

Music Criticism in Ireland

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Music criticism in some shape or form is probably as old as music itself. As Christopher Dingle and Dominic McHugh state, “[t]he earliest types of criticism were undoubtedly part of oral cultures and traditions, just like the music they would have been discussing”.¹ Once a theory of music was developed and treatises on this topic were written down, they often reveal indirect examples or hints of criticism.² However, music criticism as we understand it in Western societies today is tied to the emergence of newspapers and journals and the spread of literacy in the eighteenth century, yet was only fully crystallised during the twentieth century:

Professional music criticism in the form of reviews of live and/or recorded performances established itself as a legitimate practice in published media during the first half of the 20th century.³

Dingle and McHugh highlight another aspect that became common at this point: “[T]he straightforward use of the critic’s name [rather than no sig-

1 Christopher Dingle and Dominic McHugh, “Stop the Press? The Changing Media of Music Criticism,” in *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism*, ed. Christopher Dingle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 695–706, <https://www.open-access.bcu.ac.uk/10463/>.

2 Dingle’s *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* provides insightful examples of this development.

3 Elena Alessandri, Dawn Rose, Olivier Senn, Katrin Szamotulski, Antonio Baldassarre and Victoria Jane Williamson, “Consumer on Critique: A Survey of Classical Music Listeners’ Engagement with Classical Music Reviews,” *Music & Science* 3 (2020): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059204320931337>.

nature at all, initials or a pseudonym] *increasingly became the norm during the course of the twentieth century.*"⁴

Music criticism in Ireland has followed the general developments in other countries, yet with some specific deviations due to local conditions. In this chapter I will look at examples from three different periods of its history: the emergence of Irish music criticism in the mid-nineteenth century, the later part of the twentieth century as exemplified by the career of Charles Acton, and the impact of the digital revolution in the twenty-first century.

Today, music criticism covers all kinds of music, from popular via traditional to classical. However, in the past this was not the case – in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, critical attention was focused on classical music only. To this day scholarly discussion of music criticism still focuses much more on classical reviewing than its share in today's review publications warrants.

Irish Music Criticism in the Nineteenth Century

A randomly selected issue from the *Irish Times* may serve as an example of Irish music criticism in the nineteenth century. It was published on Saturday, 22 September 1860, and I have mainly selected it because it contains three music-related articles. The *Irish Times* (which had only been founded in 1859) was the newspaper of the Protestant ascendancy class, so it catered particularly for the Anglo-Irish ruling elite in Dublin. The music-related reviews and announcements appear on page 2 of that Saturday's issue in a section entitled "Fashionable Intelligence", which also offers what would today be called celebrity news (such as who was received by the Queen and where some high-ranking aristocrats arrived or what they did yesterday).

Let us first focus on a brief announcement of "an extra morning performance" by the Buckley's Serenaders which had been "commanded" by the Lord Lieutenant, the king's representative in Dublin.⁵ This is not a review, of course, yet still provides a useful entry into Irish reporting on musical issues. We are informed that the Lord Lieutenant intends to be present himself and that a "most attractive programme has been published" – yet no detail of the programme is shared here, so this information appears to be far less relevant than the Lord Lieutenant's attendance. The event will be followed by another appearance of the Serenaders

4 Dingle and McHugh, "Stop the Press?"

5 Anon., "The Buckley's Serenaders," *The Irish Times*, September 22, 1860, 2.

on the same evening, with the paper stipulating that “a large attendance upon both occasions will testify public appreciation of their merits”.⁶ This almost sounds as if the paper is putting pressure on its readers to attend the performances. The announcement does not mention anything about the group or the programme they will perform; all the information we get is about the event as a social occasion – particularly that the morning performance is associated with the Lord Lieutenant and will be attended by him, so attendance will offer an occasion to meet or at least be in the same room as this luminary. Nothing appears more important to the (unnamed) *Irish Times* writer than that. What is not mentioned in this brief announcement is that “Buckley’s Serenaders” were a US-based blackface minstrel troupe consisting of James Buckley and his three sons, who in 1860–1861 undertook their second tour of England and Ireland.⁷ That they offered two performances on the same day in Dublin indicates that they were well received in the Irish capital.

