Abstract
In the United States, the recent twenty years have seen the emergence of what might be defined as a “flat world” (Thomas L. Friedman) of musical styles – a reshaped cultural environment in which many listeners and scholars no longer view classical music as more sophisticated than other styles. The highbrow/lowlbrow distinction that once made the engagement with classical music a marker of cultural and intellectual superiority has been largely replaced by a sense that any style of music may be interesting and sophisticated in its own ways. The result of this flattening of the hierarchies of musical prestige places the meaning of the term “popular music” in question. This article traces the historical conditions in which the highbrow/lowlbrow distinction arose in the United States, how distinctions in musical styles were developed, and how advances in digital technology have hastened the flattening of stylistic hierarchies, rendering the term “popular music” increasingly useless except in a historical sense.

In his 2005 bestselling book, The World Is Flat, Thomas L. Friedman posits the idea of an emergent “flat world” created by digital technology and increased globalization. In the United States, the recent twenty years have also seen the emergence of what might be thought of as a flat world of musical styles – a reshaped cultural environment in which many listeners and scholars no longer view classical music as necessarily more sophisticated than other styles. The highbrow/lowlbrow distinction that once made the engagement with classical music a marker of cultural and intellectual sophistication (and even superiority) has been largely replaced by a sense that any style of music may be interesting and sophisticated in its own way. The result of this flattening of the hierarchy of musical prestige places the meaning of the term “popular music” in question. Chronically hard to define, “popular music” arose as a label not so much because of what the music was, but more importantly because of what it was not – classical
music. Over more than a century of writing, scholarship, and discussion, non-classical styles of music have been frequently jumbled together with little sensitivity to their salient characteristics, creating the hodgepodge domain of the popular, defined almost entirely by the style that was absent. As the status of classical music recedes in a flat world, however, how can “popular” have any meaning?

This article will trace the ways in which advances in digital technology have hastened the flattening of music-stylistic positioning by first considering the advances Friedman enumerates, and then the impact of these technological changes on the world of music. The formation of a highbrow/lowbrow distinction in American culture will then be explored, along with a discussion of how this distinction played out in American music over most of the twentieth century as classical music culture developed.

Living in a flat world

It is always dangerous to declare a turning point in history. We always tend to feel that when we are alive something really major is happening. But I am convinced that the genesis of this new flat-world platform and the six new forms of collaboration it has spawned will be remembered in time as one of the most important turning points in the history of mankind – one no less significant than the invention of the printing press or electricity. Someone had to be alive when it happened – and it happens to be you and me [Friedman 2007, 93].

Friedman’s argument about a flat world. Books that predict the future can often have very short lives; all it takes is for a couple of years to pass to make much of

1. Birrer [1985] would label this statement as a “negative definition” of popular music, one of four possible approaches he identifies. Middleton [1990, 4] cites Birrer’s classifications and offers a critique of each, finding them useful but ultimately unsatisfactory. Tagg prefers an «axiomatic triangle consisting of ‘folk’, ‘art’, and ‘popular’ musics» [2000, 75]. My position is probably closest to those of Frith [1987], who gives careful thought to “serious” and “popular” music, especially with regard to issues of value, and Van der Merwe [1988, 18], who reflects on the «divorce between classical and popular styles» in a section entitled “Some Th oughts on the Great Musical Schism.”

2. Recent attempts to grapple with defining “popular music” include Hesmondhalgh-Negus [2002, 2-3 esp.], Moore [2012, 122 esp.], and Shuker [2012, 5 ff.]. Kassabian’s discussion provides a useful history frame and is particularly insightful. She writes: «In most of its contemporary incarnations, the term ‘popular’ is still opposed to some idea of an elite» [1999, 116].

3. This article presents a perspective on musical culture in the United States. It is certainly possible that, in spite of arguments for the emergence of a flat world, the cultural position of classical music in other parts of the world may differ from those presented here. The arguments that follow are grounded in the development of the history of classical-music culture in the U.S.
the information seem outdated and perhaps even quaint. Thomas Friedman's writing, however, has remained relatively fresh in the decade or so since the publication of his *The World Is Flat*. There are a few things Friedman did not see coming (the rise of music streaming or the popularity of MOOCs, for instance), but much of what he identifies has indeed come to pass, and much as he described it. The idea at the center of the book – that the rise of digital technology has made the world a smaller place and provided dramatically increased access to resources to a greater number of people worldwide – has turned out to be accurate. The world is flat, at least in part, because the hierarchical structures that had previously restricted access to resources have been by-passed. In spite of the complaints of some of his critics about the use of the term, it does indeed seem that the world is (often) flat.  

