

## Leonard Bernstein – Excerpts from the New York Philharmonic Young People’s Concert, January 24, 1959, broadcast on the CBS television network

### *What is Classical Music?*

... **Why are we asking this question?**... You see, everybody thinks he knows what classical music is: just any music that isn’t jazz ... or a popular song ... or folk music ... But that isn’t what classical music means at all. People use this word to describe music that isn’t jazz, or popular songs or folk music, just because there isn’t any other word that seems to describe it better.

... When a composer writes a piece ... he puts down the exact notes that he wants, the exact instruments or voices ... and he also writes down as many directions as he can think of, to tell the players or singers ... everything they need to know about ... how it should go ... This music is permanent, unchangeable, *exact*. Maybe that’s what we should call this kind of music ... exact music.

... At least ‘exact’ is not a wrong word, and ‘classical’ *is* a wrong word. As a matter of fact, I’m sure that you can all probably think up a lot of other words better than ‘exact’ to describe the music that’s usually called ‘classical,’ and I’d love for you to write me any of the ones you think of that are really good. Who knows? Maybe one of your words will really catch on and become part of our language, so that we’ll never have to use that wrong word ‘classical’ again.

**Well, why is the word ‘classical’ the wrong word?** Because, you see, while it’s true that there is such a thing as classical music, it means something very different from what we’ve been talking about. For instance, take this musical phrase: (Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, opening phrase.) Is that classical music? Wrong! It’s not!

**Classical music refers to a very definite period** in the history of music, which is called the *classical* period. And the music that was written in that time is called ‘classical music.’ And *Scheherazade* simply wasn’t written in that time. But this music was! (Mozart’s Piano Concerto no. 21 in C - opening phrases.) And I’m sure you can tell the difference between *Scheherazade* and that bit of Mozart we just played. The Mozart *is* classical music ...

### **Beethoven and Romanticism**

... Now the classical period we’ve been talking about came to an end in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a great composer named Beethoven. Most people think of Beethoven as the greatest composer of all time ... His music got bigger in every way. It’s like looking at classical music through a magnifying glass ... Now *that* we call romanticism! And that’s the name we give to the music—most of it—that was written in the hundred years after Beethoven.

... **It’s pretty different from Mozart and Haydn**, you must admit ... It’s a reflection of changes in history, in the way people live and think and feel and act. And it all started strangely enough with that greatest classicist of all—Beethoven. You see, he was two things ... the last man of the *classical* period, and the first of the *romantic* period ... He was so full of feeling and emotion that he ... just broke his chains and started a whole new kind of music. And that was the end of classical music ...

Some professionals use the term ‘concert music’ to describe music intended primarily for concert performance. Concert music comprises orchestral music, chamber music, choral music, solo repertoire, concert arrangements of ballet and film music, etc. –S.H.