Sounds of Decline: Cultural Criticism in the Dutch Debate on the Future of Classical Music, c. 1890-1930

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Nowadays, complaints about the state of classical music culture can be heard everywhere. Articles, books, blogs and documentaries about the topic appear in rapid fashion, and warn against the same alleged signs of decline: the concert halls are no longer filled to capacity; the audience is getting older; the concert format is old-fashioned; nobody buys CDs anymore; commerce is taking over; classical music is threatened by pop music, other ‘light’ genres and fusion; attempts at bringing renewal are at the expense of valuable tradition; music criticism is becoming less visible; musicians are underpaid; music education leaves much to be desired; and the government no longer attributes any importance to it. Experts meet in institutes, research groups, think tanks and conferences that are being set up with the aim of ‘saving’ classical music from what many call its ‘downfall’ or even ‘death’. Some are looking for the ‘culprits’, including the British music critic Norman Lebrecht, who has detected the ‘killers’ of classical music. Even opposing voices that try to put this pessimism into perspective or refute it altogether make use of the same discourse, which in doing so they normalise; they too ‘diagnose’ and look for ways to ‘preserve classical music for the future’.

1. This article is a reworked version of a chapter that I originally published in Dutch: Meens 2021. I would like to thank the reviewers of the Journal of Music Criticism for their thoughtful comments and useful suggestions.
2. Lebrecht 1996.

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An important question is to what extent these worrying prospects and complaints about the development of classical music (culture) are specific for our own times. Do they perhaps have a longer history, and if so, how is this tradition related to cultural criticism? Overlooking historiography, one soon discovers that as many studies have been written about the history of classical music as there have been about its gloomy future. Yet relatively little research has focused on the history of that gloom and fear itself. In the 1960s, Carl Dahlhaus studied the often difficult relationship of the nineteenth-century German cultural elite with ‘Trivialmusik’, which was popular among all kinds of social groups and was played in salons, cafés and operetta theatres. But Dahlhaus’s work hardly deals with attitudes related to developments in ‘classical’, ‘higher’ or ‘art music’. The same applies to Kaspar Maase’s more recent study of the scepticism that ever since the nineteenth century has been part of the German discourse on popular forms of music, which have often been considered a threat to good taste and morality. Maase’s distinction between ‘substantive’ and ‘aesthetic’ criticism is interesting, but also raises the question to what extent this contrast can always be clearly made.

Recently, more attention has been paid to what scholars call ‘meloscepticism’. Timothée Picard, for example, has analysed the dismissive attitude of well-known writers and philosophers towards music. He contrasts their views with the ‘melomania’ of some of their colleagues and also shows that there were several intellectuals for whom music had an ambiguous meaning. He refers to Thomas Mann who in his novel Doktor Faustus (1947) proclaimed music as something of the highest order, which could also have demonising effects. According to Picard, some others even suffered from an all-encompassing ‘melophobia’, mostly as a result of the negative effects they thought music could have on human well-being.

In recent years, academic interest in the (historical-discursive) relationship between music and health has increased significantly. In a 2012 key study, James Kennaway has pointed out that there not only exists an ancient intellectual tradition which links music to health (with the result that it has often been used as a medicine); but also an equally old view that interprets music precisely as a cause of illness. Kennaway analyses the relationship between music and the medical discourse over the last two hundred years, and at some places touches upon

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the theme of cultural criticism. Because of his focus on health and especially on illness, and in fact on what has been written about the effects of music, Kennaway, however, does not address cultural critique in much detail. Moreover, his research focuses on a rich array of sources, but contains little systematic analysis of what specific media such as newspapers wrote about contemporary developments in classical music culture. As a result, he does not answer the question to what extent these media called for a battle against (certain forms of) music either.

Following Wiebke Rademacher, who has revealed how during the fin de siècle new initiatives in Berlin musical life were discussed in the German press⁹, in this article I discuss critical, mostly negative attitudes towards developments in classical music in Dutch newspapers between c. 1890 and 1930. We have to take into account that reflections on the evolution of classical music culture were expressed in other media too, including biographies of composers and musicians, philosophical, medical and political tracts, poems and novels, brochures, concert leaflets, radio broadcasts, and especially magazines, such as Caecilia, the most important Dutch music journal of that time. We should also not forget that in Dutch musical historiography, the period discussed here — and more specifically the years between 1870-1910 — has often been considered a very successful one¹⁰. It saw the opening of Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw (1888), the further development of both national as well as local musical infrastructures, including music schools and orchestras, and the rise of several first-rank composers and conductors, such as Diepenbrock, Wagenaar, Zweers and Mengelberg. A quick look at articles in Caecilia indeed reveals how many voices of that time were quite positive about what they witnessed and therefore rather optimistic about the future.

My interest in this article, however, is to identify and analyse more critical and negative attitudes towards Dutch music culture’s fate that were very prominent in several of the country’s newspapers. I made use of Delpher, a platform with millions of digitised Dutch texts from newspapers, magazines and books. I searched for terms such as ‘music’ and ‘future’. It soon became clear that around 1900, just like today, the Dutch press offered their readers a lively debate, that was nourished by changes in the character and form of music itself, but also in music culture. My focus on a wide variety of dailies led to the identification of several critical opinions, expressed by different people, who also explicitly or implicitly reacted to each other. Apart from the question of who actually took part in this debate, and with what purposes, I examine the arguments they used and the concepts

they employed. Although my analysis of the debate in Dutch newspapers offers scattered examples of the beforementioned sense of positivity, many of the results in Delpher can indeed only be interpreted as a specific form of Kulturkritik, which can be defined as a historically informed, fundamental critic of one’s own culture\textsuperscript{11}.

Before exploring this specific debate, I will delve into the history of Kulturkritik itself, to see how this concept has developed. It is important to remind ourselves that the German term can hardly be translated into English or other modern languages. In the following, however, I will use cultural critique as a synonym.

\textit{Kulturkritik and Its History}

According to the German-Dutch historian Theo Jung, modern cultural critique has five characteristics. First and foremost, it is of course critique: a \textit{«normative Unterscheidung und negative Beurteilung gesellschaftlicher Phänomene»}\textsuperscript{12}. The critic thereby concentrates on his own culture, in the broadest sense of that word. He is at the same time strongly involved with the culture he criticizes, but also unable to identify with it. Even when the critic comments on small phenomena, his main focus always remains the larger tendencies that he signals. A second characteristic of this cultural critique is that it is a form of culture itself, and therefore fundamentally hermeneutic. It gives meaning and does so as a metaphor: using something small (music, for example) to refer to something else (culture as a whole). What is meant by that culture as a whole is not static, but dynamic, with connotations, starting and ending points, and stereotypes, that all depend on context, time and place\textsuperscript{13}. Thirdly, Jung points to the semantic basis of cultural criticism, which is strongly driven by its holistic tendencies. The cultural critic uncovers specific phenomena that symbolise and express what he identifies as an overarching ‘spirit’, a ‘time’ or a ‘culture’, which he sees as harmful to human life. Fourth, cultural criticism is comparative and makes use of normative contrasts. Here history plays an essential role. The comparison between present and past is often unbalanced: the criticized contemporary culture is implicitly or explicitly compared to an exemplary one from the past, which has been destroyed by a secular fall, i.e.,

\textsuperscript{11} Jung 2012b, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{13} Jung 2012a, p. 385.
by man himself. Still, according to the critics, the destroyed past can count as a roadmap to a better future. No wonder, then that, fifth, cultural criticism makes use of what Jung calls «asymmetrical-diagnostic opposite terms» 14.