In the course of his chronicle, Friedman enumerates ten “flatteners” that he sees changing the world; these include uploading, outsourcing, insourcing, offshoring, in-forming, supply chaining, in addition to Windows, Netscape, and work-flow software. Friedman traces the history of many of the technological developments he discusses, often following many threads simultaneously while grounding his work in extensive interviews with some of the pivotal figures in technology’s advances. As one might expect, the rise of the Internet is at the heart of the story Friedman tells, and there are few aspects of our current lives in which this technology has not made an impact over the past two decades. What started for many with using email and accessing websites has developed today into the omnipresence of smart phones and tablets, devices that can provide instant information and communication almost anywhere and at any time. Using a small handheld device, one can easily engage in a video chat, stream music, movies, or television, and even take a college course. Though Friedman did not predict all of this, technological developments he identifies have transformed the way we do business, the ways we entertain and enlighten ourselves and each other, and the ways we relate to one another. While time will tell whether these changes are as deeply transformational to the history of our culture as Friedman believes they are, they certainly seem to be quite significant within the time frame of the last hundred years or so. Perhaps most important to the argument advanced in

4. This article quotes from the third edition of the book; the first edition appeared in 2005. In this third edition, Friedman took the opportunity to respond to critics regarding his use of the term “flat world.” He writes: «My use of the word ‘flat’ doesn’t mean equal (as in ‘equal incomes’) and never did. It means equalizing, because the flattening forces are empowering more and more individuals today to reach farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before, and that is equalizing power – and equalizing opportunity, by giving so many more people the tools and ability to connect, compete, and collaborate» [Friedman 2007, x].  

5. For more on the history of the digital revolution, see Isaacson [2014]. For detailed histories of the Internet, see Ryan [2010] and Hafner-Lyon [1996].
this article is that these changes have fundamentally changed the music business and practices of music making, as well as transforming the ways fans engage music. What, we might ask, are the consequences of Friedman’s flat world for music?

**Music in a flat world: The rise of digital music**

As artists and labels sought new directions for revenue, the importance of viral videos, publishing rights, streaming services, and the festival touring circuit continued to grow. In 2011, for the first time since the invention of the phonograph, Americans spent more money on live music than recorded. In 2012, North American sales of digital music surpassed the compact disc. In 2013, revenues from subscription and advertiser-supported streaming passed $1 billion for the first time [Witt 2015, 260-261].

*The flattening of the music business.* While Friedman does not devote sustained attention to the music business, he does mention the rise of Napster as a significant development. There is probably no factor that has more affected the music business in the last twenty years than the practice of file sharing. Ironically, file sharing has made more music available to more people than at any other time in history; but it has also crippled the record companies that used to control access to music. As technology has made access to recording and distribution of music more democratic, it has simultaneously made it much more difficult for most musicians (and their record companies) to make money directly from their recordings.⁶

A chronicle of how file sharing rose to such importance has its sources in many domains. Digitization of music and the rise of the compact disc is part of the story, as record companies in the 1980s worked hard to convince consumers that vinyl was obsolete, often encouraging fans to buy music they already owned in the new format, and frequently at twice the price. The development of MP3 technology came out of a push to standardize audio and video formats across the industry; it was determined that the MP3 format did the best all-around job of compressing CD-quality audio, shrinking the size of a file to about ten percent of its original size.⁷ As it turned out, CD tracks could then be ripped to one’s hard drive, and the greatly compressed files could then be shared on the rapidly developing Internet. In many ways, these various paths all led to Napster, the controversial file-sharing site that allowed peer-to-peer file sharing and which

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6. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Knopper [2009] and Witt [2015].
7. A detailed account of the development of MP3 technology is provided in Sterne [2012].

