

*The Music Reviewer and His Assignment**

MANY PERSONS, particularly young persons, hold the romantic idea about music reviewing that it offers a virtually unlimited field for self-expression. They believe it is any critic's delight and

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privilege to share daily with a vast body of readers his personal tastes and opinions in matters of art. This is not true, of course. No responsible newspaper owner would consider offering the use of his valuable columns for a private pulpit. A newspaper is published for the benefit of its readers, not of its writers.

The sole justifiable purpose of reviewing, in my opinion, is to inform the public; any other is an abuse of confidence. A critic is paid by a periodical to tell the truth about music as he believes that to be; and if he is not expected to advertise himself, neither is he engaged to encourage particular artists toward success, or to discourage them, or to grade them from zero to one hundred, or to help trustees raise money, or to advertise standard repertory, or to form public opinion in any given way, or to uphold standards of execution—how could he?—or to advertise certain schools of composition, or to defend the public against them, or to teach music appreciation in general, or to spread enlightenment. All these things he may do occasionally or incidentally, but his main business is to report the music life of his community truthfully.

This reporting need not be and cannot be entirely factual. It is the reviewer's duty and his privilege to analyze music and its execution, to examine their nature, and to describe them in words. He is a man of letters whose subject is music. Practical knowledge of music gives penetration to his judgment; literary skill may enable him to express it courageously. A certain involvement with music as an art, a personal engagement to it, if he has any such consecration, will prevent him from making irresponsible statements. But he is under no necessity to edify anybody or to improve taste. Musical edification and enlightenment come from music itself, not from descriptions of it; and public taste in music is raised by sound performances of music, not by literary essays on the subject.

A music review, I insist, is a service of information and little else. It is not even a shopping service, like drama or book criticism, because a musical event usually takes place only once and is unavailable by the time the public reads about it. A music review is paid for by a newspaper and addressed to the whole reading public. It is written by an expert and signed with his name or initials. Any reporter is temporarily an expert if the managing

editor says he is. If the reading public is not convinced of his knowledge, that is the paper's misfortune. The reporter himself can always go back to the shipping page.

A metropolitan newspaper should trust on the job only writers of sound musical education. They don't have to be right, but they do have to penetrate surfaces. In the criticism of anything, you do not have to be right in your judgment; you have only to use a legitimate means of arriving at it. If there is such a thing as a talent for criticism, it is a talent for judgment. Your loyalty and your workmanship are shown not merely in the way you write but in the intellectual methods by which you defend your intuitive judgment. But any opinion about art is legitimate if it is based on some knowledge and can be expressed in clear language.

I insist upon the informative character of music reviewing, but please note that I hold no brief for informing the public about things that are none of its business, nor do we presume to offer judgment in matters that do not involve us. We do not review musical events which take place in private houses or in clubs, because they are not offered to the public for its judgment. Among matters that are none of our business, let me list student recitals and church services. Student recitals are none of our business because we are not competent to estimate anything that does not take place under professional circumstances or which is not offered to the professional world of music, of which we are members, for professional consideration. It is difficult enough to estimate the qualities of a professional artist; it is even more difficult to estimate those of a student. We leave that to parents and teachers.

As for church services, any religious establishment would welcome reviewing, on condition that all the comments were favorable. Churches love advertising, but they resent criticism. And they have an impregnable position, because the music of religious worship is not offered to the public for its judgment. It is actually not offered to the public at all; it is offered to God. And God does not necessarily judge by professional standards, since sincerity, in His eyes, may make up for many an incompetence. This does not mean that a great deal of excellent music is not performed under religious auspices; of course it is. But

judging it is not our business. Besides which, from a purely organizational point of view, it would require a whole separate staff, because most religious music is performed all on the same day and at the same hour.

In offering news and commentary about professional musical events that are open to the public and submitted for its favor, our standards of news coverage are slightly different from those of the city desk. On the news pages, news is classically considered to consist of an extraordinary event happening to anybody, or any kind of an event happening to a famous person. That is to say that if I take a train, it is not news; if Mr. Toscanini takes a train, it is news. If I fall under a train, it is news; if Toscanini falls under a train, then you have a streamer across the front page.

But if we judged the importance of musical events by those standards, we would find ourselves constantly reviewing Toscanini and Marian Anderson. We would be the victims of publicity machinery, because the fame of these artists is not merely a matter of spontaneous public favor; it is also a thing that is worked at by press agents.

We have taken a different attitude on the music pages of the *Herald Tribune*—and this attitude is, I think, shared by most responsible newspapers who give serious attention to music—that intellectual distinction itself is news. It is news on the same basis that my falling under a train might be news, because it is rare. That a famous artist plays a famous piece in public is not news, because it takes place constantly.