Under the heading “Morning Concert”, the paper offers a more extended review of a recital featuring five singers and a pianist. Its success, it argues, stemmed from the “*excellence of the programme*,” the singers and “*the favourable condition of the weather*.”⁸ The (mainly Italian) performers presented a range of Italian pieces and also a few Irish songs. The focus here lies on the interaction of Italian and Irish cultures and musicality. For example, Madame Grisi’s rendition of the Irish song “Home, Sweet Home” was “*characterised by true feeling and pathos, and, although supported by the richest cultivation, lost nothing of the simplicity and ‘nature’ at her hand*.”⁹ Signor Mario’s version of “Goodbye, Sweetheart” was, on the other hand, “*a little Italian*,” yet “*nevertheless, met with an enthusiastic reception*.”¹⁰

What does the juxtaposition of “cultivation” and “Italian” style versus Irish “true feeling” and “simplicity” mean? Michael Murphy reports an argument made against the Italian style by the journal *The Theatre* in a review of a vocal recital in 1831. The reviewer castigates the “*scientific embellishments*” which destroyed the “*natural pathetic ease and the softness of the*

6 Ibid.

7 Robert B. Winans, “Buckley Family,” in *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2234604>.

8 Anon., “Morning Concert,” *The Irish Times*, September 22, 1860, 2.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

Irish melody.¹¹ What shines through here is a certain Irish national pride in their own musical culture and their songs as popularised in Moore's *Irish Melodies*¹² or *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*.¹³ A much more poignant example is related by another incident during a performance of Donizetti's opera *Lucrezia Borgia* in Dublin in 1849 in which the eponymous heroine was sung by the Irish soprano Catherine Hayes (1818–1861). At some point the audience requested she insert the song "The Harp That Once" – which Hayes did. A review in the *Dublin Evening Packet* described the scene:

The progress of the serious opera stopped for the performance of an Irish ballad. It was, in truth, an incident without precedent, and equally without precedent were the roars of gratification that followed: one ardent gentleman in the middle gallery shouting with a voice that was heard above all the tumult, "Musha! God bless you, Catherine darlin".¹⁴

Returning to the *Irish Times* from 22 September 1860, the review entitled "Theatre Royal – Italian Opera" is the longest and most detailed of the three music-related texts in this issue.¹⁵ It is a review of Gluck's "Orfeo E. Euridice?" [sic]; of its 111 lines, 37 are dedicated to a biography of the composer, followed by a synopsis of 46 lines. The actual review consists of only 24 lines – less than a quarter of the text. In this section we learn that, despite the article's title indicating an Italian work, the opera was presented in French ("which somewhat detracted from the beauty of the music") and that Pauline Viardot Garcia was the prima donna. Two other female singers are named (and praised), yet we don't learn which roles they sang or who else was involved – no male singer is identified. There are a few more music-specific morsels of information, such as "[t]here is little recitative", but mostly the text is quite bland, general and looks as if it is written by someone who doesn't know much about music ("The opera [...] has a continuous strain of

11 Quoted in: Michael Murphy, "The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," in *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, eds. Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny [Irish Musical Studies 9] (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 270.

12 Thomas Moore, *A Selection of Irish Melodies*, 10 vols. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1808–1834).

13 George Petrie, *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, 2 vols. (Dublin: The University Press, 1855).

14 *Dublin Evening Packet*, November 5, 1849, quoted in: Michael Murphy, "The Musical Press," 271.

15 Anon., "Theatre Royal – Italian Opera," *The Irish Times*, September 22, 1860, 2. All the quotations and references in the following lines come from this page.

sweet melody pervading it"). The most surprising information comes at the end, when we are informed that *Orfeo ed Euridice* was followed by the last act of Bellini's *La Sonnambula* and a comic scene by a Signor Ciampi. This lets one speculate that a truncated version of *Orfeo* must have been presented so that there was still time for more music. It also indicates that dramaturgical coherence was not a core concern of programming in Dublin at this time; however, this is not unlike the regularly eclectic programming of concerts all over Europe for much of the nineteenth century, which often combined individual movements of symphonies and concertos with selected arias and instrumental solos.

Between them, these examples give a good impression of the standard of writing about music in Ireland for much of the nineteenth century. As Michael Murphy has pointed out, it

represents most readers' worst impressions of musical criticism in the daily and weekly newspapers of the nineteenth century, which is to say there is no attempt at criticism in any sense of that term, a problem that was repeatedly lamented in the same era.¹⁶

There were no full-time, permanent music critics anywhere, while sometimes "general" journalists without any musical expertise wrote the texts. As articles were generally unsigned there was no way of knowing whether the author had some degree of expertise. Reviews regularly reported less about the quality of the performance and more about who attended, as well as how the audience reacted, as Murphy elaborates:

Applause and encores were always recorded to the benefit of the artists and the audience alike: it praised the former for their artistry and the latter for demonstrating their ability to appreciate it. As a mode of social flattery, reporting on applause was an important part of the currency of the musical economy because the notices reassured the middle and upper classes of their status in society, a condition that both necessitated their presence at such social luxuries as opera and on which the entire enterprise depended.¹⁷

Apart from the journalists' lack of expertise, another reason not to trust reviews too much is that newspapers were often intertwined with opera companies; the reviews were "commissioned" in order to sell more seats for future performances, so an objective and potentially negative assess-

16 Murphy, "The Musical Press," 252.

17 Ibid., 254–5.

ment was not in the paper's interest and would lead to no further invitations to review future performances, as well as no future advertisements by the opera company.

