

A CRITIC ON THE EDGE

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By

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A Thesis/Portfolio

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

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**MASTER OF ARTS (2006)
(Music Criticism)**

**McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario**

TITLE: A Critic on the Edge

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 169

∞ ABSTRACT ∞

The music critic is usually portrayed as a lone wolf in the musical world – an independent and mysterious figure slipping silently in and out of concerts, and pronouncing judgement from afar. However, her work cannot occur in isolation, and the interactions of the critic with her publication, her readers, and her subjects create a network of relationships, each with their own dynamic effect on the critic and her writing. These relationships function as an exchange of capital, as described in Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production*. The publication is lent capital by having skilled writers, and the critic is given a powerful position from which to reach her readers. The readers, functioning as an imagined community built around a common subject interest, grant the critic capital, and therefore authority, by being influenced by her work.

The two imagined musical communities discussed here – classical and world music – share a position as marginalized musical genres. Their places within western culture could be portrayed as opposites, as classical music maintains a privileged position as a cultural achievement for the west, and world music is both a relatively young genre, and one that is separated and Othered simply from its label as a homogenizing and encompassing genre category. Within each of these genres, the critic is faced with different challenges – navigating the social issues which surround the categories, understanding how best to address their musical communities, and then further, how to write appropriately for the publications which support them. Each publication plays a different role in the discourse surrounding the music, and each also has a different set of requirements and opportunities for the critic.

Through a combination of practical work and academic analysis, this thesis seeks to demonstrate some of the challenges facing a young critic in the field, and the dynamic relationships that govern a critic's work and musical world.

∞ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ∞

For my professors – Dr. Susan Fast, Dr. Christina Baade, Dr. James Deaville – in thanks for their critical eyes and warm hearts.

For my friends, who kept me sane in the most difficult of times, and took the ranting and raving about my esoteric interests in stride.

For my family, without whose support I would have never got this far.

And in memoriam Austin B. Caswell (1931-2006), for your joy at discovering my intelligence despite my hiding behind a violin case, your love and friendship, and for encouraging me in every way possible.

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∞ INTRODUCTION ∞ THE CRITICAL WEB

Much of the music critic's process is solitary. Her work is the result of her own opinion, and must be written independently, with no outside contributions. She cannot be affiliated with any musical organization for fear of damaging her credibility. She cannot befriend the artists she discusses, as "to know musicians intimately is precarious; to permit ties of affection to bind critic and musician together is to place in jeopardy all that the critic stands for as a disinterested spectator, an impartial adjudicator, a truthful, unflattering, yet intensifying mirror."¹

But of course, no social action occurs entirely in isolation. The interactions of the critic with the publication, her readers, and her subjects create a network of relationships, each with their own effect on the critic and her writing. The greatest hurdle in critical writing is establishing authority – the ability to act as an authoritative voice and claim influence over the consumers of her work. An understanding of that authority is difficult, since it has no quantifiable values – no empirical statement of ability, no stamp of approval, no certificate, and despite current appearances, no degree that grants complete authority to be a critic. Therefore, it must be explained through the critic's relationships with others. Authority is an issue of power, of claiming and maintaining sufficient power to function within the dynamic of her relationships with the readers and with her publications. It is through them, for them, and with them that she performs the role of the

¹ Oscar Thompson, *Practical Music Criticism*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979).

critic and establishes her place within both the power dynamic and the larger world of music.

There is temptation when discussing power relationships to categorize the participants into the powerful and the oppressed – creating a sense of negativity and unidirectional force surrounding power. However, as Foucault suggests

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.²

Power is the creative force through which criticism exists. There would be little possibility for criticism without a system of power at work that allows one person not only to form an opinion, but also broadcast it to others in a public forum. The “productive network” can refer not just to the relationship between power and production, but also the interactive nature of power – that power is held completely by no one, and that it is possible for power relationships not to be unilaterally directed, but reciprocal, an exchange of power between bodies. This exchange, particularly in the case of criticism, is best expressed in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's system of cultural capital, whereby power relationships in the world of cultural production are likened to a system of economics.

The critic obviously is required to be knowledgeable in her field, which in Bourdieu's system is discussed in terms of cultural capital, which “concerns forms of

² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge : Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 119.

cultural knowledge, competences, or dispositions.”³ But she also must gain a place of public prominence in order to be authoritative. The role of the publication in granting capital to the critic is fairly clear – the critic needs the validation of being published in order to establish herself as a professional, and also to situate herself within the relative power of publications – to establish her status within the social chain of critics (the higher value placed on a writer from a major metropolitan paper as opposed to a regional weekly). The publication grants her symbolic capital, “a degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition.”⁴

However, there is also a great deal to be gained on the part of the publication by hiring the qualified critic, as would any member of what Bourdieu calls the “art-business,” those who sell and deal in cultural products.

His [the art-businessman’s] “authority” is itself a credit-base value, which only exists in the relationship with the field of production as a whole, i.e. with the artists or writers who belong to his “stable.”⁵

The masthead and of a publication is its “stable,” and its authority as an institution rests upon the quality of the writers within it. To locate the publication within the field of production, the authority of the publication is relative to others within the field, based on the perceived quality of its product. As the judgement of a publication rests in its content (as presumably it would not be entirely an issue of paper quality or text size), the quality of the writers is of primary importance in establishing authority. It begs the question,

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 78.

however, of with whom the relative assessment rests and on what grounds it is based. In this case, it is truly the *readers* pronouncing judgment. They give the paper authority by giving it economic capital in the form of distribution, and symbolic capital in a public opinion that regards the object as being both necessary and informative.

It would be useful here to define precisely who “the readers” are because, although the publication can easily be described as a discrete entity, it is far more difficult to define as a group the readers of a particular critic or newspaper. In the field of audience analysis, the group is generally referred to as a *mass* – hence the idea of the mass media.

It is typically a very large aggregate of detached individuals, anonymous to each other, but with their attention converging on some object of interest that is outside their immediate personal environment or control.⁶

The idea of the readership as a mass can be problematic, since it is such a generalized descriptor for a large group of people. The mass associated with the media as a whole is not the same as the mass that the critic is addressing – she writes for a more particular subset of the readers, those interested in her topic. To return to Bourdieu, the readers could be considered, along with the critic, as members of a cultural field. However, the idea of the mass being comprised of “detached individuals” likens the mass to another type of constructed group – one that is “imagined.”

Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” is a description for the state of most modern communities, where physical interaction rarely or never occurs, but there is a mutual understanding of the participants’ connections to one another. He deals

⁶ Denis McQuail, *Audience Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

very specifically with concepts of nationhood, but “in fact, all communities larger than primordial village of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁷ They are connected by a sense of shared culture and shared experience, which may have nothing to do with ever actually interacting with one another, in a way similar to how a mass audience is connected solely through a mutual “object of interest.” The readers share a connection through the publication, and can also identify themselves as a community through it.

The publication, or “print-economy,” is one of the major sources of support for imagined communities. The emergence of publications “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways,” and in a sense, serve as the stabilizing point for many communities where the participants will have no direct access to one another.⁸ Anderson discusses specifically the importance of the newspaper, which serves as a centerpiece of any given community, firstly by relating information about the community and its concerns to readers, and also by confirming the connection between its citizens through its physical presence throughout the geographic community, being a visual marker of common experience by being found in libraries or barbershops. The importance of the publication to any community in part justifies the intrinsic connection between the

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

publication and its readers. It serves a greater purpose than mere information – it is the connective tissue of their social existence.

This imagined community of people is the source of most of the critic's exchange of capital and possession of authority.⁹ Critical writing is by its nature directed outward – written to appear in a published space, which is created to be consumed – and so the act of consumption in effect justifies the object. Therefore, the critic's concern with the reader's response or interest, with their consumption of her work, becomes central to her process of creation. What it means for the work to be consumed is different for the critic than for the publication as a whole. The publication must only be concerned that the readers purchase it to assume consumption, not that they necessarily pay attention to or absorb a particular piece of information. The critic must ensure her work in particular is being read in order for it to be validated and for her authority to be complete, because her authority lies in her ability to influence her readers.

Bourdieu explains in *Field of Cultural Production* that power or capital is equated with influence, the ability to reach the readers. But this ability is limited by the level of connection between the critic and her readers.

Similarly, in accordance with the law that one only ever preaches to the converted, a critic can only “influence” his readers in so far as they extend him this power because they are structurally attuned to him in their view of the social world, their tastes, and their whole habitus.¹⁰

⁹ Although her relationship to the publication is a source of capital, it is in relation to the readers that she must be authoritative, as the balance of power between herself and the publication is mostly fixed. With the readers, their interaction is solely through her work, and their attention only gained through consuming her writing.

¹⁰ Bourdieu, 96.

“Preaching to the converted” implies that the result of the critic and readers being attuned is a foregone conclusion, particularly if we accept his idea that critics are selected to write for particular publications based on their ability to speak the language of the readers “without having deliberately tried,” being the paper’s “ideal reader,” and sharing a similar *habitus*.¹¹ Bourdieu also asserts that critics are already distributed in the press in a way that mimics how the press is divided among the public, with each publication designed to speak to a certain segment of society and with writers divided similarly by social class. It is true that a writer is selected for the way she “fits” in a particular publication, that her writing style is appropriate for it, and generally, readers will seek out publications that speak to their interests and social positioning. As Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus* is fixed – being “durable” or lifelong, and “structured structures,” which incorporate “the objective social conditions of their inculcation” – the presumption is that there is a baseline of compatibility between all of the parties.¹² However, I find it difficult to accept the idea that this connection between writer and reader, and also between writer and publication, is both natural and completely unchanging.

Even if we are to accept the effect of *habitus* on this mutual attunement, that does not mean that there are not some active elements to the process of creation, by which the critic is better able to position herself to influence her readers. This is, in part, because the interaction between herself and her readers is mediated by the printed word. This has two effects. The first is that the critic, being a creature that the readers only interact with

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 5.

through the print-economy, becomes an author figure, one whom they have the ability to construct through her works. Just as the community of “the readers” is imagined by the critic, the figure of the critic is similarly imagined or constructed in the minds of the reader. The critic gains new possibilities for agency in the formation of her construct, of her “self” as the role she plays becomes not a fixed element of her habitus, but a performative one.

Judith Butler’s concept of performativity as it applies to gender identities presumes that the construction of the identity is created through repeated action. However, there is an element of “agency,” by which the subjects have the ability to change the way they perform these roles. “‘Agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of variation within that repetition.”¹³ This variation is what allows the critic control over the creation of her own identity – it becomes not a fixed element of her class structure, or her habitus, but a power that she can wield. Of course, the “I” of the writer herself is a performative role, but her role as a critic becomes separate from her person, as “the critic” functions in a similar manner to Foucault’s concept of “the author.”

According to Foucault and his writings on the concept of an “author,” the reader’s sense of who a writer is has little to do with the writer herself and far more to do with the texts she produces.

This ‘author-function’ is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author...nevertheless these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

individual as an author) are projections in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts.¹⁴

The idea of the author, the critic, is projected – the interaction between two “imaginary” bodies. The writer is a complete person, in full possession of a habitus, which is then projected through her writing. However, the *author* exists only in the works – the readers reconstruct a complete individual from the elements of the writer that they can glean from her writing. The author is a simulacrum – a projection of the original.

Although readers create the resulting author, the writer retains control over the self that she projects in her work. The role of the critic becomes performative, and as such, she has the option to change the way she performs in order to adapt to a situation, as performative identities are, to an extent, within the control of those who use them.¹⁵ In the process of being performative, the individual can, effectively, disappear. Nietzsche said in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.”¹⁶ In the case of the construction of author or critic, the deeds are all that is consequential, because that is all that the reader is able to consume – the performance. In being aware of this, the critic has the ability to control the manner in which she performs her identity –

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 127.

¹⁵ There are many factors that impinge total control over performative identities, particularly that of expectations and social norms, the denial of which can have negative consequences for the individual. In the narrow world of the critic, the social conventions are shaped by reader expectations, and the result of moving too far away from these expectations would be a loss of influence and authority, as the readers abandon the critic in favour of others who perform in ways that do not challenge their worldview quite so strongly.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), 45.

to create her image for her readers. The only point of connection between the writer and the readers is within her work, and so the writing itself is a performative process.

There are a number of things that could be implied by saying that writing is performative. In one sense of the word, it implies a creative act, allowing expression within a particular setting.

For writing is also a form of composition, in which harmony and orchestration must be used to modify and add color and variety to plain melodic statements.¹⁷

The construction of an evocative phrase in the act of criticism is as much a skill as it is in literature or music. The publication becomes the performance space for the critic – the theatre in which she creates her art, and projects it out for others to consume. In a more general sense, any act of speech is performative, in that by *saying* something we are also *doing* something. J. L. Austin first advanced his ideas of “performative utterances” in a series of lectures entitled *How to Do Things With Words*.

The name is derived, of course, from “perform,” the usual verb with the noun “action”: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.¹⁸

Further, these “performative utterances” can be divided into categories – a locutionary act, which is the act *of* saying something; an illocutionary act, which is the act *in* saying something, by ordering, warning, or informing, for example; and finally the perlocutionary act, which is the act *by* saying something, meaning that the statement is designed to illicit a particular response, and is essentially a combination of locutionary

¹⁷ Martin Cooper, *Judgements of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. Marina Sbisa and J. O. Urmson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 6.

and illocutionary statements. Austin was very limited in his conception of what can be included in performative utterances, restricting himself only to spoken interactions and to a particular list of words. However, later writers, such as John Searle and Richard Ohmann, have shifted the boundaries of performative speech, allowing for the inclusion of almost any type of utterative action, including literature, to be performative, as all speech is both an action in itself and is often designed to provoke a response.¹⁹

Critical writing is a performative act. The elements of description are illocutionary, in that by saying that I describe I am also doing so. More important are the perlocutionary acts, those through which the critic attempts to illicit response from her readers, to influence them into a reaction. Austin focuses on physical reactions, or discrete emotional responses (illocution being “I am asking you not to do that” and perlocution “do not do that”), but the meaning can be extended further to encompass more general reactions – either interest, judgement, agreement, or disagreement. All critical writing is intended to provoke some response in readers, to influence them in some way, and uses the techniques of literature – the performance of a powerful phrase – to meet those ends. Through all of these performative acts, the critic seeks to invoke one general reaction from her readers – the granting of authority. Initially, she must use only her words to impress upon her readers a sense of her abilities – her education and knowledge, as well as her skill as a writer. Later, as her store of symbolic capital grows and her name becomes recognizable, her mere position assists in her ability to influence,

¹⁹ John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning : Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge, Eng. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). and Richard Ohmann, "Literature as Act," in *Approaches to Poetics*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

as she becomes a trusted name within the critical community. No matter what her level of authority, she performs the role of the critic through the text – assisting in creating an image that the readers will respect and be influenced by, and thereby grant her the capital she needs to be powerful.

As with any power dynamic, the relationship between the critic and her readers cannot be unidirectional – the critic cannot be the only one potentially gaining power from this interaction. Consuming criticism must have some benefit to the reader, or they will not participate, for as Foucault suggests, all people are seeking power, and processes of mass media consumption are rarely altruistic. There is potential for the readers to learn something from a piece of criticism, to absorb some information that would consequently increase their own cultural capital. Readers also benefit from criticism in their store of symbolic capital, an increase that comes with being able to establish themselves as having knowledge of the arts, of current events within the cultural field, and thereby situate themselves as being cultured, an attribute generally accorded to those of a higher social class. The information gained is not necessarily only for the reader's edification, but is also leverage for establishing her place within the power dynamics of their social community.



It may seem suspect that throughout all of this discussion of the music critic, the issue of music has not arisen. However, in discussing criticism, the music is often secondary. The critic participates in music as a listener – she occupies the space of the audience, absorbing the music as an audience member would. In listening, the act of

criticism has not yet occurred, because the act of criticism, as opposed to the person of the critic, exists in the production of a written work, of creating criticism. Her critical mindset in the concert does situate her as a critic, but without the action, she cannot necessarily be distinguished from another equally critical listener, as the person next to her might be the composer or another performer or other knowledgeable body, and equally if not far more prone to critical evaluation of the performance. It is only after leaving the musical space that she becomes a critic, by reflecting back on what she has heard and commenting upon it. In the power dynamics and social implications of criticism, music plays little role. However, this does not mean that criticism is independent of music. In fact, the creation and consumption of criticism can be a part of the musical process – part of *musicking*.

Christopher Small, in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, puts forward an idea of music that extends far beyond the conventional borders of composer, performer, and audience.

*To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door, or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums, or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks, or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are all contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance.*²⁰

²⁰ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 9.

It would seem that criticism would have a natural place in this larger musical world, which accepts all persons present within the concert experience. The critic, as a member of the audience, would be included in that capacity, but Small specifically excludes the act of criticism.

Given the mercantile and nonparticipatory nature of today's concert world, criticism is a perfectly honourable profession, but we should remember that wherever people participate fully in musical performance or where musicking is part of a larger social, religious, or political ritual, *there is no need for critics.*²¹ [emphasis mine]

Small is not suggesting that there is no role for the critic, but that it only developed as the musical world became more distant from a participatory ideal, and judging by his tone, intrinsically flawed. Particularly important is the idea of music becoming a “mercantile” practice. This moves music away from being a participatory act and towards a process of passive consumption, defining the world in which criticism can even exist, since it functions as a part of consumption, rather than the creation of music.

Small's concern is that the rise of the critic coincided with the decline of amateur performance, and through that a decline in “the confidence of many people in their own musical judgement.” He attributes to critics the ability to retard the listeners development as musickers, as Small suggests that listeners might use criticism to supplant any attempt at their own assessment.²² However, his choice of figures who replaced the critic in earlier “perfect” eras, when music making was apparently more participatory, gives little confidence that listeners were ever capable or allowed to rely on their own judgement.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Ibid., 34.

In the medieval and Renaissance church there were no critics, nor were there any in the world of palace or castle or royal or ducal opera house; as like as not it was the archbishop, king, or duke who decided what was good or bad, and everyone else agreed with him. In general, the princes' ability to dictate musical taste related to the strength of his political power; Louis XIV of France, in his day the most powerful man in Europe, was also its leading tastemaker.²³

In these models, some individuals are still dictating taste for others and with far larger mechanisms for enforcement of their beliefs than today's critic might have. The current critic has no options of capital punishment should her will be disobeyed – she cannot order the guillotine to a reader who goes to a concert she deems unworthy, or burn at the stake to a performer she dislikes. Whatever power the critic may hold, she cannot forcibly alter the mind of a reader. She may participate in the readers' thought process, provide information that might inform their own ideas about music, but she has no way of supplanting their own judgement.

What the critic provides in the world of musicking is another voice – an educated voice, preferably an articulate one, but only one other. Her role is reflective – an attempt to capture what she heard in words. By doing so, she extends the act of musicking beyond those present to actually hear the music – the performers, the audience, the roadies, the ushers. Those who read her writing are participating in the musicking one step removed – through reading and experiencing her experience of the music. And the critic is musicking by both listening and creating a work in response to the sounds of the performers.

²³ Ibid.



As a music critic, these are some of the thoughts and issues that govern my interaction with the world – issues of power and performance, genre and publication, and an understanding of community. I believe that all of these issues affect all critics, although perhaps in different ways. Despite the interactions of power that govern much of the critic's work, the process of creating criticism is still a fairly solitary practice. Therefore, the powers that govern the individual critic must also be determined and understood by the individual, and my conception of what criticism is, how it works, and what it means may apply only to me. However, the purpose of this thesis was for me to discover the larger world around my work and to understand how I fit within it as a critic.

