

## Classical Music Criticism: An American Perspective

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The American perspective on the future of music criticism is, to put it bluntly, bleak. In 1992, when I moved to New York and began to write about classical music, every major city newspaper had at least one writer covering the field full time. I would see four or five fellow critics at performances, dozens of them big premières. When William Bolcom's opera *McTeague* had its premiere at the Lyric Opera of Chicago that year, one hundred and fifty critics were in attendance, having gathered for a professional conference.<sup>1</sup> In the intervening years, the ranks of the profession have steadily dwindled, to the point that only five American newspapers have full-time classical critics on staff – this in a country with a population of three hundred thirty million.<sup>2</sup> When we look at the population of classical critics working full time at national news magazines, we see an even grimmer picture: myself, alone. If the current trends continue, in twenty years' time, or perhaps much sooner, the profession will be effectively defunct in this country.

And classical music is hardly alone in witnessing a dying off of critics. Colleagues in other disciplines – dance, visual arts, books, even movies and pop music – report similar struggles. Over the past decade, dozens of arts critics have lost their jobs or been demoted to free-lance status. There is no

1 Edward Rothstein, "McTeague; A Musical Slice of Grim American Life," *New York Times*, November 2, 1992.

2 Namely: Jeremy Eichler at the *Boston Globe*, Zachary Woolfe and Joshua Barone at the *New York Times*, Michael Andor Brodeur at the *Washington Post*, Mark Swed at the *Los Angeles Times*, and Joshua Kosman at the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

reason to believe that matters will soon improve. The problem goes deep, and it has nothing to do with how this or that zone of the arts is faring. It has to do with the very survival of journalism as a business. Some time ago, people stopped thinking of news as something for which they should have to pay. “*Information wants to be free*,” the slogan went. The drastic decline in revenue that has resulted from the falling off of subscriptions and newsstand purchases has caused cutbacks across the board. The wound was to a great extent self-inflicted. When the Internet came along, many newspapers and magazines placed their “content” online free of charge, assuming that mobs of new readers would swoon over their offerings and subscribe. A battle was already lost when that word “content” entered circulation. In other words, the media voluntarily brought on itself the crisis that had involuntarily befallen the music business, when recordings were pirated through file-sharing. Print media pirated itself.

The shift to digital publication has also introduced a tremendously damaging factor known throughout the business as “clicks.” One could now measure, with alarming exactness, exactly how many people have read or look at a given story. The result, at many publications, is an overvaluation of those stories that get the most short-term attention. And once you accept the equation of popularity and value, the game is over for the performing arts. There is no longer any justification for giving space to classical music, jazz, dance, architecture, gallery shows, and any other artistic activity that fails to ignite mass enthusiasm. In a cultural-Darwinist world where only the buzziest survive, the arts section would consist solely of superhero-movie reviews, TV-show recaps, and instant-reaction think-pieces about pop superstars. Never mind that such entities hardly need coverage in established papers, having achieved market domination through social media. It’s the intellectual equivalent of a tax cut for the super-rich.

In recent years, in my country, a certain consciousness has dawned of the dangers of clickbait journalism. The election of an incompetent, corrupt, and dangerous president in 2016 owed much to the catastrophic feedback loop of fake news and clickbait. Afterward, subscriptions to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other so-called “legacy” publications surged. Do these chastened content-consumers really want breezy chitchat on trending topics? Or do they trust that storied institutions will decide for themselves what merits attention? One lesson to be learned from the rise of Donald Trump is that the media should not bind itself blindly to what-

ever moves the needle. It remains to be seen whether this lesson has fully sunk in.

There seems to have been a fundamental shift in how we value culture. In a way, the marketplace is an ongoing election in which we vote, by means of our money, for what we like. By paying for it, we assign it value. In a socialist utopia, money would have nothing to do with aesthetic values, but the world is what it is. If, in this capitalist culture, we think that we should pay nothing, either for music or for writing, we are lowering our expectations; consciously or not, we are devaluing the work. If a piece of criticism is just one of a thousand links available for free at the touch of a button, how thoughtful can it be? If the complete works of Beethoven can be had in a box set for less than a hundred dollars, or heard for free on Spotify, how much are they really worth? And, of course, nothing is ever actually free. Someone is getting rich somewhere. Corporations that have figured how to “monetize” – another horrible word – the new reality, extracting profits from vast streaming catalogues. Superstar artists receive enough plays from streaming that they can augment their already enormous fortunes. The smaller entities – record labels, journals, presses, bookstores – struggle to stay afloat.