What drives these critics? The German historian and cultural scholar Georg Bollenbeck has argued that they realize that their life experiences strongly deviate from their expectations. They complain about contemporary culture and, from a comparative long-term perspective, point to phenomena that are indicative of its decline. Cultural criticism therefore can be seen as a written record of critical self-understanding that is derived from a specific interpretation of the past 15. Paul Valéry’s famous statement «[n]ous entrons dans l’avenir à reculons» therefore seems to apply to most of these critics at first sight 16. Jung, however, reminds us that we should not confuse the cultural critics’ predilection for the past with romantic escapism, precisely because they really aim to change their own culture 17. But sometimes they lose hope of a change for the better; then, cultural criticism transforms into cultural pessimism. According to the Dutch historian Remieg Aerts this happens in two cases. First, when culture or civilization itself is pointed to as the main cause of misery. Second, if the critic believes in a fixed, repetitive scheme of rise, shine and fall, so that the decline of each culture seems a given 18.

When, where and how did cultural criticism develop? Both Bollenbeck and Jung note that the term is younger than what it defines. Jung argues that ever since the term made its appearance in the late nineteenth century, it has always provoked debate. It is still unclear to which field cultural criticism exactly belongs (dogmatics or philosophy?), and also whether it is driven by reason (and thus, according to some, leads to sharp conclusions), or by emotion (and thus, according to others, conjures up nonsensical images of doom) 19. Furthermore, the question remains as to what extent cultural criticism is normative, or whether its aim is precisely to analyse. And, whether in doing so it acts as prosecutor, as advocate, or as judge 20. Moreover, since the birth of the term a multitude of intellectuals with extremely different views have been associated with it 21. And the discussion about the exact origin of what the term describes has not been settled since its first use. On the one

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hand, criticism of contemporary culture is not bound to a specific period; it even constitutes one of culture’s core ingredients. After all, without criticism, science and art, but also political and economic systems, would function differently, if at all. On the other hand, Aerts, Bollenbeck and Jung are adamant when they date the birth of modern cultural criticism in the eighteenth century, and see Western Europe as its birthplace.

Bollenbeck points out that during the Enlightenment, in Western Europe the term criticism (from the Ancient Greek κρίνειν — to separate, to decide) received a new semantic interpretation. From then on it described the act of distinguishing and judging certain phenomena. Whereas criticism up to the early-modern period had been primarily focusing on texts — science had been dominated by text criticism up until then — from Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and his followers onward, it concentrated on objective observation, and in a way turned against texts. Or rather: against the dominance of texts in academia, which would have led to human beings being unfamiliar with the objects and phenomena themselves. The aim of this new kind of criticism, which was oriented towards ‘objective observation’, was to avoid new mistakes and to correct errors from the past. According to the German cultural scholar Ralf Konersmann, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) initiated a next profound change. Rousseau wanted to use human knowledge — including the perception of phenomena and objects — to improve man’s relationship with his environment. The practice of criticism from then on counted as a virtue.

One of the objects of this new type of criticism was what one in this period began to call ‘culture’. That concept was given a place alongside other umbrella terms, such as ‘civilization’, ‘state’, ‘nation’, ‘people’, ‘homeland’, and ‘community’. The Latin word cultura (derived from colere: to work, take care of, cultivate) initially meant intervention in and maintenance of nature (also called cultura agrí). Gradually, however, it also included the formation and cultivation of human nature — from body-care to the sharpening of the mind — and human manners (together also called cultura animi). But it was only during the eighteenth century that the term ‘culture’ began to be used to refer to the sum and essence of human activities and achievements. ‘Nature’ and ‘culture’ thus became separate, independent categories.

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Moreover, from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, history was presented as a process of change, for which man himself was responsible. ‘Culture’ was therefore not only used as an antonym of ‘nature’, but also to mark the distinction between contemporary life and a world that was or had been governed by divine meaning. The secular world view that began to dominate Western European thought meant that ‘culture’ henceforth stood for the changeable human existence and actions, and its results. ‘Culture’ thus presupposed human devotion, but was also considered a condition essential for human existence and survival, for the preservation of human ‘nature’.²⁵

Aerts has shown that from the eighteenth century on, four interpretations of the concept ‘culture’ emerged, which are still current. The humanist interpretation sees culture as personal, spiritual and moral self-fulfillment. It essentially is a normative goal with universal pretensions: all people should pursue it. This would lead to the best of what mankind is capable of, for example in the arts and sciences. The civilizational interpretation of culture places control at its center, both of natural drifts (allowing social life to proceed in a civilized manner), and of nature (allowing the basic necessities of life to be met and thus creating a certain ease). Universal civilization would result in a peaceful, prosperous and just society and even world. The holistic view of culture links it to terms like ‘people’, ‘nation’ or ‘empire’, or uses it as a synonym for these. It assumes that each community possesses its own character, style and features. This interpretation observes a coherence in what it sees as the organically grown characteristic behaviors, practices, skill sets and achievements of a society. This interpretation is as normative as the first two; it can force the individual to adapt. But it can also have a democratizing effect: each distinctive group can be recognized as a culture after all. Finally, there is the — at least at first sight — least normative, descriptive and inventory social science view of culture, which still defines it as the lifestyle or design of a group or community.²⁶

Thus, on the eve of the nineteenth century, the concepts of criticism and culture both gradually acquired new meanings. It was also precisely in this period that the two terms became inextricably entwined. Because of the idea of change, of social engineering and human responsibility, from the Enlightenment onwards «culture» was interpreted not only as a feature of the present which was influenced by the past, but also as a final destination in the future. This led to expectations and desires, both regarding one’s own times as well as the future. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck has noted that the new vision of history that

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emerged during the eighteenth century influenced peoples’ view on what was coming. Prior to that, what Koselleck calls people’s «horizon of expectation» (Erwartungshorizont) bore a great deal of resemblance to what he refers to as their «space of experience» (Erfahrungsraum). In short, people thought that their future would not essentially differ from past and present experiences. In the eighteenth century a gap opened up between the vision of the past, the experiences in the present, and the expectations with regard to what still lay ahead: the socially engineered future would (and could) be different from what had taken place in history or what was taking place in the present.

This also applied to the history, present and future of what was now understood as ‘culture’. The first three strongly normative interpretations of ‘culture’ as described by Aerts came with disappointments. People observed that development apparently did not necessarily mean progress. Modernity not only brought the idea that sovereign man could exercise control over his environment, but also the realization that some aspects of it were simultaneously uncontrollable, against which the powerless individual therefore had little to say. These disenchantments led to a sense of discontent, a concept that was now making its appearance.

Yet there was also hope, at least according to some. Whereas utopias in earlier periods had been aimed at other, imaginary places, people now clung to another, imaginary future time, whose idealized characteristics were nevertheless considered achievable. The concept of Zeitgeist came into vogue, and people began to attach characteristics to periods in history, if only to be able to capture the (negative) essence of their own times, and offer a more attractive prospect in return. This recurring affirmation of the contrasts between present, past and future shows that time itself was more and more analysed from its own, inner structure.

From this confluence of the new meanings attributed to the concepts of criticism and culture, the divergence of expectations and experiences that resulted from a more secular way of thinking and from changing conceptions of history and time, modern cultural criticism was born. It was modern, according to Jung.

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in two ways: it differed from the criticism of the centuries before; and it focused on modern, contemporary phenomena. At the same time this new sort of criticism was an expression of modern man’s handling of historicity which was «hodiecentric», dominated by contemporary interests, desires and ideas.