There are some geographic boundaries to this critical world. I have produced works for publications in the United States and Canada, and my understanding of criticism and these genres of music are restricted to a North American experience. However, equally important to my physical community are the imagined communities that my work discusses and with which it interacts. For music criticism, this imagined community is a musical community – an associated group determined not by geography but a shared interest in a particular genre of music. Just as a national imagined community would need to be understood in order to be addressed effectively, to write effectively for a particular musical community, the critic must understand its shared culture. The first step in understanding my relationships within my field would be to understand the groups I am dealing with, those I will be personally navigating in my

process of gaining authority. Particularly, this means addressing and understanding the nature of classical and world musics, as well as the publications that support them.

The two communities I have chosen to work with would, at first glance, seem to have little in common. They each require of the critic completely different banks of knowledge and vocabulary that rarely overlap. Their perceived places within Western society are portrayed as opposites, with classical music representing the highest art form, rather than entertainment, and world music as a whole representing the populist illiterate “native,” even in instances where the traditions within it far predate western classical music and potentially overtake it in complexity. Of course, these positions are highly problematic and have been extensively challenged within the academic community. It is the responsibility of the critic to understand these conflicts in order to speak about the genres authoritatively, and they are issues I will delve into more deeply throughout this work.

What these communities share, and what prompted me to want to deal with them together in this thesis, is their position on the margins of the larger musical community. This presents a challenge to a critic. In a marginalized genre, the general desire is for the audience base to expand, so that it can attract a larger proportion of public interest, and through that gain power. However, particularly with these two musical fields, a great deal of their power comes from their elite status as music for select listeners, and so there arises a deep conflict between the fear of popularization and a necessity of listener devotion to continue its existence. The critic can navigate this by trying to write in such a

way that will attract and interest readers who are just entering the musical community, as well as benefit those established within it.

Although publications support communities as a whole, there is not necessarily consistency among the members of the community, particularly when it comes to the knowledge of a genre. Within an interested community, there will be readers with extensive knowledge in the genre, as well as readers who are entering the field for the first time. The critic must balance a need to be both thorough and educational in explaining the music she discusses to those with little experience, with her ability to be insightful and to attract and hold the attention of knowledgeable readers. She must adapt her language to these unique communities, and perform as a critic who will influence upon all of the readers within it.

Musical communities function similarly to any other imagined community – they necessitate some kind of support to maintain their existence. In situations where the community is centered in a physical location, there are opportunities for some face-to-face interactions in social situations – concerts, festivals, lectures. Within a city, a musical community can cohere in “real” ways, as individuals begin to recognize one another at public events. However, in addressing the community as a whole, the members may have no more interaction between one another than would anyone else in that same geographic area. Therefore, as with any imagined community, the publication is necessary to reinforce its member’s connections to one another.

There are a variety of publications that serve a musical community. Since not all of them serve the community in the same way, the publication space will also, in turn,

influence the way the critic writes – asking her to adapt a manner of performance appropriately to each situation. The daily newspaper is a general interest publication, which also happens to include music. The information on music needs to appeal not only to those who have sought it out, but also the casual reader with only a passing interest. Therefore, the critic must use more general language, and the level of explanation for more esoteric works or genres is significantly higher. Magazines function as mainstays for many musical communities, as they are not situated in geographical communities but communities of interest – confirming for the enthusiast the sufficient involvement of others in the field to inspire the production of a magazine. The reader must seek out these publications, so the critic is freer to speak to a readership with more knowledge and interest, and adjust her writing accordingly.

The concept of the “print-economy” was created in a time when the written media was directly associated with a physical object. With the advent of the Internet, the written word has expanded beyond the borders of the printed page, and it offers a new space to support communities. However, unlike print media, which can only serve as supplementary to an imagined community, the Internet forms a space that is both confirmation of a community and a community in itself. Its participatory nature, with readers having the ability to comment upon writing and interact with one another bridges a gap between the imagined community and a virtual community – without the primordial face-to-face contact, but with a level of interactivity that goes beyond the traditional imaginary concept. This new space also opens up new forums for critical work through communities surrounding webpages, and even individualized spaces in the

form of blogs. Each new space, and new community, creates new expectations and possibilities for the performance of criticism.



This thesis comprises a combination of my practical work as well as my reflections on the process of writing and the issues that arose in my practice of criticism. It is divided by musical communities, and subdivided by the publications that support them. I begin with a discussion of classical music criticism, and particularly the print publications that support it. The nature of classical music as a longstanding and established cultural force lends itself to established media, particularly a place within the daily newspaper. It is not a genre that often finds itself within alternative media, although as I discovered, occasionally opportunities will arise in independent and campus publications. However, in these instances, the audience for the work is so different that it allows for an entirely different approach to writing about classical music. World music is relatively young as a genre within Western culture, and this grants it considerably less attention from the established media enjoyed by classical music. However, it has a greater potential to gain from exposure to new media, particularly websites and blogs, and through these new forms of “print economies” not only broaden its own communities but also create entirely new ones that are virtual, rather than imagined. Throughout it all, I began to see more clearly the interactions and differences between the genres and media, and also came to better understand my place within the larger world of critical discourse.

❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧ CLASSICAL MUSIC

The classical music critic has the dubious distinction of holding the eldest of the critical positions devoted to music in the West. The music has captured the attention of those with sufficient desire to pen their responses as far back as the eighteenth century, though they were often published in travel journals, rather than in any form of mass media. The ability to express thoughts about music in words has long been seen as a display of cultural capital, and served as a mark of breeding and class as these early critics took the grand tour of Europe. Of course, critical attention since then has been granted to many different genres of music, but the classical critic holds particular weight, if only from the force of history. He – and the average classical critic will be a 52-year old white male with a graduate degree, so it is a he – is the arbiter of taste for the music that is more than music – the music that is “art.”¹

Much of the mythology that surrounds classical music is based on the common understanding that the music is Art, as opposed to entertainment. Works that fall in the classical canon must “transcend” the boundaries of human capability, be divine, be genius. The composers are touched by God, given the gift of music that as often as not would drive them mad. To say the absolute least, according to Willa J. Conrad, critic for *The New Jersey Star-Ledger* and project director for a recent study on classical music

¹ Willa J. Conrad, director, "The Classical Music Critic: A Survey of Music Critics at General-Interest and Specialized News Publications in America," (Music Critics Association of North America and National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, 2005), 10.

critics, the music is beyond social influence: “classical music is not and never has been about race, ethnic background, gender, or current cultural trends. At its purest, it has been about pursuing the expression of timeless messages of the heart and the soul, of trying to tap into a kind of universal humanity.”²

The idea that a music so rich in history would have no bearing on the society it existed within, or that society upon it, is a contradiction that “extends to the nature of the music itself; on the one hand it is regarded as the model and paradigm for all musical experience...and on the other it is regarded as somehow unique and not to be subjected to the same modes of inquiry as other musics especially in respect to its social meanings.”³ Concepts of universality and transcendence have been questioned thoroughly in academic circles, but still persist in the eyes of the public, and it is with public perception that the critic must be concerned, as it is to them who she speaks. Despite the illogical premise of such concepts, in Western society classical music still remains on a pedestal. It has become almost mythical in its own grandeur, an untouchable and impenetrable force from on high, surviving scrutiny and questioning to remain dominant.

The persistence of this belief lies in the discourse surrounding music, including its place in the media. Therefore, an important player in the shaping of the public’s understanding of classical music is the critic, who addresses them most directly and has authority as a knowledgeable resource. Critics have greater access to the public’s attention through mass media outlets than figures with comparable authority in other

² Ibid., 8.

³ Small, 3.

areas of the field, like a performer or scholar. From a position of both power and access, the critic can be instrumental in either perpetuating or discouraging an idealistic and unrealistic view of classical music. By beginning to provide social context and meanings for works of classical music, the critic can attempt to broaden the public's understanding of the music beyond the mythologies.

Despite the view of classical music as a dominant cultural force, it is not necessarily supported in any kind of tangible sense. The audiences for classical music are marginal in comparison to other musical genres, and it represents only a small part of the record industry. The position of privilege that classical music holds in our society may not be in proportion to the public's interest in the art.

This privileging of Western classical music above all other musics is a strange and contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, it is claimed to be an intellectual and spiritual achievement that is unique in the world's musical cultures (for me the claim is summed up by the reported remark of a famous scientist who, when asked what message should be included in a missile to be fired off in search of other intelligent life in the universe, replied, "we could send them Bach, but that would be boasting"); on the other hand, it appeals to only a very tiny minority of people, even within Western industrialised societies; classical music records account for only around 3 percent of all record sales.⁴

The community of classical music is thinly spread – comprising of a very small group of people who have a demand for this arcane musical form, one that is as Small said above, "unique in the world's musical cultures." This places two particular strains upon the work of critics. The first is that the marginalization of classical music often stirs an outcry from both the interested public and arts organizations foretelling the possible death of the genre – the closing of musical institutions, and decline in funding for those that

⁴ Ibid.

remain.⁵ This results in a feeling that the genre requires not only attention, but also active support to continue. The task is often handed to critics, who are not only often the most prominent voices having both authority and media presence, but also are often the only ones engaged in the debate who can claim any kind of objective distance from the issue. As I mentioned at the outset, the critic must distance herself from arts institutions, because by allying herself with any particular institution or cause, a critic gives up the perceived impartiality of her position. A critic can be a trusted ally for the musical institutions, but also has an obligation to her own position as observer to be honest in her assessments of the works presented to her.

Propaganda is no part of criticism. The critic who becomes the champion of a composer or an artist may be a public servant; he may advance the art he loves. But he does so in another capacity. And he does so, to his peril as a critic...He has sacrificed, for the time being, a fundamental of his code.⁶

In criticism, there is an expectation of impartiality, however impossible that might be. Impartiality is a loaded word, for certain, but in the context of journalism, it is often used as an indicator of lack of unreasonable bias, and affiliation with the publication before any outside institution. The greater issue becomes the equation of being impartial and being truthful, because the public must believe that the critic is being truthful in order to

⁵ While it is true that there has been a significant decrease in spending on the arts, and many institutions are in grave financial danger, I do not feel that it has been clearly established that classical music *ever* held a place of relative prominence in the cultural field, being at almost all points in history the music of the few and the elite. However, the death of classical music has been foretold in countless commentaries and speeches, and is often used as a rallying point for arts funding. Whether there is any actual danger of it happening isn't entirely relevant – public perception forces a critic to at least navigate the issue in her own work, if not address it directly.

⁶ Thompson, 33.

take her words seriously, be open to influence, and to grant her authority. Therefore, a sense of “critical distance” must be visible in the work, in order to maintain authority.

The second effect that a decline in public support of classical music can have is a change in the readers, and therefore, a change in the role of the critic to reach them. With the historical equation of classical music and high art, and certainly cultural capital, it is natural that there would be a direct connection between being knowledgeable about the field and being capable of enjoying it. Particularly in the case of “new music,” or 20th and 21st century compositions, there is a perception that this music must be thoroughly and academically understood in order to be enjoyed. Whether this is true or not, there remains an expectation for the critic to function also in a role as educator. In times past, this role may not have been as significant, when the critic could assume some amount of knowledge on the part of her readers. However, in the current cultural climate, it is less likely that the readers of a general interest publication will have had significant training or knowledge of classical music. With a potentially unfamiliar and unreceptive readership, the critic must be more careful in this role – making choices in her manner of address and content to appeal to and interest a disinterested public. In part, this will be a process of providing basic information about the work, the performers, and other salient details. However, it is the providing of context that comprises a large part of the critic’s ability to break down mythologies surrounding classical music – giving her readers an opportunity for comprehension both of the “music itself” as well as its social situation.

These requirements upon the work of the critic play out differently in different media outlets. Her work for a newspaper will be different from that for a magazine,

simply because the readership she will be addressing varies in their level of interest and knowledge of the subject matter. Unique to classical music criticism is a large place in the daily newspaper – one that in many ways perpetuates the position of classical music as an active and valued part of contemporary society. Classical criticism also appears frequently in magazines devoted to music, and occasionally manages to step outside of the common mass media and find a place in alternative media. Each medium must be approached with the understanding of its benefits and limitations, and the critic must adapt her work to use each effectively.

THE DAILY NEWSPAPER

To begin any discussion of contemporary classical music criticism, the best place to start would be the medium most associated with the craft – the daily newspaper. The timely review of concerts represents the greatest proportion of the practicing critic's work, and therefore the medium is an important one to the field. The newspaper has become an omnipresent part of our society – an object of reference and of record, of consistency and information.

Newspapers have for so long been such a deeply embedded institution in Western urban culture that the practice of reading them has a momentum of its own, independent of the psychological needs that brought it about in the first place. Like the practice of instilling literacy among the young, acquiring useful current information is generally accepted as essential in a civilization in which creature comforts and material progress depend upon the mastery of information.⁷

Acquiring news is essential to the functioning of our civilization, and the newspaper has been ubiquitous for over a century. Even in this digital age, it is still the primary vehicle by which most people receive news.⁸ What do readers look for in their newspapers? “The primary function of newspapers is to communicate to the human race what its members do, feel, and think.”⁹ This is the goal of newspapers as a group, and each individual newspaper narrows its focus to communicate not with the human race

⁷ Leo Bogart, *Press and Public: Who Reads What, When, Where, and Why in American Newspapers* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), 111.

⁸ John Vivian, *The Media of Mass Communication*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn And Bacon, 1997), 81.

⁹ George L. Bird and Frederic E. Merwin, eds., *The Press and Society: A Book of Readings* (New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1951), 108. Although this reference may seem outdated, more recent textbooks on Mass Communication have significantly shifted their focus away from traditional media and towards more recent developments such as radio, television, and especially the Internet. Even in this instance, the newspaper is receding from public consciousness.

perhaps, but with the community it serves, providing those within it with information that they need.

But keeping up with the news (however broadly defined) does not merely have utilitarian function, it also establishes and reinforces the connections between the individual and his social environment, defined narrowly as his home town or community, or defined more broadly as his country or the world. Newspapers, among the mass media, uniquely express this social bond, because of the sheer volume of information they carry from which every reader can select what is relevant.¹⁰

It is not only through the selection of information that the newspaper is relevant – it also serves as the physical confirmation of the imagined community.

Part of the imagined community rests in the ceremony of consuming this representation of social bonds, of shared information.

The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing...creates this extraordinary mass ceremony...It is performed in silent privacy, in the layer of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.¹¹

The reader is connected to those in his or her community by the knowledge that this information is being shared by others. It is also, as I mentioned in the introduction, a connection reaffirmed by the presence of the newspaper throughout the geographic community.

At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.¹²

¹⁰ Bogart, 111.

¹¹ Anderson, 35.

¹² Ibid., 36.

The connection between the imagined community and a location is further reinforced by the nature of newspapers. A unique attribute of this particular media is that they are so strongly geographically situated – based from and identified with one particular location (*The Boston Globe, The Washington Post, The Vancouver Sun*). However, there are also some newspapers that serve either a national readership (*The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Globe and Mail*) or actually have a larger readership outside their home city than within it (*The New York Times*). Each of these establishes a different sort of community – local, national, interest-based, or even a particular social class.

One consistent element among all of these communities is that the newspaper is held in reverence, perhaps unspoken, as an object with power. One aspect of its power is inherent in the object itself. The concept of the paper as an object of authority is due in part to the stability of print media. Radio and television, like music, are temporal media, where the information is presented within a span of time and cannot easily be recaptured. The Internet bridges this gap somewhat, being a print medium itself, but it is easily and constantly updated; the visual of a headline may change from one minute to the next, as a different breaking story emerges to replace the last one at the top of the page. Print media has a solidity, a finality, to it because once published it cannot be changed. Newspapers are objects that can be saved and catalogued, regarded as objects of record; although still largely disposable, used to line birdcages or wrap fish, they still maintain a sense of permanency.¹³

¹³ Vivian, 8.

However, perhaps more importantly than the physicality of the object is the effect it has on the information within it. The newspaper is the standard of the “general interest” publication – one designed so that each reader can select the items from within the paper that are the most important to them – international news, local news, interest specific like sports or arts – all the necessary information to situate the reader within a variety of different communities – global, local, and imagined. Since the format provides such an easy way for the readers to assess exactly the information that interests and is necessary to them, it communicates directly to them and to their needs. However, the variety of information within a newspaper serves not only the readers, but actually lends authority to the information. Since a newspaper is designed to contain everything that a person ought to know – for survival, for community, for civilized life – it is presumed that everything within a newspaper is important. The reader may have the choice to decide what the most important information for them is, but there is automatic authority granted to any information that falls within its scope. This is an incredible power for this object to hold, and at times, this position of influence may even transcend the perceived value of the information itself.



This may be the case with classical music. The relatively small portion of the population who may have a vested interest in this particular kind of music would not seem to warrant the kind of continued attention it receives. If it were only through the force of the interest of the classical music community, there is no way in which classical music could maintain its privileged position within our society. It is through auxiliary

elements – including educational institutions, a historical equation with cultural capital, and particularly the media – that it is able to remain in its position of power and authority. The greatest of these is its continued presence within daily newspapers. These objects of record and general interest still contain a great deal of information about a subject that appeals to very few of its readers. The equalizing influence that the daily paper has on the relative value of information within it creates a sense of balance between the different topics it addresses, and therefore this field with little popular support gains credibility as an area of worth and importance.

The importance of the daily paper to classical music criticism cannot be overemphasized. Looking at the work of music critics in North America, as represented by a survey done by the Music Critics Association of North American in conjunction with the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, 74% of critics have half or more of their work appearing in a daily paper. 46% of the critics worked for papers in major metropolitan areas (New York, Boston, Toronto, etc.), while the remaining 25% were in mid to small size city dailies, or regional/suburban daily papers. After newspapers, the next largest point of distribution was in magazines, at 15%. Any of these aforementioned categories dwarf the remaining options of Weekly Alternative papers (2%), online resources (5%) and other (7%).¹⁴

It is through this medium, then, that most critics are employed and continue to practice their craft, and also partially explains why they still have something to write about. It is clear that the newspaper is of paramount importance to the field. What must

¹⁴ Conrad, 12.

be discussed now is in what capacities a critic serves the newspaper, and how its format influences her writing.

A newspaper, in its strictest sense, is a paper containing news, and as such, the information within it is required to be both current and pertinent. It might be possible to say that music criticism, not being “news,” has no place in the newspaper at all, and particularly criticism of classical music, since most of the repertoire and concepts discussed belong to centuries long past. However, the types of criticism being written, mostly reviews of concerts that were performed within a day or two of publication, are timely enough to approximate event reporting. In addition to being representative of the opinion of the writer, these reviews are an accounting of events in the arts community, a report on what happened on that particular evening. The critic is providing the news of the music world.

The newspaper critic generally produces two types of work. The first is the most commonly identified type of criticism, the concert review. These pieces are short, often no more than 250-300 words, and each one restricts itself to a particular concert or event. As works of both reporting and overt opinion, they allow the writer a significant amount of freedom to express personal opinions in the creating of their judgement of the quality of a concert. In addition to these, a critic will also often produce feature articles – sizable pieces that can go into depth about performers or arts organizations. Although the same person writing both, there is often a distinction made between “criticism” and “arts reporting.” Feature articles are specifically designed to fit more closely within the realm of news, and a writer crafting one is expected to adhere to journalistic principles of

impartiality, attempting to avoid stating her own opinion overtly and attempting to represent her subject, rather than herself. Reviews certainly cannot be false or libellous, but as they are the opinions of the individual critic, they have more freedom to portray a sense of distance and objectivity.

