

What is happening to music criticism?

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“Music criticism is in crisis.”¹ “Why do we still have music criticism?”² “Do we still need music critics?”³ Articles and symposia with these and similarly impactful titles have been appearing for decades. The situation is no different in the other arts. *What Happened to Art Criticism?*⁴ is the title of a well-known book by James Elkins, for example, and similar reflections are also to be found in the fields of theatre, film, dance and jazz criticism. Not even pop criticism is immune. It seems clear, then, that something is happening with criticism in all the arts. While there may be specific differences in individual fields, in its essential features the situation is the same everywhere. With this paper, I will try to shed some light on the problems of arts criticism in general, while focusing on music criticism when specific characteristics of the field are involved.

Signs of the changing role and importance of arts criticism can be seen in the generalised reduction (or disappearance) of cultural content in media where such content has been a constant presence for decades. It is being supplanted by entertainment content with an abundance of visual materi-

1 “Musikkritik,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, no. 1 (2019), <https://musikderzeit.de/ausgabe/musikkritik/>.

2 Title of a symposium held in Dortmund in 2006; <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/wozu-noch-musikkritik-100.html>.

3 Title of an article: FW, “Do we still need music critics?,” *Artmuselondon* (31 January 2020), <https://artmuselondon.com/2020/01/31/do-we-still-need-music-critics/>.

4 James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

al, and arts criticism is usually one of the first victims. In his article “*The fate of the critic in the clickbait age*,”⁵ music critic Alex Ross describes the shrinking space for arts criticism in American newspapers and the consequent decline in the number of professional critics. In the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* we read: “2018 was a year of mass extinction for traditional music publications.”⁶ In this country, too, criticism appears increasingly rarely in our media, and even such criticism that does appear is often written by jack-of-all-trade “experts” who are not actually masters of any field. The drastic dimensions of these changes in Slovenia can be seen even from a fleeting comparison of the cultural pages of the *Delo* newspaper in the early 1990s, when it was Slovenia’s biggest national newspaper, with the cultural pages of *Delo* today. Culture is becoming increasingly unimportant and is disappearing from public discourse.

The content of criticism is also changing, with the disappearance of critical judgement becoming increasingly noticeable. This is a wider social phenomenon that is not limited to traditional fields of the arts. For example: in the context of the unclear future of popular culture magazine *Rolling Stone*, the German music and film critic Andreas Borcholte concluded that critical reporting in the field of music is disappearing everywhere.⁷ Generally speaking, writing on the arts and music is moving closer and closer to overt promotion. Elkins, for example, talks about “*descriptive criticism*,” which means describing an event or work without expressing any critical judgement on it. “*There is too much positive reporting*,” thinks pop critic Britta Helm,⁸ since critical, particularly non-affirmative reporting in the media is becoming more an exception than a normal phenomenon. This is confirmed, for example, by a glance at Slovene theatre criticism in the 2014–15 season in the daily newspapers *Delo* and *Dnevnik*. On the basis of critical rankings (scores ranging from 1 to 5 stars), the season was apparently “*superlative*,” although nothing would appear to justify such an evaluation. It is therefore possible to conclude that the rankings were too high.⁹

5 Alex Ross, “The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age,” *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-fate-of-the-critic-in-the-clickbait-age>.

6 “Musikkritik,” <https://musikderzeit.de/ausgabe/musikkritik/>.

7 Britta Helm, “Kritik an der Musikkritik. Musikbranche ist ‘ein fürchterliches Klüngel-Business,’” *Deutschlandfunk*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/kritik-an-der-musikkritik-musikbranche-ist-ein-100.html>.

8 Ibid.

9 Mitja Rotovnik, “‘Kr neki’ o uprizoritvi + zvezdice = gledališka kritika,” *Delo*, April 24, 2015, <https://old.delo.si/sobotna/kr-neki-o-uprizoritvi-zvezdice-gledaliska-kritika.html>.