Finally, some of the reviews published in Irish papers were essentially lifted from British papers which had reviewed the same productions before they moved to Ireland (a common occurrence at the time). Ite O'Donovan describes another practice at the time: "*At other times the readers were expected and even directed to peruse the critiques published for the London theatres in order to familiarise themselves with the latest productions.*"¹⁸

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, standards began to gradually improve. Murphy links much of this to the first performances of Wagner operas in Ireland (*Lohengrin* in 1875, *The Flying Dutchman* in 1877) – discussing simply what distinguishes them from other operas required some musical expertise. It was also during this time that music reviews began to be signed by their authors, so generally music criticism began to move towards standards as we still know them today.¹⁹

Charles Acton and Irish Music Criticism in the Later Twentieth Century

The career of Charles Acton probably marks a high point in Irish music criticism. Acton (1914–1999) was the main music critic of the *Irish Times* from 1955 until 1987. During this period he produced some 6,000 reviews in "*a polemical and eminently readable style*,"²⁰ focusing not just on classical but also on traditional and sometimes even popular music. He was, however, never on a permanent contract and always got paid per review. Despite coming to this role after a chequered and not always very successful career in several other areas (such as travel agent, charcoal manufacturer and salesman for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), he became enormously influential in Irish musical life. As Richard Pine put it in his obituary for the *Guardian*:

Charles Acton, music critic of the *Irish Times* who has died aged 84, dominated musical life in Ireland. He was distinguished not only for his trenchant criticism, which contributed to the development of mu-

18 Ite O'Donovan, "Music in Irish Periodical Literature 1770–1970" (PhD diss., University College Dublin, 2013), 105–6.

19 Murphy, "The Musical Press," 265–9.

20 Gareth Cox, "Acton, Charles," in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, vol. 1 (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013), 5–6.

sic-making, but also as a vigorous and passionate commentator on, and participant in, cultural politics in a period which saw an exponential growth in Irish musicianship and musical infrastructure.²¹

Acton is credited with establishing “*standardised and punctual starting times for concerts in the capital*” and was one of the main campaigners for a national concert hall (which was opened in 1981) and generally for adequate funding for music in Ireland.²² He did not just write reviews but also contributed to discussions concerning aesthetics and cultural policy. In recognition of this, he was elected a governor of the Royal Irish Academy of Music in 1957 and was made an honorary fellow in 1990 and its vice president in 1998. He wrote a book on Irish music and musicians²³ and co-edited a history of the Royal Irish Academy,²⁴ while being the subject of an extensive biography himself.²⁵ A selection of 65 of his reviews and speeches was published during his lifetime.²⁶

A talk entitled “A Critic’s Creed” which he gave in 1974 in Dublin offers a good insight into his approach to reviewing, yet also into the issues musical life in Ireland had to grapple with during this period.²⁷ In it he emphasised that “[t]he critic’s first responsibility, by a very long way, is to his readers.”²⁸ Yet he immediately added another duty: “*Perhaps an Irish music critic’s prime responsibility is (in theory) the advancement of the practice and enjoyment of music in Ireland.*”²⁹ While this second point comes close behind the responsibility towards the readers, for Acton the two can and often do reinforce each other – there is no conflict between them.

The standard of classical performance in Ireland at the time was by and large below that in countries like Germany, France or Austria. How

21 Richard Pine, “Obituary: Critic with a Unique Voice That Helped to Shape Irish Musical Culture: Charles Acton,” *The Guardian*, April 29, 1999, 24, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/apr/29/guardianobituaries>.

22 Ibid.

23 Charles Acton, *Irish Music and Musicians* (Dublin: Eason & Son, 1978).

24 Richard Pine and Charles Acton, eds., *To Talent Alone: Royal Irish Academy, 1848–1998* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998).

25 Richard Pine, *Charles: The Life and World of Charles Acton, 1914–1999* (Dublin: The Liliput Press, 2010).

26 Gareth Cox, ed., *Acton’s Music: Reviews of Dublin’s Musical Life, 1955–1985* (Bray: Kilbride Books, 1996).

27 Charles Acton, “A Critic’s Creed. A Talk by Charles Acton,” *The Gate Theatre*, October 20, 1974, quoted in: Cox, *Acton’s music*, 15–29.