The consistent element within each situation is that of the readers – a critic's sense of this community will affect her writing. In this case, the main challenge is the level of education and interest of the average reader. As a newspaper is a general interest publication, the newspaper's tacit acceptance of classical music as a subject does not necessarily translate into an interested and educated readership. According to the study of North American classical critics mentioned earlier, 92% of critics agree that their readers care about classical music, but only 64% believe that they have a basic understanding of the subject.¹⁵ This is a challenge to any classical music writer, who must further understand how to address a general readership to engage them in a very limited topic.



Although facts and figures can provide some proof of the importance of the daily newspaper and the makeup of the readership, in a craft that is truly a practical art, it is easiest and most valuable to understand the constraints and freedoms of working at a newspaper by actually doing so. I was afforded this opportunity during the summer of 2005, when I was a freelance writer for *The Washington Post*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26.

The Washington Post is one of the most widely read daily papers in the United States, reaching 51% of people in the Washington Designated Market Area (DMA) on a daily basis, and 42% on Sundays.¹⁶ This far outstrips the local readership of any of the other top ten papers, including the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*.¹⁷ Over the course of the ten weeks that I was in residence in Washington, I attended and reviewed seven concerts in the DC area. These included performances by the National Symphony Orchestra and Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, chamber music concerts, and solo recitals in a variety of venues, including Wolf Trap, an outdoor amphitheatre in Vienna, Virginia, the Strathmore Center in Bethesda, Maryland, several churches and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The reviews appeared in the arts section of the paper, either under a general heading of Classical Music or Performing Arts, or with a review-specific headline. I have included six of these reviews here, particularly those that I felt gave me trouble or gave rise to interesting issues. However, each concert provided a different challenge for me as a developing writer and critic, and served to illuminate different aspects of my future career.

¹⁶ *The Washington Post General Marketing Book 2005* [PDF] (accessed 8 January 2006); available from http://advertising.washpost.com/the_market/2005General.pdf.

¹⁷ It should be noted that this is only measuring circulation within the paper's home area – the *New York Times* may have a far wider national and international circulation than the *Washington Post*, but within New York City, it reaches 12 out of every 100 households.

My first review for *The Washington Post* was of a concert by the Palestrina Choir, connected with the Washington Early Music Festival. It was a program of early music, mostly by the composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. Although this was not my first experience writing at a newspaper, having worked for the Indiana Daily Student during my undergraduate degree, it brought to bear an entirely new set of standards. My review was going to be distributed in one of the largest papers in the country, and one with a reputation for its arts coverage. I would attend the concert on a Saturday night, and my review was due by 11 o'clock the following morning. On top of it all, it was my first piece, and so would be highly indicative of my ability to take on future work and also go a long way to establishing my authority with my editors and supervisor. I felt my work was being scrutinized and evaluated in ways I had never even imagined, even if the scrutiny was only in own perception of the situation and not the result of editorial comments, but in my mind, the bar had been raised to dizzying heights.

Aside from my nervousness, the most difficult and immediate problem was the constraint of space. The concert had been almost two hours long, and trying to capture the entire experience in such a short space was far more difficult than I had imagined. The final review counted in at only 210 words, whereas my original draft was closer to 600. It was mostly an issue of determining which details were most salient – was it more important to name individual works, to spend time describing the performance style of such an ensemble, or discuss the history of the festival as a whole? In retrospect, there are plenty of changes I might have made, but this first experience made me think most

clearly about what was most important, and also most interesting in a review. However, the necessity for brevity can also cause some larger problems.

Generalities, like calling a work “genius” and “timeless,” can be dangerous, having the tendency to perpetuate stereotypes and ideas that critical musicologists spend their lives and work trying to problematize. But at the same time, they are often necessary. When the constraints of space and a general readership are presented, it is difficult to fathom how else works or artists could be characterized efficiently. The fact that these terms are loaded often works to a critic’s advantage, because they commutate ideas of sound or experience that, although perhaps less than ideal, still help illuminate the concert in ways that could otherwise only be done through extensive explanation. In this case, the concept of music being “transcendent” is a highly contested one, and a word that I used rather carelessly in this piece. Upon reflection, I think that it was appropriate, had I used it in a slightly different context. With religious works, it was the composer’s intent to create sounds that were greater than human, which transcended the limits of earthly concerns to travel directly to the ears of heaven. This was the intention, and although no work is truly without mortal bounds, as a description of the performance it seemed appropriate to the occasion. Had I more space, I might have been able either to qualify my statement or find another description. In this instance, it was an expedient way to convey the description I wanted, but the issue of balance between expediency and accuracy arose again and again in my reviews of classical music, and become far more prevalent, and more problematic, in my work with world music.

C4 MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2005

STYLE

THE WASHINGTON POST

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Palestrina Choir

The Washington Early Music Festival, now in its second summer, is a young institution celebrating very old music. This year, the festival theme is "Music From Spain and its Colonies," some of which the Palestrina Choir explored in its Saturday night concert at St. John's Catholic Church. The choir — 12 unaccompanied voices strong — sang motets and hymns by Tomas Luis de Victoria, a Spanish liturgical composer from the 16th century and a contemporary of the choir's namesake, the Italian composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina.

The individual works — the motets "Ne timeas, Maria" and "Sancta Maria," for example — tend to blend together, but the sound is unique to this type of music. The singers use no vibrato, which makes the sound pure and clean, like tracing a finger along the edge of a water glass.

The potential downside to no vibrato and no instruments is that the choir is entirely exposed, and every slip of intonation becomes immediately obvious — a cracked jar among crystal. But the Palestrina Choir was nearly perfect, with only the occasional hairline fracture. They have an exceptional technique and sound, which, combined with the beautiful performance space of St. John's, gave the audience a taste of the transcendent effect of this music.

— Claire Marie Blaustein

Figure 1 – *The Washington Post* – Monday, June 13, 2005; C04

With my second piece, on a recital given by violinist Yang Liu, I was immediately faced with two of a critic's demons: writing about my own instrument and writing a negative review. As a violinist, I was excessively well equipped to evaluate the performance, and Liu chose a program I myself had played or was at least familiar with, meaning that I had further ammunition with which to discuss, and criticize, his recital.

Despite the reputation that critics have of being cold and mean-spirited, one of the hardest things to do is to write about a concert that disappoints. The negative reaction I had to the concert was heightened by my nervousness as a relatively inexperienced critic. I was reluctant to pass judgement, as I was not yet comfortable with my role and the expectation that I do so. However, my authority as a critic was confirmed for me by the way I was treated at the venue. Afterwards, the performer's publicist approached me by name, without my having offered it, and introduced me to others by title, as being "from *The Washington Post*." That simple statement carried such power that I began to understand that, despite my reluctance, I had a role to play. I had been accepted within the power dynamic at work, and therefore had a responsibility to myself to establish equal measure of authority in my writing.

In the end, I had to be honest, although the final review came out much softer than any original drafts, probably as a result of my equivocation on the best way to approach the task before me. The aftermath of this particular review, however, was interesting. It was because of this review that I received my first reader mail – a letter from one concerned person, who noted that I had not mentioned the name of the accompanist in the review. This was a mistake on my part, the result of cutting a 500-word review down to

under 300, but it confirmed something for me – people were actually reading my work – not only reading, but paying attention and responding. This had a dual effect – mortification that I had made such an elementary mistake, but also elation that my words were actually reaching someone. It may not have been the response I had hoped for, but it was a response, which further developed my sense that I was accountable to my readers and heightened the importance of the readers in my process of writing criticism.

PERFORMING ARTS

Yang Liu

The buzz at the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage concert by violinist Yang Liu wasn't necessarily for the player — it was for the instrument. The Lady Tennant, a violin by Antonio Stradivari, is the most expensive instrument ever sold at auction, going for \$2,032,000 at Christie's in April. The anonymous buyer gave it to the Stradivari Society, which then lent it to Liu.

Liu had the instrument for only three weeks when he took the stage Wednesday evening, and it seemed the two had not yet found their perfect fit.

The balance between violin and piano was a little off, particularly during Beethoven's "Spring" Sonata. The violin lines were clearly articulated, but sometimes overpowered by the piano.

Liu had a tendency to be overly meticulous. Everything was clean, but there was little feeling of spontaneity. The Bach Chaconne in D Minor was lovely, but Prokofiev's Second Violin Sonata was the best example of the capabilities of both the player and the instrument. The fast second movement was more vibrant than the earlier repertoire, and the violin responded beautifully to the strident playing necessary for Prokofiev.

Stradivarius instruments are remarkable, but the player and the violin still must get to know each other. This was the first performance for Liu and his Lady Tennant, but it certainly won't be the last.

— Claire Marie Blaustein



KENNEDY CENTER

Yang Liu performed with a Stradivarius on the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage.

Figure 2 – *The Washington Post* -Friday, June 17, 2005; C07

If approaching a review about an imperfect performance on my own instrument for Yang Liu was difficult, the prospect of writing something similar about one of my personal idols, Joshua Bell, was far more intimidating. Again, the end result was less than caustic, but did reflect what I thought of the performance – technically brilliant, but acoustically soggy.

The difference here was in my mindset. I no longer had the same fear of my position that I had held earlier. The process had become more natural. I was no longer afraid of being “found out,” of someone catching me doing work for which I was unprepared or unqualified. I had become confident in my own qualifications, and secure in my authority to say what I had to say. I believe it was a sign of my growth as a critic that the idea of not saying what I thought never crossed my mind.

THE WASHINGTON POST

ArtsSATURDAY, JULY 9, 2005 **C5**

The NSO Brings Out The Big Guns

Rain couldn't keep the audience away from Wolf Trap Thursday, especially when "Russian Bells and Cannons" beckoned. The National Symphony Orchestra and conductor Emil de Cou's all Tchaikovsky program featured two of the classical world's greatest crowd-pleasers — the "1812" Overture and violinist Joshua Bell.

Bell holds the rare position of a classical music superstar. His playing proves that he is deserving of the title, and his performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto was no exception.

Bell projects a sense of comfort and ease, as if the famously difficult passages of the concerto are nothing to fret over. It was unfortunate that the humidity dampened both his sound and spirit, occasionally making the brilliant playing slightly soggy. It was still a masterly and passionate performance, and it bodes well for his new CD of the concerto coming out this fall.

It says something about Bell that the NSO pulled out the heavy artillery to balance the program: The U.S. Army Choir and a battery of cannons joined the orchestra for its traditional summer performance of the "1812" Overture.

It's really just the last 45 seconds of the Overture that everyone is waiting for, with its famous triumphal theme and blasting cannons. It was appropriately grandiose, but the artillery did little more for me than almost cause a coronary. Selections from the opera "The Maid of Orleans" touched my heart in a more pleasant way.

The lesser known piece was poignant in its contrast between the innocence of a young Joan of Arc and the brutality of her later battles, and the solo by assistant principal flute Thomas Robertello was particularly touching. The piece still fit into the militaristic theme of the evening, but it was a welcome relief from the constant aggression of the "1812" Overture and "Slavonic March."

Tchaikovsky may have his share of splashy spectaculars, but his work is more than just special effects — it is the passion, not the cannons, that makes him so beloved.

— Claire Marie Blaustein

Figure 3 – *The Washington Post* – Saturday, July 9, 2005; C05

There are moments where writing a review can be hindered by outside forces – the late hour, illness, or other personal issues. In this case, my personal issues were centered in my anger and the need to calm my personal indignation long enough to produce a coherent review of the concert by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Again, the final product represents only a portion of my original draft, in which I spent a considerable amount of time chastising both the behaviour of the soloist, who seemed disinterested in even being on stage, and an audience member, who roused my ire by answering her cell phone in the middle of the performance, and fiddling with a plastic bag during the rest of it.

This piece clarified for me one of the differences between newspaper criticism and other outlets. Although I was allowed complete freedom of opinion, I felt that there was an unspoken requirement of constraint, of civility, that came with the position. It asks the critics to be honest, but not spiteful, and to voice opinions with justification. In part, this comes from the tone of other newspaper critics with whom I was familiar, who, even when completely panning a performance or an artist, would do so with ample reasoning, and often with softer words than could have been chosen.

It also can be dangerous to go too far into negative assessments because often they will give the perception that the critic is being personally biased, rather than accurate. In the words of critic Oscar Thompson:

On paper, the angry word looks and reads unfair, even though it may hit the nail squarely on the head. Passion savors of bias, though it may be passion in a good cause...Emotional writing breeds distrust of opinion. The desire to obliterate or

to humiliate is difficult to reconcile with impartiality. The crusading critic is likely to become more propagandist than critic.¹⁸

The critic must maintain some pretence of objectivity in her writing in order to be truthful, even if the truth would entail the kind of vicious response that I first created. However, it would have gone further to damage my credibility than it would have to soothe my seething at the event.

The balance of power here is more apparent. Although the critic can be seen as an autonomous force, her authority comes in great measure from the publication that employs her, such as mine coming from being associated with *The Washington Post*. Especially in my case, the institution had a far greater reputation than I, and therefore considerable power over me. Had I been an established critic, the balance would have been different, as I would have enough capital of my own to say what I pleased. However, the capital the paper was lending me was far greater than what I was giving them, and so I felt I could not risk their anger, and potentially that of the Baltimore Symphony as well, as I had little evidence to back up my claims to professionalism. It was better, in this instance, for me to temper my response and court the power of all institutions involved, without sacrificing the claim I had on the ability to produce the valid and articulate opinion that I needed to establish my own authority, than to damage these relationships by speaking the most blatant version of the truth.

It is fortunate that fear of my editors restrained me from that course, as the potential consequences to my future credibility were only apparent to me upon later

¹⁸ Thompson, 138.

reflection. Had I been employed by a different organization, or not employed at all and writing for myself in some other forum, the piece would have been entirely different. I would have taken as much space and time as I felt were warranted to get my opinions down on paper. I would have spit and fumed and cursed with all the abandon I felt, and been every bit as vicious as I wanted. However, with newspapers, the writer represents not only herself but also the publication, and that must serve to temper the nature of any review.

Inflammatory writing may be attractive for its tendency to be evocative prose, and in an instance where the audience had been less impressed with the work, I might have leaned far more on my incendiary vocabulary. However, that kind of review would have not only served to insult the performer, who may have deserved it, but also to insult the audience, who did not. The audience responded well to the work, and my complete dismissal of the performance as inferior would have also been a sign that their judgement was faulty. It was better for my ire to be understated than overt, I still feel, although I keep the original draft in my files for future reference.

THE WASHINGTON POST

SATURDAY, JULY 16, 2005 C5

Arts

The BSO, Treading Lightly and Brightly

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra concert at Strathmore on Thursday was a surprising mix of the serious and the lighthearted. Even the most serious composers occasionally move away from serious composition, although it may take extenuating circumstances to get them to do so. Shostakovich wrote his "Festival Overture" because the Soviet government told him to stop moping and write some festive music or face the consequences. He did, and it was played at a thrilling and breakneck pace by the BSO.

Wagner wrote "Der Meistersinger" because his pocketbook wouldn't withstand another unperformable epic like The "Ring" cycle, and the arrangement presented by conductor Mark Wigglesworth captured some favorite moments from Wagner's lone comic opera; it was played with extraordinary energy.

The only problem was the Dvorak Cello Concerto performed by BSO principal cellist Ilya Finkelshteyn. Though classical music does not have to be serious, the experience is diminished if the performer does not take it seriously. The lack of effort on the part of the cellist — failing to memorize the score and spending the rests doodling along with the orchestra — was detrimental to the visual effect *and* the sound of the piece.

The performers have an obligation to do their best for the people coming to the concert, and although in the end the audience clapped and cheered, it is sad to think that a good concert might have been great with more effort.

— Claire Marie Blaustein

Figure 4 – *The Washington Post* – Saturday, July 16, 2005; C05

When I was fortunate enough to see the National Symphony Orchestra performing the score to *The Wizard of Oz*, there was little in the evening for me to disparage – the playing was good, the audience responsive, the evening lovely. As a result, it was a positive review in all aspects, and as much a joy to write as the performance was to attend.

This review served as a different model for me, however, as several weeks after the show I discovered that I had been quoted. IMG Artists, the company that represented the project, used my review as a part of their promotional materials.

In summer of 2005, the program premiered to sold out crowds at Wolf Trap and the Ravinia Festival. Claire Marie Blaustein of *The Washington Post* declared, “It was an exciting evening, and the grander message of this event was truly something I found in my own back yard – the five children sitting next to me...who had never seen the movie before. They were as enraptured at their first sights of the Emerald City as I was seeing it with new eyes.”¹⁹

To a large extent, the authority we get originates in our perceived ability to influence readers and, through them, the commerce of music, to help the audience decide what is and is not worth their entertainment money. A positive review, like this one, can do wonders to validate any artistic experiment.

This brings to mind a common question for critics: how much of what we do is actually promotion? It is true that a positive review is beneficial to the artist, and a negative one unfortunate for them, but should a critic be any further involved in the active promotion of artists than I was? I would say not – that no consideration besides the critic’s own reaction to a work should be taken into account. In actively trying to

¹⁹ <http://www.imgartists.com/?page=artist&id=630>

promote an artist, the critic loses as much credibility as she might when being overly viscous towards one, as I was tempted to be towards the BSO. The perception of fairness, of unbiased judgement, must always be maintained in order to preserve authority. This is not to say that the critic will not have personal preferences, and voice them at times, but only that these personal issues will not overtake an accurate assessment of the performance.

The attention of this publicity agency also brings into question how real this authority is. Yes, I am “Claire Marie Blaustein of *The Washington Post*,” but how much does that mean? I am not Harold Schoenberg, Tim Page, or Virgil Thompson. I am not famous or well respected for my work, at least not yet. But the mark of the publication, especially one like *The Washington Post*, was sufficient to establish my authority and make my words useful, not only for the paper, but as an endorsement for the concept of the concert itself.

THE WASHINGTON POST

STYLE MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 2005 C9

Off to See — and Truly Hear — ‘The Wizard’

I saw “The Wizard of Oz” on TV when I was 5, sitting on my mother’s lap in my grandparents’ living room.

But I saw it again, and for the first time, on Friday night at Wolf Trap, where a screening of the movie was accompanied by the National Symphony Orchestra playing Herbert Stothart and Harold Arlen’s thoroughly imaginative score. Conductor Emil de Cou, with his trademark humor, welcomed the audience and advised them to clap or boo along with their favorite moments. He also told us to sing

along with the songs — but when we got home.

There are many technical challenges in a performance like this — not the least that the orchestra musicians must keep pace with a screen they cannot see and singers who cannot hear them. The NSO navigated all of these bumps in the yellow brick road, and having the music in the foreground of the film brought out elements and moments that usually go unnoticed. From the frightening tarantella of the Wicked Witch to the melodies of

“there’s no place like home,” the threads of the film are woven together by the music.

It was an exciting evening, and the grander message of this event was truly something I found in my own back yard — the five children sitting next to me, aged 2 to 6, who had never seen the movie before. They were as enraptured at their first sights of the Emerald City as I was seeing it with new eyes.

Together with the NSO, we were all off to see the Wizard.

— Claire Marie Blaustein

Classical music is already a marginal part of the wider musical world, but if there were possibly an even smaller subset, it would be reserved for new music. Those who are interested are devoted, and the rest of the world probably cares even less about new composers than those of the 18th and 19th century who have the mythology of greatness and genius behind them.

