

CLASSICAL MUSIC

FLOPPERS:

DISASTROUS PREMIERES

It is remarkable how many treasured gems of today's standard classical repertoire were panned at their inception, by audiences and critics alike.

Most often it was no fault of the composer that a great work was scorned and rejected at the premiere. One recalls, for instance, the jeering and heckling that took place at the opening of **Rossini's Barber of Seville**. It so happens that Rossini's main rival, Giovanni Paisiello, was in attendance that evening in 1816, and, playing off of the audience's disfavor, he essentially led a revolt in the theater.

The Paris premiere of Wagner's **Tannhäuser** was likewise sabotaged by members of an elite society known as the Jockey Club. Here Wagner broke away from established custom by placing the ballet in the first act of his opera rather than the second. Members of the Jockey Club cared only about seeing the ballet when they attended an opera and had thus made a habit of appearing fashionably late, so as not to be bothered by the material of the first act. They were therefore disgruntled at having to be present for Act I of Tannhäuser. Cat-calls and whistles ensued.

Often it is the content of the show that the public finds objectionable. Both Bizet's **Carmen** and Strauss' **Salome** were ill-received for the sheer depravity of their themes. Carmen's character was scorned by the public, and the creator of the role, Célestine Galli-Marié, was even believed to have led a romantic affair with Bizet during the opera's rehearsal period. Stones were cast by the press as well, denouncing Gallie-Marié's interpretation as "the very incarnation of vice." It is only thanks to a later revival that we now cherish the melodies of Carmen as some of the catchiest and sweetest in the repertoire. While Carmen, the Castilian queen of coquetry is perhaps a familiar, even stock character in the eyes of today's viewers, Strauss' portrayal of Salome kissing the severed head of John the Baptist remains positively shocking. Therefore



it is no wonder that *Salome* was initially banned in both London and Vienna. Similarly, Puccini's **Madama Butterfly** threw the Italians for a loop when it premiered at La Scala in 1904. If the public's expectations were in any way molded by Puccini's previous operas, then they would have been awaiting a tenor who was both heroic and noble. Instead they got a coward, and one who did not even have a single aria through which to redeem himself musically.

One cannot always blame the viewers for the failure of a premiere, for it is not always the public's obtuseness that is at fault. Often the circumstances surrounding a performance are simply too drastic to allow for success. **Beethoven's 5th Symphony** was one masterpiece that suffered this fate, premiered as part of an enormous, all-Beethoven concert the week before Christmas in 1808. Like **Elgar's Cello Concerto** a century later, Beethoven's work that day was severely under-rehearsed and thus poorly performed. Furthermore, temperatures were low and the dense program dragged on for over four hours. One can only imagine the combination of boredom and discomfort experienced by the audience in the freezing hall, so that when the now-too-familiar opening four notes rang out to announce the 5th Symphony, the weather was perhaps more menacing than the motif.

Of course no discussion of disastrous performances is complete without mention of the premiere of Stravinsky's **Rite of Spring** at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1913. The story is now canonized in the popular imagination: the images of frenzied concert-goers crawling over one another, screaming, and tearing at their clothes in a most violent reaction to the unfamiliar sounds that would later become a centerpiece of modern music. It is doubtful whether this occasion should truly be classified as an all-out riot as it so often is; the word "riot" may have been used to describe any moderate amount of uproarious behavior in a Parisian atmosphere otherwise characterized by

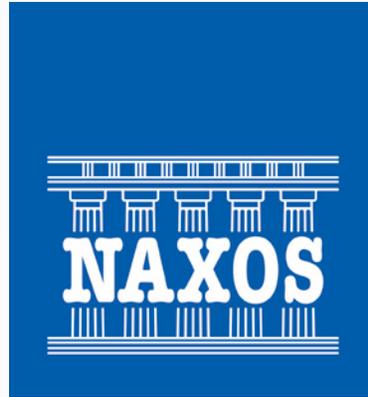


elegance and class. Still, it is clear that the music took the public by surprise, and ironically this only fueled Stravinsky's fame in Europe.

The effects of a disastrous premiere can of course be devastating for a composer. Rachmaninov, for instance, was unable to bring himself to compose anything for years in the wake of his **First Symphony's** failure. With the notable exception of Bizet, who died suddenly after the premiere of Carmen, all of the composers presented here enjoyed continued success in the careers. The modern listener can only rejoice at the fact that the true value of these works was eventually recognized.



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