28 Acton, “A Critic’s Creed,” 17.

29 Ibid., 18.

should a reviewer react to this state of affairs? Is there one “absolute” way of judging, or do circumstances have to be taken into account? Acton had a clear position on this question:

There is a school of criticism [...] that there is only one standard of judgement – the highest. He would have one judge the RÉSO by the standard of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and castigate them when they are below those standards. I believe that idea to be utterly wrong, impracticable and harmful. [...] however valid such a standard might be in London, Paris, Vienna, New York or San Francisco, it is invalid in Dublin, or in any capital of a musically small country.³⁰

As Acton added, judging Irish performers according to international standards would discourage both performers and audiences, while virtually every review would be “slaughter”.

Yet how should standards for Irish performances be determined, then? Not in an absolute but rather a more relative way, based on local comparisons and the development of performers over time:

I believe that one has to set a standard for each event and consider how the actual example compares with that standard. [...] I believe that (broadly speaking) the standard of judgement should be what the particular performer is capable of, tempered by whether that is proper to the reader’s attention. Thus, a performance in a student concert may rightly be described as outstanding if it is so in the context of Dublin student concerts.³¹

Thus, a *Messiah* presented in Dublin during a Christmas season should be judged in comparison with the many others performed there that December, as well as with previous renditions by the same conductor, soloists, choir and orchestra. However, these “local” standards did not apply to visiting foreign performers; they were to be judged according to international expectations. Over time, foreign performers are meant to raise local standards, and if they can’t provide examples of those international standards, they should not come to Ireland:

There is no earthly point in importing Britons, Germans, Americans or Italians unless they can give us something we should not get without them. [...] It is straightforward common sense that the Irish artist of suf-

30 Ibid. RÉSO stands for Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra. Later this ensemble transformed into today’s National Symphony Orchestra.

31 Ibid., 18–9.

ficient merit should be able to expect support from Irish audiences and Irish critics.³²

The last point is one that Acton expanded on repeatedly in his talk (and is also reflected in many of his reviews): “[T]he critic should encourage the performance of Irish works.”³³ Irish performers as well as composers deserve the special support of Irish audiences – and also of Irish critics. He saw this as the only way to improve Irish standards of performance and composition over time. And he was right – today they certainly are higher than they were in his time. There are more Irish composers of international renown than ever before, such as Gerald Barry, Jennifer Walshe or Donnacha Dennehy, and also more internationally successful performers, including Tara Erraught, Barry Douglas or Finghin Collins. For its size Ireland has a thriving operatic scene, with around three newly commissioned works premiered every season. Of course, Charles Acton was not the only person responsible for this, yet he exercised much more influence than can normally be expected from a critic; he got as close as anyone could in Ireland to influencing public opinion and cultural policy in a way similar to Joachim Kaiser or Heinz-Klaus Metzger in Germany. In many ways his age can be regarded as a pinnacle in Irish music criticism.

Irish Music Criticism in the Digital Age

In recent decades the role of music criticism in Irish newspapers has been in continuous decline. Today the *Irish Times* does not regularly review concerts, reserving individual reports only for the biggest international stars (be it of classical, popular or traditional music). Instead, the paper offers Michael Dervan, Charles Acton’s successor as its main music critic, a column every Wednesday to collectively review a range of events during the past week, with very little space available for each individual recital or concert. Other Irish newspapers dedicate even less space to the coverage of musical events (of any genre). Music theatre premieres and festival events are reviewed more regularly.

Music-specific journals such as the *Irish Journal of Music* naturally include reviews more regularly, as they represent one of the core functions of their existence.³⁴ Founded in 2000, the *Journal of Music* started its existence

32 Ibid., 19.

33 Ibid., 24.

34 “Reviews,” *The Journal of Music*, <https://journalofmusic.com/reviews>.

in print, yet moved quickly online and stopped operating as a print medium many years ago.

Like in most other areas, the digital revolution has been a massive game changer in the field of music criticism. It has affected what might be called formal and informal music criticism, giving opportunity for the latter to arise in the first place. This section will look at the review practice of an Irish online journal before presenting two examples of informal discussions of a recital and a movie on social media which – according to my hypothesis – are more and more likely to inform music listeners (and movie watchers), to the detriment of formal reviews.