At the same time, popular culture has almost wholly subsumed the nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetics that once elevated the position of classical music. Theodor W. Adorno, in a response to Walter Benjamin’s theory of the dissipating aura of bourgeois art, made the penetrating point that the newer cultural forms, such as the cinema, had their own version of aura, their own rituals of sacralization and pilgrimage. He wrote: “*Wenn es einen auratischen Charakter gibt, dieser den Filmen im höchsten und freilich gerade bedenklichsten Maße eignet.*”<sup>3</sup> Consider the rites of mourning that have surrounded the deaths of David Bowie and Prince: as in the nineteenth century, the individual artist is seen as a vessel of the otherworldly, as a telephone to the beyond, in Nietzsche’s phrase. In the end, there was no loss of aura in the shift from a grand bourgeois culture to a mass culture, or indeed from a culture of live performance to a culture of reproduction. One can draw a straight line from the bourgeois cult of the solitary genius to the mass cult of the stadium, television, or YouTube celebrity. In both cases, a musical object radiates ritual power within a radically unequal capitalist society. Indeed, rising inequality within the domain of a pop-culture

3 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, part 3, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 1004.

hegemony makes one wonder whether the two domains are in some way interdependent, despite the rhetoric of dissent arising from some sectors.

The classical concert has become an increasingly singular phenomenon in modern life, one that leads us away from the culture of distraction and into a very different mode of paying attention. Thoughtful criticism can perform a similar function. As long as we have concerts and art exhibitions and films and books, we should have need for writing of substance as we prepare for these works or as we think back upon them. And to the extent that cultural choices are now being organized and controlled by algorithms, by a sophisticated averaging out of mass taste, the critic can serve as an anti-algorithm, as a wrench in the machine. We can point people in a different direction, we can speak up for idiosyncrasy, eccentricity, difficulty, overlooked pleasures. Journalistic criticism may have no practical future, but the function of criticism can be carried out by those working in a free-lance capacity, especially those who have positions in academia and can write journalistically on the side. Encouraging in this respect is a new communicative urge among younger musicologists, who have embraced the practice of “public musicology.”<sup>4</sup> They follow in the wake of the late musicologist Richard Taruskin, who wrote prolifically and brilliantly for *The New Republic* and *The New York Times* in the last years of the twentieth century and in the first years of the twenty-first.<sup>5</sup> Even if the critic in the traditional sense dies off, criticism will undoubtedly continue.

Permit me to insert a few autobiographical notes on how I conduct myself in this endangered but not quite extinct profession. I have been writing for *The New Yorker* since 1996. My principal responsibility is to write the magazine’s Musical Events column, which appears fourteen times a year. In planning the columns, I seek maximum variety: major orchestral and operatic events, smaller chamber-music or recital concerts, new-music concerts, early music, choral music, and so on. My role, as I see it, is not to respond overnight to musical events, in the style of a daily newspaper critic, but to step back and survey the entire field, intervening as a kind of color commentator. I attempt to assemble a portrait of the musical world piece by piece, in mosaic fashion. I alternate between major events at big institutions – the magazine wishes me to report regularly on the latest ups and downs of the Met and the New York Philharmonic – and the activities of

4 See: William Robin, “Public Musicology,” annotated syllabus, <https://willrobin251824868.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/musc-699p-syllabus.pdf>.

5 See, among many other publications, Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

smaller groups, unknown young composers, enterprising projects in unlikely locations. For example, in June, 2017, I wrote about Renée Fleming and Alan Gilbert's farewell appearances at the Met and the Philharmonic; in the same month, I went to Rangely, Colorado, to see a defunct water tank that has been converted into a hyper-resonant performance space.<sup>6</sup> That zig-zag motion between the famous and the obscure exemplifies my mission.

In addition to the columns, I have also undertaken a series of longer essays, generally running around five thousand words, as well as profiles of leading musicians and composers. The essays have often centered on major composers of the repertory, from Hildegard von Bingen to Morton Feldman, with most of the familiar names appearing in between. My intention in these articles is both to provide a kind of general introduction for lay readers as well as to summarize recent developments in scholarship and interpretation for the benefit of those who follow the field more closely. The essays sometimes involve a fair degree of research, and I find myself in the fortunate position of being able to pursue these projects over the course of many months. In 2013, I published an article about the Afro-Swedish contralto Luranah Aldridge, daughter of the great African American tragedian Ira Aldridge; her name had almost vanished from history, and I was able to reassemble traces of her career, including her surprising relationship with the Wagner family and the Bayreuth Festival.<sup>7</sup> The patient interest that my editors show in these undertakings – I must name with gratitude Daniel Zalewski and David Remnick – is something exceedingly rare in American journalism.