**A Well-funded, Well-designed and Well-filled Concert Hall:**

**Three Weapons in the Battle for Civilisation**

On 31 May 1891, the editors of the Dutch liberal newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad* made a remarkable move. They broke with their old habit of never recommending monetary investments to her readers. But now they sensed emergency. All men and women who cared about the future of Amsterdam were encouraged to lend money «without which our town cannot exist as a great and civilised city». That loan was to benefit the Concertgebouw, which had suffered financial setbacks after several incidents. At the same time, the editors claimed that «there is really no need to despair about the future». After all, music had become «a kind of religion» for many, and people now valued the concert hall more than the club. «High music», according to the editors, had the «cleansing power» to counteract all decay in society. A well-funded concert hall was, however, indispensable for this.

It is significant that the editors of *Algemeen Handelsblad* made a clear distinction between ‘art music’ and ‘popular music’, and expressed their belief in the healthy future of the former, even calling it a powerful weapon in the battle against further cultural decline. This was not an exception. During the 1880-1890s, the Dutch-Indian newspaper *De locomotief* interpreted well-attended concerts as «evidence of new life and interest which may be a favourable sign for the future». Similar articles appeared regularly in other newspapers until around 1900. Sporadic news of empty seats in concert halls was almost always linked to too much supply — and thus to the success of classical music. In 1898, with a nod to the German music theorist and critic Eduard Hanslick, who observed

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«Klauenseuche» in musicians who gave too many concerts, a reviewer of De Telegraaf called this «excessive music-making»38.

The great interest in classical music inspired some to dream of a new musical infrastructure. In 1896 the Delfsche Courant, for example, reported that concert life in the Dutch city of Delft was increasing to such an extent that it needed a «spacious, substantial» concert hall39. At the same time, various intellectuals were convinced that an ideally designed hall could contribute to high-quality classical music culture, and to civilisation. In 1902, for instance, Algemeen Handelsblad reported on the German music critic Paul Marsop, who had sketched a vision of the «music hall of the future» and who, with Wagner in mind, had advocated that everything, including the musicians, soloists and choirs, should become invisible40. Loggias, balconies and galleries should disappear in favour of good acoustics. One only had to look at Paris to see what happened when a well-designed hall was missing. In 1902, the correspondent of the Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant noted that the French capital only had places of vulgar entertainment. A «decent concert hall» would, according to this journalist, suit the civilized part of French in their fight against cultural decay41.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Dutch newspapers facilitated a debate about the architecture and design of the country’s concert halls. In 1908, the Haagsche Courant published an article that reported on a lecture on this topic by the famous architect Hendrik Berlage. Berlage believed that the design of a concert hall should be in accordance with the music that was performed, and thus should never bear witness of «vulgar mediocrity» or «ostentatious complacency»42. Concert halls should be sober, so that they could accommodate all kinds of ‘serious’ music. In that same year, Berlage and his friend, the musician Willem Hutschenruyter published a leaflet in which they set out their plans for the construction of a «Beethovenhuis», which Berlage was to design as a true temple of music with strict proportions. In the press, the couple received both criticism and acclaim. In Algemeen Handelsblad the influential music critic Willem Sibmacher Zijnen set out the initiators’ arguments43. For a real understanding of Beethoven’s music, which possessed a ‘spiritual height’ that even scholars could barely comprehend, an environment that served Beethoven’s quality was essential.

38. De Telegraaf, 28 November 1898.
42. ‘Kunst en letteren’, in: Haagsche Courant, 4 April 1908.
43. SIBMACHER ZIJNEN 1908b.
The design of existing buildings in the Netherlands was not in tune with the highest art of music. Moreover, all the halls were part of city life, whereas music had to be detached from it. Only then could the listener be purified from the cultural decay that manifested itself so strongly in urban environments.

Where and when had it gone wrong, Sibmacher Zijnen wondered? Here, too, he repeated the views of Berlage and Hutschenruyter, who interpreted the poor state of contemporary musical culture by structuring the history of its decline in various stages. In the eighteenth century, all had been perfect: musical performances had been of a high level, and the content of music and the way it was practised had perfectly matched. Then came the «decline in the level of the performers», who no longer exclusively came from the aristocracy. The bourgeoisie was a social group with a «poorly developed» understanding of art. Thus, all boundaries between art and entertainment broke down. The result, according to these men, was major decline. Musical masterpieces were handed down to «artisans of low musical birth», who had received little education and fell into «routine», which was closely related to «rut». A «general demoralisation» followed, precisely at a time when music was setting high technical demands.44

Sibmacher Zijnen applauded Berlage’s and Hutschenruyter’s solution, which according to him showed respect for «the art of music as a voice of higher life». They were right to strive for the purification of the contact between performers and listeners, which could prevent music from degenerating into a commodity: «If there be a Beethoven House, it must be a symbol of resistance against degeneration, a shining symbol of the new era, which will draw power from a sense of community to get rid of the current mercantilism of art»45. And if the House would not be built, the initiative would still have meaning, according to Sibmacher Zijnen, in a time that «has sometimes rightly been called ‘sick’». Sibmacher Zijnen interpreted the current state of classical music as a symptom of the general decline of Western culture. Little remained of the optimism of the pre-war period; yet this critic believed that it was actually music itself that could put modern man back on the right track again.

Soon there came a reply from Dr. J. de Jong, a music critic who deemed the plan of Berlage and Hutschenruyter, although well intended, completely unrealistic.46 Who was waiting for education any more, and then also specifically on Beethoven’s music? De Jong argued that even if one were not a philistine,
and even if one were a warm friend of the arts, one was not always inclined to being taught, especially after a long day of work. De Jong remembered hearing a famous Wagnerian who, after attending two performances of Tristan und Isolde in Amsterdam, got an immense desire to go and hear *Die Dollarprinzessin*, which he enjoyed without any reservation. According to De Jong, human being was simply «a flawed creature, with all kinds of evil in his mind». He foresaw that Berlage and Hutschenruyter would be disappointed because for the majority, music was a «means of entertainment». The Beethoven House would therefore never become a means of «general reform»; that was and would always remain a utopia. At the end of his article De Jong taught the two initiators a final lesson. They had borrowed the motto of their leaflet from Tolstoy: «So long as the merchants are not driven out, the temple of art shall be no temple. But the art of the future will drive them out». Apart from questioning if art could have a temple at all, in a time when entertainment was so central, De Jong reminded his colleagues that the money of the Amsterdam merchants would be sorely needed. No art had ever been able to do without merchants after all.

The Beethoven House was never realised, but the discussion about the importance of well-designed concert halls continued. In 1911, an anonymous journalist of the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* stated that the local concert hall was too small for successful performances: there were not enough seats, which meant that the profit was too small to programme musicians of the highest level. The author called for reflection on future needs, especially with regard to the performance of «modern» music: there was, for example, no room for a large ensemble, which was necessary for Mahler’s Eighth Symphony. In 1917, the *Algemeen Handelsblad* noted the opposite for Amsterdam. The Concertgebouw only had one large and one small hall, but no medium-sized, which meant that some modern music could not be performed. And now that the First World War was in full swing, this new, intimate music was sorely needed. As the music critic Herman Rutters argued, Amsterdam had to make room for a «new aera in the practice of music that is barely perceptible and yet urgent». Audiences, according to him, were tired of the masses and longed for intimacy: «It is a time of struggling, of searching, of experimenting. [...] Hear how in the new music everything searches for intimacy, but cannot yet free itself from a form that has grown out of a life longing for the

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47. *Ibidem.*
49. H.R. 1917.
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great and the wide». The great «old» music, including the works of Mahler, Strauss, Debussy and Ravel, was to be replaced by new, smaller music, like that of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, which, so Rutters thought, could only be appreciated in a setting somewhere in between a large and small concert hall.