GoldenPlec is an Irish online music magazine that was founded by two friends in 2002. It produces some interviews and feature articles and has occasionally engaged in event curation, yet its bread and butter are album and live reviews, covering popular, traditional and classical music performed or released in Ireland or featuring Irish artists. Popular music receives the most attention, while classical and traditional musics are covered less often. At the time of writing, recent live reviews cover artists such as Depeche Mode, Peter Gabriel and Bruce Springsteen, as well as Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and the "New Music Dublin Festival" of contemporary art music.³⁵ Recent album reviews focus exclusively on popular music.³⁶ On their webpages the two editors explain *GoldenPlec*'s basic modus operandi as follows:

Team members do not receive a wage and everyone works voluntarily on items they put themselves forward for. [...] *GoldenPlec* is currently maintained by a team of 5 deputy editors, 52 writers and 25 photographers.³⁷

In "ca. 2018" the journal had ca. 250,000 monthly page views and 100,000 monthly visitors.³⁸ Not only are the writers and other content providers not paid, there is also not really a budget – apart from occasional advertisements on the webpage, the journal generates virtually no income, and *GoldenPlec*'s two founding editors developed the webpages themselves. Most of the 52 writers cover popular music; events or albums are only reviewed if one of the writers expresses an interest in doing so – since no wages are paid the editors cannot commission anyone to write a review.³⁹

35 "Live Reviews," *GoldenPlec*, <https://www.goldenplec.com/live-reviews/>.

36 "Album Reviews," *GoldenPlec*, <https://www.goldenplec.com/album-reviews/>.

37 "About Us," *GoldenPlec*, <https://www.goldenplec.com/about-us/>.

38 Ibid.

39 The information in this paragraph stems from an interview with Michael Lee, *GoldenPlec*'s classical editor, which was conducted in Dublin on 3 March 2023.

Currently there is effectively only one person covering the classical area. Reviewers get free tickets to the event or a free copy of an album, yet no expenses are paid. Hence usually only concerts in places with a resident *GoldenPlec* contributor can be reviewed (although the classical editor admitted to covering his expenses on occasion himself in order to attend a performance in another city). New reviewers are invited on the webpage to come forward, yet at least in the classical area this happens quite rarely.

Generally *Goldenplec* provides interesting, high-quality reviews. They have not fallen into the trap that Doug Freeman saw emerging in 2008:

The ease of online publication and race to post stories first has produced a snap-judgment journalism that increasingly undermines reflection, analysis, and sometimes even simple facts. [...] The other issue of integrity of reviews in relation to industry affiliations, advertising, and sponsored events is somewhat more problematic. For many blogs, where one person or a small team handles all aspects of the site and beyond, the division between editorial and business functions is blurred.⁴⁰

Yet the reason this trap could be avoided is that *GoldenPlec* doesn't have a business function; it is mainly run by and for enthusiasts. No one is making money with it. This includes the reviewers – they are prime examples of one of Tim Page's main concerns regarding music criticism today: "*Worst of all, almost nobody gets paid.*"⁴¹ Generally, people expect internet content to be free (with the exception of online shopping, of course), and most would not frequent an online music journal if they had to pay for it. Large companies such as Google or Meta can make their money through advertising and the marketing of their user data, yet small pages like *GoldenPlec* can at most get a few ads, which won't generate significant income. Does this mean one can only run a local music criticism journal as an enthusiast, provided one finds enough co-enthusiasts who contribute to it for free in their spare time? The jury is out on this, yet the danger is certainly there.

The feedback sections of online shops such as Amazon and even more so social media provide another, if unstructured, competition for formal music criticism. Most of us probably check the feedback left below items

40 Doug Freeman, "Online Integrity: Music Criticism 2.0," *The Austin Chronicle*, April 11, 2008, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/music/2008-04-11/611521/>.

41 Tim Page, "In Memory of the Critic's Trade," *21CM*, De Pauw University, September 12, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200923072319/http://21cm.org/magazine/state-of-the-art-form/2019/09/12/in-memory-of-the-critics-trade/>.

we consider purchasing – knowing full well that some of them may be fictitious, produced on behalf of the seller. As Tim Page has highlighted,

some of the record reviews on Amazon are startlingly erudite, but they are in the minority. Still, for better and worse, there are few gatekeepers, people to guide a curious reader toward writing that will be both authoritative and as open-minded as possible.⁴²

However, I only get to see feedback of this kind once I have opened the page offering a product such as a recording, so I have already expressed a certain degree of interest in it. In blogs, vlogs and social media, I encounter content without knowing beforehand what it will be. Here a much broader range of people can be reached. As Elena Alessandri et al. have pointed out,

[s]ome have suggested that while print media devote less and less space to professional arts coverage, non-professional blogs and message boards are luring the audience away from professional criticism.⁴³

This is because “*in the age of peer opinion sharing and quick communication channels it is not clear what place music critics’ judgements still hold in the classical music market.*”⁴⁴ Christopher Dingle concurs with this and goes even further when pointing out that

the advent of Facebook and, particularly, Twitter has taken criticism out of its privileged domain as a specialist activity and enabled the general public to give individual responses to performances based on personal experience rather than perceived qualification.⁴⁵

Already in 2008 Doug Freeman saw blogs and other webpages as an ever-increasing danger for music criticism and its formal outlets:

Online sites and individual blogs are gaining increasing critical influence and force within the music industry, a reality perhaps most evident in the recent foldings of magazines like *Harp*, *No Depression*, *Resonance*, and *Bluegrass Now*, which have either closed shop or switched to

42 Ibid.

43 Alessandri et al., “Consumer on Critique,” 2.

44 Elena Alessandri, Antonio Baldassarre and Victoria Jane Williamson, “The Critic’s Voice: On the Role and Function of Criticism of Classical Music Recordings,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.925394>.