At the outset of my career, I could look back on a rich history of American music criticism, extending up to the present day in the extraordinarily learned reviews of the English-born Andrew Porter, who wrote the *New Yorker's* Musical Events column from 1972 to 1992. Colleagues in both England and America regarded him with awe: he heard everything, remembered all, brought to bear profound cultural knowledge, and cast his immense learning in an elegant, fluid style. His *New Yorker* columns were a mesmerizing fusion of criticism, scholarship, and cultural commentary. He would give the literary background of an opera libretto, delve into multiple editions of the score, and recount its performance history before proceed-

6 Alex Ross, "Departures and Arrivals," *The New Yorker*, July 3, 2017; Alex Ross, "Tank Music," *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2017.

7 Alex Ross, "Othello's Daughter," *The New Yorker*, July 22, 2013.

ing to the rendition at hand. A characteristic digression, from a column on Donizetti's "Dom Sébastien":

Among the Scribe papers in Paris I discovered an affidavit to the effect that the composer had rewritten the baritone's principal air, 'Ô Lisbonne,' between the dress rehearsal and the first night ... The next day, I found the original air – a beautiful piece – in the baritone's partbook.<sup>8</sup>

Although some readers found these asides a little donnish, the dispensation of particulars achieved a sensuous flow: you could go swimming in Porter's omniscience. And, when he got into the nitty-gritty of performance, he wrote with a newspaperman's bluntness: "*René Kollo is probably the best Siegfried around. The notes are all there, audible, agreeable in tone, if not exactly heroic. He looked good, if rather too tidily coiffed.*" In contemporary music, Porter favored such modernist masters as Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, and Harrison Birtwistle, but he also wrote sympathetically of John Adams's *Nixon in China*, Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, and the songs of Ned Rorem.

The other potent influence on American music journalism in the late twentieth century was the composer-critic Virgil Thomson, who wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1940 to 1962 and remained a mentor to younger writers until his death, in 1989. The co-creator, along with Gertrude Stein, of two of the greatest American operas – *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* – Thomson took music very seriously, but he did not always speak about it in a serious tone, and he liked nothing better than to puncture the solemn cult that long ago arose around the principal figures in classical music. Thomson tore into the conventional wisdom of a middle-class public with unconcealed glee, killing one sacred cow after another. His début review for the *Herald Tribune* dismissed Sibelius's Second Symphony as "*vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description.*"<sup>9</sup> Toscanini was said to offer "*a solid, expensive, luxury-product feel*"; Vladimir Horowitz was "*a master of musical distortion.*"<sup>10</sup> Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony "*seems to have been written for the slow-witted, the not very musical and the distracted.*"<sup>11</sup> A review of Jascha Heifetz ended thus: "*Four-starred super-luxury hotels are a legitimate commerce. The fact*

8 Andrew Porter, "The Tide of Pomp," *The New Yorker*, April 16, 1984.

9 Andrew Porter, "Wagner Goes West," *The New Yorker*, July 8, 1985.

10 Virgil Thomson, *Music Chronicles, 1940–1954* (New York: Library of America, 2014), 10.

11 Ibid., 61, 192.

12 Ibid., 108.

*remains, however, that there is about their machine-tooled finish and empty elegance something more than just a trifle vulgar.*"<sup>13</sup> That the reader may happen to disagree with most or all of these assessments – that is certainly my own reaction – illustrates the important point that the critic's task is not to fashion an opinion that represents the popular majority. What arrests the attention is the forcefulness with which these judgments are delivered and the knowledge in which they are grounded.

The donnish Porter and the waspish Thomson were very different critics, but they had in common an enormous inborn authority. They did not speak down to their readers but addressed them as intellectual equals, capable of grasping sophisticated references and digesting complex arguments. Given the parlous state of modern journalism, such assumptions are now considerably riskier, but they are still worth holding up as models. Some readers will be well versed in classical music; others will know very little. The challenge is to navigate between these groups and to find a language that engages both at once. There is also an educational component to the profession. It is clear that classical music has an actual audience and a potential audience. A critic can draw new listeners in, give them a vocabulary for their unspoken but often very solid perceptions. Critics writing in general-interest publications are among the few people in the public eye who even mention classical music. Because the art form is for the most part shut out of the mainstream media, we have attained a peculiar and perhaps undeserved prominence that critics in other genres do not possess.