The music staffs, if they are musicians—which is largely true in New York City—also find this system of judging the value of news events useful for their private purposes. It makes their work easier, because the performance of a new work, the debut of a new and valid artist, the performance of an old work which is not often heard, or a change in the repertory line of a famous artist—all these things give us a more interesting theme than we could find in constantly reviewing famous people and famous pieces.

All these things we describe for all our readers. We do not write for the artist or for the management or for the backers of concerts or for the trustees of the Metropolitan Opera, and certainly not for our advertisers or their friends. Anybody can

understand why you don't write for the advertisers or for trustees. But people do not always remember that your review is not addressed to the artist that you are reviewing. I recall saying to a very experienced singer some years ago, "We don't write for you; we explain you."

She said, "I never thought of that."

I said, "I do not have to mobilize a newspaper in order to make you a personal communication. Besides, correcting you in public would be the kind of rudeness that husbands and wives engage in when they take advantage of a gathering to say things to each other that they haven't dared say in private." Personal criticism is an abuse of the public, and the larger the public the greater the abuse.

In writing about an artist's work, I consider the description more important than the estimate of value. The estimate of value has its use, of course, because it enables the reviewer to confess his prejudices and predilections. No reviewer is a perfectly clear glass between the reader and the subject he is writing about; and if he pretends he is, then he is a very dark one indeed. So that an expression of opinion is a perfectly legitimate thing, and it also makes the reviewer feel good; but it is not a very important matter. Whereas the description of what took place, or of the nature of something, can be a quite broad communication. We try to tell the truth as well as we can, and a part of telling the truth is the admission of our prejudice for or against things. Our aim is to describe a musical event truly, as well as we are able.

In order to tell the strict truth, we must observe, of course, strict courtesy. Because if you observe the amenities, you can say much more unfavorable things than if you express them angrily. Actually, musicians do not differ very much about truth of fact; they only differ about opinion. If a vocalist sings off pitch, every musical ear in the house will know it. And any reviewer who states that she did can defend himself by the evidence of other persons present. The analysis of a musical work is subject to similar correction from other expert persons present; and within several months, or sometimes several years, a fairly definitive agreement is usually reached in the musical world about the structural nature of a piece of music.

At the very beginning, of course, many a highly complex work is taken by the naïve reviewer for pure spontaneity. That happened to the work of Arnold Schoenberg; it happened to Debussy; it happened to Beethoven. The ignorant reviewer likes to think that since he is judging hastily, the work was hastily created. And when his lack of preparation makes him unable to understand, he thinks that the work was written as casually as it is being listened to, which is not necessarily the truth at all.

Let me come back to the matter of courtesy in the statement. It enables you to make the really deadly attack, because the specific adjective is practically never actionable, neither in court or in public opinion. The noun, yes. Gertrude Stein was right when she said that nouns are the bane of the language, because if you use nouns in talking about somebody, before you know what you have done you have called him a name. But the specific adjective is merely descriptive. Verbs are dangerous, too, because the verbs of motion and the verbs of action all have overtones of approval and disapproval, as the nouns have. But the adjective, the specific adjective is virtually neutral.

There are adjectives of approval and disapproval, and we try to avoid using them. If you try to make a hierarchy out of "wonderful," "sublime," "splendid," "magnificent" and "outstanding," you weaken your communication, because you are not using those words in any specific meaning. You have turned them into advertising slogans. I tell the boys who work for me and the young people who come to learn the trade that they may use "splendid" only in its correct meaning, which is "shining," and "magnificent" only in the sense of "grandiose." "Splendid" and "magnificent," unless they mean in English what they mean in Latin, are not specific; and they will always sound foolish.

So far I have been talking about a standard operation, which is the reviewing of an artist performing standard repertory. Music reviewing becomes a part of the intellectual life of its time only when it deals with the composition of its time, that is to say, with new music. Now let us observe a little how you make up your mind about a new work.

You can often make up your mind very well from one hearing,

from first acquaintance. As a matter of fact, that is what most teachers do with their students' works. And the musical historians, I must say, often make up their minds, or at least express an opinion about a musical work from the far past without any other acquaintance than that of the page.

Similarly, from a first performance, professionally presented in public, one can more often than not form an honest opinion and make an honest description. It is not very many times a year, especially in these days, when there is so little music of an advanced nature in existence at all, that one runs into a work of such complexity as requires preparation ahead of time. When those do come up in the programs we know about them in advance; we provide ourselves with scores; we got to rehearsals. There is no question about it—you always write a better article about something you know something about than about something you are not prepared about.