And indeed, there was a lot of experimentation with the design of concert halls. In 1918, De Maasbode reported that the Amsterdam String Quartet had performed on a living room-like stage, decorated with small paintings «tastefully along the plain canvas walls» 50. The «cold reality» of the hall was masked, the tradition partly set back. In the middle of the stage, a large lamp stood on a pied-de-stalle, shining softly under a wide shade, surrounded by the four desks of the strings.

Complaints about the atmosphere at the concerts, however, continued well into the twentieth century. In 1925, the composer and music critic Rudolph Cort van der Linden lamented in Het Vaderland about the dominance of the mundane 51. According to him, the concert halls were populated by a powdered, perfumed and silk-wearing audience that was only concerned with distinction. Cort van der Linden went on to reflect on the history of concert culture, interpreting it in terms of emergence, heydays and decline, a scheme so characteristic of cultural criticism. First, according to him, there had been the old opera and court music. The «progress of civilisation», however, had brought triviality and ostentation. Pleasure and respect for music increased, and music itself became more complex and sensual. At the same time, however, social boundaries had gradually been broken down. Concerts had turned into a mass product and everything had become «coarser, more superficial, cheaper, freer». Moreover, music had been given the wrong meaning: its recent focus on form had «reduced» its «inner life». Cort van der Linden also argued that in his days everything was exaggerated; the exceptional was generalised, all things of general value neglected. Using terms from the economic sciences, he claimed that form over substant meant loss of value. At the end of his account, however, Cort van der Linden drew hope from a small but growing group of people who resisted mundane concert culture. They wanted music for its own sake, real art, in short, solemn and in silence, and they strived for an atmosphere that was «more congenial, more intimate, more direct, different». They saw the «vanity» of success, «emptiness» and «vulgarity» in «the enthusiasm of an excited crowd», with its «coarser instincts», and a «deafening barbarity» in its applause.

51. Cort van der Linden 1925.
Meanwhile, more general concerns were being raised about the declining interest in the performing arts. Although reports about full concert halls and lively music societies remained, after 1900 most of the newspaper articles became less optimistic. In 1906, a reviewer of the *Arnhemsche Courant* lamented:

Had a stranger visited the new Musis concert hall last night, he would not have had a high opinion of our fellow citizens’ interest in good music. Properly counted, there were less than 50 of us listening [...]. We know [...] that in other places too, various concerts fail to arouse interest, so in a certain sense, we have no complaints.\(^52\)

An empty concert hall, however, could not be a weapon in the fight for civilization. On the contrary: it was itself symptom of decline.

**A Time of «spiritual poverty» and «musical impotence»:**

**Classical Music’s Nature under Threat?**

Not only the atmosphere in, and the design and line-up of concert halls were evaluated in the Dutch press; so was the nature of classical music itself. Some saw the success of Liedertafels, summer festivals, brass bands and new choirs as positive signs or even weapons in the fight against the downfall, even though they also expressed doubts about their financial viability.\(^53\) Moreover, what to some seemed a solution, others viewed as the main threat. These critics were concerned about the ruining effects of popular music on art music and morality. In 1901, for instance, the *Haagsche Courant* reported that in the Netherlands art and civilisation in general were in a deplorable state because of what the Dutch were singing: «For while on the one hand it proves a low degree of civilisation if a nation has such low demands regarding the content of what they sing, the often offensively mean and coarse singing in brutally flat language of what is called folksong exerts a very big

\(^52\) KR. 1906. See also: KR. 1902.

and highly disastrous influence on the level of morality»\(^{54}\). According to this critic, only proper singing instruction could save them from «spiritual decline».

Others also lamented the Dutch, who no longer knew their own «liederen», mostly because musicians preferred foreign-language repertoire, and particularly German songs. The result, they said, was a «devaluation» of the «popular spirit»\(^ {55}\). In 1912, for example, the *Leeuwarder Courant* quoted the antiquarian and musicologist Herman Wirth, introducing him as a «fanatical-pessimist»\(^ {56}\). Indeed, Wirth praised the old and resolutely rejected the new, trying to make the audience aware of the «high significance of mankind’s economic-ethical revolution». Wirth explored a distant past, where cantors had brought comfort and enlightenment with their singing. Yes, even still at the beginning of the nineteenth century, music had been an important part of people’s lives. But then had begun what Wirth called the process of «degeneration», a concept Wirth had borrowed from Max Nordau’s «Entartung» (1892). According to Wirth, the situation in the Netherlands was even worse than in Germany. Holland was a country of «parvenus» and «people with a lot of money» who had their own orchestras. But it lacked good composers and a real sense of musical culture. Wirth denounced his own times because of its «spiritual poverty and musical incapacity» and pointed to the «Calvinist-political-economic process’ as the main cause, which had prevented any aesthetic development and allowed ‘insane sounds and colour impressionism» to dominate.

Did a visit to the concert hall actually make sense in times of such musical poverty? Did the critics believe that music itself could counterbalance the decline that they observed? Most of them doubted it. In 1902, «Ypsilon», pseudonym of the music journalist Carel van Nievelt, published an article entitled «Arme phantasie» [«Poor fantasy»] in *Het Nieuws van den Dag*\(^ {57}\). He raged against what he heard in the concert halls, especially the programmatic music of Berlioz, Liszt and Richard Strauss:

> These composers do not work mainly with sounds based on sensation, but on representation; and the result of this endeavour is that with their music, our hearing suffers and our senses go hungry, while our imagination has to do with the most trivial effects, like a

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\(^{57}\) Ypsilon 1902.
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soldier who is equipped for battle with a pea blower instead of a gun. [...] The audience, as always inclined to misinterpret swelling for grandeur and noise for power, applauds furiously.

And then, Van Nievelt noted with irony, there were the «modern» musicians who came up with the «crazy» idea of allowing «the sense of smell to contribute to the proper understanding and enjoyment of music» during concerts. Van Nievelt knew that the battle was over, that the new would prevail and that the «old critic» could only grumble and note his own discomfort: «Poor, overstrained, inwardly distressed people, who can only see art in such coarse outward appearances; only by means of such coarse stimuli can they be brought into a quasi-poetic mood!»

Van Nievelt was not alone in his ironic representation of musical decay through the sense of smell. In 1914, the Provinciale Geldersche en Nijmeegsche Courant published an article titled «Geuren-symphonie [Smell-symphony] (Anno 2436)»; a dystopian-ironic prediction of music’s future. The author went on the offensive, particularly against the futuristic tendencies in art (music):

Now that art expresses itself in so many ways; now that (...) futurists, cubists and a hundred other -ists force their often incomprehensible art products upon us as the pinnacle of perfection; now that Futurism is also beginning to reign supremely in music and now that in Milan has taken place what old-fashioned people would call a noise concert of donkey-bawing, cockcrow, car horns, peddlers’ shouting, iron clanging, hammer clanging, and whatever else everyday life has to offer in the way of noisy sounds, the question arises as to whether more attention should not be paid to the sense of smell, and whether symphonies should not be written for the nose? The eardrum mongering of earlier centuries has been overcome; the art of smelling has replaced the art of hearing.