Because I have been trained to do so, my instinct was, and still is, to promote this music. As Susan McClary writes in her essay *Terminal Prestige*:

[M]uch of the university curriculum is devoted to a usually futile attempt at instilling a very artificial demand for academic music in young musicians. We shame students for their incorrigible tastes in popular music and browbeat them with abstract analytical devices in hopes that they will be influenced by, say, stochasticism and will maintain the illusion that this kind of abstract experimentation informs the future of music.²⁰

My undergraduate education fully turned me out with a feeling that somehow I just wasn't getting it, but with further exposure, and more study, I would come to understand and appreciate the artistic value of these works. My purpose as a critic became to promote a similar understanding in my readers. But to what end? I wished to support public interest in new music, but it begs the question – should it be supported at all?

Milton Babbitt dismissed such intervention in his essay “Who Cares if you Listen?”

Those well-meaning souls who exhort the public “just to *listen* to more contemporary music,” apparently on the theory that familiarity breeds passive acceptance. Or those, often the same well-meaning souls, who remind the composer of his ‘obligation to the public,’ while the public’s obligation to the

²⁰ Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. David Schwartz, Anahid Kassabian, and Lawrence Siegel (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 61.

composer is fulfilled, manifestly, by mere physical presence in the concert hall or before a loudspeaker.²¹

Babbitt scorned this kind of passive reception, believing that it gained nothing either for the public or for the composer. In addition, few critics have the technical knowledge to unravel the most esoteric performances, those with a complex mathematical or theoretical basis, or an impenetrable sonic front. Restricting this to my own situation and experience, rather than “familiarity breeding passive acceptance,” familiarity went further to breed contempt. Through repeated exposure I certainly wasn’t much closer to “getting” the music, or appreciating it particularly. It was difficult to fathom how my readers would have a different reaction, particularly in response to my writing, which given my lack of understanding, could be nothing more than vague.

Even while being indoctrinated through university I found it difficult to fathom how a music that no one wanted to hear, not just at its inception, but half a century later in the case of many of Babbitt’s own works, could represent the future of music. However, now in my work as a critic, and particularly in the instance of this concert, I was presented with works of which I had little comprehension and being asked to review them. I could have taken the tactic of giving my most blatant opinions of the work, but the sense that someone might appreciate this music, if not me, still held fast. I was unable to overcome my programming for this particular work, and although this is another instance where slander of the work might have been therapeutic for me and perhaps even interesting for the readers, I was concerned that it could be potentially

²¹ Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares If You Listen?,” in *Music in the Western World*, ed. Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin (New York: Schirmer Books, 1958), 532.

damaging to my authority as a critic. If I were seen in the public view, or at least that of those with interest in the subject, as being biased, or worse, *uneducated*, my judgements would be less effective in areas in which I had more knowledge and authority.

Sadly, the resulting review did little either to promote a more complete understanding of the works, as I had little myself, or to make any groundbreaking attempts at dissolving inaccurate expectations of public consumption or understanding of new music. I still inserted the comments that I felt could be justified – the concert was exceedingly long, and the performers were compelling – but as to the quality of the works themselves, I found myself without words to describe them. I have to hope that later in my career, I will feel more comfortable saying what I actually feel about these kinds of concerts, and not hiding behind a false sense of necessity to support these works. But in the meantime, I have to comfort myself that my illusions about new music are not unique to me, nor firm in their hold, as I recognize the problematic nature of my education about avant-garde composition.

C2 TUESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2005

STYLE

THE WASHINGTON POST

'Sounds of Slovenia'

The Capitol Hill Chamber Music Festival gave its second "Sounds of Slovenia" concert Sunday at St. Mark's Church, and the few but stalwart attendees were presented with an epic exploration of music by recent Slovenian composers.

The program offered a wide variety of sounds and styles. Composer Brina Jez was present at the concert, and her work employed technical effects such as using a recording as second player to violinist Branko Brezavscek in "Silence or They Are All So Nice and Handsome."

In contrast, Ivo Petric's Sonata for Flute and Piano, performed by artistic director Jeffrey Cohan and pianist Jeffrey Chappell, reminded one of sonatas by Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

But the crowning work of the evening was a world premiere

MUSIC

"Four Temperaments," by Igor Dekleva. This set of songs was hauntingly performed by soprano Kate Vetter Cain and Chappell. The final song, "Cholera," memorialized the cholera epidemic of 1998, and mixed in elements of the Catholic requiem chant "Dies Irae" with the Slovenian text in a heart-rending and twisted waltz.

Although hearing several works of eight composers gave a broad overview of styles, it also created a sensory overload. It was such a massive 2½ hours of music that it wasn't easy to process any one part of it. But, perhaps in smaller doses, the music of Slovenia will start to infiltrate the wider classical music world.

— Claire Marie Blaustein

Figure 6 – *The Washington Post* – Tuesday, August 9, 2005; C02

MAGAZINES

After daily newspapers, the largest outlet for classical music critics is in magazines. Although they are also print media, and therefore hold some of the sense of permanency and historic significance of the newspaper, they do not have the same sense of timeliness that is inherent in a daily paper, since they are generally printed on a longer publishing schedule – weekly or monthly as opposed to daily. They are also not general interest publications, but usually center on a particular subject area (in this case music) and appeal to an audience who seeks them out for the information they contain. They are directed and specific, and for the critic, offer different opportunities and challenges.

As magazines containing classical music criticism are most often devoted particularly to music, if not specifically classical music (*The Gramophone*, *BBC Music*, *Muso*), or even one specific area of classical music (*Strings*, *Classical Guitar Digest*, *Double Bassist*), the critic is working with a vastly different readership than that of a general interest daily paper. Magazine readers have sought out a publication tailored to their interests, and made the effort to consume something that is restricted to one genre. Therefore, they will presumably be more knowledgeable, more interested, and more open to deeper exploration of musical topics. With this audience in mind, the critic may delve into the concerts or recordings that she is reviewing, assume a reader's understanding of concepts and practices of music, and use terminology that must be avoided in general interest publications.

Additionally, a magazine generally offers more space than a newspaper, needing to fill its hundred pages with material, rather than just a single or double fold of an arts section. This additional space allows for longer articles, which suits a readership with more specific interests and who might be willing to read a 2,000-word article on new breathing techniques of opera singers or the discovery of one of Beethoven's handkerchiefs. Increased space also breeds a new kind of writing – that of the feature article. Similar to the longer pieces written for newspapers, they need not reference any current event. These exploratory works take the reader deeper into individuals and concepts in the music world, and offer the critic the opportunity to expound on musical subjects that may not be related directly to a performance event.

The same debate between what is and is not “criticism” can be seen here, although the line is decidedly less clear than in newspapers. It is not only the practical reality that that most music critics will end up writing material other than reviews of concerts, (to return momentarily to facts and figures, 85% of the critics interviewed in *The Classical Music Critic* study said that they wrote profiles of musicians or musical figures).²² There is also the fact that given the ability to bring in both current and historical context, make broader theorizations as to the nature of music and the subject's place within it, the feature article for magazines is actually closer to the kind of analytical criticism that a critic might aspire to but are impossible in the shorter reviews she also produces.

²² Conrad, 16.

There is an additional reason that magazines tend to depend more heavily on feature writing than newspapers: the issue of timing. Magazines are not published at the same rate as newspapers, and so must be tailored to a monthly or bi-monthly distribution. Timely concert reviews would have little place here, since the performance and performers would be long gone by the time the publication even went into production, much less print. Feature pieces have a much longer shelf life than discussions of concerts.

Since concert reviews are impractical, the attention paid to live performances tends to be present in preview articles or concert listings, which provide information about events that are upcoming. Even in these instances, where direct commentary is scarce, criticism is being performed. It is a form of advance criticism – the writer is asked to make her opinions of ensembles or soloists known not by explicitly passing judgement, but by deciding which concerts are likely to be of interest and worthy of the reader's attention and including them in their listings. There are obviously obstacles with this type of criticism, since the writer has no way of knowing that a particular concert by an ensemble with a less than stellar reputation might be well worth the time to see it, or that a performance by a well respected performer might be one of the worst of their career. The writer's judgement is completely based on reputation, personal feelings and past experience. This might appear to be flawed, even biased, but it is difficult to deny that these elements of bias are present in every work of criticism, whether overtly or covertly. Just as the critic cannot be completely independent, neither can a concert stand entirely alone. Any work of criticism contains elements both of judgement on the events

presented and the influence of experience and expectation. Although the preview cannot balance bias with fact, it still functions in a manner similar to the concert review. In this case the authority of the critic is even more important, especially the reader's belief in her experience and expertise, as there can be little within the article itself to justify her decisions of which concerts to include or not. In the case of a critic whose name is not recognizable, the borrowed authority of the publication comes into play, since the readership has sought out this particular publication by its reputation for quality.

The timing and size of magazines do not completely eliminate the need for reviews. Magazine publishers have turned to music with an extended lifespan – recordings. CD reviews account for the greater proportion of the writing within these publications and are a mainstay of their existence. *The Gramophone*, which touts itself as “the best classical music magazine,” advertises its extensive coverage of recording reviews, with up to 150 in a month.²³ These reviews function for readers as a guide to possible consumption, in a manner similar to live performance reviews in a newspaper, as well as helping to promote the interest of labels and recording distribution companies whose advertisements allow the magazine to function.

From the perspective of the critic, the CD review is both similar and dissimilar to reviewing a live performance. Obviously, there is greater opportunity for scrutiny, since a track can be replayed for further analysis. The listening process is completely disassociated from any performance space or temporal situation – it can be listened to in

²³ *Haymarket Publishing - Gramophone* [Web Site] (accessed 10 January 2006); available from <http://www.haymarketgroup.com/products/index.cfm?fuseaction=showProduct&productID=22®ionID=0>.

small portions, at any time and in any place. With the evolution of the iPod, most of my recording reviewing happens while I am in transit – walking or on the bus. There are no visuals to describe or reference, and the expectations of the performance are much higher because the critic is aware of the myriad of opportunities within a studio setting for retakes and postproduction adjustments.

However, the connection between CD reviews and the magazine more deeply locates the magazine within the music industry. The companies provide the CD's for the magazine, and it is their advertisements that keep the publication in business. It is not to say that other print publications are not profit oriented, but when the print media is particularly devoted to promoting the material it discusses, there arises some potential for conflict between ideals of "journalistic integrity" and necessity for advertising dollars. One of the few things distinguishing magazine writing from pure advertising is that the writer is not being compensated directly by the music companies for her work. The magazine still holds the decision to publish or not publish a review of any CD, and that gives just enough distance to make the process legitimate. However, as I discovered, the writing would still occasionally have the feeling of ad copy – of unpaid promotion for the artists and organizations mentioned.

Despite fewer space constraints in other areas of the publication, the bulk of recording reviews tend to remain short – 200-300 words apiece. There are exceptions for featured recordings or editor's reflections, but generally, these reviews are succinct and clear-cut, with a rating providing easy reference for the reader. This is part of the publisher's desire to cover as many recordings as possible in the space allotted, as this

“consumer’s guide” element of the publication is often what keeps the publication afloat, eliciting both reader interest and advertising dollars, so the space allotted for criticism remains restricted.



I was fortunate enough to gain employ with a magazine that offered all of these elements of critical writing. *La Scena Musicale* is “The most important music magazine in Quebec and Canada,” along with its sister English publication and *The Music Scene*, where I worked.²⁴ *The Music Scene* distributes 40,000 copies with approximately 80,000 readers for each of their English language quarterly issues. They are distributed nationwide, with focuses on urban areas of Ottawa, Southern Ontario, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, and Victoria.

The readership for this particular magazine is very clearly divided – the two major groups are “music lovers aged 40+” and “musicians.”²⁵ 91% of the readers have a university education, and a dedicated interest in music. This slim demographic, with an education and interest in classical music, is vastly different from the audience I had in my work with a daily paper. This allowed for the adjustments to language and content that could be expected with a knowledgeable audience.

The magazine contains all the elements I described above – feature articles, concert listings, and CD reviews. For each quarterly issue I wrote the Southern Ontario Instrumental Preview, describing upcoming events in the Toronto Area. I also wrote a

²⁴ *La Scena Musicale Media Kit*, [PDF] (accessed 11 January 2006); available from <http://www.scena.org/pdf-files/sml1Medkit.eng.pdf>.

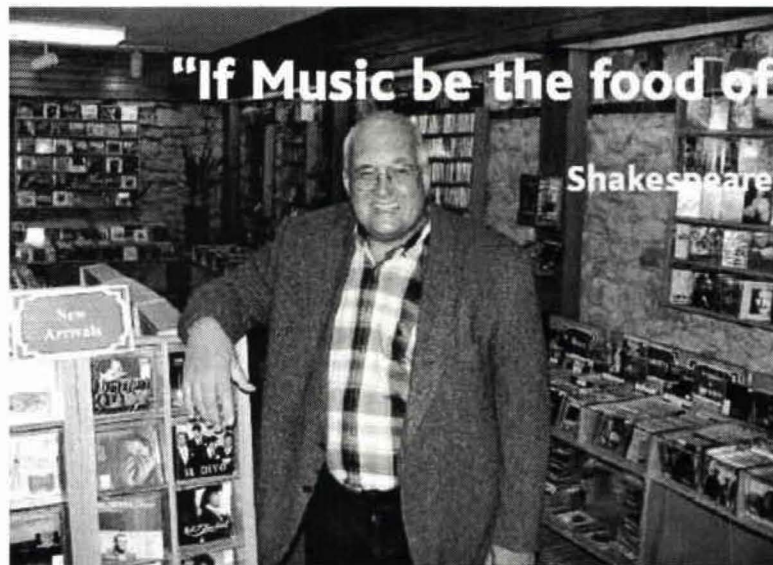
²⁵ *The Music Scene Media Kit*, [PDF] (accessed 11 January 2006); available from <http://www.scena.org/pdf-files/TMS-MediaKit.pdf>.

series of pieces featuring the owners of classical music record stores in Canada. It was primarily in these works that I had the feel of writing advertisements, but again, the distance given by not being compensated by the organizations in question, or in my case, not at all, maintained some distance between the subject and myself. After several months with the publication, I was offered a chance to write a cover article on Peter Oundjian, conductor and artistic director of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. My work with this publication further illuminated the need to adapt my writing from one publication to the next.



Both of these features on independent record stores began as interviews. Although the original intention was for them to be phone interviews, the assignments were given to me only days before the print deadlines, which necessitated resorting to a less interesting, but more expedient mode of interview, via email. With text, there is no chance to probe for a deeper answer, or question the respondent's tone of voice. They also have ample opportunity to consider their answers, and make changes before sending it off. Had these been hard-hitting interviews with elusive performers, this might have been a problem. However, "puff piece" is apt description for these, given that they required no significant digging for information, and the resulting stories were intended to be positive support for these business. They served far less purpose in increasing my skills as a reporter than my practice at writing for this particular publication. I took the results of the interviews and adapted them into a narrative form, including the storeowner's recommendations for favorite classical recordings. Neither of these was

particularly exciting, but good preparation for a writer who was just trying to enter the field of magazine writing – proving an ability to do an interview, as well as organize a coherent story.



"If Music be the food of love, play on!"

Shakespeare Twelfth Night (I, I, 1-3)

CLAIRE MARIE BLAUSTEIN

around so there are no interruptions. A good recording like this one won't be out of the catalogue for long so watch for it to be re-issued. (Philips 464 685-2)

A recording that is currently available and a real steal in my opinion is the Handel CD that Atma has released by Suzie Leblanc. They've packaged this CD with their catalogue and released it at a budget price! It can't be topped at that price in my opinion and it is a fine addition to any collection, even if only for easy listening. (Atma ACD2-2587)

Not to take anything away from Angela Hewitt's Bach recordings for Hyperion, for you will never go far wrong with them, my personal favourite of the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, is still the RCA recording by Sviatoslav Richter. It's part of RCA Red Seal's Classic Library and it really is an amazing recording—and at mid-price! Even if you have 2 or 3 recordings of Book 1, go out and get this Richter recording—you won't be sorry. (RCA 82876-62515-2)

I often wonder if the 20th century will be known as the age of the guitar. Surely the guitar is featured on more recordings and in more "hits" than any other instrument. It's easy to forget what a wonderful instrument the lute is. Pick up a copy of Hopkinson Smith's Bach: L'oeuvre de luth and you'll be pleasantly surprised. It is a 2-CD set and from the very first track you'll be able to hear how warm the lute sounds and what a master Hopkinson is. This repackaging has unfortunately seen the liner notes trimmed back considerably, however, at half the price, you can't go wrong. (Naive E3000)

Another title off the beaten track but a wonderful find is "The Harp of Ludovico" by Andrew Lawrence-King on the Hyperion label. Petar Simic, in our Guelph store, loves to put on this recording when the store is full just to see how many copies will sell! There were no teachers of the historical harp and Andrew Lawrence-King had to teach himself how to play it by studying historical sources. It is quite interesting if you take the time to read about it, but even if you don't, it's nice just to listen to him on this beautiful instrument. (Hyperion CDA66518)

This is the first of a series of articles on Canada's independent music retailers.

Music may be the food of love, but it is also a labour of love for those dedicated enough to devote their lives and livelihoods to it. In this world of music megastores, independent specialty record stores, especially those dedicated to classical music, are few and far between. However, the people who own and run them do so out of a passion for their work that rivals that of the musicians on the discs they sell.

One of these stores is the Twelfth Night Music Shoppe, owned and operated by Paul Cellatly. He doesn't have a formal background in music but music had been in his life from as early as high school, when he DJ'd at dances to when he became a record buyer for the Wilfrid Laurier University Bookstore. Cellatly describes himself as an "avid listener." He was certainly avid enough to turn his attention to selling classical music when he decided to leave his former career. "My career as a retailer specializing in Classical & Jazz CDs started out with tires," Cellatly said via email. "I had put 20 years in with the industry... [so] I decided I'd had enough of corporate life, traveling and meetings, and I'd like to try my hand at something else."

Around 1993, when Cellatly left selling tires to open a business with his wife, there were many classical record shops across Ontario, but none in Kitchener-Waterloo. They decided to try and close that gap, and although there was always the fear that the venture would be unsuccessful, they tried to maintain a positive attitude. As he says, "Even if things went terribly wrong—although unlikely—the worst that could happen would be that we would end up with a great CD collection!"

Fortunately for them, and the communities in Waterloo and Guelph, as of 2001, when they

opened a second location, they didn't just end up with a large personal collection. The business took off, and has been running ever since. Still, that doesn't mean there are no challenges. What usually makes these smaller businesses go under is competition from corporate chain stores. But the competition doesn't particularly bother Cellatly—he sees it as a challenge. He says, "Sure I'm in competition with other stores, but competition is a good thing. It means you have to do things right and at a fair price. You have to look for a niche and fill it to the best of your ability."

Running these stores is not an easy job, but Cellatly thinks that it just takes a particular kind of person to do it. "I don't think it's difficult if you're the right kind of person. You have to be fairly knowledgeable, outgoing, personable and disciplined. If you get along with people, know your music and take care of people's needs at a fair price you're going to keep customers coming back," he explains.

The customers do keep coming back, and after 12 years, the Twelfth Night Music Shoppe is still going strong. Cellatly is going strong too—fuelled by the pleasure he gets from helping customers find exactly what they are looking for. "Every time a customer leaves with a smile on their face and says thanks for helping them out, it feels great," he beams.

