

Artistic Manifesto

No nostalgia, but necessity

Utrecht 2025 – Amir Swaab

(The tone of this manifesto is polemical—because a nuanced version would be uncomfortably long.)

In the early 20th century, a new generation of artists chose experiment over beauty. Art no longer had to console or connect; it had to innovate, provoke, break boundaries. Urinals appeared in museums, rhyme and meter were banned, and in music melody and harmony were abandoned in favor of atonality and sound experiments.

This development produced undeniable richness. But once the novelty wore off, only a small circle of devotees remained loyal to the new movement. Concept and radicalism can break the status quo only once. After that, they remain as monuments—reminders of the boundary once crossed. Where Beethoven or Chopin introduced innovations in dialogue with the public, now the unquestioned autonomy of the artist took center stage.

More than a century after Schoenberg, it is difficult to maintain that “the audience is not yet ready.” Long lines form outside museums devoted to old masters, while halls dedicated to the avant-garde remain sparsely visited. Concert halls and broadcasters largely avoid avant-garde programming, because in an age where people have more freedom of choice than ever, too much experiment risks severing the bond with the audience.

Looking only to the past is no solution either. A concert hall should be more than a museum of historical practice. The struggle of classical music to reach new generations is partly due to a lack of compelling new works. If we want classical music to remain alive and relevant, if we want audiences to keep listening, we must also listen to them. We must put the public back at the center—just as the artists for whom we still stand in line once did. History often highlights the innovator, but in reality it was often the audience that showed the way.

Accessible classical music is not a step backward, but a step forward. A search for melody and harmony that once again carry expressive power—without sacrificing depth or complexity, and going beyond superficial neo-classical clichés. New music that does not lock itself in an academic niche, but fills the concert hall with stories that move, enchant, and transport.

All art that endures does so because it communicates. That is why our task is to make classical music understandable again—not by repeating its past, but by shaping its future. By creating new fruits from old roots.

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