Let us look a little further into that matter of first acquaintance and what really happens. The very first moment of cognition is extremely important, the way the piece begins and how the first few measures or pages of it taste to the auditory tongue. That tasting is not a final judgment, but it is material for judgment. And as soon as you have got the work's taste, the question arises of whether you go on listening. If your mind wanders, you try to pull it back; but it will not always go; the mind is a very strong organ. The beginning of listening, and the going on of listening should last you through the piece, but there will be some drama about it. The tendency of the mind to wander does not come about because the mind is lazy, but rather because the mind has its own way of judging, the instinctive mind, over and above your intention and your will.

Now as soon as the piece is over, there is another thing that happens comparable to that very first taste when it began, which is an auditory after-image that will last five, sometimes ten and sometimes fifteen seconds, when you can still hear the whole thing—not necessarily as a shape, but as a sound and almost as a shape, in any case as an experience that you are still having. And in that moment of the after-image, of the after-experience, before the applause of the audience or your own fidgeting with your hat, there is a moment of what the French call *recueillement*, for which I do not know the English word,

in which one is still absorbed by the work, still tasting it, still feeling it. The intensity of this third experience is important for your final judgment.

Five minutes later, particularly if it is the work of a rival composer, you will find every reason to disapprove of it. If it is the work of a pupil or of a close friend who is not a rival, you will have found reasons for saying you like it. But to find out what you really think you must remember very hard. Your memory of what the piece tasted like when it started to sound, of how vigorously it made you listen to it while it went on, and of what it tasted like after it stopped sounding—these are the data that you have to deal with. You can verify them, test them, prove them, but they are the only reality that you can bear witness to; and you are a fool and a dishonest man if you do not consider them your major evidence.

On the basis of that evidence, you now have to make up your mind. This consists of putting your evidence through the classical procedures of judgment, of testing your reactions for error. You have already asked yourself, “Does it hold my attention?” “Does it remain in my memory?” “Is the taste of it strange and interesting upon the tongue?” You must now try to distinguish between its design and its execution. “Have I heard a good piece or just a very slick performance which deceived me into thinking it a good piece?” Have I heard a bad piece, or was I so sales-resistant about an over-slick performance that I resisted the piece itself as vigorously as I did the salesmanship of the performance?”

You must also try to separate the expressive power of the work from its formal or structural or textural interest. The world is full of people who think that Sebastian Bach is an extremely expressive composer. All musicians will admit that he is a fascinating composer, because the intrinsic interest of his musical textures is very great. But only heaven knows what they mean! Choose among the whole series of the forty-eight preludes and fugues in *The Well-Tempered Clavichord* and describe to me what any of them is about; and I will give you fifty cents. They must be about external things, because they are too varied to be about the composer’s interior emotional life. As painters know, no two arms look alike. But the emotional life tends to

fall into repeating patterns. So wherever you find a composer whose work is varied in melodic invention, texture and form, you can safely bet that the inspiration for each invention of melody and form was of an exterior nature, because that much variety does not exist inside any one human being. And so you must distinguish, in making up your mind about any piece, whether you are dealing with expression or whether you are dealing with an intrinsic musical interest of form and texture.

If you opine that the expressive power of the work is very great, you must further distinguish between a convincing emotional effect and a meretricious one. I cannot tell you exactly what a meretricious one is; but we all know that composers do have ways, just as theater people do, of making us think pleasurable about our mothers or about sex. Such easy effects are at the disposal of any advertiser, of anybody in show business; but a work of art is something different. It needs to have an objective life, a shape of its own. And if expression is its specialty, it needs to have an expressive power of a much more ample nature than that which merely provokes us to applause or tears.

Let us say that by this time you have heard the piece and that you have taken account of your own spontaneous reactions while hearing the piece, and that you have tested these for errors of judgment and errors of reaction, so far as you are able, and that you are back at your office and about to write your review. You can go farther, if you have time. You can identify the style of the work, answer the question, "What is it like?" You can even sometimes identify its expression, answer "What is it about?" For this you must decide whether it is predominantly a strophic work, imitating speech cadences, or a choric work, imitating body movements, or a spastic one, imitating those anxiety-and-relief patterns that make up our interior life. The great monuments of symphonic music, I may add, are mostly of this latter character.

Now you must start writing. As I said before, you use specific words and try to explain them all. A newspaper man once told me, "Never underestimate the public's intelligence, and never overestimate its information." As evidence of good faith toward the reader, you express your personal opinion of the work. But you mostly try to describe the work by the methods of musical description that are available to you. Never bother about trying

to express your enthusiasm or lack of it; that will come through automatically in your choice of words. Just keep your mind on the music and describe it loyally.

When your piece is done, you read it over three times: once for grammar, a second time to see if you have said a little bit of what you meant to say, and a third time—this is the most important of all—to see whether you are willing to mean what you have said. If you are not, you cut out that paragraph of opinion. If you are, you send it down to the printers just as it is.

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