Porter and Thomson also had in common an unswerving belief in the centrality of contemporary music. They set themselves against an American classical-music establishment that viewed the commissioning and performance of new music as an annoying duty to be dispatched as quickly and bloodlessly as possible. As a practicing composer, Thomson was maddened most of all by the degree to which concert programs had devolved into a fixed canon, which he famously named the "Fifty Pieces." In a 1944 essay, he rails against not only the unchanging nature of that repertory but also the idea of the masterpiece itself. One passage is worth quoting at length:

The enjoyment and understanding of music are dominated in a most curious way by the prestige of the masterpiece. Neither the theatre nor the cinema nor poetry nor narrative fiction pays allegiance to its ideal of excellence in the tyrannical way that music does. They recognize no unbridgeable chasm between "great work" and the rest of produc-

13 Ibid., 221.

tion. Even the world of art painting, though it is no less a victim than that of music to Appreciation rackets based on the concept of gilt-edged quality, is more penetrable to reason in this regard, since such values, or the pretenses about them advanced by investing collectors and museums, are more easily unmasked as efforts to influence market prices. But music in our time (and in our country) seems to be committed to the idea that first-class work in composition is separable from the rest of music-writing by a distinction as radical as that recognized in theology between the elect and the damned. Or at the very least as rigorous an exclusion from glory as that which formerly marked the difference between Mrs. Astor's Four Hundred and the rest of the human race. This snobbish definition of excellence is opposed to the classical concept of a Republic of Letters. It reposes, rather, on the theocratic idea that inspiration is less a privilege of the private citizen than of the ordained prophet. Its weakness lies in the fact that music, though it serves most becomingly as religion's handmaiden, is not a religion. Music does not deal in general ideas of morality or salvation. It is an art. It expresses private sentiments through skill and sincerity, both of which last are a privilege, a duty, indeed, of the private citizen, and no monopoly of the prophetically inclined.<sup>14</sup>

With a slight hint of Marxist cultural theory – Thomson admired Hanns Eisler and read Adorno with interest – the critic lays out the fundamental problem at the heart of American classical music: its overweening veneration of a European heritage that the Europeans themselves had learned to treat more skeptically. In my own work, I have attempted to challenge at every turn the excessive dependence on the musical past, even as I venerate its achievements.

Thomson memorably defined criticism as “*the only antidote we have to paid publicity*.”<sup>15</sup> Critics can push back against the power of the star system, which exercises its influence in the classical-music world as in every other cultural field, even if the sums of money changing hands are not comparable to what goes on in the pop world. Critics can encourage listeners to think for themselves and not to accept the consensus choices that are set before them by leading institutions and the agencies that feed the star system. The *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott, in his 2017 manifesto *Better Living Through Criticism*, writes:

14 Ibid., 278–9.

15 Virgil Thomson, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, eds. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page (New York: Summit, 1988), 222.



As consumers of culture, we are lulled into passivity or, at best, prodded toward a state of pseudo-semi-self-awareness, encouraged either toward the defensive group identity of fanhood or a shallow, half-ironic eclecticism.<sup>16</sup>

The role of the critic, Scott says, is to resist the manufactured consensus – to interrogate the successful, to exalt the unknown, to argue for ambiguity and complexity.

In the end, however, critics exercise authority through their style. Their language can heighten the stakes for performers and composers alike. For many decades, the conversation around classical music has been rather too placid and detached. A dry, reserved manner predominated, especially in newspapers. If we look into the archives of writing about music, we see a much more unabashed approach. About a century ago, the critic and author James Huneker had this to say about Chopin's C-sharp-minor Prelude: "*There is a flash of steel-gray, deepening into black, and then the vision vanishes as though some huge bird had plunged down through the blazing sunlight, leaving a color-echo in the void.*"<sup>17</sup> (That is from Huneker's preface to the Schirmer edition of the Chopin Preludes, from which many American students learned the music.) A hundred years before that, the great critic, author, and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann summoned Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:

Glühende Strahlen schiessen durch dieses Reiches tiefe Nacht, und wir werden Riesenschatten gewahr, die auf- und abwogen, enger und enger uns einschliessen und alles in uns vernichten, nur nicht den Schmerz der unendlichen Sehnsucht.<sup>18</sup>

It is not a matter of reviving these historically dated styles. But one can seek a similar energy, a similar flair, in a contemporary voice.

In 1942, at the height of the Second World War, the supreme American poet Wallace Stevens delivered a lecture entitled "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." He asked: what is the use of art, of poetry, at this frightening time in history, when it seems as though all luxuries must fall away? He quoted Shakespeare's Sonnet 65: "*How with this rage shall beauty hold*

16 A. O. Scott, *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 10.

17 James Huneker, "The Preludes," in Frédéric Chopin, *Complete Works for the Piano-forte, Book Nine: Preludes*, ed. Raphael Joseffy (New York: Schirmer, 1915), v.

18 E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Schriften zur Musik, Nachlese* (Munich: Winkler-Verlag, 1963), 36.

*a plea?*” He might as well have been talking about music, about the use of music, or even about criticism, the use of criticism. This is the answer that he gave:

It is hard to think of a thing more out of time than nobility. Looked at plainly it seems false and dead and ugly [...] something that was noble in its day, grandeur that was, the rhetorical once. But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. [...] It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.<sup>19</sup>

Those last sentences come close to articulating the philosophy that I pursue in my own work, even if I am always doomed to fall far short of it.

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