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quickly became the target of the RIAA in 1999. Though the RIAA was successful in shutting Napster down as a hub for illegal file sharing, the practice of file sharing continued to grow rapidly. Steve Jobs and Apple attempted to harness some of this downloading energy and enthusiasm with its iTunes service and iPod player, but most writers agree that the amount of music fans actually paid for was only a small percentage of what they actually downloaded.

The rise of digital recording also flattened the music world, as home recording became an affordable option for many bands and artists that previously would have had to pay thousands of dollars simply to use a professional studio. Once musicians had their tracks recorded inexpensively, they could post MP3s on websites that came to specialize in creating such opportunities. Following Friedman’s model, musicians no longer had to work through record companies to get their music heard: they could now record their music themselves and distribute it via the Internet. What used to require a recording contract could now be accomplished with a laptop, software, and an Internet connection. For fans, flattening meant that more music than ever was instantly available and almost all of it free. Eager music fans were surfing the ‘net in search of a wide variety of music, much of it from around the world. Ironically, just as the record business began what would become a steep decline, music was flourishing.

**Highbrow, lowbrow: music and prestige**

The urge to deprecate popular musical genres was an important element in the process of sacralization […] If symphonic music was […] divine, then it followed that the other genres must occupy a lesser region [Levine 1988, 136].

8. For more on the rise and fall of Napster, see Menn [2003].
10. The development of home recording can be traced back at least to the first affordable Teac four-track tape decks of the late 1960s. A progression could be followed through Teac and Fostex four-track cassette decks through Roland digital work stations and to Alesis ADAT eight-track decks, finally arriving at the rise of ProTools software, which has become one of the most popular programs used by home recordists.
11. Though replaced by other sites such as Soundcloud.com and Bandcamp.com, ten years ago MySpace was a primary site for independent musicians.
12. It is worth noting that many professionals were quick to complain that these new home recordings were often not very well done, and considering the fact that many musicians had no training and little experience at making such recordings, this should come as no surprise. And while these recordings were cheap to make and easy to distribute, they were not likely to make any money for the musicians involved. With so many musicians posting music online, the task of getting one’s music heard, no matter how readily available, also becomes a significant challenge.
Lawrence Levine on culture. Those who attend classical music concerts, plays, dance performances, or musical theatre are familiar with the required deportment: nobody expects the audience to act as if they are at a rock concert. But Lawrence Levine [1988] reveals how, in the mid-1800s in the United States, most performances were more like rock shows (or even club dates) that modern symphony performances. As he chronicles how the notion of highbrow was developed in American culture, he surveys the arts and culture generally. This leads to tales of Shakespearian troupes touring the country and playing to crowds that got more involved in the performances than we would ever expect today – sometimes even chasing an actor off the stage if the on-stage character offended.  

So how did the change from such rough-and-tumble audiences to the docile and polite ones of today’s high culture occur?

Levine’s key concept in chronicling this transformation is the notion of “sacralization” – the idea that the arts could become almost holy and worthy of focused contemplation, that they would somehow put us in touch with something higher, either in the world or in ourselves. But the elevation of the arts in this way is not necessarily how it always was. As he writes,

One of the central arguments of this book is that because the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable. To accept this thesis is to accept a picture of the American cultural past and present that departs considerably from the images most of us have learned to accept, which is never an easy thing to do [ibid., 8].

And if highbrow art was not always highbrow in the past, it could be that it will not remain so in the future. Levine gives us a history of how highbrow was created, but Friedman provides a framework for how it may be transformed: can a flat world indeed undermine, or at least significantly transform, the highbrow/lowbrow distinction?

13. «In a wonderful instance of how nineteenth-century American audiences tended to see drama as both reality and representation simultaneously, a canal boatman screamed at Iago in a production of Othello in Albany, New York: “You damned lying scoundrel, I would like to get hold of you after the show and wring your infernal neck”» [Levine 1988, 30]. Lott [2003] likewise chronicles the touring (and adventures) of several classical pianists in the mid-nineteenth century.

14. Frith [1995] also engages Levine’s writing on the highbrow/lowbrow split and its history, as well as the writing of Joseph Horowitz (see below).
Classical music in America

He particularly esteemed Beethoven’s symphonies as the embodiment of ethical striving, and considered music as entertainment invalid and corrupt. He inveighed against whatever seemed frivolous, bacchanalian, or exhibitionist. He espoused “classical music” [Horowitz 2005, 27].