Paul Cellatly's top 5 recording recommendations:

One of my favourite choral CDs isn't even in the Philips catalogue at present: the World Premiere Recording of Berlioz' Messe Solennelle by John Eliot Gardiner, the Monteverdi Choir and the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique. It's best to listen to it with the volume up and nobody else

Sikora: Vancouver's CD Valhalla

BY CLAIRE BLAUSTEIN

Everyone has their own idea of heaven. As a classical musician, I always pictured my Valhalla as a big record store in the sky, with thousands and thousands of CDs to pick from. But it turns out I don't have to wait for the afterlife for my vision to come true, I could just go to Vancouver instead.

Vancouver's Sikora's Classical Records has a stock of 25,000 albums. Twenty-five THOUSAND. Everything is there: classical CDs, classical concert and opera DVD/Videos, Super Audio CDs, and DVD-Audios, as well as vinyl LPs

music as were its founders.

Working in a classical music store had not been in the stars for either of the men. "I have a BSc in Cell/Molecular Biology and an MSc in Genetics," Savenye said about his academic background. "I have taken some basic piano lessons to a certain level." Roger Scobie does have a degree in music – he studied piano at the Victoria Conservatory – though he doesn't play any longer. Yet, it's apparent that both are equally devoted to music and excited about their work.

For Ed Savenye and Roger Scobie, Sikora's is

tickets to events. Sikora's keeps itself actively involved in the musical community. But the store itself is also a community, especially for the people who have been shopping there since the beginning.

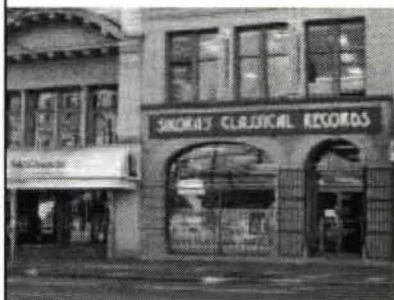
"We offer a great selection of the music people know and love from their experiences growing up and attending concerts," Savenye said. "We have a great, friendly and knowledgeable staff - it makes for a good impression and a great experience shopping at the store. People feel good about coming here to shop."

With larger chain stores becoming the norm, there is a fear that smaller businesses may not be able to compete. So far, Sikora's hasn't been affected. "Things have remained pretty stable overall here," said Savenye. "Our LARGE selection of classical titles keeps us in good (or better) standing with respect to any competition. Customers tell us the other outlets are cutting back significantly on their classical inventory, so our selection puts us in a relatively good position."

Although business is going well, it hasn't been an entirely smooth path for Scobie and Savenye. As they'll tell you, any enterprise of this magnitude has its ups and downs.

"We haven't had any real difficulties with the basic operation of the store," Savenye said. "[But] Roger and I were just handed the store when Rod developed some serious health concerns. That was a very emotionally shocking event - with a very STEEP learning curve I can tell you!"

"Probably the worst thing was the four months of Transit strike that started just as Roger and I took over the store from Rod. The best - [it's] hard to say. I think the privilege of being at the store, working here, being able to say one truly enjoys their job - the 'Sikora's experience' as a whole has to be the best."



for those who prefer older technological forms.

Sikora's has been up and running for over 25 years, an impressive feat for any business, especially one dealing in the niche market of classical music. It got started in 1978 when Rod Horsley got together with Dick and Dorothy Sikora and decided that Vancouver needed a store that would help foster a strong classical presence in the city.

Although Dick is still involved with the store, he has turned over the day-to-day business to Ed Savenye and Roger Scobie, who are as dedicated to the distribution of classical

more than a store, it's a part of the classical music community in Vancouver. "We have a very broad base of regular customers here who have been regular customers for many, many years," Scobie said. "And we do a lot of promotion for local concerts, selling tickets."

"We're located right next to the large print music shop in Vancouver [Long and McQuade]...and that's where the young musicians come to get their scores. So a lot of young musicians come through here trying to promote their concerts."

Through promoting local artists and selling

SIKORA'S TOP 5 STAFF CD PICKS:

Schulhoff: Piano Music, Kathryn Stott
BIS CD 1249
 Contemporary piano music by Czech composer Ervin Schulhoff performed by the ever-fascinating Kathryn Stott.

Cavalleri: Lamentations
Alpha CD 011
 Everything on the Alpha label is exceptional. This is a masterful and historically authentic performance of Italian Baroque music which is beautifully packaged with a 32-page booklet.

Berlioz: Les Nuits d'ete; Ravel, Sheherazade; songs by Poulenc and Debussy, Regine Crespin
Decca CD 460 973 2
 The legendary Regine Crespin in a number of her most outstanding performances, all at a budget price!

Le belle immagini: Myslivecek, Mozart and Gluck opera arias, Magdalena Kozena
DG CD 471 334 2
 It is refreshing and exciting to hear Myslivecek

- a lesser known but very delightful composer - on the same disc with some well-loved Mozart and Gluck arias, performed by the magnificent Magdalena Kozena.

Rameau: Une Symphonie Imaginaire, Les Musiciens du Louvre, Marc Minkowski
Archiv 477 557 8
 Energetic French Baroque music interpreted by some of the best musicians in the field. Delightful.

Figure 8 – The Music Scene, Winter 2006, p 46

the horrors of war, Beethoven's 4th Symphony, written as one empire fell in 1806, and Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a plea for peace in the wake of WWII. Unfortunately, the turmoil of war is still with us today, and more recent

Although much of the programming this spring will be focused on Mozart's 250th birthday, Beethoven's 235th on December 16th hasn't been totally forgotten, and many musicians are celebrating with cycles of Beethoven's



I Furiosi Baroque Ensemble



Miró Quartet

Southern Ontario Instrumental Preview

BY CLAIRE MARIE BLAUSTEIN

Fall is a season of many moods – dread, for those students returning to school; contentment, for those with happy summer memories; and joy for the music lover, because fall marks the start of the regular season for their favorite ensembles.

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra has a particularly promising fall ahead, with many star-studded performances. In their opening Gala Performance, Peter Oundjian conducts Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony and piano sensation Lang Lang in Chopin's 1st Piano Concerto, which is sure to show off Lang Lang's particular brand of virtuosity (October 1). Later concerts bring a battery of violinists – Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg (October 14-15) in Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, Pinchas Zukerman and the National Arts Center Orchestra playing Beethoven's Violin Concerto (October 21), and James Ehnes (October 29, 30) in a program inspired by Italy, featuring Respighi, Vivaldi and Paganini. That concert will be conducted by CinAndrea Noseda, who will also continue the orchestra's fond wish for warmer weather and tribute to Italy in a concert of Respighi's *Fines of Rome* and Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien* (November 2).

November 9 marks Remembrance Day, which will be commemorated with a special concert by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the University of Toronto MacMillan Singers. They will perform great pieces of music expressing

reflections may come forward in the world premiere of the TSO commission by Andrew MacDonald, *War Machine*.

In the world of early music, Tafelmusik starts off the season with a greatest-hits concert – *Best of the Baroque* (September 21-25). There is no way to go wrong with this world-class ensemble playing Telemann's *Water Music*, Bach's Concerto for Two Violins, and Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Their second concert, a *Tribute to Rome* (October 12-16), may prove to be more inventive, demonstrating the profound influence this city had on the musical development of all of Europe, beginning with its own composers and then moving to their disciples. The **I Furiosi Baroque Ensemble** takes a wrier twist with its programming this fall, beginning with their *Introduction to the Body* (September 30), which explores the "naughty and not-so-naughty bits" of the human form, starting at the top and working their way down.

Moving to the other end of the temporal spectrum, the Esprit Orchestra is kicking off its season October 15th with a world premiere by R. Murray Schafer — *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, for voice and orchestra. This CBC Radio Music commission was specially composed for Esprit's guest artist, mezzo-soprano Eleanor James. Also part of the concert is Arvo Pärt's *Tabula rasa* for two violins, prepared piano and string orchestra. On the same day, as part of their 35th Anniversary Season the New Music Concerts will present clarinetist and composer Jörg Widmann, playing the Canadian premieres of four of his own works (October 15). Then later in the month The University of Toronto will play host to composer Steve Reich as part of their Visiting Artists series. Along with a lecture on October 27th, there will be a performance *The Music of Steve Reich: A Soundstreams Concert* (October 30). The program will include Reich's infectious *Drumming* and the Canadian premiere of *You Are (Variations)*,

works. Evgeny Kissin will start the celebration off with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Sir Andrew Davis, with all five of Beethoven's varied and wonderful Piano Concerti (October 5, 7). The early and more Mozartian Numbers 1, 2, and 3 will be on October 5th, and the heroic and turbulent Numbers 4 and 5 (the Emperor Concerto), will be on October 7th.

Moving from keys to strings, the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society has two Beethoven-centered concerts this fall. The world-renowned Miró String Quartet, praised for its treatment of these works in the past, will play Beethoven's six Opus 18 string quartets (November 11). These were the first quartets that Beethoven ever published, and demonstrate a particular moment in the history of the genre, as he moved from the lighter touch of Haydn to the complete metamorphosis of the later quartets. The **Miró Quartet** is releasing a recording of these works on the Vanguard Label later this year. Jeremy Findlay and Elena Braslavsky will also be celebrating the big day in Kitchener-Waterloo, with a complete performance of the five Beethoven cello sonatas (December 19).

Fall is definitely upon us, but the warm weather tradition of music festivals is not quite ready to let go. There are several in the Toronto area this fall that should capture one's attention.

In Barrie, the Colours of Music festival (Sept 23-Oct 2) will host a wide spectrum of artists and performances. There will be a Bassoon Bonanza on September 26th, with Bill Cannaway, Elizabeth Cowen, Julie Shier and Jerry Robinson bringing together a mix of Prokofiev, the Beatles and F.D.Q. Bach. The eclectic percussion ensemble Nexus always delivers a unique listening experience and will be performing at the festival on the 27th. But for the more classically inclined, there will be recitals from some of Canada's foremost

the music scene Fall 2005 31

Figure 9 – The Music Scene, Fall 2005, p 31

soloists, including Anton Kuerti and James Campbell, and a highlight appearance from the Penderecki String Quartet (September 27) playing Mozart, Ravel and Beethoven.

The academic year gets underway at The

New Music Concerts
 (416) 961-9594, www.newmusicconcerts.com
University of Toronto
 (416) 978-3744, www.music.toronto.ca
Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society



Anton Kuerti



Yannick Nezet-Séguin

University of Toronto with the International Bach Festival (October 2-6). The opening concert on October 1st will be a feat of massive proportions with Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins performed by students from the Faculty of Music and Bach's Concerto for Four pianos played by four members of the Faculty. Berg's Violin Concerto may involve only one soloist, but Scott St. John is sure to make it no less spectacular. The festival continues with its Cantata series – each of the five days will feature a different Bach Cantata, rehearsed, explained, and performed live and on stage.

In October McMaster University will host its 11th annual Great Romantics Festival (October 6-8). This series of lectures and concerts brings together many of the greatest composers of that emotionally charged era. It will be a keyboard-full festival, including a Piano Gala (October 8) of "Tales from Old Vienna" and the Grieg Piano Concerto in A minor with Valerie Tryon and the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra (October 6).

Music can seem miraculous all on its own – beauty coming seemingly from thin air. But when the performers have the added challenge of a disability, then the miracle of music extends far beyond the experience of the listener. The Abilities Festival in Toronto (October 27-30) celebrates just that, performers who have overcome more than the standard odds to bring their art to life. Their second gala performance at the Glen Gould Studios on the 29th – Art With an Edge – will include young violin virtuoso Adrian Anantawan, who was born without a right hand. He had his debut at the Kennedy Center in 1992, played with the National Arts Council Orchestra, and will be performing with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in November.

Toronto Symphony Orchestra
 (416) 593-4828, www.tso.on.ca
Tafelmusik • (416) 964-6337, www.tafelmusik.org
I Furiosi Baroque Ensemble • www.ifuriosi.com
Esprit Orchestra
 (416) 366-7723, www.espritorchestra.com

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886-1673, www.k-wcms.com
Colours of Music Festival
 (705) 726-4980, www.coloursofmusic.ca
Great Romantics Festival
 (905) 525-9140 x23674
<http://www.artset.net/greatromantics.html>
Abilities Festival
 (416) 966-0293, <http://www.abilitiesfestival.org/>

Figure 10 – The Music Scene, Fall 2005, p 32

After proving my ability to do interviews with the earlier record store works, the chance came up to do a cover story. This interview with conductor Peter Oundjian was by far the most exciting project I was given for *The Music Scene*, and while the record interviews might have been “puff pieces,” here the term “big break” would hardly be inappropriate. I was desperate to do well, and prove to my editors and myself that I was up to the challenge.

Actually getting the interview was far more complicated than I had anticipated – I actually had to call him while he was on tour in Paris, and make myself understood to a hotel clerk who did not speak English, and laughed at my pronunciation of Oundjian’s last name. What resulted, however, was a 45-minute phone interview, from which I produced the following article.

When reviewing a concert by someone famous, a critic still gets to be a bit distant. They don’t know who you are in the crowd, and probably you will never meet. However, doing an interview is different – they know who you are, and you certainly know who they are. You are making a direct impression on them, and not through your writing, but through your ability to have a conversation. You have to be able to not only get the subject to answer your prepared questions, but also respond to their questions of you. You need to follow the changes of direction that naturally occur in any dialogue, while still getting the material you need for the piece.

All in all it was an amazing experience, not only for the rush of seeing my name in print, which never gets old, but also for proving that I was ready for the next big challenge.

BY CLARE MARIE BLAUSTEIN

FOR MANY CONDUCTORS, setting foot on the podium is comparable to standing on the peak of Mount Olympus. Like the all-powerful Zeus, they appear impossibly distant from both players and audience members. Not so with conductor Peter Oundjian whose passion and warmth are palpable, even from the nosebleed seats of Roy Thomson Hall.

Peter Oundjian

ON NEW MUSIC PATHS



Figure 11 – The Music Scene, Summer 2006, p 6

Peter Oundjian – Cover Story
The Music Scene – Spring 2006
By: Claire Marie Blaustein

For many conductors, setting foot on the podium is comparable to standing on the peak of Mount Olympus. Like the all-powerful Zeus, they appear impossibly distant from both players and audience members. Not so with conductor Peter Oundjian, whose passion and warmth are palpable, even from the nosebleed seats of Roy Thomson Hall.

His climb to the podium has not been the most direct Oundjian spent most of his musical career as a violinist in the Tokyo String Quartet, but focal dystonia forced him to trade his bow for a baton. “I stopped playing because I had a condition with my left hand that prevented me from having freedom of movement, so I had no choice but to stop playing, and I always had a passion for conducting. So it turns out that you never know where you’re going to have a silver lining. I can’t say that I’m glad that happened to my hand, exactly, but if it hadn’t happened, I would never be doing what I’m doing.”

He worked his way across the globe in his pursuit of conducting, beginning at the Caramoor Music Festival in New York, and then moving to become the music director of Amsterdam’s Nieuw Sinfonietta. Last year he returned to his native Canada to become music director of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, where he is currently finishing his second season with the ensemble. At the time of this interview, he was on the road in Paris, to conduct the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. Even through the phone, the distance between us was traversed as Oundjian spoke candidly and engagingly about his transition to conducting, the New Creations Festival, and his hopes for the future.

TMS: Does your focal dystonia affect your conducting at all?

PO: It doesn’t affect anything except when I play the violin, which I actually just did for a fundraiser last week. It’s always frustrating when I play the violin, because my fingers go into a spasm. But that’s why they call it focal – because when I play the piano, it doesn’t affect me at all, and it doesn’t affect anything in my daily life or conducting.

TMS: What drew you to conducting?

PO: When you’ve made music for people for that many years, you’re kind of addicted to it. I needed to find another outlet, and I had always a passion for it – I had studied conducting when I was young – so it was kind of the obvious thing. I wasn’t going to learn another instrument at the age of 39, so it was something that appeared in front of me, as that was the only door to walk through. Which is lucky in life, in a way, when you get to a crisis point, most people are “should I do this, should I do that?” For me, there was no question.

TMS: This your second year working with the TSO – has your relationship with the orchestra changed?

PO: It's like anything else, you meet somebody – whether it's a friend or whatever – and you hit it off. Then you get to know each other and the relationship strengthens. It's very similar in that way – I think we understand each other better. The more repertoire we do, the more they find out what kind of things I'm looking for and how to understand my gestures even more quickly. Something is developing in the sound that is more what I'm looking for, and even in terms of response, its getting quicker and quicker. A closer relationship is developing, musically, between myself and the players.

TMS: What are you looking for in the sound?

PO: You're looking for an enormous number of sounds – more and more colors, more and more sensitivity, more impulsiveness sometimes. The music dictates what you're looking for in the sound. But what I'm looking for that whatever I'm picturing in my head I can get across and they can respond to that. I think this is what's developing – a kind of instant sensitivity not only to sound, but delicacy of phrasing and the making of a magical moment that is way beyond just sound. It's a level of sensitivity that only the greatest orchestras really produce.

TMS: What do you feel is your role is in the orchestra's interaction with the community? I've especially noticed that you interact extensively with the audience during concerts.

PO: In the concert halls, I try to make people feel welcome – to slightly de-formalize the introduction of it, though certainly not the music making. Christoph Eschenbach [conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra] used the term “raising the invisible curtain,” and I think that's really good, actually.

It's also informing the public of what the Toronto Symphony really stands for, and not what they're going to do, but what they're already have done. We have probably 110,000 students a year that hear the Toronto Symphony, either in Roy Thomson Hall or in their own schools. Because when you get involved in this from a young age, you realize that this music brings something to us that is a little bit different than other music. I'm a big fan of rock music, but this is different. There is a level of connection that is deeper, spiritually, and more subtle, and evokes a much more complex set of feelings in us.

TMS: This year will mark the second New Creations Festival, which you helped start. Do you think that it's an important thing for the orchestra to do?

PO: I firmly believe it is a terribly important part of any artist's mission, to explore what their contemporaries are creating. But by and large the very pairing of those two words – New and Music – is petrifying to all but a very few people. So it's about finding context,

I think, for people to come and hear a lot of music that they wouldn't ordinarily buy a ticket and drive to hear, something that is new and exciting and unusual.

Like last year, when we had Henri Dutilleux. The atmosphere in the hall was just incredible, when he came on stage, we were all witnessing a piece of history – he was 89 years old, and arguably the greatest composers alive today. And I think people really felt that something was happening that night that was unusual.

And this year, we're focusing on the concerto. We have great artists – Emmanuel Ax and Peter Sirkin and Evelyn Glennie and so many others – all playing pieces that have been written mostly for them, and premiered in the last 12 to 18 months. And we bring them together and put them in a festival....even I find it exciting, and I supposedly came up with the idea!

TMS: Do you think Toronto is particularly well suited to this kind of event?

PO: I think we are very lucky – we have a tremendous community of listeners and a foundation of people who appreciate the arts in general, which is quite rare. And we have a huge student body, which is very important to the arts, and equally important that we give access to the students, so that this becomes part of their lives.

TMS: Do you think that new music festivals here should be promoting particularly Canadian composers, or all new ones?

PO: People need to promote good composers, or great composers. And it's perfectly natural that we look in our own community for those voices.

This is a big issue which I think sometimes is misdirected. I always say it's all very well to give Canadian composers the opportunity to write a piece and then perform it – it's important. But what we also need to be doing is sending the Toronto Symphony on tour with Canadian music, so it gets outside of Canada. You can play as much Canadian music in Canada as you want, and no one is going to know. We have talent, but it's very hard. Until somebody becomes internationally well known, Canadian music remains a kind of Canadian phenomenon. And that's what I'm most interested in breaking through.

