

Music Criticism – Yesterday and Today

Jernej Weiss

University of Ljubljana / University of Maribor

The present monograph *Music Criticism – Yesterday and Today* looks at the role and importance of music criticism in the past and present. “*If my lengthy critical activity has had any real use, it exists exclusively in a gradual educative influence on the public.*”¹ So wrote Eduard Hanslick, one of the most influential music critics in history, who possessed almost papal authority and whose severe and uncompromising judgements in the prestigious Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* frequently decided an artist’s fate. The quotation comes from Hanslick’s voluminous autobiography,² published as he was approaching his seventieth birthday and thus able, it would seem, to evaluate his past work as a critic with greater objectivity. Less widely known is that from 1891 onwards Hanslick was also an honorary member of the Ljubljana Philharmonic Society, one of the oldest philharmonic societies in Europe. The fact that as well as numerous eminent composers and performers the latter’s members included some of the most important music critics of the day clearly shows that music criticism still played a central role in musical life, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth.

1 “*Hat meine langjährige kritische Thätigkeit wirklich einigen Nutzen gestiftet, so besteht er einzig in ihrem allmählich bildenden Einfluss auf das Publikum.*” [If my lengthy critical activity has had any real use, it exists exclusively in a gradual educative influence on the public.] Eduard Hanslick, *Aus meinem Leben*, Band 2 (Berlin: Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Litteratur, 1894), 292.

2 Ibid., 296.

Given Hanslick's reputation, the most surprising aspect of the statement quoted above is the author's emphasis on the "educative" importance of criticism, rather than on its aesthetic role – as we might have expected from a man who in his day was the champion of formalist aesthetics. On the other hand, this conception of the critic as public educator points to one of the fundamental roles of criticism in the nineteenth century: a model derived from the Enlightenment in which criticism is seen as one of the most important shapers of public opinion. While it is probable that the essential educational mission of criticism remains the same, it is a fact that the decline of print media and the increasing predominance of elements of popular culture have seen the role of criticism change significantly. From one of the central genres of the so-called newspaper civilisation of the nineteenth century, to the almost total marginalisation of art music criticism that we are faced with today.

The absence of the latter appears to be the result of certain tectonic shifts in society and the utterly transformed role of the arts and media in the present age. This is to a large extent driven by the digital transformation, with a radically altered media landscape characterised by changes in the speed and quantity of information – and the ways we access it – that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. It is, of course, true that the number of concerts and other events that can be enjoyed from the comfort of one's own armchair with just a few clicks of a mouse, along with recordings posted on *YouTube*, specialised TV programmes dedicated to classical music, freely accessible digital databases of serious music, and so on, allow greater access to concerts and opera performances than ever before. On the other hand, it is precisely because of the oversaturation that characterises the modern digital environment more than at any time in the past that there is a lack, on the part of users or recipients, of that indispensable critical reflection on content and message that makes it possible to separate the wheat from the chaff. At a time when the absence of authorities is ever more marked, anonymous comments dominate the discourse and the dependence of media on commercial considerations – in other words the number of clicks – is increasingly apparent, even artistic criticism is facing more difficult challenges than at any time in its history. It is an unfortunate fact that, more and more often, quantitative criteria – not only in smaller media but also in some mainstream media – are becoming decisive both for the treatment afforded to an individual artistic event and for the evalu-

ation of a critical contribution. In this regard, the role of the media appears to be crucial.

Some of the quandaries faced by music criticism today are addressed by the 15 articles in this, the seventh edition of the collection *Studia musicologica Labacensia*. Among them it is worth mentioning the keynote article by one of today's most prominent critics, the music writer Alex Ross, who is the music critic of *The New Yorker* and the author of the bestseller *The Rest is Noise*, which has been translated into more than 20 languages, including Slovene. His article draws on his wealth of experience as a music critic in the USA and sheds light on the problem of the near nonexistence of critical discourse, a phenomenon that has been affecting the USA for some time now. The second keynote article is contributed by Professor Susanne Kogler of the Institute of Musicology at the University of Graz and uses historical examples to shed light on the socio-political dimensions of art music criticism in the past and present and illustrate the kind of role that music criticism could develop in the future.