Willem Sibmacher Zijnen had his say again too. In 1913, as a critic for the Algemeen Handelsblad he reported on complaints from audiences about the programming of the Concertgebouw. They felt that it was too modern and paid too little attention to the great masters of the past. There was too much «dissonant music» — the taste of the minority! — and too little «imperishable beauty». Although Sibmacher Zijnen relativised that Beethoven was still the most

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59. SIBMACHER ZIJNEN 1913; H.R. 1928.
frequently performed composer and that the programme was certainly broader than the complainants had suggested, he took their side. He called on everyone to be open to new music, which one could only get used to by experiencing it. But his main line of reasoning was that the current developments were so revolutionary that they had little to do with the human «soul», but only with the «spiritual», the «intellect». In contrast to other cultural critics of the fin de siècle, Sibmacher Zijnen used the term «spirit» not as a synonym for «soul», but for «intellect» 60. He was not so much afraid of a «de-spiritualised» society, but of a «spiritualised» and therefore «soulless» one. According to his poetics, the intellect should never be allowed to rule over the mind, just as technology should never be permitted to spoil inner beauty. Therefore, programming had to be well balanced-out: the canon should be respected and celebrated, but room also had to be given to really good, new music.

Sibmacher Zijnen had already clarified what he understood by this in 1909:

Opposite empty formalism, vague idealism, and pessimistic tendencies, one feels in Russian music the power of a spontaneous inflammation, something of the Dionysianism that Nietzsche desired for the musical future; something ‘barbarian’ perhaps, but still that simple, healthy-impulsive that could be a happy counterweight to the aforementioned influences, and indeed meant a revival. “Back to the pure and simple life” was the slogan of the ‘realist’ Mussorgsky 61.

Clearly charmed by Nietzsche’s call for vitalism, Sibmacher Zijnen believed that modern man had to leave rationality behind and search for a purer form, in which he could rediscover the lost core of his soul. He was not alone in his opinion that music could play an important role in cultural revival. In 1927, the Nieuw Rotterdamsche Courant argued something similar, comparing new composers with «weed that spreads quickly, sometimes presenting us some half-ripe fruit, but never reaching maturity» 62. No wonder, then, that the public yearned for music of earlier periods; for Russian composers of the last century, but of course first and foremost for Beethoven, from whom, according to this article, classical concert life derived its meaning: «Through his music of unprecedented and profound humanity, he gave it substance. He is the example of the incomparably intense development of the human soul».

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61. Sibmacher Zijnen 1909b.
How, then, were the completely new sounds that were appearing in Western art music to be viewed? In 1924, *Het Centrum* published an article in which it argued that contemporary composers were yearning for «something absolutely new, something different, in the way that the music of the Javanese, the Chinese, or, in worst case, the Papuans, is different to us».

As we will see, this hierarchical structuring of music from different regions was common to this form of *Kulturkritik*. Many, according to this anonymous author, found these new developments hard to accept; they still had «Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner in their ears». This new music called for new concepts that would help listeners understand these new sounds; but these concepts simply did not yet exist. This critic went on to characterize a few modernist composers: Stravinsky was «rugged, masculine, but very resolute and clear»; Milhaud possessed a «warm, passionate, southern touch»; and Honegger had «the right to invoke Bach». This new musical era came with a different way of programming, in which non-European influences made themselves heard. The combination of Bach and American blues to this critic suddenly seemed more stylish than a fugue by Bach followed by a sonata by von Weber. Thus, he doubted whether it was right to consider «the syncopated rhythms of the music heard in public entertainment» «not good enough for a concert hall», and to see it only a temporary deviation, a decadence. Perhaps, he argued, the minuet and the polka had been judged in this way in the past too. Who knew if the rags to which the man of the world could not dance were not the beginning of a glorious future! This author encouraged his readers to open up, even though they did not have any idea of how to judge this new music yet.

Other critics believed that Western musical culture was in fact threatened from outside. In 1925, the *Indische Courant* reported that Otto Kahn, president of the Metropolitan Opera, had placed an advertisement for a jazz opera. According to the author, Kahn had completely lost his mind. Classical music and jazz had to remain two separate worlds, since «the art of music» had been developing for much longer than jazz, which had only just «crawled out of the nappies». Literally, jazz had to know its place too, namely «in the grill rooms of the big hotels, the palatial dance halls, and the excessively expensive night clubs, where one pays 30 dollars for a bottle of champagne». Jazz was good for «visitors of cinemas and variety shows, for wedding parties and perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, for

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63. See also Johnson 2019, pp. 421-439.
65. ‘Jazz en concertzaal’, in: *De Indische courant*, 2 February 1925.
Sounds of Decline

funerals of famous generals and admirals». But now jazz was trying to become a serious art form, which could only lead to a «desperate» result. How could an art patron agree on this? The author backed up his argument with racist remarks about the appearance and names of jazz musicians. He did acknowledge jazz as an «original art» with «a chance of a future». But then the composers would have to be able to create interesting content.

Here it becomes clear that for these music critics, the standard for the assessment of all music was that of classical music, of which they presented themselves — the «connoisseurs» after all of that «ultimate art» — as the ultimate judges. To this end, they categorised musical genres and styles, to which they then assigned adjectives according to equally static patterns. This critic concluded, for instance, that if there had to be a jazz opera — which, in his opinion, was highly undesirable, because it crossed all borders of decency — it would have to be specifically American: «No Indian girls, who love a white hunter, in the prairies of the West». It all had to be «good enough» and if not, «they» had to «leave the concert hall alone».

This was not the only critic who warned against the «black danger» that threatened Western art music; a «danger» that, according to an article in the Nieuwe Apeldoornsche Courant could lead to Westerners being «thrown back to the infancy of humanity».

It is particularly striking how with its racist undertone, this article expresses a vicious criticism of the inspiration modernism drew from «primitive» cultures in order to rediscover its own origins, which it considered to have lost. According to this criticism, however, this inspiration could eventually only lead to a return to «dark», «pagan» times.

According to some critics, the lamentable influence of all things non-European did not only reach the Netherlands, but spread over the entire continent like «an inkblot». In their admonitions, these authors regularly combined the classification of music with the categorisation of race. Moreover, they made full use of the concept of «nature», not as an antonym for the word «culture» as such, but to indicate and demarcate the essence of their own culture. Art music, the representative of the «natural soul» of the white part of Europe, had, they believed, to be protected against and purified from «black», «unnatural» sounds from outside. An example of this can be found in a 1926 review that Het Vaderland published about a «Negro revue» in Berlin. Like others, this anonymous author ordered the cultural expressions from various parts of the world in a fixed hierarchy. He argued that one could still appreciate what came from Asia, but that one could only shudder when experiencing objects and influences from Africa and America. They possessed no beauty, no art, no civilisation. Its «cursed nigger music», for instance, worked on «us Westerners» «like poison». «They» sang «horribly», «those» people who danced with their «elastic bodies» to the «rushing tempo». Their sounds shook the already over-stimulated Europeans, with their «overwrought nerves»; they worked on them like «cocaine», pushed them over the borders of their «natural fatigue» and «natural taste».

Typical of this criticism was a concern about the physical effects of music. This concern goes back to Plato, who in his Republic already pointed out the dangerous effects of sounds on the human body. This specific newspaper article characterised the European and the «Westerner» by referring to their «natural taste», «art» and «civilisation»; they were, in short, beings of the mind and of the inner self. According to this author, the danger did not only come from outside geographically, but also initially threatened the western man’s outer self, his body. But this degradation of, and wake-up call for that Western body also worked its way into the soul; after all, the «natural» taste was affected by it. And so, Cartesian dualism, the separation of body and mind which had dominated European thinking and had served as the basis of European identity for so long, was now under major threat.