The reasons for such a development are complex and rooted in profound social changes, the appearance of new media and, not least, the excessive adaptability of critics. The prevailing opinion is that it is the result of an interaction of various social phenomena. The start of this development can be placed in the 1960s, at the time of the pop culture revolution and the gradual affirmation of pop culture as the social and cultural mainstream. This revolution began to blur the boundaries between “high” and “low”, not only in the arts but also, gradually, in every other segment and level of the life of society. At one time this was a very usual classification of artistic genres. The French music critic Armand Machabey, for example, divided music into two major families: higher genres, consisting of instrumental and vocal works, opera and ballet; and secondary genres, consisting of music hall and cabaret shows, together with their substitutes: film, radio, etc.¹⁰ Today the boundaries have disappeared completely, while the arts continue to diminish in importance as part of mainstream culture and are becoming increasingly marginal. The situation is vividly described by the German music critic Ulrich Schreiber:

The European musical tradition and, with it, music criticism has ‘gone to the dogs’ and is on a sinking ship. And the iceberg that sank this ship was the pop culture revolution of 1968, reinforced by the events of 1989, by the turning point, by the great capitalisation, in other words the global victory of capitalism.¹¹

Arts criticism may be said to have had its heyday in the print media era. With the advent of television and, later and more significantly, the internet, print media began to lose importance. Western civilisation is already predominantly visually oriented, something that even in the golden age of print media began to be exploited by tabloids with short sensationalist articles and an abundance of visual material. In the digital age, this approach has gained further momentum. The cultural pages of many newspapers, where they have survived at all, are becoming increasingly similar to picture books, to which the articles are then adapted. A general increase in “*resistance to reading*,” in particular resistance to reading in-depth content, may be observed, with the result that, as Alex Ross puts it, “[c]riticism

10 Cristina Şuteu, “Is there a theory of musical criticism?” *ResearchGate*, January 2014, 113, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348175583_IS_THERE_A_THEORY_OF_MUSICAL_CRITICISM.

11 Katja Lückert, “Wozu noch Musikkritik?” *Deutschlandfunk*, Februar 11, 2006, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/wozu-noch-musikkritik-100.html>.

*of any kind is increasingly unwelcome at the digital-age paper.*¹² Arts criticism does not achieve the desired level of reader attention, which these days is measured by the number of clicks. Newspapers are attempting to compete with the new media by adapting to them and adopting their principles of operation, but for print media this is a losing battle, since all they are doing is renouncing their own characteristics as media. Ross points out that this approach can also be problematic for print media from the business point of view: no one is bothering to ask themselves whether the readers of arts criticism, few in number though they may be, are not also the most loyal subscribers to printed newspapers, who expect to find criticism in their daily paper.

A further point is that the internet has permitted a pseudo-democratisation of criticism. These days anyone can write reviews and publish them in their own blog. This means that the selection process that was once carried out by newspapers when engaging critics is absent, with the result that the reader is surrounded by a glut of opinions without any way of clearly distinguishing their relevance. As a result, critical opinions are becoming increasingly unimportant.

A similarly important role in the fate of arts criticism is played by capital, particularly in the period since the fall of the Iron Curtain. In the Western world, the arts have become, first and foremost, business. More and more often we are seeing that quality is no longer measured by aesthetic criteria but by profitability, while popularity is slowly becoming the basic value criterion. *“When hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in a celebrity artist such as Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons, it makes little difference if a critic gives them a bad review,”*¹³ says art critic John McDonald. Artists with enough capital invested in them are simply not allowed to be anything other than *“excellent”*, lest their *“profitability”* suffer. Serious criticism can thus be unwelcome.

Tabloidisation is also present in this country. Even arts criticism has adapted to an age in which almost every artist past the age of 35 is a *“legend,”* when practically everyone is *“iconic”* and every singer who has ever opened her mouth on an opera stage is an *“opera diva.”* The author of the previously mentioned article about theatre reviews in Slovenia found that

12 Ross, “The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age.”

13 John McDonald, “The Role of the Art Critic,” *Raven*, <https://ravencontemporary.wordpress.com/portfolio/the-role-of-the-art-critic/>.

these reviews contain practically no evaluation, with the exception of the number of stars appearing next to the review.¹⁴