45 Dingle and McHugh, “Stop the Press?” Of course, at the time of writing the influence of Twitter (now known as “X”) may be waning, yet there are enough other platforms competing with it, ready to take over its market share.

a strictly online format. It's a trend endemic to the entire print industry, not just music publications.

Freeman particularly bemoans the "loss of *in-depth, feature articles*."⁴⁶

Today very few of us are not active on at least one social media platform. My own filter bubble within this space consists largely of people with a significant interest in music, so it is not uncommon that I encounter dialogues such as the following (in which the contributors have been anonymised). It engages with a piano recital that took place in early March 2023 in Cambridge, UK. There were altogether 30 comments on the original post; I have left some of them out here, while some typos remain unchanged.

(A) Yesterday was Chopin's birthday, so I spent half an evening listening to a young international star murdering Chopin. The choice in the interval was either to leave, or to have a glass of wine first.

(B) Yes, it was painful.

(A) second half any better?

(B) (A) no

(C) Who? There's a pretty big choice out there. Szymon Nehring and Rafał Blechacz are pretty OK though.

(D) Where was this?

(D) And what was this player doing with the Chopin?

(A) (D) Well let's say destroying the line, the pulse, and the balance for the sake of theatrical effects which wore off after 5 minutes

(A) It was in Cambridge

(D) (A) I understand that. Thank you. I wish I could play better. but then I'm not young, nor an international star. Perhaps you will play us some Chopin.

(A) (D) I am not a pianist, I just can't keep my critical opinions to myself

(D) (A) you must play an instrument, surely.

(E) "perhaps the most 'complete' pianist of his age"

(A) (E) him!

(F) Perhaps this choice is brilliantly described in Chopin's music.

(G) very few people now play Chopin well: too loud, too fast and virtuosic. The harsh, percussive modern instruments don't help either.

(H) So – leave, or leave buzzed?

46 Freeman, "Online Integrity: Music Criticism 2.0."

(I) Piqued by curiosity, I listened to a little of his op.9 no 2 and couldn't get through it. Murder indeed!

(I) The rubato is particularly baffling.

(J) For public benefit, name the culprit to enable avoidance.

(K) I acquired a cd of Louis Lortie playing the Ballades interspersed with a selection of Nocturnes plus the Barcarolle and Berceuse. I don't think I will ever hear Chopin played better.

(K) I remember him at Leeds – wonderful player.

Example 1: Facebook discussion of a Chopin recital

While there is quite a bit of non-critical banter here, there is also some serious assessment of the unnamed pianist's playing style. Overall this is not a review, of course, yet it still contains more informed judgement than the nineteenth-century reviews we looked at above. Its mix of social banter/reporting and critical assessment is more personal, yet otherwise not that far away from the *Irish Times* in 1860 (except, of course, that we would hardly find a negative review there, as pointed out above). While these comments were written as responses to individual statements (and thus not primarily aiming for a large audience), everyone active on social media is aware of the fact that hundreds or even thousands of people may read their lines. Certainly the person who started this thread did so in order to reach as large an audience among their friends as possible, and many friends of friends may also get to see it. I see exchanges like this one so regularly that it may be warranted to speak of a new, alternative and semi-public social media reviewing scene.

My second example is a thread that developed on my own Facebook feed between 13 and 23 January 2023 about *Tár*, a movie about the downfall of an acclaimed female classical conductor played by Cate Blanchett. The film triggered often heated discussions, particularly among "culture warriors". My initial post is already an indirect response to some of the reactions I had read in the feeds of Facebook friends. In this example I don't anonymise my own contributions.

(Wolfgang Marx) Just coming back from watching "Tár". Given that I have read several quite diverse reviews and comments, here are three aspects I found particularly interesting (spoiler alert!).

