Jackson, a brilliant pianist, composer, conductor, and (to use an overworked word which is justified in this case), an absolute genius. The article, which ran in a high-quality but little known magazine on African American culture, was the only tribute paid to a man who was one of the most remarkable musicians of his generation. Millions of people (including those often protesting the neglect of African-American achievers) have heard of Michael Jackson; very few have heard of Calvin Jackson, and that is the problem in a nutshell.

The challenge to preserve and conserve good music might as easily be issued on the subjects of literature or art. The novelist who ignores the fashions and fads of the moment is likely to be dismissed as a dreamer who does not acknowledge the harsh realities of the contemporary world. (Robert Nathan, a master of satiric fantasy who wrote such wonderful books as *Portrait of Jennie* and *The Bishop's Wife* dismissed the champions of realism by observing that an open sewer is real, but so is an April meadow. It's all a matter of where you choose to focus your attention.) An artist who produces paintings of objects you can recognize (or people who do not appear to be in the middle of horrendous nightmares) will probably be dismissed with a casual wave of the hand by those who insist that "representational painting" is "too traditional." When "traditional" becomes pejorative, our culture is in

trouble. Within a few years, these writer and painters will also suffer the fate of the forgotten composers, while ignorant throngs cheer the latest four chord virtuoso of rock music, the most recent master of the foul-mouthed screenplay, the most contemporary painter of ugliness on canvass. Like all crises, this one is not predestined. There is an alternative. It is time that those who value art, who take culture, seriously recognize that Corwin is right when he speaks of artistic genius as a national treasure. Our society is full of people who have come to recognize that it is important to preserve our natural resources. But just as preserving our rivers and forests is important, so is preservation of our cultural treasures (and support and encouragement of those who created them in the past and continue to create them today.) “Culture” and Conservation” are words which are not often used together. This should change. A society which preserves its natural resources, should preserve its cultural resources; it will be a far better society in the long-run.

2. THE SOLUTION: CULTURAL CONSERVATION

Cultural Conservation is being established to specifically address the problem that music, literature, and art of quality can be easily dismissed as “old-fashioned” and therefore, historically irrelevant to our time. In an age of mass media, of instant communication, of cable television satellite dishes, and the Internet, solutions must be adapted to the technology of the times. Therefore, Cultural Conservation will set as its goals:

- a. Development of a strategy specifically designed to address an educational challenge of the 21st century, to use high technology to preserve the finest music, art, and literature. Research will be conducted to explore the ways in which computer technology, the Internet, and new developments in telecommunications can be used to increase the availability of the arts to students and the general public.
- b. Distribution of a series of educational videos at cost to schools, churches, libraries, and other non-profit institutions. These programs should present to a large public the history and development of American music, with emphasis on four areas, concert music, jazz, musical theater, and music for motion pictures. This series of programs will clearly further the exempt purpose of this non-profit corporation, because it will provide essential information to large audiences of students who are not presently discovering this material through available commercial sources.

c. Distribution of a series of children's books at cost designed to present positive role models in the arts to children, and to make young readers aware of the outstanding contributions of artists in our society. These publications introduce young readers to important historical figures of whom they are presently (and sadly) uninformed.

d. Presentation of conferences, lectures and seminars specifically designed to be televised, addressed to the academic community, with emphasis on the need for widespread cultural literacy, especially in areas related to the arts.

e. Creation of a web site to actively promote cultural conservation over the internet.

f. Active support of efforts to reverse the decline of language and the rise of the "inarticulate American", through multimedia publication, conferences, and seminars.

g. Combination of an educational goal, the conservation of the best music, art, and literature, with multimedia, specifically designed to lift culture out of its "ivory tower" environment, and into the real world.

h. Establishment of a repository or library collection of books, music, and recordings that reflect the goals of the foundation and preserve important contributions to our culture and history that would otherwise be neglected.

Cultural Conservation will fulfill its mission to conserve and preserve the arts in our country through the technological advances of the 21st century.