This situation, this “*dumbing down*,” is a consequence of the deliberate cultivation of the good consumer, who is supposed to feel unique, one of a kind, exceptional. Someone, in short, who deserves more and who only deserves the best, where this best usually means the most heavily promoted and the most popular, wrapped up in shiny packaging and, most importantly, not too demanding. In the world of classical music, we have been seeing for some time the phenomenon of “*young and attractive*” musicians, where the focus of attention is shifting to their appearance, while their musical qualities are increasingly of secondary importance. Criticism is also moving in this direction. At a symposium on music criticism held in Dortmund in 2006, the critic Christoph Schmitz summed up the situation as follows:

The music scene, musical life, that was the general assessment, has developed strongly in the direction of the cult of stars. . . . Music criticism today is, generally speaking, all about praising the big stars, but at the same time something that, in musical theatre for example, no longer places the music in the foreground but the staging. And when it comes to staging, no one asks any more whether the music can communicate its own content or if the staging communicates what is actually contained in the music.¹⁵

Criticism is therefore adapting to and, to a certain extent, contributing to the present situation, since as a result of its “*uncriticalness*” it is losing credibility.

What is music(al) criticism?

Let us now look at what criticism actually is, or rather what it should be. In the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, we read:

Criticism, Musical. The profession of writing about the aesthetics, history, and evolution of music and of reviewing musical compositions and performances in newspapers, periodicals, books, and on the radio or TV.¹⁶

14 Rotovnik, “‘Kr neki’ o uprizoritvi + zvezdice = gledališka kritika.”

15 Helm, “Kritik an der Musikkritik.”

16 Michael Kennedy, “Criticism, Musical,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 156

These days we would also need to add the internet. *Britannica* offers the following definition: “*Musical criticism, branch of philosophical aesthetics concerned with making judgments about composition or performance or both.*”¹⁷ The Encyclopedia.com entry for music criticism reads as follows:

Diverse literary genres emerged in the early modern period that voiced opinion on works of music or their performance, and as such constituted the field of music criticism. The genres most commonly associated with such writing in the present day, the formal, critical review of a concert, opera, edition, or recording, were, however, only beginning. The main genre in music criticism as a whole was the essay, usually done in polemical terms.¹⁸

Finally, the *Music Encyclopaedia* of the Yugoslav Lexicographical Institute: “*Music criticism: the public expression of reflections on the value of a musical work and the manner of its performance in the daily, weekly or specialist press.*”¹⁹

From these definitions of music criticism, we may conclude that music criticism has two essential components:

- writing about music (a composition, a concert, a performance, a recording)
- evaluation

The first element, then, is writing, and here it is possible to agree with Alex Ross, who says: “*Cultural criticism is a form of journalism – odd journalism, but journalism nonetheless.*”²⁰ It is certainly a hybrid genre, which some people would even like to classify as literature or art. In contemporary practice we often find a mixture of very different journalistic genres under the label of music criticism, including news, reports, commentary and reviews. Similarly, in the field of art criticism, Elkins identifies seven types of art criticism, where he particularly highlights “*descriptive*” criticism as an important product of the twentieth century.

The second essential element of criticism or the critical approach is evaluation, and it is here that we find the most problems in the present age.

17 Alan Walker, “Musical Criticism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 8, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/musical-criticism>.

18 “Music Criticism,” *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/music-criticism>.

19 Josip Andreis, “Muzička kritika,” *Muzička enciklopedija*, vol. 2 (Zagreb: Jugoslovanski leksikografski zavod, 1958), 244.

20 Ross, “The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age.”

I believe that the value judgement is an essential component of criticism or, to put it another way, writing about music without a clear value judgement is not and cannot be criticism. The disappearance of critical writing is a generalised phenomenon. To return once again to the article on theatre criticism in Slovenia, its author found that despite the clear definition of theatre criticism in the *Gledališki terminološki slovar* ("Dictionary of theatrical terms"), where criticism is defined as "*a specialised piece of writing that reports on and evaluates performances in the media*,"²¹ there was no trace of evaluation in the vast majority of examples of criticism he looked at. The only hint of a value judgment came via yet another product of pop culture – the number of stars (1 to 5) which the critic, at the editors' request, was required to publish alongside each individual review. Without these stars, in the majority of cases it would be difficult for the reader to establish whether the critic's opinion was positive or negative. The author of the article therefore expressed the principle of Slovene theatre criticism by means of a mathematical formula: "*Some bullshit about the performance + stars = theatre criticism*."

