

Symphony concert attendance is up. Journalists who lament the aging of concert audiences may be forming their opinions by looking around from the most expensive seats—the ones the young concertgoers can't afford. Up in the nosebleed section, wrinkles may be scarce.

Classical concert tickets simply price out many young people. Tickets are like wine. Buyers start out with Two Buck Chuck, move on to a Yellow Tail, and eventually feel flush enough to indulge in a fine Burgundy. Looked at another way, the life cycle of concertgoers might once have been graphed in three quantum leaps: Twentysomethings went to clubs on weekends; couples in their thirties stayed home raising children; and people in their forties began to subscribe to more highbrow entertainment, such as concerts. One theater director notes that the 21st-century version of the graph would be elongated: Parents with young children at home were once aged

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20 to 40; now they're 30 to 50.

Demographic and economic explanations aside, the appreciation of classical music requires early exposure, something less common in schools than in the past. And selling high culture is no longer a matter of posting a repertoire and expecting the audiences to come. Competition for the time, attention, and money of the "new gray" performance-goer is fierce. Symphonies, operas, and even musicals will have to work for their patronage. A concert has to be more than a great CD sound with visuals. Audiences want to be touched by the experience, Haithman concludes. They seek not only to be entertained, but moved.

ARTS & LETTERS

Chagall's Curious Legacy

THE SOURCE: "Whatever Happened to Marc Chagall?" by Michael J. Lewis, in *Commentary*, Oct. 2008.

THINK OF MARC CHAGALL (1887–1985), and what immediately comes to mind is a large, colorful canvas filled with whimsical symbols from his Jewish childhood in the Russian city of Vitebsk—a fiddler or a pair of lovers or a cow (sometimes all at once) cavorting on the roof of a rough-hewn peasant house or, just as likely, floating through the air in a dreamy dance. When Chagall died, at 97, he was acclaimed as the last survivor of the pioneering Modernists and the world's preeminent Jewish artist. But Michael J. Lewis says that Chagall was a "straggler in the march of Modernism," whose best work was already behind him by the end of World War I.

EXCERPT

America's Greatest Reader

By the end of his life—hell, by the middle of his life, Edmund Wilson was a fat, ferocious man: petty, pretentious, and petulant, a failure at many of the most ordinary tasks of life. But, man, could he dance: through a poem, through a book, through a library. He was the Nijinsky, the Nureyev, at what he did—a genius, really: probably the greatest reader America has ever known. . . .

If he seems lost to us now, that's not just because we have no similar genius to occupy the space that he filled. It's also because that space has nearly disappeared. The magisterial critic has no role left in America, really. We appreciate, we enjoy, we peruse, we watch. But we don't define ourselves by reading anymore. The novel, the premier art form of Western civilization over the last 200 years, has ceased to be the mark of civilization. And so what need have we of Edmund Wilson—that fat, ferocious man, so nimble on his feet?

—JOSEPH BOTTUM, editor of *First Things*, in *Humanities* (Nov.–Dec. 2008)

Born Movsha Shagal into a Hasidic Jewish community that did not value visual art, the artist was raised in modest circumstances; his “remote, pious father toiled in a herring warehouse, and his mother ran a small grocery business from their home,” relates Lewis, a Williams College art historian, drawing on a new biography by Jackie Wullschlager, the art critic at *Financial Times*. Early on, Chagall studied with Yehuda Pen, a “realist who painted plein-air scenes of Jewish life,” and later in St. Petersburg with Léon Batsk, a ballet set designer. Though the

young Chagall resisted his tutors’ attempts to rein in his artistic style, Batsk left an impression on the painter, “who learned to place his figures on the canvas as if they were stenciled cutouts, their eloquence made up almost entirely of their expressively straggling silhouettes.”

By 1911, Chagall had charmed several benefactors into financing a move to Paris. There he was dazzled by the chromatic intensity championed by artists such as Henri Matisse and Odilon Redon. “Many of Chagall’s Paris works were updated versions of paintings he had

made in Russia, transposed into Fauvist or Cubist keys,” Lewis says. Indeed, “recycling earlier compositions and themes would become a lifelong habit, and is one of the great peculiarities of his career.” Still, Chagall’s “uncanny gift for coining fresh and haunting symbols, with the rubbery logic of dreams,” impressed the avant-garde crowd that surrounded him in Paris. The poet Apollinaire proclaimed his canvasses “*surréal*” (a term that found its way into the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924), but Chagall resisted inclusion in that club. According to Lewis, he “did



Birthday (L'Anniversaire) by Marc Chagall, 1915

not like their exaltation of the arbitrary and the random, feeling that his own personal language of symbols was meaningful and thoroughly sincere.”

Following the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks sought to make use of Chagall’s growing international fame. He declined a position as Soviet commissar of visual arts, but agreed to take a similar local position in his native Vitebsk, where he spoke out, somewhat naively, in support of personal expression. In 1922 Chagall decamped from Russia, eventually

winding up in France, where he began “very assiduously to market himself,” Lewis says, publishing his autobiography at age 36. Chagall worked in a cocoon, protected and sometimes directed by his wife, Bella, and the women who succeeded her after her death in 1944. While commissions kept coming—“stained glass for the cathedrals of Rheims and Metz, a Dag Hammarskjöld memorial at the United Nations, the great ceiling mural in the Paris Opera”—Chagall’s painted work, Lewis contends, remained limited by the same characteristics

that define all folk art, “the filling-in of blank spaces with auxiliary figures, the strange shifts in scale that show hierarchical importance rather than recession in depth.”

But if Chagall’s “gifts were limited, he exploited them intensely and with unusual urgency of feeling.” Lewis believes that the early works mark Chagall as “a minor master on the order of a William Blake or an El Greco,” and that he “has earned a permanent place in the pantheon of artists who have spoken deeply about the secrets of the human heart.”

OTHER NATIONS

A Sickening State

THE SOURCE: “The Health Crisis in Russia’s Ranks” by Murray Feshbach, in *Current History*, Oct. 2008.

RUSSIA’S ARMY AND NAVY, bristling with nuclear weapons, rocketry, and 1.2 million conscripts and volunteers, is a ripe-looking fruit with a diseased core. Its military capabilities are undermined by the nation’s low birthrate and poor health.

Murray Feshbach, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, writes that Russia’s armed forces lack the skilled and healthy workers to back up its saber rattling and international ambitions. As the military deploys ever more technologically sophisticated weaponry, it relies on ever less educated troops to operate it. Military records show

that only 43 percent of new naval conscripts in 2004 had finished high school. Some had less than four years of schooling, and the percentage of draftees who had completed higher education fell from 17 to 13 percent in a six-month period.

The cause of much of Russia’s problem is demographics. Births fell by 50 percent between 1987 and 1999, and Feshbach predicts that this decline will produce an “echo” in a depressed birthrate starting in 2012 and continuing for decades to come. The most optimistic national estimates show Russia’s population falling to 136 million in 2020, down from 141 million today. Life expectancy in Russia is among the lowest in the developed world: for



Russian honor guard soldiers stand at attention in front of posters touting some of the threatened elements of post-Soviet life: (clockwise from top left) life, health, happiness, family, and comfort.