You get a lot of pressure from various people to fill the Canadian content quota. And for me, while I respect them for it, they aren't pushing enough, or at least not in the right place.

TMS: What is the right place?

PO: It's context – it's where that thing needs to be heard.

TMS: What would you like to accomplish in the next year? Things you'd like to have happen, or do?

PO: Well, have a very, very significant endowment [laughs]. There will be times – and I don't say if, I say when – when we have an even more solid financial footing, we'll be able to do so much more. It's so important to have guests – we have Gergiev coming next year, we just had Charles Dutoit last week – having musicians of that calibre, experience and reputation does something for the orchestra and the community that is very important. So I look forward to the day when I have even more freedom to bring great artists to Toronto.

But repertoire wise, I'd love to give people the opportunity to hear everything between the small classical orchestra, and even the baroque although I don't do baroque myself, from that size to the huge Mahler or Strauss. That's what's important, getting everything so that you have a very wide pallet.

TMS: How was it having Charles Dutoit there?

PO: Oh, I went to the first rehearsal, and it was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. We were doing Petrouchka, and it was a virtuoso rehearsal. I don't know how many times he's conducted Petrouchka, but it sounded as if he had written it. One of the fiddle players even said to me, "did he write this piece?" [laughs] It was fantastic, and he was extremely nice to the orchestra, and he enjoyed the orchestra tremendously.

TMS: What would you say is your vision for the ensemble?

PO: We are unlike any other musical organization in that we are ever-present. Week after week – if we're not playing subscription concerts, we're playing light classics, we're playing pops concerts, we're playing for schools, we're playing family concerts. I think that the image of the orchestra is developing at a good pace, to becoming an institution that is regarded as bringing true significance to the cultural life of the city.

The vision has a lot to do with balance: what is right for the community, and sometimes to challenge the community, by giving performances of pieces that are rarely heard or brand new, and trying to make sure that our subscribers don't run away. Every year I try and bring significance to the body of repertoire we choose. It's like a diet, nourishment for the city. A great city should have a great orchestra, and should have it giving to its population and listeners a wonderfully balanced diet of great music.

TMS: As you grow as a conductor, are there things you are doing to develop your conducting technique further?

PO: I think the music teaches you, and the activity of doing it teaches you. Conducting technique isn't quite like violin technique. A lot of very successful conductors of the past

and the present who if you ask players, it's more 'we know what he means, and we don't even know why.'

I personally had several conducting teachers, and one of them insisted that I develop a real technique where my hands were completely independent of one another, and that I would really understand what it is to lay out a score clearly for a large group of musicians. He was very strict with me, and I really appreciated it.

So, when I'm studying a score, I'm not thinking any longer about exactly how my hands will do it, but I know subconsciously what I want. You can show a huge amount with your hands, and you don't have to talk that much in front of an orchestra if you really know the score well. It's like messaging really.

And everything happens the beat before, because if you wait until when you want it, they won't have time to adjust. So if you want a sharp sforzando, the upbeat you give to that one player, maybe third trombone, will have to be in that particular place – you catch their eye, you know they are focused on your eyes and your hands, and you give exactly the attack on the upbeat that you want. If you hear back exactly what you want to hear back, you know two things – you were very clear, and you have a great third trombonist.

INDEPENDENT PAPERS

With any type of music, there are modes of behaviour appropriate to the genre. In the instance of classical musicking, these behaviours are considerably more strict. The roles of the performer and audience are clearly defined, and part of understanding classical music is an acceptance, or at least occasional acquiescence to standards of practice and behaviour that accompany the process of writing, performing, or listening to this repertoire. Classical music criticism is not immune to these effects – the sense of restraint I felt was warranted with my reviews for *The Washington Post* exemplifies that. Attitudes in critical writing are reflective of the genre they describe, and in the case of classical music, the writing most often reflects the culture that surrounds the music – one of restraint, decorum, and propriety.

My perceptions of the attitudes of classical music come from years of training – of going to orchestra concerts from a very young age, performing in recitals, attending university for music. In each of these situations, I learned to adapt my behaviour. Even in instances where I feel that a shift of voice would be appropriate, there are also the constraints of reader expectations to navigate. Although classical music criticism may appear in general interest publications, with perhaps a larger proportion of readers who do not have as strong a sense of propriety about this hallowed ground, there is still a narrow space in the paper in which the writing fits. The writing may be intended for the average reader, but not one with general interests – the reader will have sought out the critical writing, and most likely will have distinct expectations about what it will provide.

The expectations of the understanding few, coupled with the overwhelming force of centuries of tradition and linear thought about what classical music is, and ought to be, can be extraordinarily difficult to contend with.

It is rare that a chance comes along where some of these restraints are lifted. The Internet is one place that offers some breathing room, because it removes the expectations of a publication from the equation, allowing the writer considerably more freedom to express her unmitigated opinions. Finding similar opportunities in print media is considerably more difficult. I was fortunate enough to have a chance to write about classical music for an audience that likely had no interest in classical music at all. This might seem to be a disadvantage, but without particular expectations of content, from either the publication or the reader, I was able and in fact required to relinquish certain conventions, which created the formal environment so common to classical music, in order to appeal to the disinterested readers to whom I was presenting my work.

Incite is a student-run publication at McMaster University. It is a monthly general interest paper, with articles on local events and campus happenings, as well as commentary on music, movies and other arts. With an entirely volunteer staff, their desperation for writers, and complete freedom of content, this was a space ripe for exploration. My column, “Rock of Ages,” would be a monthly feature. I was given free reign to discuss classical music in any manner or context that I wished. My goal was to not only give some educational background on whatever genre or ensemble I was discussing, but also to talk about the music in a way that would attempt to separate it from the elitist image that reigns so strongly. I had no ambition of bringing great art to

the masses, or of saving classical music from its own self-destruction. Instead, I simply wanted to put classical music in a new space, and try and write about it in a way that might break down some of the artificial barriers that seem to stand between it and everything else, and ones that I felt prevented potential listeners from becoming involved with this musical community.

Although the format set out in the first column was fairly strict – that I would attend a concert and review it, and bring with me a friend with less investment in classical music to garner their reactions – the result was very different. My second column focused on the McMaster Institute for Music and the Mind, an organization devoted to understanding the cognitive functions of music. My irritation at the premise of the project was one that I might have had to hide better in a different published setting, but with 1200 words at my disposal, and relatively lax editorial oversight, I felt more freedom to commentate, rather than review. Another political issue arose in my fourth column – the potential firing of an elementary school music teacher in Denver for showing twelve minutes of Gounod’s *Faust* to her class. The column became a space for me to discuss both censorship in teaching, and the perceived safety of classical music, when truly there are many layers of danger and darkness lurking beneath the polite surface of the genre.

Although in truth the project was more an exercise for me than the production of any kind of professional product, it did serve to inspire in my writing new ways of thinking and talking about the music that I had been indoctrinated into at a young age. These pieces served as inspiration for other writing elsewhere – on my blog, which I will

discuss in the next chapter in the context of world music, and also in reviews – broadening my ideas of what was appropriate to say in a classical music context.

COLUMN

It's a normal, typical, boring day. You're riding the bus or walking to campus. You take a look around, and notice little specks of white everywhere. These specks lead to long white strands that loop around before disappearing into a hand pocket or backpack. And if you can get close enough (without freaking someone out) you can probably hear the little pulses, drings, and whistles that make up that person's morning playlist.

We are the new pod people.

I'm not here to advertise for any particular fruit-related company, or to say that we're becoming zombies of any kind. It's not the product I'm interested in so much as what we're doing with it.

Everyone is listening to music. Every day, all day, every free and walking moment, there is music inside our heads. And when I pass people strolling down the sidewalk to a beat I can't hear, I wonder what they are listening to.

Because what you are listening to is important. Not for status, not because it makes you cool, but because what you listen to is a part of who you are. You know that whole 'you are what you eat' thing? Well, since I haven't noticed a whole lot of pizzas and rice cakes and (since it's modern time) massive cups of coffee walking around, I propose a change to the adage.

You are what you hear.

What you listen to is a reflection of your personality—after all, most people don't listen to music they hate. What you like, what you don't, who you like, who you don't—it's not much of a stretch.

Many of our subcultures revolve around music: goth, emo, indie, punk, mod, and gangsta, to name just a few. People flock to music—it's a social thing, a group thing, something meant to be enjoyed together. So we take what we listen to, and turn it into a community, a place to belong. That's why the portable individual music player seems counterintuitive: it's always solitary listening. It wraps you up in your own personal musical world. But maybe it's the virtual community that really is more important—it brings us together, even when we seem to stand alone. You see someone else walking down the street, plugged in like you are, and you can tell from the way they look or dress or move that they are in your particular club. Do you give them that look and a nod that means 'yeah, I'm listening too'?

I don't do that very often, because my music isn't many other people's music. I'm actually a classical violinist.

You think we'd be easy to spot, right? Don't classical musicians tend to congregate in small nerdy groups in corners of dusty music shops, discussing the Boston Orchestra's recording of Mahler's seventh symphony, securing the rest of the world for wasting their time with all of this rock-and-roll business and scoffing, 'it's noise, not music'?

Not so much.

It is true that classical music is sometimes

seen as outside of all other musical genres—either above or below, just off to the left or right depending on who you ask. You can listen to rock and punk, or ska and swing, and be totally fine—but classical and something else?

But for the majority of classical musicians, that's not the way we live. Very few of us spend our time searching for that one Mahler record, and we certainly don't seem the rest of the musical world for worshipping Paul McCartney. I'm sure some of you were thinking, 'But I listen to ska and punk and pop and emo and everything else! I don't just fit in one community!' Well, we don't either. It's just that the walls around classical music are a little bit thicker.

Classical musicians are people too, after all. If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? And if you force us to listen to 16th century motets for hours on end, do we not become pointedly homicidal?

My favorite movie of the moment is Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*. At one point in the film, Russell from Stillwater is up on a roof during a party, and proclaims: 'I dig MUSIC.'

Okay, so he goes on to say that he's on drugs and then throws himself off the roof. Besides that, the sentiment rings true. My relationship with classical music is not exclusive—I dig MUSIC, in all its wonderful and wild forms.

That isn't to say that I like everything. In fact, I've never met anyone who can make that claim without also growing a nose of inestimable proportions. Nor do I argue that there aren't divisions between kinds of music; there obviously are, or HMV would just be one big stack of CDs reaching from floor to ceiling. But in my world, there are no value judgements—classical music is no better than rock, indie is no better than pop. They are different, they are special—there really is something for everyone.

So why not classical music?

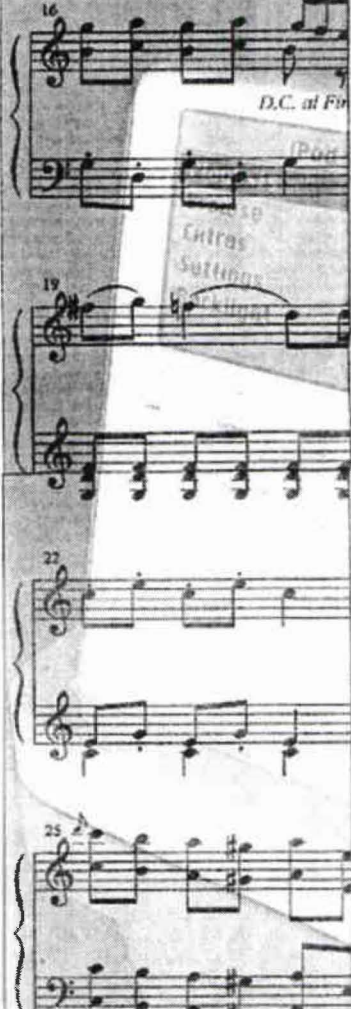
What I *like* is music. What I *love* is classical music, and for all of its bad rap, I love it. I've been in love with it since I was a little thing squeaking away on my 1/32 size violin. It's that knowledge and love that drives me to do what I do now: I am the Encey—a music critic.

I write about music for a living (an academic living at the moment—a.k.a. free—but eventually for real money, I hope), and it's my job to put it into context, make it interesting, bring you what I think, and make the music come alive through print.

So, what I'll be doing here is bringing you music. Yes, it will be classical music because that's what I do. But I don't want to bring it to you as 'capital C' Classical music, this huge and impenetrable and BORING thing that can fit into something called a canon (a word better reserved for sweepstakes in my opinion). This wonderful, diverse, and interesting music, lumped together from several particular points in history, doesn't have to be any of those things.

Cause it's all music, after all. And I dig music. ←

POD PEOPLE AND MAHLER MAVENS



rock of ages by Claire Marie Blaustein

Incite 15

Figure 12 – Incite, November 2005

***Incite* – Volume 8, Number 2**

November 2005

Rock of Ages – “Pod People and Mahler Mavens”

By Claire Marie Blaustein

On any given day, you ride the bus or walk to campus. It may seem completely normal, typical boring day. But then you take a look around, and notice these little specks of white everywhere. They loop around, lead to long white strands that disappear into a hand or a pocket or a backpack. And if you could get close enough (without freaking someone out) you could probably hear the little pulses dings and whistles that make up that person’s morning playlist.

We are the new pod people.

Now, I’m not here to advertise for any particular fruit-related company, or saying that we’re becoming zombies of any kind. It’s not the product I’m so interested in, as what it’s doing.

Everyone is listening to music. Every day, all day, every free and walking moment, there is music inside their heads. And every time I pass someone grooving down the sidewalk to a beat I can’t hear, I wonder what they are listening to.

Because what you are listening to is important. Not for status, not because it makes you cool, but because what you listen to is a part of who you are. You know that whole “you are what you eat” thing? Well, since we don’t have a whole lot of pizzas and rice cakes and (since it’s around midterms) massive cups of coffee walking around, I propose a change to the adage:

You are what you HEAR.

What you listen to is a reflection of your personality – because most people don’t listen to music they hate, after all. What you like, what you don’t, who you like, who you don’t – it’s not much of a stretch.

It’s funny how many of our subcultures revolve around music – goth, emo, indie, punk, mod, gangsta, to name just a few. Because people flock to music – it’s a social thing, a group thing, something meant to be enjoyed together. So, we take what we listen to, and turn it into a community – a place to belong.

And the portable individual music player (or PIMP) seems counterintuitive that way – because it’s solitary listening, always. It wraps you up in your own individual musical world. But, maybe it’s the imaginary community that becomes more important – bringing us together when on a daily basis we stand alone. So that you see someone else

walking down the street, plugged in like you are, but you can tell from the way they look or dress or move that they are in your particular club, and you give them that look and that nod that means – “yea, I’m listening too.”

Personally, I don’t do that very often, because my music isn’t many other people’s music. I’m actually a trained classical musician, a violinist.

You would think we’d be easy to spot, right? Don’t classical musicians tend to congregate in small nerdy groups in corners of dusty music shops, combing through bent LP’s of the Boston Orchestra playing Mahler’s seventh symphony, scorning the rest of the world for wasting their time with all of this rock-and-roll jazz?

No – not so much.

But it is true that classical music is sometimes seen as outside of the rest of it – either above or below, just off to the left or right, depending on who you ask. You can listen to rock and punk, or ska and swing, and be totally fine – but classical and anything else? Well, why are you wasting your time?

But for the majority of classical musicians, it’s not the way we live. Very few of us spend our time searching for that one Mahler record, and certainly don’t scorn the rest of the musical world. And I’m sure some of you were thinking earlier: “But I listen to ska and punk and pop and emo and everything else! I don’t just fit in one community!” Well, we don’t either. It’s just that the walls around classical music are a little bit thicker than around some of the others.

Classical musicians are people too, after all. If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? And if you force us to listen to 16th century motets for hours on end, do we not become pointedly homicidal?

Trust me – we do. And so would you.

My favorite movie of the moment is Cameron Crowe’s *Almost Famous*. At one point in the film, Russell from Stillwater is up on a roof during a party, professing his last words:

“I dig MUSIC...”

Ok, so he goes on to say that he’s on drugs and throw himself off the roof, but besides that, the sentiment rings true. I don’t like just classical music – I dig MUSIC, in all its wonderful and wild forms.

That isn't to say that I necessarily listen to or like everything –I've never met anyone yet who can say that without their nose growing to inestimable proportions. Nor that there aren't divisions between kinds of music – there obviously are, or HMV might be one big stack of CD's reaching floor to ceiling. But in my tastes and my world, I want there to be no value judgements – not that classical music is better than rock, or indie than pop, or anything else. They are different, they are special (and not in the short bus way...for most of it), and there is really something for everyone.

So, why not classical music?

What I *like* is *music* – but what I *know* is *classical* music, and for all of its bad rap, I love it. I've been in love with it my whole life, from when I was a bitsy little thing squeaking away on my 1/32 size violin. And it's that knowledge and love that drives me to do what I do now – be the Enemy – a music critic.

I write about music for a living (an academic living at the moment, which means for free, but eventually, I hope, for real money), and it's my job to put it into context, to make it interesting, to bring you what I think and make the music come alive through print.

So, what I'll be doing here is bringing you music. Yes, it will be classical music, because that's what I do, and there are plenty of other people who will bring you other things. But I don't want to bring it to you as “capital C” classical music, this huge and impenetrable and BORING thing that can fit into something called a canon (a word better reserved for the weaponry, in my opinion). Because this wonderful, diverse, and interesting music, that happens to be from several particular points in history that we have lumped together to become ‘classical’, doesn't have to be any of those things.

So, Hamilton will be the place, music will be the quest, and I'll be dragging some of my friends along for the ride. This is in part because it's more fun to draw my unsuspecting friends into my little world, and also so I can talk about music I know with people who maybe have a bit of a different perspective on things than I do – people for whom music was invented with the Beatles, for example, or never progressed past Pink Floyd.

Cause it's all music, after all. And I dig music.

COLUMN

The image of the classical musician I thought up last month—nerdy, obsessive, and in complete control of troves of worthless information about dead white men—is an image fed by the contention that classical music makes you smarter.

I would like to declare that that is a lie.

I'd love to know where my staggering genius comes from, but I doubt I gained more as a child from listening to Beethoven than I did listening to the Bee Gees.

Surprisingly enough, I can actually back this up.

The McMaster Institute for Music and the Mind is a new interdisciplinary research group on campus. Their aim is "to create a world-class facility where musicians, scientists and researchers can work together to study questions about the physical structure of music, the evolution of music, the neural processing of music, the performance of music, and the perception of music."

Wow, that's a lot of stuff. Let's break it down. Musicians and a whole bunch of scientific professionals are trying to figure out how music works on and in the brain. To this end, the MEMM is sponsoring a series of lectures and concerts. The first of these happened on 19 November, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Hamilton. The title "Does Music Make You Smarter?" had my curiosity, so I grabbed a friend, and off we went to be edified.

The lecture was by Gilina Schellenberg, a professor at the University of Toronto. He started out by explaining the Mozart Effect—the classic experiment where students, after listening to Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* K. 488 for 10 minutes, were given an IQ test. Those who listened to Mozart got a mod better than the people who sat silently for the same amount of time. Tada! Mozart makes you smarter.