This threat, this critic thought, would not only have catastrophic outcomes for the body and soul of Europeans, but also on the outlook and identity of their continent. For, as he warned his readers, «the dark continent» was in the process

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of culturally overpowering and «subjugating» Europe, the «Occident»: «[...] in this process, the negro troops have now followed the negro sounds and are celebrating their triumphs in turn, dancing furiously to the furious sounds of screeching, squealing, shrieking, thundering, clacking and croaking instruments, which are maltreated, so as to embarrass their natural sounds, at a breakneck speed». Referring to Oswald Spenger’s Der Untergang des Abendlandes this author wondered whether this was a final symptom of the disease that the old continent had to go through on its way to health; or an «unmistakable sign of unstoppable decay»? He hoped for the former, but feared the latter.

According to this critic, it would end badly for all of those who were involved. The sad thing for «the Negroes» was that they had adopted European «vices» and instruments: «[one] scene showed a boxing match; it ended with a scene of drunkenness; the women have oiled frizzy hair and wear Titus heads or Herrensnitt, they accompany their cannibal dances with motifs of European classics specially prepared for their purpose, and they no longer play their primitive drum instruments, but on violins and clarinets and on a Steinway grand piano». The European depravities and achievements listed by this author mainly served as signs of luxury and technical ability with which he hoped to prove the high state of development of his own old continent, from which the Other, the enemy, had to keep distance. This critic made no secret of his social Darwinist conviction. Europeans, he said, had been «captured» and brought back to

[...] a level of civilisation thousands of years closer to that of what according to the Darwinian method were our ancestors. [...] If the Occident must fall and its civilisation be swallowed up, it is regrettable that it is not a people such as the Javanese, with their own, albeit different civilisation, who exercise cultural imperialism over us, but that we are subjected to the manifestations of a primitive barbarism acting under a guise of art⁶⁹.

Racism, social Darwinism, the fear of inverted forms of cultural imperialism and appropriation, of a broken Cartesian world view and identity, all led to a critique in which cultural hypochondria clearly predominated.

In their answers to the questions about who or what was to blame for the decline, critics did not only point to the outside world, the foreign and the Other. In 1907, for example, a committed subscriber in a letter to the Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant argued that in earlier times the admiration for, and veneration

⁶⁹. ‘Kunst en letteren…’, see note 67.
and practice of music had had a more dignified, less embellished character\textsuperscript{70}. Anyone who studied the discourse related to the great composers of the past, so the anonymous author continued, soon came to the conclusion that all the idiom that had been used for so long to describe their masterpieces was no longer adequate for «the contemporary melomaniac, who lives only for irreproachability and morbid excitement». This melomaniac needed something completely different; only quasi learned «gibberish» could suit him. In his letter, this angry reader especially chastised the music critics, who, in his opinion, swore by what was new; they frightened and drove away the audiences, that, as had always been the case, still understood that the old masters had provided «simplicity, intimacy and feeling». But this author meant that amateur musicians were «guilty» too: if choirs and amateur orchestras were big at all, it was because the presence on the stage mattered more to them than any active participation in the musical performance.

The aforementioned Carel van Nievelt, too, had something to say about this topic\textsuperscript{71}. In 1909 he wrote about taste, and this time, he started his explanation with a fictitious conversation between two «gentlemen», about a concert they had attended together:

Mr A: «Isn’t it an admirable work, the seventh symphony!»

Mr B: «Pooh! I am always glad when it’s finished. Those symphonies — I will be frank — I would be happy to leave them to the devotees. You just have to swallow them when attending a proper concert. But for me, I cannot understand the glory of it. Fortunately, there is something else to hear afterwards, rather than such head-scratching work. You see, that Rhapsodie Algérienne by Trombonini, that I enjoyed! That’s what I call music, sir! Delicious!»

Mr A, indignantly: «How can you say such a thing? — A lousy piece, composed for its effects, that should not be allowed on any decent concert programme! A concession to the barbarians in the audience!»

Mr B: «Thank you!»

Mr A: «At your service. But, really — excuse me, my dear, — your roundness does not give me a high opinion of your taste.»

Mr B: «My taste? My taste? — And why should my taste not be as good as yours?»

Mr C, mediating good-naturedly: «Yes yes! De gustibus non est disputandum.»

And with this, they moved on to a more important subject: the latest bankruptcy on the stock exchange.


\textsuperscript{71} Ypsilon 1909.
Sounds of Decline

With his parody, Van Nievelt hoped to address two problems. Firstly, the audience had little interest in the essence of music; modern life, represented here by the stock market, was more important to them. Secondly, the critic believed there was something to be said about taste. There was a taste of the senses and a taste of the mind. There was no point in arguing about the former, but about the latter there was. Van Nievelt saw an essential difference between art and popular music, between «noble» and «mediocre» art; a difference that he as a critic — the authority — of course helped to establish and survive. Van Nievelt stated that Beethoven was obviously many times higher in rank than Trombonini; anyone who did not understand that was a barbarian or just badly informed. People were malleable, certainly children, and so which music parents presented their offspring with was decisive. But even if parents believed they had made the right choice, there was always the danger of copycat behaviour and pedantry, which Van Nievelt characterised as «creeping diseases».

Van Nievelt’s plea for good musical examples met with great approval. In 1926, Truus Eygenhuysen gave educational advice to «the female readers» of De Gooi- en Eemlander. Music, according to this critic, was indispensable for comfort. But enjoying the art of music was not easy; it required practice. Three years later, the social-democratic daily paper Voorwaarts quoted the Austrian musicologist and composer Paul Pisk who argued that the significance of proper musical education did not only relate to children but also to factory workers. And his colleague, the aforementioned Wirth, thought that music would be doomed unless university Chairs for this specific form of art were established: «Only then will the Dutch people be able to perpetuate their own national musical life».

Cort van der Linden saw yet another solution when he suggested that it was the composers who, more easily than the «conservative» public, were able to give a powerful reaction to the «superficiality and commonness» of modern concert culture. How could composers do this? By exclusively making music for those who were initiated: «less worldly», more serious, higher and deeper. For this, new music was needed, «with its own atmosphere»: «the atmosphere of the future».

72. Eygenhuysen 1926.
73. Pisk 1929.
75. Cort van der Linden 1925.
Could modern technology be a way out, or was it in fact an obstacle, or even a cause of decay\textsuperscript{76}? Firstly, critics discussed new instruments, machines and devices that were being developed in rapid fashion. In 1908, for instance, Sibmacher Zijnen mentioned the rise of the pianola and other «playing devices» such as the fonola\textsuperscript{77}. Sibmacher Zijnen acknowledged that these new instruments had their advantages: they made it easier to learn music, even for those whose musical aspirations had almost «died». But this pedagogy would not lead to music making that was technically correct. No matter how far humanity would be able to perfect these musical machines, real musicality and nuance would both be lost. Sibmacher Zijnen rather optimistically reassured that while this was a case of «false art», it «could not equal the real, but therefore could not threaten it either».

The music instruments market saw even more innovations, that were fiercely debated in the newspapers. At the beginning of 1914, \textit{De Sumatra Post} informed its readers about a circular letter issued by the French organ builder Eugène Ducroix, in which he announced a new kind of «futuristic» organ, called «Vox Nasale»\textsuperscript{78}. According to Ducroix, modern audiences had modern needs: they opted for instrumental effects. Therefore, many classical works were hardly appreciated any more:

\begin{quote}
The masses don’t understand a thing of Bach and Beethoven, they find Mendelssohn nagging and call Mozart weak. And classical French music? They want nothing more of it. [...] The more modern, the better! The wild helter-skelter of the modern creature can make audiences tremble. Sometimes it brings tears to the eyes. That is what one wants!
\end{quote}

And so Ducroix had built an organ that could bring about new effects. Some years later, in 1928, \textit{Het Vaderland} announced the ‘irenaphoon’, invented by A. D. Loman Jr., which sounded like a factory siren. Now the whole city would be

\textsuperscript{76} See also THORAU – ZIEMER 2019, pp. 1-33.
\textsuperscript{77} SIBMACHER ZIJNEN 1908a.
able to enjoy music at once\textsuperscript{79}. Moreover, with this new instrument, the risk of impurity had finally been solved. And even authorities such as the composer Johan Wagenaar and the conductor Willem Mengelberg believed that this instrument would have a future, so this author announced.