In the field of music criticism, the situation in Slovenia has not yet become so desperate, at least as regards evaluation, although even here there are signs of development in the direction summed up by jazz critic Ted Gioia in his article "*Music criticism has degenerated into lifestyle reporting*,"²² where he says: "*The disappearance of critical judgment from music coverage can be seen across the full spectrum of modern media*."²³ We may conclude from all of this that critics themselves are, at least indirectly, contributing to the disappearance of criticism.

The importance of art criticism

I am certainly not the only person who thinks that arts criticism is important. Its importance is apparent at several levels: in relation to the public, in relation to artists and, last but not least, in relation to the general life of society.

It is a fact that today we live in an information rubbish dump. We are swamped by an immeasurable quantity of information of every type, rang-

21 Rotovnik, "Kr neki' o uprizoritvi + zvezdice = gledališka kritika."

22 Ted Gioia, "Music criticism has degenerated into lifestyle reporting," The Daily Beast, March 18, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/music-criticism-has-degenerated-into-lifestyle-reporting>.

23 Ibid.

ing from authentic to fake, from high-quality to utterly worthless. This is above all due to the new media. While things may not have been idyllic even in the golden age of the press, at least every medium had one or more editors responsible for making a selection from amid the mass of information. Readers' trust in the credibility of the medium was of key importance. The media were well aware of this and therefore had to maintain a certain quality level in order to retain the trust of their readers. In today's conditions, particularly in the new media, there is practically no selection. Even on YouTube, we find music videos of the highest quality alongside the most amateurish clips imaginable. How is someone who is not familiar with the field but wants to learn about it supposed to find their way through this confusion? No wonder then, that quality has been replaced by popularity, or in other words that quality is measured in quantitative terms by the number of views and likes. Quantitative indicators frequently diverge radically, of course, from criteria such as aesthetic excellence and craftsmanship. Print media, unfortunately, are trying to adapt to online media and looking for ways to satisfy "*online taste*" in a battle that is already lost because of the essential differences between the two types of media.

In such conditions, it is arts criticism that can to some extent guide and educate the public and, with greater or lesser success, effect a selection based on quality. Elena Martinique says: "*Criticism has an important role in developing and deepening the work of artists, but also in helping viewers [or listeners] perceive and interpret works of art.*"²⁴ In some cases criticism can have an even more important and far-reaching impact. One example of this would be the critical re-evaluation of Mahler's music in the 1960s and 1970s.

The second level is the relationship between criticism and artists. There is no question that it can be extremely useful for every artist to be confronted with a critical view of their work. Such confrontation stimulates reflection and self-examination. And what is art if not a constant search? The attitude of artists towards criticism can vary greatly. Many artists do not care about criticism and reject it – particularly negative criticism – *a priori*, usually on the grounds that it is uninformed or the result of the critic's failure to understand their work or their lack of erudition. On the other hand I cannot think of an example of an artist who has branded a positive review of their work as uninformed.

24 Elena Martinique, "What is the purpose of art criticism today?" *Widewalls*, January 14, 2017, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/what-is-the-purpose-of-art-criticism>.

The third level is the function of criticism as part of the general life of society. With the blurring of quality criteria and the dominance of all-powerful capital in every facet of life,

criticism is a tiny part of the ecology of the music business, but an essential part. Without smart, independent critics who know their stuff, everything collapses into hype, public relations, and the almighty dollar.²⁵

This aspect of the importance of criticism is more relevant today than ever before.