While *Tár* seems to "win" the Julliard scene at the beginning the rest of the movie demonstrates in great detail that she herself is the best example of the division of art and artist not really working, at least not while the artist is still alive, or hasn't been dead for a few centuries. She turns out

to be a devious character who manipulates (often vulnerable) people, destroys careers (to the extent of driving people to suicide) and schemes and lies all the time. So in a way the student is vindicated by the entire rest of the movie, and one could argue that Tár has to stress the division of art and artist (or better artistic and private persona) for otherwise she could – at least subconsciously – never look into the mirror. Secondly, at its heart this is not a film about music (although the “Death in Venice” context of Mahler 5 provides interesting associations). We never really get a meaningful picture of Tár’s artistry; those few clips of at most 30 seconds during rehearsals are not enough to warrant that, as much as some have talked about her funny conducting technique. Ultimately we have to believe that she is a great conductor, it is not demonstrated – and probably rightly so. (This reminds me of McClary’s argument that the better composers never included the song that gets Orfeo back Eurydice in their operas – they knew that any attempt to realise the divine music that swayed the gods would inevitably disappoint, so they only had someone reporting about it. Only secondary composers tried setting it, and their efforts did indeed always disappoint). The focus is entirely on the downfall of a complex and deeply flawed character – her being a celebrated artist is “just” the backdrop for that, and the rehearsal scenes part of the outline of her personality/character rather than her artistry.

Finally, much has been made of Marin Alsop’s critique of the film, namely that the first big movie about a female conductor does her gender a disservice by making its main character a female equivalent of someone like James Levine. Yet Alsop is explicitly named in one of the first lines Tár has in the movie (I think the second one) – and not for her artistry as such but as the first of four examples of women having made it in conducting, so – according to Tar – no further special support of female conductors is necessary anymore. It seems therefore not only to be expected but even appropriate if Alsop’s response focuses entirely on that aspect; she was directly challenged – it’s almost a bait.

I would be interested in other people’s views of this fascinating movie. It’s a highly complex character study, and as such very well made. As a sidenote, I was surprised how much German dialogue during the rehearsal scenes was left unsubtitled (Cate Blanchett’s umlaute are excellent, by the way).

(L) Completely disagree with your first point. Even if Tar is off the mark in her treatment of the student--frankly, I don't think she is, much--and wrong, *he* is desperately wrong and fucked up himself. “I don’t have time for ‘cis male composers’ like JSB”? Stay the hell away from music, schmuck! Thus I don’t view this scene as a synecdoche for her devious and ultimately disintegrating character.

I also feel the choice not to show her excellence as a musician is, certainly, intentional, and arguably artistically intelligent. Just as, perhaps save for her bizarre roughing up of the schoolgirl, we don't see her abuse. Despite the brilliant actor's presence in every scene, much of what is crucial remains offscreen, to be uncovered and pondered on our own.

I have to agree that the film is not "about" music; nor, eventually (wie sagt man das?), even musicians. It's a straight up tragedy, sensitively and knowledgeably told in the experience-language of music and musicians; no? (And, bitte sehr, we don't *see* Oedipus kill his father nor romance his mother.)

Yes, indeed; her German is excellent.

Finally, Alsop's comments are tendentious misunderstandings. Offended as a conductor, woman, and lesbian, was it? The first is easily disposed. The plot dynamic concerns a person in a position of power, based in artistic accomplishment. The second perspective is more complex, indeed debatable. I think it does a disservice to the film's subtlety to view it as a male narrative cruelly and unjustly stapled onto a female character. Yet I would not say that gender is irrelevant. The key moment may be when she says early on that Alsop et. al. had prepared the way for her, so now she believes gender is insignificant, NB, to *music*. She could be *wrong* in this, and we must realize her error.

But I believe that the framework is that, thanks to art--thanks to music--she is now in a position to indulge her tragic character flaws, ultimately culminating in her downfall. That is more important to what's happening than her lesbianism, or indeed her gender.

The tiny scene towards the end when we find that her true name is "Linda" and her social origins are ostensibly American working class may be a subtle key. Her brother accuses her of living a lie with her entire life. Otherwise, class is conspicuous by its absence throughout. Might the film be another telling of *Gatsby*? Worth considering.

Wolfgang Marx (L) It's not black and white in the Julliard scene, even if both of them make it appear that way. I don't mean that we should ignore JSB's music, of course, but that the argument that art and artist can be kept separate is no longer valid, at least not with regard to living ones. The first 30 minutes of the movie are so over-the-top anti-woke that it's clearly a caricature, particularly given that this doesn't come up again explicitly later on. I can't imagine that any conservatoire student would adopt that aggressive a stance in this kind of

situation in real life. It's meant to act as a bait, just like Tár's comments in the opening interview.

I agree that much of her manipulative behaviour is not shown directly, but a few times it clearly shines through. There are her devastating references for Krista, her hints to Francesca that she will give her the job (while her remarks to others at the same time make it clear that that was never her intention), or the way in which she puts Elgar on the programme and secures the solo part for her favourite. Btw, that she has highly qualified musicians as her personal assistants to maintain her diary and carry her bags beggars belief.