Well, not exactly. Professor Schellenberg suggested that it isn't really Mozart, but rather anything that catches your interest that makes you smarter. He tried the experiment again with a batch of 10 to 12 year olds, having some of them listen to Mozart while others grooved to pop songs by the alternative band Blur. The music they liked, Blur, raised their test scores more than Mozart. Another experiment took adults and compared the results of another piece of classical music, this time a standard funeral march, and found that although that piece is of the high classical tradition, it didn't have the same stimulating affect as Mozart. Schellenberg argues that this music fails to enhance performance because it doesn't engage the listener.

This thrilled me to no end. Take that, you classical snobs! The pedestal begins to crumble! But really, considering the concert that followed the talk, the classical arrogance still seems pretty solid. What's wrong here?

After hearing this wonderful message of musical equality, the concert line up gave us pause. With appearances by pianist Valerie Tryon, soprano Mary Jane Pelech, and The John Laing Singers, among others, it was a fairly impressive line-up of classical music—no Blur in sight.

The scientific data told us that one type of music isn't privileged over another. But at the same time, this particular concert program obviously implies that there is one type of music we should be listening to, or studying, and it's classical music—classical music is somehow higher, somehow better, and manages to make you smarter.

Doesn't give, does it?

There is another issue here as well. We've established that it isn't classical music that makes you smarter—it's music in general. Or more accurately, it makes test scores go up. But do test scores really give much insight into intelligence? I apologize to all those parents out there who have been buying "Mozart for Baby" tapes, but, although your little cooing infant may enjoy the music, it's probably not going to turn her into Einstein. Sorry.

The "intelligence" measured by IQ tests is severely limited by the preconceptions and expectations of the tester. A better measure of how truly smart you are is your capacity for applying your amazing brainpower. And building that capacity takes more than just plunking down near a CD player for a few minutes.

The second half of the program did address the idea that studying music is linked to intelligence as well. Prof. Schellenberg again challenged current assumptions by arguing that any kind of extracurricular activity that vaguely resembles a school setting will make a kid smarter. Although I found this perspective refreshing, I was still a little bothered by something—I don't really want music to make me smarter.

I think that far too many people listen to classical music for all the wrong reasons. They listen because they think it'll make them look smarter, because they think it'll make them be smarter, or because it's some kind of status symbol. I'm not saying that you don't have to think about classical music—sure, many pieces are incredibly complex, with layers of technique and meaning that a person could invest hours of thought into. But that isn't all of it.

What is really great about music, any music is that it isn't about what you think—it's about what you feel. It's about that thing that makes your pulse race, that makes your feet tap. And if, as Prof. Schellenberg said, it's about what "turns you on", then whether it gives you a two point bump in your IQ or not, music is a good thing because it makes you feel good.

Time's up, please put your pencils down, the test is over. Now, forget about IQ and go listen to some music—it's good for you. ◀

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON MUSIC



rock of ages by Claire Marie Blaustein

incite 1

Figure 13 – Incite, December 2005

***Incite* – Volume 8, Number 3**

December 2005

Rock of Ages – “This Is Your Brain on Music”

By Claire Marie Blaustein

The image of the classical musician I brought up last month – nerdy, obsessive, and in complete control of TROVES of somewhat worthless information about dead white men – is an image fed by the concept that classical music is somehow supposed to make you smarter.

I would like to declare, right here and now, that that is a lie.

I’d love to know where my staggering genius comes from, but I have always sincerely doubted that I gained more as a child from listening to Beethoven than I did listening to the Bee Gees.

And surprisingly enough, I can actually back this up.

The McMaster Institute for Music and the Mind is a new research group on campus. Their aim is “to create a world-class facility where musicians, scientist and researchers can work together to study questions about the physical structure of music, the evolution of music, the neural processing of music, the performance of music, and the perception of music. The institute brings together music theorists, musicians, psychologists, neuroscientists, mathematicians, kinesiologists, health scientists, and engineers with the goals of promoting music education, music in the community and the scientific study of music.”

Wow, that’s a lot of stuff. Let’s break it down, shall we? They’re taking musicians, and a whole bunch of scientific professionals to try and figure out how music works in the brain. And towards that end the MIMM (sounds a bit like NIMH, doesn’t it?) is sponsoring a series of lectures and concerts. The first of these happened on November 19th, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Hamilton. The title – “Does Music Make You Smarter?” fed directly to my curiosity, and so I grabbed a friend, and off we went to be edified.

The lecture was given by Glenn Schellenberg from the University of Toronto. He started out explaining about the Mozart Effect – the classic experiment where students, after listening to Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante K 488 for 10 minutes, were given an IQ test. Those who listened to Mozart did better than the people who sat silently for the same amount of time. Tada! Mozart makes you smarter.

Well, not exactly. What Professor Schellenberg was suggesting is that it isn’t really the Mozart, but rather anything that catches your interest that makes you smarter. He tried

the experiment again with a batch of 10-12 year olds who got to listen to Mozart and then pop songs by the alternative band Blur. And surprise – the music they liked, the Blur, raised their test scores over the Mozart! Another experiment took adults and compared the results of another piece of classical music, this time the standard funeral march, and found that although that piece is technically of the high classical tradition, it didn't have the same results as Mozart or any other music. Because it didn't engage the listener, didn't "turn them on," it didn't help their test scores.

This thrilled me to no end. Ah hah! Take that, you classical snobs! The pedestal begins to crumble! ::kick kick kick::.....wait. It still seems pretty solid. What's wrong here?

Oh, yeah. The concert.

With this wonderful message of musical equality floating in the air, there was still the concert program to contend with. With appearances by pianist Valerie Tryon, soprano Mary Lou Fallis, and The John Laing Singers, among others, it was a fairly impressive line-up. Of ALL classical music – no Blur in sight.

Musical equality nullified.

As a stodgy classical musician, I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to buy this kind of stuff – to believe that MY music is the best and makes you smarter. Fortunately Paul, the friend who went with me, isn't under any such obligation. He is a jazz guitarist, and while I spent my formative years locked in a practice room playing scales, he was out jamming, and actually playing music. But, despite differences we may have with the origins of music – the ancient Greeks or the Beatles – we both took issue with the whole event, especially because we were being presented with a mixed message.

The scientific information told us that one type of music isn't privileged over another as far as test scores went. But at the same time we were also being shown that this particular concert program obviously DOES believe that there is one type of music we should be listening to, or studying, and it's classical music – that classical music is somehow higher, somehow better, and manages to "make you smarter."

Doesn't jive, does it?

There is another issue here as well. We've established that it isn't classical music that makes you smarter; it's MUSIC that makes you smarter. Or more appropriately, it makes test scores go up. But since when did test scores ever really indicate much about intelligence? I apologize to all those parents out there who have been buying "Mozart for Baby" tapes, but although your little cooing infant may enjoy the music, it's probably not going to turn her into Einstein. Sorry.

Intelligence that comes only from test scores doesn't mean much in the end – it just means that you can fold and cut paper faster. To be really, truly smarter, you have to actually learn something. And that takes more than just plunking down in front of a CD player for a few minutes.

And the second half of the program did address the idea of doing something – that *studying* music is linked to intelligence as well, although Prof. Schellenberg's acquiescence that any kind of extracurricular activity that vaguely resembles a school setting will make a kid smarter was refreshing. Though this was better, I was still a little bothered by something.

I don't really want music to make me smarter. Or at least, I don't want to care that it does.

I think that far too many people listen to classical music, if they listen at all, for all the wrong reasons. They listen because they think it'll make them look smarter, or because they think it'll make them smarter, because it's some kind of status symbol. And I'm not saying that you don't have to think about classical music – sure, many pieces are incredibly complex, with layers of technique and meaning that a person could invest hours of thought and ponderance into deciphering. But that isn't all of it.

Because what is really great about music, any music, isn't about what you think – it's about what you feel – that thing that makes your pulse race, that makes your feet tap, that makes you feel. And if as Prof. Schellenberg said, that it's about what "turns you on," then whether it gives you a two point bump in your IQ or not, music is a good thing – because it makes you feel good. Thanks, science!

Time's up, please put your pencils down, the test is over. Forget about smart and go listen to some music. It's good for you.

COLUMN

A music teacher from a town near Denver, Colorado might be fired for showing her elementary school students opera.

Yes, opera. Not for teaching sex ed, or explicit literature, but classical music.

The teacher showed students 12 minutes from Gounod's *Faust*, which tells the story of how the aging scholar Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his heart's desires. The video was from a series—featuring soprano Joan Sutherland and narrated by a trio of puppets—called *Who's Afraid of Opera?*

Well, apparently the parents are afraid. Some are claiming that students were traumatized by images of the devil and also by allusions to suicide, as a character is seen impaling himself on a sword in silhouette. One parent is quoted as saying, "I think it glorifies Satan in some way."

Saying that *Faust* glorifies Satan is like saying that *Requiem for a Dream* glorifies heroin use. Faust is damned for his association with the devil, and the whole opera details the destruction of Faust's life as a result of his contract. Taking a few moments to understand the context of the thing they find so objectionable might have served the parents well.

I also have a hard time believing that normal, acculturated seven- and eight-year-olds would be permanently scarred by seeing puppets telling them about the devil, especially when it is abundantly clear that he is the bad guy. One would presume that they do watch television, where even the most benign cartoons have villains with pointy horns and forklid tails.

I don't think that images of the devil should be the issue here, nor do I think it rational to assert that watching *Faust* suddenly makes this teacher a glorifier of Satan. But I will admit that there is some scary stuff in *Faust*. It is about the devil, and rape, and suicide, and madness. It hardly seems well-suited to puppet narration. But *Faust* has some incredibly beautiful music, and its potential to unsettle the audience is exactly what makes it worthwhile.

Faust was written to reflect concerns about morality, with a message that the temptations of the devil, in the end, are more harmful than the pleasures they provide. The woman Faust loved died insane because of him, and he goes to hell to be punished for his association with the devil, while she ascends into heaven. I can't say for sure, but I think these concerned parents would want to promote such a message about the devil.

I wholeheartedly support the teacher's decision to show the video. What I do question is one of the arguments in favour of the teacher's actions. Some supporters have said that showing *Faust* to kids is okay because it is classical music and thus inoffensive by nature. It's all pretty, happy background music, right?

Of course not.

Most of the best classical music is about topics that could make people uncomfortable. Music is good because of conflict, because of toil, strife, temptation, damnation, love, lust, pain, blood, guts, and gore. It's what we like in our TV too. There is no opera without conflict—to remove potentially problem-

atic themes or offensive content would be to create an incredibly boring product. Imagine this:

Act 1: Shepherd boy sits in the meadow, singing to the sky. He wishes he had a girl with him. Suddenly—a girl appears! He courts her, she accepts, they get married, have a family and everyone lives happily ever after. The end.

Who wants to spend three hours listening to that?

It's far easier to gloss over controversy in instrumental music, because you don't get to see the devil leering from the stage. Generally, music teachers are not chastised for teaching Shostakovich, whose works portray acts of war and violence. We don't see the darkness and misogyny in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Would the parents have accused a teacher playing Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, with or without Mickey Mouse and Disney's *Fantasia*, of promoting sorcery and devil-worship?

Will we stop teaching about Paganini because he supposedly sold his soul to the devil? What about Schumann, who claimed to have a legion of voices speaking to him inside his head? Even Mozart, most innocuous of composers, said a dark visitor drove him mercilessly to write his Requiem. Sound demonic to anyone else?

Of course we won't stop teaching any of that. That would be stupid.

Music should not be accepted because it is safe or harmless—it should be studied and praised because it is poignant and powerful. These students should watch *Faust*—the whole thing—and appreciate it for its message, its music, and its story, which in the end is a powerful warning against precisely the things that these parents are afraid of.

By trying to make the arts safe and palatable, we take away any ability that they have to change things. Looking at all the debate and strife that resulted from twelve Danish cartoons should be plenty of evidence that arts can be powerful. Does that mean that we should stop drawing things? Of course not. We should keep drawing things, keep listening to things, keep being exposed to things that excite, inspire, and enrage us, because that is what the arts are for.

Opera usually gets a bad rap for being long, boring, and all about fat ladies with horns. *Faust* moves us from fat women to cloven-hoofed men, but still—albeit for different reasons—gets an unfair reputation as something to be avoided.

By restricting exposure to opera—whether for engendering ennui or espousing evil—we are contributing to a legion of kids ignorant of the profound moral and metaphysical questions that opera so deftly depicts. They will have no basis upon which to judge what is good or bad, right or wrong, because they will have never had the chance to learn about any of it.

If you'd like to try opera, Opera Ontario will be performing La Traviata on 29 April and 4 and 6 May, and the Canadian Opera Company is doing Bellini's Norma from 31 March until 15 April and Berg's Wozzeck from 30 March to 13 April.

DEFINITELY THE OPERA



rock . . . of . . . ages by Claire Marie Blaustein

incite 15

Figure 14 – Incite, March 2006

***Incite* – Volume 8, Number 5**

March 2006

Rock of Ages – “Definitely Not The Opera”

By Claire Marie Blaustein

A music teacher from a town near Denver, Colorado might be fired for showing her elementary school students opera.

Yes, opera. Not for teaching Sex Ed, explicit literature, or god forbid, evolution, but classical music.

The teacher showed students 12 minutes from Gounod’s *Faust*, which tells the story of how the aging scholar Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his heart’s desires. The video was from a series featuring soprano Joan Sutherland and is narrated by a trio of puppets – yes, puppets – called “Who’s Afraid of Opera?”

Well, apparently the parents are afraid. Some are claiming that students were traumatized by images of the devil and also by allusions to suicide, as a character is seen impaling himself on a sword in silhouette. One parent is quoted as saying – “I think it glorifies Satan in some way, yes.”

My concerns with this are many.

First of all, saying that *Faust* glorifies Satan is like saying *Requiem for a Dream* glorifies heroin use. Faust is damned for his association with the devil, and the whole opera is about the destruction of Faust’s life as a result of his contract. Taking a few moments to understand the context for the thing they find so objectionable might have served the parents well.

Secondly, I have a hard time believing that normal, acculturated 7 and 8 year olds would be permanently scarred by seeing puppets telling them about the devil, especially when it is abundantly clear that he is the bad guy. One would presume that they do watch television, where even the most benign cartoons have villains with pointy horns and whipping tails.

Thirdly, I would hope that a music teacher wouldn’t lose her job just because she exposed her students to something that a few parents found objectionable. She sent a letter of apology, and as it was her first year teaching in the district, a warning should really be sufficient.

But the thing that bothers me the most is that I don’t ENTIRELY disagree with the parents.

I certainly don't think that concerns about images of the devil should be the issue, or assertions that watching *Faust* suddenly makes this teacher a worshiper of Satan, but there is some scary stuff in *Faust*, and perhaps it wasn't the most appropriate thing to show these kids.

Faust IS about the devil, and rape, and suicide, and madness. It hardly seems like the kind of thing that would be well suited to a video narrated by puppets. *Faust* has some incredibly beautiful music, sure, and in these excerpted videos is unlikely to be particularly explicit, but it is still about subjects that might be unsettling. But that is an issue with the videos, not with the teacher, and the unsettling nature of the plot is really the whole point of the opera.

Faust was written to reflect concerns about morality, with a message that the temptations of the devil, in end, are more harm than the pleasures they provide. The woman Faust loved died insane because of him, and he goes to hell and is punished for his association with the devil, while she ascends into heaven. I can't say for sure, but I would think that this is general message that these concerned parents would want to promote about the devil.

I feel that the teachers decision to show the video was justified and fully within her rights as an instructor. I wholeheartedly throw my support behind her based on those grounds. What I cannot see is the argument floating around that the reason showing *Faust* to kids is ok is because it is classical music. After all, how could classical music ever offend anyone? It's all pretty, happy background music, right?

Of course not.

Most of the best classical music is about topics that could make people uncomfortable. Music is good because of conflict, because of toil, strife, temptation, damnation, love, lust, pain, blood, guts, and gore. It's what we like in our TV, too. There is NO opera without conflict – to remove potentially problematic themes or offensive content would be to create an incredibly boring product. Imagine this:

Act 1: Shepherd boy sits in the meadow, singing to the sky. He wishes he had a girl with him. Suddenly...a girl appears! He courts her, she accepts, they get married, have a family and everyone lives happily ever after. The end.

Who wants to spend three hours listening to that?

It's far easier to gloss over controversy in instrumental music, just because you don't get to see the devil leering from the stage. Generally music teachers are not chastised for teaching Shostakovich, whose works portray acts of war and violence. We don't see the darkness and misogyny in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Would the parents have

accused a teacher playing Dukas' *Sorcerers Apprentice*, with or without Mickey Mouse and Disney's *Fantasia*, of promoting sorcery and devil-worship?

Will we stop teaching about Paganini because he supposedly sold his soul to the devil? What about Schumann, who had a legion of voices speaking to him in his head? Or even Mozart, most innocuous of composers, who had a dark visitor who drove him mercilessly to write his Requiem. Sound demonic to anyone else?

Of course we won't stop teaching any of that. THAT would be stupid.

Music should not be accepted because it is safe or harmless – it should be studied and praised because it is poignant and powerful! These students should watch *Faust* – the whole thing, and appreciate it for its message, its music, and its story, which in the end is a powerful warning against precisely the thing that these parents are afraid of.

By trying to make the arts safe and palatable, we take away any ability that they have to change things. Looking at all the debate and strife that resulted from six little cartoons should be plenty of evidence that arts can be powerful. Does that mean that we should stop drawing things? Of course not. We should keep drawing things, keep listening to things, keep being exposed to things that excite, inspire, and terrify us, because that is what the arts are for.

And by restricting exposure to them, we are creating a legion of kids who will no idea how much is out there, and have no ability to judge for themselves what is good and bad, right and wrong, because they will have never had the chance to learn about any of it.

Opera usually gets a bad rap for being long, boring, and all about fat ladies with horns. We've moved from fat women to red-skinned men, but still opera is something to be avoided. But there is nothing to fear in opera – other than fear itself. Because being afraid never got us much of anywhere.

If you'd like to try opera, the Opera Ontario will be performing La Traviata on April 29th, May 4 and 6, and the Canadian Opera Company is doing Bellini's Norma from March 31-April 15 and Berg's Wozzeck from March 30-April 13th.

Classical music afforded me a wide variety of publication spaces and many different kinds of writing. From daily newspapers to magazines to independent papers, each one came with a different readership and new challenges and expectations on my writing. However, none of my work within classical music could compare to the diversity of musical material I would encounter within my work with world music. Artists from almost every corner of the globe, every tradition and time period can be included within this one genre category, and the critic can easily be presented with and expected to write about all of them. But in order to write about world music, a critic must first understand the meaning of the term and its problematic nature, and how both the term and her subject position influence the way she addresses the genre.

❧ CHAPTER TWO ❧ WORLD MUSIC

In comparison to the traditions of classical music criticism, world music criticism is in its infancy. This youthfulness is not in relation to the musical material, which encompasses traditions that far predate the Classical era in Western music, but stems from the recent development of the term as a genre category in the West. In the late 1980s, record executives and other music business representatives gathered in a North London pub and attempted to come up with a succinct label to describe the variety of international musics that were flooding the scene. After looking at several options, including “ethnic,” “folk,” “international,” and “tropical,” they settled upon “World Music.”¹ To take this open-ended term at its literal meaning, one might create a definition similar to Philip Bohlman’s in his book, *World Music: A Very Short*

Introduction:

World music is the music we encounter, well, everywhere in the world. World music can be folk music, art music, or popular music; its practitioners may be amateur or professional. World music may be sacred, secular, or commercial... The world of world music has no boundaries; therefore access to world music is open to all. There’s ample justification to call just about anything world music.²

However, a definition this broad raises a question. If there is ample justification for anything to be world music, then why do we not call it all simply “music”? Although the strictest interpretation of the term would be all-inclusive, this is not the way in which it is characteristically interpreted. One element is always present when defining this term and

¹ Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

² Phillip V. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi.

that is the division between Western and non-Western, between “us” and “them.” This division is closely related to the way ethnomusicologists conceived of world music from the time of their discipline’s inception – as a way to describe “the music of the world’s peoples” – and a “shorthand way of separating the musics of the west and the rest.”³

“World Music” is not a term of inclusion; it is a means of othering, whereby the music of the Western world can be just music, and music from everywhere else fits into a single record bin at HMV.