Articles by Viennese colleagues Prof. Hartmut Krones and Bianca Schumann shed light on different aspects of the rich panorama of music criticism in the former Habsburg capital. The former focuses attention on composer Hugo Wolf's activity as a music critic in the "combative" Viennese daily press of the 1880s, where an all-out war between the advocates of absolute music and those who favoured the newer programmatic orientation was waged in the pages of the capital's newspapers. Dr Schumann's article focuses on the reception afforded to the religiosity of Franz Liszt by Viennese music critics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Critical debate at that time did not only revolve around composers and their aesthetic preferences but gave increasing importance to other aspects, above all national identity and religious belief, which in many ways came to define the shape of critical discourse. Similar themes are addressed in the articles by Prof. Helmut Loos and Prof. Stefan Keym, respectively the past and present heads of the Institute of Musicology at the University of Leipzig. The former presents in greater detail the already mentioned dispute among music critics that took place in the pages of newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Prof. Loos demonstrates, the fundamentally opposing views of these critics derived on the one hand from the Judaeo-Christian tradition and, on the other, from the modern atheist movement. The dispute had a particularly significant impact in Leipzig, which was then the capital of German music publishing and of music journalism both in Ger-

many and more widely across Europe. Prof. Keym's article, on the other hand, considers the artistic and political aspects of music criticism in relation to the treatment of "foreign" orchestral works in the Leipzig musical press in the nineteenth century. It is a fact that music criticism became increasingly politically coloured towards the end of the nineteenth century. At a time when nationalism was reaching its peak, the origin of the composers and performers featured in a concert programme was of increasingly decisive importance. In the same way, music critics frequently regarded the principles of musical works and the performance practices of individual artists through the prism of national stereotypes and clichés.

The article by our Czech colleague Viktor Velek, the head of the Department of the Theory and History of Fine Arts at the University of Ostrava's Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, focuses on the activity of the Czech musician Břetislav Lvovský (real name Emil Pick) as a music critic and presents the findings of new research. In the second half of the nineteenth century Lvovský worked in Lviv and then in Vienna, where he acted as foreign correspondent, sending his reviews to the Prague-based magazine *Dalibor*, at that time one of the most important Czech music publications. His reports and reviews frequently covered the concerts of Slavic musical societies and musicians working in Vienna. Lvovský is also remembered as one of the harshest critics of the music of Antonín Dvořák. The article by Niall O'Loughlin, one of the leading experts on contemporary Slovene music, shines a light on the work of another extremely important figure from the world of music criticism: the influential British music critic William Glock. In addition to his activity as a radio and newspaper critic, Glock served as controller of music at the BBC, thoroughly overhauling the output of the Third Programme, and as controller of the Proms festival. Glock's reviews and reports helped lift numerous British-based musicians out of anonymity and he also commissioned and published works by them. Among the composers promoted by Glock, three important figures worth mentioning are Robert Gerhard, Elliott Carter and Pierre Boulez. Glock was one of the principal critics of the influential Critics' Circle, whose music section brought together many of the most prestigious critical names, among them the British music critic Charles Acton, who was based in Ireland. The work of the latter is part of the subject of the article by Wolfgang Marx, currently president-elect of the Council of the Society for Musicology in Ireland and an associate professor at the School of Music, University College Dublin. Dr Marx's article explores the specific characteristics of music criticism

in Ireland at three distinct points in its history. It focuses on the emergence of Irish music criticism in the mid-nineteenth century; on music criticism in the latter part of the twentieth century, a period marked above all by the critical activity of the aforementioned Charles Acton; and on the impact of the digital revolution on music criticism in the twenty-first century. Dr Lucija Konfic of the Department for the History of Croatian Music at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts presents an extremely rich picture of music criticism in the local press of the Croatian city of Karlovac in the nineteenth century, a subject that has not previously been researched. The final contribution from the highly diverse range of foreign authors that characterises *Studia musicologica Labacensia* is an article jointly written by Luba Kyanovska, a professor at the University of Lviv, and Lidiya Melnyk, an academic associate at the University of Vienna's Institute of Musicology. The article is an attempt at a theoretical discussion of music criticism and music journalism from the point of view of general theories of media, theories of journalism and journalistic activity. In it, the authors illustrate various strategies in music journalism and, on the basis of the predominant characteristics of an individual style, formulate an original typology of music critical writing (with categories named after Hanslick, Rellstab and Beckmesser).