Joseph Horowitz and the rise of “classical music”. While Levine chronicles the process of sacralization in often relatively broad terms, Joseph Horowitz [2005] provides a sweeping account of how sacralization happened in music, tracing the story from mid-nineteenth century Boston up to the end of the twentieth century. In the quotation above, Horowitz is discussing the influence of John Sullivan Dwight, a Boston music critic and journalist. Dwight was a key figure in the sacralization of symphonic music, though by no means the only one. According to Horowitz, it is Dwight who coined the term “classical music,” the Bostonian working hard to create an aesthetic and cultural distinction that had not existed in quite the same way before him (in the United States, at least). Horowitz tells a tale of two cities, with Boston generally being the center for symphonic music and New York the center for opera, though with extensive interaction between these two music capitals. The musical life in these two American cultural capitals came to define highbrow music: if it was not classical, the distinction went, it was lowbrow, “entertainment” music. The idea of popular music being defined by what it was not thus became the standard.

Horowitz sees a second stage in the history of classical music in America beginning with the rise of conductor Arturo Toscanini. Toscanini’s rise was fueled by his charismatic image and his role in the quickly developing industry of radio in the 1930s. As radio became increasingly central in American cultural life, Toscanini, armed with the strong support of NBC’s top executive David Sarnoff,

15. Broyles [1992] goes into great detail with regard to the key role of Boston in sacralization. The standard accounts of American music in the nineteenth century are Hamm [1983], Chase [1987], Hitchcock [1988], and Crawford [2001]. In the preface to his study, Crawford provides a survey and reflection on the work of these other authors.

16. “Taken as a whole, American classical music describes a simple trajectory, rising to a height at the close of the nineteenth century and receding after World War I. In the decades of ascendency, the quest for an American canon was its defining virtue, whether of not the reigning German model proffered true hope for an indigenous American style. The decades of decline were at first highly interesting: a new culture of performance was crowned by amazing feats of virtuosity and probity, and textured, as well, by an exciting if subsidiary pursuit of the American symphony. After 1950, the absence of a native canon was a defect no longer disguised or minimized by spectacular borrowed goods. By century’s end, intellectuals had deserted classical music: compared to theatre, cinema, or dance, it was the performing art most divorced from contemporary creativity, most susceptible to midcult decadence” [Horowitz 2005, 516].
became a celebrity in much the same way that Bing Crosby was: radio made Toscanini a star.\textsuperscript{17} What distinguishes Horowitz's account of classical music in America from other histories is that Horowitz places emphasis on the role played by the business of music in its development. As Horowitz considers contracts, managers, venues, broadcasts, and recording deals, we could for a minute forget that he is discussing classical music; his chronicle seems very similar to most histories of popular music. This suggests that the image of classical music as a higher form of expression than entertainment music was constructed in the same way that so many other images in the music business have been. One might conclude that the distinction Dwight had worked so hard to achieve was then later solidified in American culture by the same kinds of mechanisms that made Toscanini, Crosby, Judy Garland, and even Clark Gable stars. To a certain and significant extent, highbrow was a marketing category.\textsuperscript{18}

The flat world of musical styles

Since the “British invasion”, nearly half a century ago, it has been socially acceptable, even fashionable, for intellectuals to pay attention primarily to commercial music, and they often seem oblivious to the existence of other genres. Of no other art medium is this true. Intellectuals in America distinguish between commercial and “literary” fiction, between commercial and “fine” art, between mass-market and “art” cinema. But distinction in music is no longer drawn, except by professionals. Nowadays most educated persons maintain a lifelong fealty to the popular music groups they embraced as adolescents, and generation gaps between parents and children manifest themselves musically in contests between rock styles [Taruskin 2009, 335].

When it comes to classical music and American culture, the fat lady hasn't just sung. Brünnhilde has packed her bags and moved to Boca Raton [Vanhoenacker 2014].

\textsuperscript{17} Horowitz 1987 provides a detailed study of Toscanini’s career. For a parallel account of how radio in the UK developed during roughly the same period, see Frith [1983] and Born [2005, 23-64].