In 2005 art critic Dave Hickey offered the following important warning: *“Criticism, at its most serious, tries to channel change, and when nothing is changing, when no one is dissenting, who needs criticism?”*²⁶ His voice joins the ongoing debate about the crisis of contemporary arts criticism. To continue with Elena Martinique:

For a long time, art criticism has been perceived as a form of privileged consciousness that provided an insight into the art that required a special eye for it. *Art critics served a regulatory, introspective and proscriptive function for the circulation and reception of art, and artists often saw their opinions as useful, insightful, or instructive.* In this way, art practice and art criticism are supposed to be in a dialectical relationship – to complement each other.²⁷

Hickey is not alone in this view. Cristina Şuteu believes that “[the music critic] *must ‘unite’ the artist with the public, and educate the general taste by guiding it into a deeper understanding of the valuable works.*”²⁸

Or there is this opinion from the Dortmund symposium mentioned earlier:

Jürgen Kesting, one of the invited music critics, states very clearly that without a sense of art, art will be destroyed – he said this freely quoting Goethe – and music criticism promotes a sense of art. Music criticism is thus a form of aesthetic training that leads to correct listening, which controls and improves it, and through this exchange one can penetrate into the mysteries of music. It is also true that enjoying any art without understanding and education is actually not possible. The more you

25 Gioa, “Music criticism has degenerated into lifestyle reporting.”

26 Martinique, “What is the purpose of art criticism today?”

27 Ibid.

28 Şuteu, “Is there a theory of musical criticism?” 96.

know, the more you have heard, the greater the experience, the greater the pleasure in music. And music criticism can also contribute to this.²⁹

Kesting also believes that

the music critic today has fallen into a competence trap. [The critic] as careful listener is no longer necessary if one no longer wants to know exactly what is going on. If we no longer want to hear the subtle tones, the subtle observation of how music develops, how it sounds, how voices sound, how they are produced.³⁰

With the tabloidisation of our relationship with the world, interest in a profound confrontation with art is vanishing and criticism is becoming superfluous.

One important question – whether, perhaps, the language of music criticism also has to change because the language of culture has changed – was not addressed at the Dortmund symposium and remains unanswered.³¹

Who should a critic be and what should criticism be like?

*“Is there a theory of musical criticism?”*³² is the title of a study by Cristina Berengea Şuteu, which includes a comparative analysis of the critical approach of five important music critics of the twentieth century³³ who provided their own theoretical presentations of their critical methods. The fi-

29 “Jürgen Kesting, einer der geladenen Musikkritiker, sagt es ganz deutlich, weil ohne Kunstsinn die Kunst zerstört wird – er sagte das frei nach Goethe zitiert – und Musikkritik den Kunstsinn fördert. Also Musikkritik als ästhetische Schulung gewissermaßen, die dazu hinführt, richtig zu hören, die das eigene Hören kontrolliert, verbessert und durch die man über den Austausch in die Mysterien der Musik hinein steigen kann. Auch weil Kunstgenuss ohne Kunstverstand und Bildung eigentlich nicht möglich sind. Je mehr man weiß, je man gehört hat, je größer die Erfahrungen sind, umso größer ist auch das Vergnügen an der Musik. Und dazu könnte auch, meinte Kesting, die Musikkritik beitragen.” Lückert, “Wozu noch Musikkritik?”

30 “Dann, eine sehr interessante Wendung von Jürgen Kesting, dass der Musikkritiker heute in die Kompetenzfalle geraten sei. Er als der sehr genau Hinhörende sei nicht mehr gefragt, wenn man es so genau gar nicht mehr wissen wolle. Wenn wir die subtilen Töne, die subtile Betrachtung dessen, wie sich Musik entwickelt, wie es klingt, wie die Stimmen klingen, wie sie erzeugt werden, gar nicht mehr hören möchten.”

31 “Aber die Frage, ob vielleicht auch die Sprache der Musikkritik sich verändern muss, weil sich die Sprache der Kultur verändert hat, darauf wurde gar nicht eingegangen. So herrschte eher Ratlosigkeit.”

32 Şuteu, “Is there a theory of musical criticism?”

33 The study compares the critical approaches of Ernest Newman, Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, Oscar Thompson, Armand Machabey and Alan Walker.

nal conclusion of the study is that there is no valid theory. Nevertheless, all five authors have a number of views in common.