"The key moment may be when she says early on that Alsop et. al. had prepared the way for her, so now she believes gender is insignificant, NB, to *music*." That is also an example of her callousness – I made it, so no further support for women is necessary anymore? And while there are many deeper layers and subtleties here it can't have escaped the makers of this movie that they are creating a kind of female Levine, and that this would have predictable consequences in today's world (particularly given that I believe this is an original story, not based on a book or so).

The point about class (and about Tár making both her first and surname sounding more unique/interesting, trying to escape her upbringing) is well made.

(L) "I made it, so no further support for women is necessary anymore." Yes; I think that's the nuance exactly. But I believe "it can't have escaped the makers of this movie that they are creating a kind of female Levine" is a point entirely parallel to Alsop's not at all articulated objections to the character's lesbianism. The decision to take a character, especially one as carefully ambiguously drawn as this one, as an outright, en clair synecdoche or allegorical representation is on the interpreter, not the artist. No? Bluntly, Alsop is projecting. Of course the filmmakers would have foreseen such a thing. But they elected, fairly to my mind, to ignore the prior restraint that would impose on their storytelling. And I thought the most bluntly "anti-woke" scene was her "trial" before the whatchamacallit board, which stopped short of presenting the procedure as a kangaroo court; but only just.

(M) Beyond content analysis, I do think there's more to say about the way the film is directed and paced.

(L) (M) Absolutely. These prominent but ultimately rather external considerations distract from the genuine art of the piece.

(N) Great to read your comments, Wolfgang. In brief: I found *Tár* fascinating. True, the protagonist is an appalling individual, but – regardless of the script’s allusions to real-life composers and conductors, #MeToo, and canon discourses – the film is a work of fiction. As such, I’m a little surprised by some of the hostility towards it (not just from Marin Alsop, but also fellow feminist musicologists).

Example 2: Facebook discussion of the movie Tár

Of course, this is about a movie rather than about a musical performance or recording, yet this movie is about music – and the genres of music and film critique are similar enough to support my point here. While both examples are unstructured and don’t try to discuss their topic in as exhaustive a way as a formal review would, both provide critical insights that people who have not been to the recital or seen the movie may find interesting. The second example discusses the issues it raises in much more detail than the first one, yet both combine information and entertainment for their readers in ways that many “traditional” reviews might not. In the case of *Tár*, I encountered so many social media “reviews” of this kind that I almost didn’t need to read any formal film review in order to get all the relevant information. (I still did it as there are some film critics whose views I value, yet it wouldn’t have been necessary to make me want to watch the movie.)

Conclusion

The three stages of Irish music criticism discussed here cover some 160 years. In their early days, reviews in Irish newspapers could be of very low quality, often written by journalists without any music-specific knowledge who treated concerts as social occasions. Until late in the nineteenth century, reviews remained unsigned, while statements about the pieces performed and the quality of their renditions were regularly bland and uninformed. Some papers used reviews to pursue a nationalist agenda, praising Irish music as a proxy of Irish culture and nationhood.

Charles Acton’s term as main concert reviewer of the *Irish Times* marks a high point of music criticism in Ireland. Reviews were published more regularly, their quality had improved significantly and Acton’s influence beyond the pages of his newspaper attests to the regard he was held in by the Irish musical scene. His approach to reviewing Irish performances that did not (yet) match those by top international ensembles is an instructive example of the issues arising in a country that was more at the periph-

ery of the international music scene. Of course, this only applied in an art music context; in traditional and (at least since the rise of U2) also popular music, Ireland has been much more central for a long time.

The changes in music criticism triggered by the digital revolution are not specific to Ireland; they occur everywhere in equal measure. While a journal such as *GoldenPlec* will only find a significant readership in Ireland, informal music criticism on social media reaches across geographical boundaries and can easily involve people from several continents. Just as more and more people nowadays get their news virtually exclusively from social media feeds (which means being restricted to what their friends are sharing), they could also choose social media as the main source of their music (and other) reviews, with the added benefit of being able to interact directly with those engaging in the reviewing activity.

While the developments in Ireland are not fundamentally different from those in other European countries, the small size of the country and its comparatively even smaller musical scene have posed specific challenges. For example, there has never been a full-time, permanent music critic in Ireland – and apart from Acton it is unlikely that anyone could ever make a living by reviewing concerts and recordings alone. By relying more and more on the unpaid work of enthusiasts and the equally unpaid contributions to social media discussions, music criticism in the digital realm has only exacerbated this trend in the twenty-first century.

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