\textsuperscript{18} Dwight MacDonald [2011] offers a different perspective on high culture. For MacDonald, mass culture (“masscult”) is a kind of perversion, surpassed in odiousness only by middlebrow culture (“midcult”). Horowitz [2005, 507] argues that MacDonald would have considered Toscanini’s popular success to be midcult, meaning that it was mass culture disguised as high culture. See also footnote 13. For a diverse survey of approaches to a broad range of topics in mass culture at the mid-twentieth century, see Rosenberg-White [1957]. For a markedly more sympathetic view of middlebrow culture than that of MacDonald, see Rubin [1992].
The shrinking of the classical audience. A quick search on the Internet returns dozens articles, columns, and blogs addressing what is often called the “crisis in classical music”. Depending on the source, the sales of classical music are thought to constitute about 1.5 to 3 percent of overall music sales. When the definition of “classical music” is broadened to include crossover artists and recordings, the sales figures are better. In a flat world in which profits from sales of recordings in all styles are significantly diminished by downloading, the reliance on performing revenue increases. On this front, classical music continues to struggle. According to Robert J. Flanagan, «no orchestra in the world earns enough to cover its operating expenses; no orchestra is self-supporting» [Flanagan 2012, 4]. The changes in classical music’s fortunes in recent years have even caused music-school deans to consider adjusting curricula for music majors, broadening them to include exposure to styles outside of classical and jazz, as well as to skills in career building and entrepreneurship.

The flattening of prestige among styles. While it seems clear that classical music’s appeal may not be what it once was, it also seems unlikely that it will ever

19. «Classical music sales have been struggling for years now. They make up just 1.4 percent of music consumption, compared to 29 percent for rock, according to a Nielsen survey last year. Symphonies from Nashville to Canada’s Prince Edward Island are dealing with mountains of debt. And audiences of classical music haven’t changed much, which makes it tough for artists who aren’t Andrea Bocelli to make it in the industry» [Douban 2015].

20. In countering what he takes to be exaggerated claims of classical music’s demise, Jim Farber writes: «Granted, the albums that sold best weren’t “core classical” records – i.e. the nine millionth rerecording of a Bach concerto or a Mozart sonata – but “crossover classical” works, the kind made [by] artists like “popera star” Andrea Bocelli and YouTube phenomenon/violinist Lindsey Stirling» [2014]. Neither John Sullivan Dwight nor Dwight MacDonald would have approved.

21. Some might wonder if orchestras could ever cover their costs with performance revenue. To address this question, Flanagan computes how things would work out if every orchestra in his study (more than sixty U.S. groups) all sold every seat at face value of the tickets (i.e. without discounts). He concludes as follows: «Applying these very optimistic assumptions about ticket pricing and costs, selling out each concert performance would eliminate about 45 percent of performance deficits on average, with considerable variation among symphonies. Only a few orchestras might eliminate the performance income gap by filling every seat. In short, even if every seat were filled, the vast majority of U.S. symphony orchestras still would face significant performance deficits» [Flanagan 2012, 61]. Lest one believe that this situation is of recent origin, Flanagan mentions a 1970 study of the Cleveland Orchestra that arrives at similar conclusions.

22. Former dean at the Eastman School of Music, New England Conservatory, and University of Texas College of Fine Arts Robert Freeman writes in the preface of his recent book: «The message of this book is that the current crisis in classical music comes in important measure from the obsessively narrow ways we have trained musicians for more than two centuries» [Freeman 2014, xvii]. See Covach [2015].
disappear completely. The “crisis” is often framed not so much as a fear that the music itself will disappear, but rather that opportunities to pursue a career in classical music will become impossible. In a flat world, there is more classical music available (at least in recorded form) than ever in our history. It is the institutions that have supported classical music (and mostly in professional performance) that are threatened. These will certainly experience change, but these kinds of changes are not restricted to classical music: many aspects of the music business are being transformed by technology.