Although many studies and books have been written on criticism, incorporating presentations of the methods of critical evaluation, it is not possible to talk about any generally accepted rules of the discipline. Ernest Newman, a British music critic writing in the first half of the twentieth century, offered the following reflection:

If there hadn't been a science of composition, if each composer had had to discover everything on his own (harmony, counterpoint, orchestration etc.), things would not have come so far. Perhaps that is why criticism has made no considerable progress, because every critic had to discover its basic principles by learning from his and from other people's mistakes.³⁴

All the authors agree that the critic should possess broad knowledge encompassing philosophy, aesthetics, literature, history and various other fields, and that formal musical training is a *sine qua non* for the critic. The critic must win the trust of the public. The reason for this is simple: would you rather be operated on by an untrained quack or a trained surgeon? Would you rather be tried by a reader of the crime section in the newspaper or by a professional judge? Oscar Thompson was of a similar view:

Trained criticism is more likely to work for good than untrained criticism; disciplined judgement promises more of what is sound and fair than undisciplined judgement; the professional is more to be trusted than the amateur.³⁵

A survey conducted at Columbia University in New York found that the majority of classical music critics are highly educated, while at the same time almost half of them have performed music themselves.³⁶ Almost all the authors in the study likewise emphasise the importance of experience.

The next question we need to consider is the eternal question of whether, and to what extent, criticism can be objective. It is not unusual for critics to have diametrically opposed views on the same subject. The *Britannica* article on music criticism makes a similar point.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to show that a value judgment can stand for anything that is even remotely true about music, as opposed to stand-

34 Şuteu, "Is there a theory of musical criticism?," 99.

35 Ibid., 106.

36 *The Classical Music Critic* (New York City: Columbia University, 2005), 48–9.

ing for something that is merely a personal whim on the part of the critic, since there is no such thing as an organized body of knowledge called ‘musical criticism’. The entire history of musical criticism can be summed up as a struggle to forge itself into a suitable tool for coming to grips with the art of music.³⁷

Various authors have elaborated mechanisms of critical judgement, but none of these attempts has become generally accepted. Despite constant striving for “objective” criticism, it is clear that there is no objective criticism, since criticism is always dependent on variables such as historical context, the critic’s education and training, the critic’s personality and other circumstances. In the words of Ernest Newman:

The duty of music critic is to judge correctly and to write well. He treats objective things subjectively. And subjective things objectively. A work remains a value or non-value for reasons beyond the state of mind he is in when he comes into contact with it. It is desirable that in criticism there should be a basic technique, just as there is also a technique of composition.³⁸

In his work *Studies in Modern Music*, the musicologist Sir William Henry Hadow claimed to have found “*the permanent principles of criticism which may enable us to discriminate good from bad.*”³⁹ In this country, Stanko Vurnik attempted to introduce a “scientific” approach to arts criticism in the article “*Umetnostna kritika kot družabna vrednota*” (“Arts criticism as a social value”), which appeared in the magazine *Dom in svet* in 1926. In it, he attempted to reduce the questions of criticism to the simplest possible formulas. He was answered in the same magazine by Anton Lajovic, who was doubtful of the efficacy of simple formulas in the field of the arts and of the ability of rational scientific thinking to address the problems of art. Time has proved Lajovic right, or, as Calvocoressi puts it: “*Otherwise, even if we refuse to admit that musical criticism entirely reduces itself to a matter of opinion, we shall remain unable to show that it does not.*”⁴⁰

To sum up: most authors agree with Calvocoressi that “*sensibility and a formal musical training are imperative conditions for a critic.*”⁴¹ In the con-

37 Walker, “Musical Criticism.”

38 Şuteu, “Is there a theory of musical criticism?,” 99.

39 Ibid., 102.

40 Ibid., 101.

41 Ibid.

clusion to her study, Cristina Şuteu states that each of the authors she covers shares the view that

formal musical training is a *sine qua non* in the critical act. Starting from the same premise, their unanimous purpose is forming a viable judgement of value. Between these two coordinates, each author presents their ‘method’ which in their opinion will lead to the establishment of principles concerning music.⁴²

Practical experience of music and the broadest possible education are also desirable qualities in a critic.