A profoundly analytical approach to research also characterises the papers by the four Slovene authors whose articles have been chosen for publication in the present collection. The first of these comes from Darja Kotler, a professor at the Academy of Music in Ljubljana and one of the leading connoisseurs of Slovenia's musical past. Her article touches on the critical endeavours of one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century Slovene music, Lucijan Marija Škerjanc, whose critical writings spanned his entire life from his secondary school years right up until his death and appeared in practically every Slovene magazine and newspaper of significance from the point of view of music journalism. With more than 700 published pieces to his name, Škerjanc was one of the most prolific Slovene music journalists of the twentieth century. The article focuses in particular on Škerjanc's pre-war music criticism in the daily newspaper *Jutro*. Next comes an article by the editor of the present publication dedicated to one of the rare public attempts at imposing discipline on Slovene music criticism in the new cultural and political reality that followed the Second World War. Elements of the ruling cultural circle used the "incident in the Union Hall" that occurred at the premiere performance of Matija Tomc's cantata

Stara pravda ("The old rights") on 12 March 1956 as an opportunity to try and discipline the field of music criticism by presenting "more appropriate" socio-political guidelines for critical writing. The music critics who covered the event in question were deemed incapable of showing sufficient insight into the social uselessness of merely "aesthetic" writing and, consequently, unable to offer an adequate political condemnation of "deviant" social phenomena. The article by the independent researcher, established music critic and conductor Borut Smrekar reflects on the role and position of music criticism today. Regarding the purpose of criticism, the author believes that there is a need to define what music criticism should be and what it should not be if it is to serve its purpose; and, last but not least, to establish where the boundaries of music criticism lie. These boundaries are not only about the actual impact that criticism has in a given social setting, but also about the value of criticism in terms of its relevance, credibility and "objectivity". The contributions dedicated to music criticism in Slovenia are rounded off by an article by Tjaša Ribizel Popič, an assistant in the Department of Music Education at the University of Maribor. Having already analysed, in her doctoral dissertation, the critical contributions of some of the most important Slovene critics after the Second World War in connection with the functioning of the majority of the principal musical institutions in Ljubljana, Dr Ribizel Popič now turns her attention to reviews of concerts by the most prominent youth music institution in Slovenia, *Glasbena mladina Slovenije* (Jeunesses Musicales Slovenia), specifically the Symphonic Matinees that took place from the early 1970s until the 1990s, and thus becomes the first author to offer a presentation of the trends that may be observed in music reviews published in the magazine *Glasbena mladina*. Despite the enormously important role of music criticism in Slovenia's musical past, it nevertheless seems that, with the exception of individual treatments of music critical writing, music criticism has not yet enjoyed significant attention from Slovene musicologists, perhaps in part because of its hybrid or interdisciplinary nature. Accordingly, more systematic and comprehensive studies of the field of Slovene music criticism will be needed in the future.

With a rich selection of articles by foreign authors, complemented by a number of contributions from Slovenia, the present monograph attempts above all to shed light on the critical activities of some of the most important figures in the field of music criticism. Not only did the latter dictate performance standards, it influenced the reception of music in a broader sense and, to a greater or lesser extent, played an active part in shaping mu-

sical culture. The articles by Slovene and foreign contributors alike clearly demonstrate the extremely important role played by music criticism in the past in practically all areas of musical life. The present discussion also looks at the current state of music criticism and its survival or opportunities for development in the future. It is an undeniable fact, given the increasing prevalence of the “tabloid” approach, that the space previously dedicated to music criticism in the media has shrunk. The predominance of brief information and pictorial material from the broader field of pop culture has, in most media, completely replaced more detailed consideration of more complex creative and performing phenomena in the field of serious music. A more in-depth analytical approach is still maintained to a limited extent by some mainstream media outlets and to a greater extent by certain specialised media, in particular those few national radio stations with arts programming that continue to operate. Yet the audience for these media is limited, while music criticism in the mainstream media is for the most part restricted to coverage of only the most prominent cultural events.

In the face of the growing absence of music criticism, a question of great or indeed crucial importance inevitably raises itself for the field of music historiography: how will those who come after us be able to create a complete picture of the musical life of our present age or, to put it another way, what consequences will the absence of critical thought have on the development of art music in the future? One of the chief purposes of the present study is, then, to voice an appeal to preserve music criticism, along with criticism of other fields of art. The survival of artistic criticism is essential, not only for the insight it provides into individual artistic events, but above all for the critical reflection it offers on the life of society at large – something that is increasingly necessary in the present age.