In 1925, the \textit{Indische Courant} was far less positive about a gigantic machine that had been placed in the concert hall:

> For the first time since creation, one can enjoy an orchestra consisting of four pianos, four shells, a propeller from a flying machine, a wooden rattle and two empty cans, all set in motion by electricity. [...] Listening to this new music, one can imagine a set of circular saws at work, accentuated by all kinds of other 'Industrial Sounds'\textsuperscript{80}.

The article went on to report that the composer, George Antheil, was convinced that in the near future, all music would be performed mechanically, so that there would be no need for spirited musicians any more. One attentive human being driving a machine that performed the music «punctually», and more cheaply too, would be enough. The author could not deny that this was a new development, but wondered whether this should be the future of music. With his emphasis on the contrast between the cold mechanical modern culture and the emotional depth of the past, he answered implicitly.

Secondly, there were new media, including cinema. Many critics felt that cinema competed with the concert hall, even if initially it had been incorporated into it. The \textit{Delftsche Courant}, for example, foresaw that while it had not been a success yet, cinema would become something big, offering its viewers and hearers something new all time, especially with its «ever more perfect and interesting recordings»\textsuperscript{81}.

From the 1920s onwards, however, critics related these modern technologies to the future of classical music. They particularly focussed on the role of the radio. Some, including the German art critic Max Osborn, claimed that this new device offered listeners the «real illusion» of being in the concert hall\textsuperscript{82}. Others, like Truus Eygenhuysen, on the other hand, believed that the radio and gramophone


\textsuperscript{80}.'Een automatisch orkest', in: \textit{De Indische Courant}, 2 March 1925.

\textsuperscript{81}.'Alberts bioscoop', in: \textit{Delfsche courant}, 3 March 1909.

\textsuperscript{82}.

O\textsc{S}\textsc{born} 1922. See also 'De tooverfluit', in: \textit{De Tijd}, 11 November 1926; De tooverfluit', in: \textit{Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant}, 20 December 1926b.
offered musical education to children from poorer families. In 1929, Het Vaderland also foresaw a bright future for classical music that was broadcasted by radio, provided that new works would be specifically composed for it. Sounds had to be «doubly captivating», because this «hearing in the living room» lacked the strong optical dimension of a concert hall. Therefore, composers had to adapt the logic and structure of their scores: «heavy» compositions were to be avoided and music with few voices was to be preferred.

In the years before, fears and criticism had dominated the debate about the radio’s influence on classical music culture. The music journalist Herman Rutters, for instance, observed that radio’s quality was still relatively low, but also mentioned the bleakness of contemporary concert culture. People were therefore more inclined to stay at home where, thanks to the radio, they could now experience music «almost live». Rutters wondered what it must be like for musicians to be recorded in an empty studio, but also suggested that it might be even worse to perform in a half-empty concert hall. Rutters wanted to offer radio a chance; culture was ever changing after all. But he regretted the loss of personal contact and thought that the acoustic requirements for a perfect listening experience were not yet clear. The future development of music was a mystery to him: «Nobody really knows where it will go; we seem to live in a stage of rudderless, groping, uncertain, far from deliberate experimentation».

In 1926, an article in Gooi- en Eemlander by an anonymous author was more dismissive. Here again we see the historical thinking in terms of stages that is so typical of Kulturkritik:

[...] one only has to imagine that Beethoven would return in the here and now, and would read in the radio section of a newspaper that one of his concerts would be part of the evening programme. One can imagine the mental anguish he would suffer if he were to listen to his own composition through a receiver and earplugs or a loudspeaker.

The main objection to radio was that it did not have a new and distinct field of activity, but «parasitised» cultural fields, whose internal harmony was

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83. Eygenhuysen 1926.
85. Rutters 1925.
thus disrupted. This author expressed his sympathy to the audiences, which were already so unfussy, and less and less able to separate the «pure» from the «impure». They were therefore satisfied with «surrogates» and encouraged to appreciate wrong music. And the concert halls, he went on in despair, already remained empty despite ridiculously low prices; and they were now turned into cinemas themselves! The surrogate apparently aroused no desire for the original. According to this author, the famous conductor Sir Thomas Beecham was right to denounce radio music, «which made the cleanest human voice sound like the roar of a bull», and which reduced the intricate, beautiful harmony of an orchestra to the «howling, snivelling and bellowing of devils and other evil spirits».

In 1928, Limburgsch Dagblad referred to an interview with the Finnish conductor Georg Schneevoigt, who had presented an equally pessimistic view on the current and future state of classical music. According to him, there were only few modern composers with real talent; most works died a quick death from «anaemia», and the audiences were bored. More important, he said, was that radio threatened concert life. People stayed at home, and in the near future one orchestra would be able to provide the entire world with sounds: the «end of the great symphonic period».

Thinking in terms of historical eras with clearly marked beginnings and endings also dominated the critical reflection on technological developments by the composer, conductor and organist Hubert Cuijpers jr. According to him, the «technical-musical happenings» of the year 1928 were decisive and even «epoch-making», because everything that had previously been just theory or experimentation had now been put into practice. Of course, radio provided entertainment for some, and work to others. It could impart musical knowledge and taste to many. But artistically, it was a «catastrophe» and made «victims».

In this part of Cuijpers’ plea, we recognize the influence of the famous Dutch medievalist Johan Huizinga, who saw a «weakening» of the ability to judge as a result of new media such as radio and film. To his war-inspired rhetoric Cuijpers added the argument that the real contact between artists and audiences was lost because of these new media. No wonder, then, that musical societies were «killed off»; what parent would encourage his child to become engaged in music in a time dominated by the gramophone, radio and film?

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88. Cuijpers 1929.
Floris Meens

A Time of «Hurried Lifestyles», «Tyrannical Sports»
and «fierce mutual strife»:
The Development of Music in Relation to Culture as a Whole

Most of the critics thought that the current state of music was representative for the whole of Western culture. With their analyses of the decline of the classical music tradition, they thus also diagnosed their own civilisation. While some meant that music was threatened by the general decline, others indicated that music was the cause of it. In 1909, for example, Sibmacher Zijnen argued that everything used to be better. Consumer culture was nothing new, of course, but the hard-working citizens of the past had known how to appreciate real art\(^\text{89}\). Moreover, they had lived in a healthy, well-balanced society. Where had this sense of unity gone? According to Sibmacher Zijnen, music, like culture in general, had become «more complicated, more agitated, more adventurous». New social and technological mobility had not only resulted in a loss of local character, but had also created «nerve-racking competition». Was there a need for an orchestra nowadays, he wondered? Those that existed could hardly survive. The best artists from all countries were part of fierce competition between concert and theatre companies (also a modern element!). According to this critic, the unprecedentedly high fees were the result and symbol par excellence of this «sickly competitive battle» in the world of classical music.