Rational and emotional perception must be balanced, or, as Oscar Thompson puts it:

The critic’s emotional, subjective involvement is allowed, because it is necessary; without such involvement, music could not be experienced, and the critic cannot exclude his feelings entirely in order to be purely objective. However, he is advised to not let himself be dominated by them, and thus become their slave.⁴³

This view echoes that of the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal:

Those who are accustomed to judge by feeling do not understand the process of reasoning, for they would understand at first sight, and are not used to seek for principles. And others, on the contrary, who are accustomed to reason from principles, do not at all understand matters of feeling, seeking principles, and being unable to see at a glance . . .⁴⁴

At this point I would like to mention two further important characteristics of the critical personality: ethical integrity and soundness of judgement. Despite the diminishing presence of criticism, the critic still enjoys privileged access to the public discourse. This requires a corresponding sense of moral responsibility. The critic is a judge who expresses aesthetic judgements, so ethical integrity and soundness of judgement are reasonable requirements, although not always evident in practice. The Columbia University survey of music critics includes a special section dedicated to ethical issues. The great majority of critics found the following practices to be “*never acceptable*”:

- making money as a promoter or musician’s agent;

42 Ibid., 124.

43 Ibid., 108.

44 Ibid., 116.

- selling or offering to sell promotional CDs, DVDs or other videos received for free from record companies;
- accepting payment for writing programme notes published by performing organisations you cover;
- accepting free tickets for concerts you are not going to write about;
- accepting travel expenses or other perks from an organisation connected with something you intend to write about;
- sitting on boards of musical organisations.

The field of ethics is, of course, wider than this. There is no room in criticism for the critic's personal grudges and the critic should never lose sight of their responsibility – towards music, towards composers and performers and towards the audience.

So what should criticism be like?

Evaluation is an essential part of criticism, but the problem with evaluation, as we have seen, is its extremely limited capacity for objectivity. Objectivity can only relate to objective facts (in music these include intonation, rhythm, faithfulness to the score, etc.) and their importance in the context of the accepted rules of the discipline; it can never apply to purely aesthetic categories. On the other hand, evaluation is not possible without criteria, regardless of where these criteria are found. The opinions of “*theorists*” differ on this point. Some claim that the critic must have predefined criteria, while others say that it is the artistic work that has the criteria and it is the critic's job to identify them. In all cases, however, the critic must be consistent with regard to the criteria or their identification.

The object of judgement or evaluation must be clearly evident in a piece of criticism. It may be a work or performance or both. It is important to avoid going beyond these specific contexts, since this either means straying into another genre or involves a different object of evaluation. Regarding the functions of the critic, it is advisable not to be too ambitious. As Ernest Newman put it: “*A critic's duty is not to foresee the future of music, but to explain the present, and this can be done only insofar as he is anchored in the past.*”⁴⁵

The critic's ‘mirror’ must reflect the effects of the sonorous phenomenon, and not its causes. It should be descriptive for the reader, and not

45 Ibid., 100.

corrective for the artist. The specialist music teacher corrects the mistakes, whereas the critic only finds them.⁴⁶

Every value judgment must be justified. The judgement expressed by the critic must be supported by an answer to the question of why they think that way. Criticism must express a clear position and must be comprehensible, which is, of course, the most difficult thing. Only a clear idea can also be a clearly expressed idea.

Criticism is aimed at a specific audience and must therefore be written in such a way as to be accessible to the target audience. Calvocoressi says:

Thus, for an accurate understanding, the public must be familiarised with the critic's vocabulary, through his publications. This is a permanent imperative condition for a critic to make himself understood and believed by the public.⁴⁷

It is also important to take context into account. We cannot judge musical life in Ljubljana the same way we judge musical life in, say, Berlin. We cannot judge a professional ensemble the same way we judge an amateur ensemble. Yet the taking into account of context must be clearly defined in criticism.