The most consequential flat-world shift for this article has to do with the prestige of classical music: does classical music remain significant enough, by virtue of a continued highbrow status, to permit definition of all other styles in reference to itself? As Taruskin mentions in the quotation above, the shift in prestige regarding classical has been underway for decades (even if, according to Freeman [2014], this shift has often gone unacknowledged by music schools). It is not so much that classical music no longer has the prestige it once did, it is that it now shares that prestige with other styles. Though, as Taruskin points out, the highbrow/lowlbrow distinction may still hold in other arts, it seems less definite and defining in music. The flat world of music created by digital technology serves to further weaken the distinction. Indeed, many classical musicians – and especially the younger ones – are eager to capitalize on the technologies and techniques often associated with popular music. In a flat world of music, prestige is still a factor, but it is not restricted to a single style.

Horowitz has also reflected on the changes of the recent decades. He advocates for the term “post-classical music” to designate recent concert music. He writes: «What does “classical music” mean today? If the term is to retain anything like its old aplomb, it must refer to a moment that is now past and to its attendant prestige and influence» [Horowitz 2005, 537]. Likewise, when one considers the historical context of how the use of the term “popular music” has tended to be defined in American musical culture, it seems clear that the bases of the distinctions it draws are no longer valid or useful. To define all other music by a single style that no longer has exclusive claim to elevated cultural status and is of marginal popularity in the culture is, at best, an intellectual habit formed by the

23. MacDonald comments optimistically on the state of high culture at the time of his writing, listing what he considers to be some positive statistics: «The sale of classical records, now about a fourth of total record sales and actually equal in dollar volume to Rock ‘n Roll. The proliferation throughout the country of symphony orchestras […] local art museums […] and opera-producing groups» [1960, 56]. Horowitz writes: «Americans of the 1930s, 60 percent of whom said they liked to listen to classical music, knew who Toscanini was; for most people today, Leonard Bernstein is not even a memory» [2005, 508].

values and practices of the past. Defining popular music as everything that is not classical music was once a useful distinction: it reflected the American culture of its time and so possessed significant meaning. One could argue, of course, that such a distinction was unfair to the music of its day, lumping various styles together simply by what they were not; but it is at least of historical value to understand why some would have wanted to define music in this way.²⁵

The collapse of highbrow/lowbrow distinctions facilitated by the technological changes of the flat world has made the continued use of “popular music” seem antiquated. “Popular music” is now a historical term. In a flat world, “classical,” “rock,” “jazz,” “bluegrass” and many other stylistic labels are still useful in organizing the enormous range of music available for listening, study, and performance. But “popular music” is far too broad to be useful in anything but a historical sense. It is a term that helps us remember – culturally and aesthetically – the way we were.

²⁵ For a wide-ranging discussion on the continuing usefulness of the term “popular music,” see the 2005 “virtual symposium” in Popular Music, which contains remarks by a wide range of pop-music scholars, including Simon Frith, Philip Tagg, David Brackett, Allan Moore, Deena Weinstein, Barbara Bradby, Peter Wicke, and Richard Middleton. See International Advisory Editors [2005].
References


Abstract
Negli ultimi vent’anni, negli Stati Uniti si è assisto all’emergere di quello che – sulla scia di un celebre libro di Thomas L. Friedman (The World Is Flat. A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century, 2005) – potremmo definire come un “mondo piatto” di stili musicali: un ambiente culturale totalmente rimodellato, in cui molti ascoltatori e studiosi non considerano più la musica classica come uno stile più sofisticato di altri. La distinzione tra “alto” e “basso”, che un tempo induceva a valutare la frequentazione della musica d’arte come un segno distintivo di superiorità culturale e intellettuale, oggi è stata ampiamente sostituita dalla consapevolezza che qualunque stile musicale possa risultare interessante e sofisticato in sé e per sé. Una delle conseguenze di tale “appiattimento” delle gerarchie del prestigio culturale è la messa in discussione del significato della locuzione “popular music”. Questo articolo propone una ricostruzione del processo storico che ha condotto alla separazione tra “alto” e “basso” e alle conseguenti categorizzazioni degli stili musicali nella cultura statunitense; si riflette inoltre sul ruolo dello sviluppo della tecnologia digitale nell’accelerazione del processo di “appiattimento” delle gerarchie stilistiche. Tale processo ha reso progressivamente sempre più inefficace la locuzione “popular music”, che oggi conserva una sua validità solo in prospettiva storica.