



Stephen Pollard: Is there a scale of excellence in music?

I would assert that Beethoven is a genius and REM, and their fellow rock bands, a waste of time

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I was castigated by a friend the other day. I have a large CD collection - nearly 3,000, of which fewer than a hundred are anything other than classical music: some jazz, some 1960s pop, and some embarrassing presents which I have to keep on my shelves lest their absence be noted by their donors.

It showed, I was told, that I am far too narrow in my tastes. I should open my ears to the wonders of ... well, I forget which popular beat combination he suggested I try. As far as I'm concerned, you see, they are almost all a waste of time. I would rather listen to the cacophony of an orchestra tuning up than to the finished efforts of almost every pop, rock, soul, call it what you will, "musician". Some - the Beach Boys or the Beatles, for instance - are perfectly fine as background music, but the idea that any otherwise intelligent person would choose to sit and listen to them while doing nothing else, or even go out of their way to hear them perform live, strikes me as bizarre.

And that, it seems, brands me not just as a cultural snob but as an especially ignorant one at that.

Fine. If that's what my passion for classical music, and my inability to see merit in rock, means; fine. But as I was watching this weekend's Leeds Piano Competition (broadcast live on BBC4 and Radio 3), I realised that my response isn't really good enough. There has to be something more than "I like that and I don't like that".

Out of the six finalists, each of whom played a piano concerto with the Hallé Orchestra in Leeds Town Hall, it was clear to me - and, given the result, to the jury - that there were two competitors head and shoulders above the others: the Finn, Antti Sirala, and the competitor from Uzbekistan, Evgenia Rubinova. The former had won three other competitions, and his performance of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto was excellent: classically styled, and fully in command of the musical argument. But Rubinova's account of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto was all that - and a lot more. It had something to say. It was of the moment - a real performance, which took off and left everything else behind. It took risks.

The result, of course, was the wrong way round. The Finn won. It was no wonder he added Leeds to his three previous competition victories. His playing was the sort of note-perfect playing which juries love: the safe rather than the risky. That was its biggest fault. It lacked what Rubinova's performance had: the spark engendered by real personality and real musical imagination.

I know that the jury are wrong and I am right. I assert it as a fact rather than as a mere opinion. And that, surely, is cousin to my assertion that Beethoven is a genius and REM, and their fellow rock bands, a waste of time. Both assertions are statements of artistic merit, ranking performers and composers on a continuum from the worthless to the genius.

We've been here before. Christopher Ricks came at it from the opposite perspective in the 1970s, arguing that Bob Dylan's lyrics were great poetry. A couple of years ago he argued that Dylan's song "Not Dark Yet" ranked alongside Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". Others have made similar comparisons, such as Eric Griffiths' consideration of Talking Heads alongside William Empson in his Cambridge lectures during the late 1980s.

I look at what they say, at their specific, detailed, academic attempts to equate the two, and my reaction is to laugh. To me, it's self-evidently preposterous - about as convincing as arguing that a finger beating time on a desk is as musically rich an experience as an Angela Hewitt performance of a Bach partita.

But not to others. To them, a Bach passion is an interminable drone, a Bruckner symphony an hour-long yawn. Does that mean they have a point, that the appreciation of all art is only subjective, and that there is no such thing as a scale of excellence?

Of course not. Unless you really do believe that the finger tapping on the desk is as good as the Bach partita - or even as good as the Bob Dylan song - then you believe in a scale of excellence. And once you acknowledge that, then there is only one conclusion. A is better than B who is better than C. And if you are trying to tell me that Dylan is better than Bach, then I suggest you lock yourself in a dark room and wait for the fairies to rescue you. Bach elevates, transports, is capable of re-interpretation, speaks to generation after generation, and is a composer of near inconceivable perfection; relative to Bach, Dylan is an unpleasant groaning noise. Turner, Titian or Tintoretto do the same; Tracey Emin can't even make her bed. And if you disagree with me? You're wrong. That, at any rate, is what my friend says to me.