Criticism in Slovenia

The remarks on the development and state of music criticism around the world that introduced this paper also apply to Slovenia, except that the consequences of social changes are perhaps even more evident here than elsewhere. In the years following the Second World War, culture enjoyed a privileged position in this country. This is partly because it was important to the communist authorities as one of the mechanisms enabling the ideological control of society, and partly – perhaps – because of the extremely important mobilising role that culture played during the national liberation war. That is why the present confrontation of culture with the embrace of capital is all the more stressful, while the small size of the Slovene cultural space is an additional aggravating factor.

Today the fundamental question for Slovene music criticism is: does it still exist? Like everywhere else in the world, serious music criticism is disappearing from print media and other media. Music criticism has practically been eliminated from *Delo*, once the country's most important na-

46 Ibid., 107.

47 Ibid., 105.

tional newspaper. It still appears occasionally in *Večer* and is most present in *Dnevnik*. But even in *Dnevnik* there is no longer continuous coverage of the music scene but, instead, occasional pieces on “*more attractive*” events. Music criticism has survived on the radio, where, however, it has its own particular problems because of the nature of the medium. It is more difficult to access, because you have to tune in at the right time, while since it is only broadcast once, it is also more difficult to analyse. There are also some websites, such as the Slovene Music Information Centre (SIGIC) with its online magazine *Odzven*, where music criticism appears somewhat sporadically, and various private blogs maintained by critics *manqués*. In these cases, however, these are media that lie outside the daily mainstream. Such websites are mainly visited by musicians and cannot reach and address the general public and, in this way, place music among the current topics of daily discourse. In such conditions, it is no longer possible to talk about music criticism as an integral part of musical life and the life of society. The following comments on the phenomenon of music criticism in Slovenia therefore relate to the situation as it was some years ago.

Just over 25 years ago, in a paper I presented at the Slovenian Music Days, I talked about the state of opera criticism at that time. In doing so, I made most of the same points that I made in the introduction to today’s paper. It is a fact that we are experiencing the same development as other countries. For this reason, it may be easier to identify the characteristics and peculiarities of music criticism in Slovenia from those aberrations that are impossible or at least very unlikely in other contexts. For example: nowhere else have I seen a newspaper publish a sensationalistic negative review of an opera – before the premiere! – on the basis of a rehearsal closed to the public. Similarly, it is not normal for critics to wreak their anger on blameless prompters, to complain that singers were out of tune when reviewing performances characterised by faultless pitch and intonation, to accuse singers of being vocally weak and inexpressive in roles in which they were “*clearly miscast*”, and so on. Rhetorical questions in reviews asking why specific individuals were not among the performers are probably another peculiarity of music criticism in Slovenia. For a critic to ask such questions is particularly ethically problematic, given that in most cases artistic directors cannot respond publicly out of consideration for the musicians and loyalty to the house that employs them. The case of a critical overview of an opera season in a publication of the national theatre museum in which the central problem of the season would appear to be the ter-

mination of the employment contract of a member of the chorus is surely a unique case.

I nevertheless believe that a significant step forward has been taken as regards critical integrity. In my earlier paper, in the part dealing with opera criticism, I highlighted the problem of maintaining a healthy minimum of critical credibility, illustrating it with the example of a critic involved in writing reviews of an institution with which he had, that same season, signed a series of “*significant*” contracts and received a number of other benefits, all of which was clearly reflected in his writing. The situation has significantly improved since then as regards the avoidance of conflicts of interests. Although we still find examples of a critic being linked, professionally or otherwise, to the institutions he covers, these are quite rare.

It should also be acknowledged that music criticism in Slovenia, unlike criticism in certain other fields of the arts, has for the most part managed to maintain evaluation as an essential element of criticism. Despite occasional excesses, I believe that Slovene music criticism to date has fulfilled its role quite well. The question now is where does it go from here? The absence of criticism is certainly not a good thing for the arts, not only for developmental and aesthetic reasons but also as regards placing the arts in the social sphere as part of public discourse. It is time that this were recognised by cultural policy, which should respond, not, as has been proposed, by creating specialised media for arts criticism, welcome though this might be, since this would mean placing criticism under the exclusive focus of the interested public, which is still a marginal position. Instead, we should subsidise arts criticism, above all in those print media with the widest circulation and put the arts back on the agenda of socially relevant topics.

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