The editors of the Delfsche Courant argued that capitalism was not the only cause of the malaise\(^\text{90}\). Modern culture paid more attention to ephemeral phenomena such as sport, which had destructive effects, since they were just as strongly characterised by competition as capitalism, which trickled down to truly valuable forms of art. Any real interest in the essence of music ebbed away. Other newspapers, such as Het nieuws van den dag reminded its readers that this real interest required dedication, serious study and therefore a large time investment\(^\text{91}\). The German singing teacher Lille Lehmann used this periodical to warn against the «laziness» of a culture dominated by people who were only interested in attributing talent to themselves and who thought it possible to become an artist in an instant. Hardly anyone understood that art was not a market, but a temple; and hardly anyone recognised that the Dutch word for «art» («kunst») derived from the verb «to be able» («kunnen»).

\(^{89}\) Sibmacher Zijnen 1909a.
\(^{90}\) ‘Mannenkoor-uitvoeringen’, in: Delfsche courant, 12 August 1903.
\(^{91}\) Lehmann 1901.
Remarks on the negative influence of capitalism, the disappearance of social boundaries, increasing speed and mobility, laziness and sport also dominated the pages of the *Sumatra Post*. In 1915, an unknown author asked what was to become of music, especially after the war. He stated that the «doubtful formulas» and «unnecessary complexity» should make way for «sincerity, conciseness, simplicity». Habits and routine would be replaced by a genuine love of art. Capitalist thinking, which had turned music into a commercial enterprise, had to come to an end. Just like Sibmacher Zijnen, this author noted that only a new way of programming would bring improvements. Future generations would be baffled by today’s old-fashioned concerts; their form was «worn out». Mankind’s aim had to be to achieve a «more ideal musical practice» and «more peaceful musical enjoyment» in this period of «hurried life and tyrannical sports». And who knows, the article continued, whether the war, with its «thought-provoking consequences», with «all the disillusionments of superficial civilisation», would not in fact bring a reaction that would do musical development much good. In fact, according to this critic, only a combination of a devastating war and a responsible public could counteract the disastrous effects of modern sport and capitalism on classical music.

Pessimism persisted, however, also after the war had ended. In 1926, *De Zuid-Willemsvaart* in the article ‘Signs of the times’ complained about the large number of candidates who had who had failed their final school exams. No wonder, with the low level of education, which was «very typical of our time». Complaints about this, the newspaper acknowledged, had been around for some time. Fathers regretted that their children no longer showed any interest in literature and art: «the spiritual and civilising relaxation that one used to find and practice in books, poetry and music has had to make way for one-sided sport and competitive mania». According to this article, the new generation was miserable and had an astonishing lack of civilisation:

> They are indifferent to literature; they only know the latest tunes and dances in music. They do not understand painting. They never go to concerts or museums, and they only go to the theatre for farce or revues. (…) The flattening of today’s youth in these areas therefore does not open up any positive prospects for the future.

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In 1926, in an article titled ‘Our musical civilisation’, Rudolph Cort van der Linden brought together almost all characteristics of the _Kulturkritik_ of his time. According to him, there was a «decline of taste», a disappearance of «refinement», a «corruption», a «loss of character», «intemperance», «false assumptions», «narrow-mindedness», «defectiveness and ignorance», and this especially on the part of «half-talents» and «tinkerers». Cort van der Linden also opposed the dominance of business models, which had led to the mixing of the valuable with the «massive», the «vulgar», the «sick» and the «inferior», such as the «screeching» jazz. In the concert hall, one heard «the most wonderful cacophonies, with nerve-shattering sounds and mind-boggling contra puncture [...].» And then the «most miraculous» instrumentations, pianos used as percussion, strings with stopped-wind sounds and «bumped, pinched, razor-sharp, unnatural sounds endlessly». According to Cort van der Linden, music criticism had also lost its way when it spoke of «succès d’estime, and of neo-this and a-that, and of horizontal verticalizing». Music was «art»; and art could never be fragmentary and practical, never mechanical and banal. If one twisted or forgot the notions of civilisation such as art music, it was the clearest proof of decay. Whoever fell for it was stupid; whoever participated in it was dangerous and harmful to society. It was a sign of the times, the critic sighed, that music, «the noblest of the arts, has reached a high level of development, but is being pulled down and interpreted with coarseness». In short, there was a total «musical unnaturalness», a sign of a «lesser form of civilisation».

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Dutch newspapers, music critics sketched the development of ‘their’ art not only to indicate cultural decline as a whole, but also to reveal how music itself was affected by it. Their visions were more often than not pessimistic. The fact that they used music as a metaphor for the downfall of civilisation is hardly surprising; insofar it can be determined from the authors’ names above the articles, they were representatives of, or in any case strongly connected with the traditional field of classical music. They defended their bastion against influences from outside and inside, in articles that were regularly published on the prominent pages of both national as well as local newspapers, which were quite diverse in their political signature (liberal, social-democrat, Christian democrat).

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94. Cort van der Linden 1926.
These critics signalled a musical imbalance that they considered threatening to the cultural, social and political harmony, or representative of the lack thereof. They based their findings on the categorisation and comparison of styles and genres (classical vs. jazz, vocal vs. instrumental), periods and stages (past, present and future), places of birth (Europe, America, Africa, and sometimes Asia) and techniques. They also made use of classification in other ways, for example by contrasting ‘high art’ with ‘popular entertainment’, the ‘masses’ with the ‘connoisseurs’, and concert halls with other places of entertainment. Their discourse was infused with words taken from medicine and the then rapidly developing study of psychology («sick», «healthy» and «dying»; «nerves» and «defused»; «body» vs. «soul»), the economic sciences («decline» of «value»), warfare («enemy», «struggle», «victims», «peace»), capitalism and sport («competition», «winners», «loss»), which many of these commentators themselves so detested.

Some critics presented the impact of contemporary musical developments on the body and soul of Westerners, Europeans and the Dutch as a moral issue. According to them, modern Western man was an overstrained, overexcited and tired human being, that was now threatened physically, but also mentally, in his identity, which was based on the ideas of Descartes. These authors saw great danger in the shifting of boundaries based on nationality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, gender and age that was so characteristic of this period. They feared a musical but also a general domination, including reverse processes of cultural imperialism and appropriation, on the part of mass man, the non-European Other, or technology. In their cultural criticism, which could be seen as a form of cultural hypochondria, we find traces of nostalgia, conservatism, social Darwinism, xenophobia and racism.

Although some people tended to pin down «the» foreign as the cause for all misery, and «the foreigner(s)» as the culprit(s), others pointed to actors and factors from nearer by. These included fellow representatives of the traditional field of classical music, who, according to these critics, did not sufficiently defend their own identity, did not actively admit the dangers, or had too little eye for the conditions under which renewal could actually lead to improvement. With their widely divergent, but nevertheless strongly interconnected visions, these critics confirmed an old discourse that attributed to music a great, sometimes even dangerous power, which could both unite as well as separate people, and thus both positively as well as negatively influence relations between several different social groups (men vs. women, young vs. old, Europeans vs. non-Europeans, etc.).

With their writings, the critics normalised the idea of the downfall of classical music (culture) and moreover contributed to a greater awareness of the
things they detested. Some made use of media that were rejected by others, such as the radio. The majority did look for solutions, but did not agree among themselves. While some sought remedy in music education, others pointed to it as the main cause of the decline. Moreover, many of the critics’ reasoning was circular. They presented music as the most important ‘medicine’ against cultural ‘diseases’, while at the same time noting how ‘symptomatic’ the art of music was of the deplorable state in which culture found itself.

However ‘moribund’ classical music may have seemed in the eyes of others, their gloom formed a dynamic polemic, which, paradoxically, only served to emphasise the vitality of classical music. Undoubtedly, also in this respect, there is a parallel with contemporary debates on the future of classical music.

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