This process of “othering,” of homogenizing the world, is a concept commonly used in colonialist discourse. Othering is not a physical act, a wall built between two groups. It is a belief system, a discourse that produces distance between “us” and “them.” In the monograph that first defined the terms of this practice, *Orientalism*, Edward Said notes the power of European discourse around what was called “the Orient” to create a common belief of what “the Orient” was.

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.⁴

Although “corporate institution” here seems to refer to a more general sense of outside power, with world music, the corporate structure of the music business is intrinsically linked to the way in which the Western world addresses and understands “world music” as a whole. The term originated for economic reasons, and the corporation continues to

³ Taylor, 3.

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 3.

apply the label of “world” regardless of musical divisions within it, consistently reinforcing the belief that “the world” functions as a single and separate entity from “The West.” It is also because of this infrastructure that the position of world music critic exists, since mass media criticism is fundamentally linked to the availability of certain musics in the public marketplace. Additionally, this emphasis on the corporate institution places a great deal of importance on the expectations and understandings of consumers, which here would refer primarily to the people in the Western world, since it is these consumers who drive the market.

In every discussion of terminology or beliefs surrounding world music, it must always be understood that they develop from a Western standpoint, and are constructed and imposed upon the music. Ideas of what “world music” is or is not, what it can or cannot be, are constructed entirely by Western consumers. It is the ways in which the West consumes world music, and the ways in which world music is discussed, taught, and described that reinforce the division between “us” and “them,” equating the world to the Orient, the location of our “deepest and most recurring images of the Other.”⁵

These images of the “other” are many, but most of them will originate in the idea that the other exists as half of a binary, and as such will stand in opposition to our images of western culture.

The space between the West and its others has vexed ethnomusicology since its inception... Depending on the historical moment and the disciplinary focus, it becomes the space between “high” and “low” culture, “oral” and “literate” culture, “popular” and “elite”, peoples “with history” and those “without history”, “premodern” and “modern”, or, in our own age, “modern” and “postmodern.”

⁵ Ibid., 1.

The paradox here becomes even more troubling when we realise that all these terms and the conceptual pairs they form have distinctly Western origins. Within the pairs one term is available for the observer, transforming the other into a place occupied by the observed.⁶

Although the values attributed to world music might be seen as the “lesser” side of the binary – that low is valued less than high, or premodern less than modern – there are two difficulties with this assertion. The validity of this devaluing is debatable, and not least because of the paradox Bohlman mentions, of the mediation of western culture inherent in the valuation. The paradox is troubling, but hardly surprising – as I mentioned before, “world music” is not really the music of the world, but music from places other than the West mediated through a western lens of what the world is.

Additionally, even if premodern were to be less valued than modern, there is often an element of desire in these differences – an aspiration towards qualities perceived to be present in the other. With world music, it is particularly the image of perceived purity that the West admires.

The point is that the earliest European observers viewed the unspoiled, unmodern “savage” as living lives that modernized Europeans could only envy: natural, innocent. And lives in which music was made, not manufactured.⁷

This “innocence” of “savage” music is more often described now as another attribute of world music – that of “authenticity.” If it were necessary to place it in a binary, it would stand in opposition to the over-commercialized and over-developed music of the West – music that has lost its “purity.” It is an idea that is difficult to lend concrete definition to, as it cannot be precisely likened to the ideals of an “authentic” performance in western

⁶ Bohlman, 37.

⁷ Taylor, 27.

music, which deals primarily with historical accuracy in performance practice and presentation – for example, that a baroque orchestra would perform standing instead of sitting. With world music performers, the expectations of authenticity go further, extending completely beyond musical production to the positions of the artists themselves. Authenticity becomes a reference to the person's positionality as being only representative of their side of the binary – as being “racialized, ethnicized, subaltern and premodern.”⁸ The expectations of the artists are the same as the expectations of their culture and cultural production, and they in turn become similarly one-dimensional.

The problem is that there are multiple subject positions available to anyone, and multiple interpretations and constructions of those positions...But the west, while it views its citizens as occupying many different subject positions, allows “natives” only one, and it is whatever one the west wants at any particular moment. So constructions of “natives” by music fans at the metropolises constantly demand that these natives be premodern, untainted, and thus musically the same as they ever were.⁹

This ideal of the “native” links authenticity directly to the person of the musician – the music is authentic only if produced by an authentic, untainted native body. Their purity is important, but even more so is the fact that they must remain “musically the same as they ever were.” This promotes a concept that Homi Bhabha terms “fixity” in cultural development.¹⁰ Because western culture is promoted as being ever changing and developmental, the implied opposite would be for the other to remain stagnant and in the process remain “pure,” and musically the same.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 95.

The desire for this difference often manifests itself in the work of western artists, who will “borrow” material from world musicians.

The act of borrowing from other musical cultures has been portrayed as primarily an open-minded and emphatic gesture of interest in and fascination with marginalized musics. Such a perspective holds the danger of treating non-Western cultures purely as a resource for the reinvigoration of Western culture.¹¹

Most colonialist discourses take the position that other cultural resources exist to reinvigorate or benefit the West. When applied, the power structures become further hidden, because it is far easier to believe in the mythology of music as a non-representational, and hence non-political force than to accept that power is being wielded in the supposedly collaborative endeavours between Western and non-Western musicians and musics. Of course, these practices have undergone extensive criticism within the academic community, but much of this has not reached a general audience; in this discussion, public perception is key, because it is that public discourse that the critic will have to navigate and either serve to further or counter in her own work.

I have mentioned my readers’ subject positions as part of western culture, but as a white, middle class critic from the West, I am no less susceptible to the kind of assumptions and beliefs I have been discussing. I must first be adequately aware of them and take care to counter these impulses in the content my work. However, my approach to the process of writing criticism can also contain elements of the us/them divide.

Although each genre has its own challenges, assuming that world music requires a drastic difference in approach can also further the sense of distance between my subject matter

¹¹ Georgia Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 8.

and myself. By assuming that writing about world music is intrinsically different from writing about any other genre, we only serve to further the distance between the world and “us,” and perpetuate the impetus for othering so ingrained in the West’s attitudes towards other countries.

The process of writing world music criticism is often categorized as inherently different or more “dangerous” than writing about other more established genres.

One major problem is that the music is frequently combined with theatre, ritual, dance, poetry, and the visual arts, which is a lot to discuss intelligibly. And to make the critic’s task even harder, ethnic works appear in often-unknown languages, in excerpts which distort and obscure the meaning of the original, and frequently with inadequate program notes. Besides, ethnic programs are closely related to the culture from which they come, and a critic must understand the culture to comprehend the art. Although many renowned ethnomusicologists cautiously write only about their specialties, a music critic may have to review all kinds of ethnic music. Pity that poor individual who must be a generalist in such a risky field!¹²

Besides the requirement of writing about a multiplicity of different musical cultures, none of these requirements are particularly unique to “ethnic” music. The combination of theatre and visual arts with music is present in opera, as are “often unknown languages.” All concert-going is a ritual of some kind, with protocol that must be followed. If one were to take a similar standpoint with classical music, the performance of a single movement from a symphony could be thought to distort the meaning of the original, multi-movement work. Finally, there is no music that is not intrinsically linked to the culture from which it comes, and a critic must always understand the culture to comprehend the art. The only difference in reviewing world music is that the cultures

¹² Robert D. Schick, *Classical Music Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 166.

may be more distant from my own – but even then, cultural difference has little to do with physical distance. I am confident in saying that I would have just as much trouble, if not more, writing about a punk rock concert – using appropriate language, not essentializing, and accurately capturing the spirit of the performance – as I would world music from a country with which I had similarly little experience.

This is not to ignore the unique challenges that world music offers a critic. When understanding her musical community, the diversity of what is included within “world music” becomes an issue. Because the term is so broad, it requires the critic to be knowledgeable in many areas of music that might have nothing in common besides a shared constructed genre. This also offers a wider variety of readers. There are always those readers who may be new to the field, with little or no knowledge of the music, but with world music, even readers who are musically educated might be familiar with only a few of the many types of music within this category. A reader may have extensive background in music from Latin America, but they might know nothing about music from India, both of which are “world.” Therefore, the process of providing background and contextual information for each review becomes even more important, since all readers could potentially be relatively ignorant of the musical practice discussed.

When discussing context, the world music critic encounters another perplexity. When the music presented comes from one particular cultural context, and then is presented within an entirely different one, how should the critic evaluate it?

Ethnic programs often reveal a conflict between being entertaining and being authentic. Should a performance be primarily entertainment for a Western audience, or should it present an authentic picture of a country’s art? And if an

audience prefers entertainment to authenticity, is it ethical to distort a people's art for the sake of a lively show?¹³

Although the process through which the music is “distorted” is unclear, particularly in cases where a program might represent music of a ritualistic nature, religious or otherwise, a balance must be made between discussing it as a cultural artefact and discussing it as a concert. Although attempts can be made not to overemphasize the “foreign” nature of world music, it still must be acknowledged that this is the product of a different culture, and understood within that cultural context as much as possible, just as music of the West is representative of our own cultural practices.

The principle difference in my experiences writing for print media about world music as opposed to classical lay in the type of music I was addressing. By far, the demands for CD reviews far outweighed that for live performance reviews, which was quite the opposite of my experience with classical music. In all of my published reviews, I produced not one classical CD review, and not a single live performance review for world music. In part, this may be because world music exists as a genre only due to a need within the music industry, and therefore leans towards the products of that industry for its consumable material. This may be because the music mostly comes from places not in the West, and potentially difficult to obtain in a live setting. However, this distinction also brings to bear the conflict between two different imagined communities – the Western listeners to world music and the diasporic community from the musical culture itself.

¹³ Ibid., 169.

It is a safer thing for the world music community to be imagined for the Western listener, because in that imagining, he or she can more easily maintain the ideal of being the “us,” rather than the “other.” A concept of a genre that places a small fraction of the planet’s population into a dominant role, and groups the rest of it into a single entity which can be governed over would have to be at least in part a cultural and economic construction. Recorded music is controlled and contained by the West – the recording industry, the retail outlets, and the listener herself. It is a mechanism by which the imagined community of “us” still exists. When in a performance setting, the Western listener is not necessarily either in control of the music, nor are in the majority of listeners. I personally found it more likely that I would be the minority – the little white girl in the back of the club, feeling like everyone was wondering why she was there. At a concert of Mexican rock group Café Tacuba, I was relatively ignored by the largely Hispanic audience. In my experience with the Indian group Sidi Goma, I was further “othered” by the language barrier, as the majority of audience members spoke Hindi, and the performers switched into that language half way through the concert, leaving the few of us who did not understand to simply sit and wonder what was being said. The paradigm for western control does not entirely dissipate with concert performances, as they are often held in western venues, and organized and promoted by western cultural institutions. However, the differences between the communities present become at once more obvious and reversed, as the western listener becomes the “other.” This position is an educational one for a critic, who might have previously fallen prey to ideals of Orientalism and control that I discussed earlier. In seeing the music at least in part in the

context of its own cultural community, she is better able to gain perspective on her role in discussing these performances. She is a conduit to western listeners, as they are also western readers. But the music is not a proprietary object, it is a cultural product, and must be understood and discussed within both its original context and also within that of the West.



I mentioned at the outset the youthfulness of world music criticism. This might be considered a disadvantage, as few practices and standards have been established to govern the behaviour of the critic, and someone new to the field has little to guide them. However, this youthfulness makes the actions of the critic all the more important. The discourse around world music is still developing, and through acknowledging the issues surrounding it, the critic can be instrumental in the creation of that discourse. Her work reaches the public of her readers, with whom so much of the power in these western-created structures lies, and attempts to influence them. Through her informed and cognisant writing, she can avoid perpetuating the distance and divisions that plague the discussion of world music. Her greatest task is to be constantly aware of where the boundaries surrounding what is and is not world music lie, and discover if they are truly barriers, or simply hurdles that may be overcome.

PRINT MEDIA

Classical music is strongly supported in traditional media, but the opportunities for writing about world music in print are nowhere near as extensive as for classical music. There is often little coverage in daily papers, except in instances when the artist has a name recognizable to the general public or can be placed in relation to something that has emerged in popular culture.¹⁴ Most of the writing on world music appears in specialty publications, either those devoted to music, or to world music in particular. Because of that more limited scope, I will describe my experience writing world music reviews in terms of print media in general, rather than dividing it by publication as I had for classical music. As a model, I will use one of the publications I was able to write for during my tenure at McMaster – *Exclaim!*

The Canadian music magazine *Exclaim!* is a nationally distributed monthly music and culture publication. It is free, primarily caters to the 19-24 year old readership, and covers music in a wide variety of genres, as well as movies and graphic novels. The focus of the magazine is primarily on reviews, both of live concerts and recordings. The reviews are divided into genre categories, including Pop and Rock, Improv and Experimental, Electronic, Metal and Hardcore, and Hip-Hop. World music, here referred to as “Outernational Vibes” falls into the *Groove* category, which is shared by Funk and

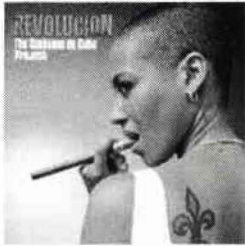
¹⁴ An example of this would be the coverage of Brazilian artist Seu Jorge, whose appearance in the movie *The Life Aquatic* garnered him some attention in larger print publications like the Boston Globe and San Francisco Chronicle.

Soul and appears only every other month, along with *Wood, Wires & Whisky*, the section for Country, Folk and Blues music.

Writing for print media of any kind has common restrictions. There is always the issue of space. CD reviews for *Exclaim!* are expected to be approximately 200 words, leaving little room for expounding or explanation. The reviews of live performance take slightly more space, being between 300 and 400 words.¹⁵ More importantly, given that this is a general music interest publication with only a marginal presence for world music, there can be few expectations of prior knowledge, and a need for contextualizing and explanation of unfamiliar music or artists.

The reviews that follow are a mix of published and unpublished work. As I discussed earlier, the demand for reviews of recordings was far greater than that for live concerts, so all of the CD reviews here were published while those featuring live performances were not. However, all were produced with the guidelines, deadlines, and expectations of a print publication in mind.

¹⁵ Although *Exclaim!* did publish live reviews, they rarely addressed world music, leaning more heavily towards indie and rock genres.



Revolucion: The Santiago de Cuba Project
Petrol Records

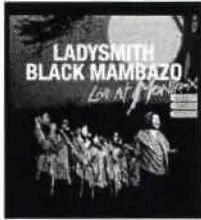
As much as warm sun and sand, Cuba is defined by its music, from son to salsa to jazz to rock. But the hidden treasure of Santiago, a city on the southern edge of the island, is hip-hop. It's still an art of the streets and the people, rather than of music videos and diamonds. Kids buy bootlegged backup tracks to practice their rhymes and every bar and street is filled with music.

And when Australian musician Mark Edwards came to Santiago, he heard the music of the streets and set up a studio to put it all down on tape. And the result is *Revolution: The Santiago de Cuba Project*.

Hip-hop has become a sort of international music – spreading across the globe and taking on the influences of each musical culture it touches. There is no mistaking this for hip-hop from anywhere else. It has its own feel, its own cubanismo that marks it as being from this particular musical crossroads, of Spanish and African, of North and South America.

The album is a total mix of styles and sensations – some tracks exude the anger of oppressed youth, and others just pure dance and beat. There is even some goofiness, with a reggaeton track *Chinito* by Candyman that mixes Spanish and fake Chinese to a pop-y beat. But with as broad a selection of sounds as the people making the music, it's all absorbing and impossible not to move to.

– Claire Marie Blaustein



Ladysmith Black Mambazo: *Live at Montreux* 1987/1989/2000
Eagle Records – 2005

Paul Simon was a big part of my childhood – one of those artists that your parents have on around the house that somehow makes their way into your psyche. I always loved *Graceland* best, mostly because of Ladysmith Black Mambazo's *Isicathamiya* singing (a word that means to walk on one's toes, since their choreography makes it look like they are tiptoeing on stage).

The group was already fairly well known their native South Africa when Simon pulled them onto North America's center stage, but their career since has been even brighter. This album collects three of their live performances from the Montreux Jazz festival, from 1987, 1989, and 2000.

The sound of these voices fills you from your gut to your head – the richness and depth combines with the higher vocals meant to capture the attention of any passer-by. And as with all their shows, and the tradition of the singing itself, it's a combination of Christian hymns and Zulu singing that is familiar to the Western ear, while still sounding fresh and new. It is music that makes you feel a million miles away and yet right at home all at once.

- Claire Marie Blaustein



Ozomatli: *Live at the Fillmore*
Concord Records – 2005

Up until recently, my love for Ozomatli was chaste and from afar...well, maybe not chaste. I was one of many who knew the LA based band only from their albums. For anyone who knows *Street Signs* or *Embrace the Chaos*, you know how infectious this music is. You feel it, you move with it, you take it into your brain and let it envelop you. Live...well, it's a whole new thing. I had my first musical orgasm front row centre at a live show. You are THERE, with THEM, and it sucks you in even deeper than anything coming through a stereo ever could.

The new album – *Live at the Fillmore* – may not be quite the same as a live show, but it's as close as you can get without leaving the comfort of your home. The CD is good, but with no new songs, it's only the extended solos, instrumentals, and cheering crowd that separate it from the studio recordings.

But look! Another disc! The accompanying DVD has the full 2004 concert from San Francisco and tons of other extras. It is a must for the die-hard fan, and a great introduction for anyone who hasn't had the experience of being right there. It becomes a flashback, musical *deja-vu*. The moment it starts, I'm gone – or as Ozo would say: *ya se fue*.

--Claire Marie Blaustein

Groove

Funk, Soul & Experimental Vibes

LES YEUX NOIRS

Tchorba

Les Yeux Noirs (the Black Eyes) are a French band, but their music combines gypsy and Klezmer with a touch of jazz. Founded by violinists Eric and Olivier Slabik, the group try to encompass some of the relationships between the Gypsies and the Jews — musical cultures with a lot in common, and social cultures with a shared history of celebration and oppression. This is an album with a head-spinning variety of moods and sounds, and often a sweet and sentimental ballad like "Reve" will move straight into a blazing instrumental track and then back to a ponderous song like "Yankele," a Yiddish lullaby to a little boy who is growing too quickly in his parents' eyes. What caught my interest the most were the instrumental tracks, which show off the serious chops these guys have — the opening "Tchorba" has this fabulous funky backdrop that brings in gypsy strings, and my favourite, "Doina Si Joc De Marian," shows just a little of the real speed and virtuosity inherent in Klezmer and Romani music. This is an album with a lot to offer to any listener, and although the changes from one song to the next might rock you back on your heels a bit, pull it back in and brace yourself for the next one — it'll be worth it. (World Village, www.worldvillagemusic.com)
Claire Marie Blaustein

THE MIGHTY SPARROW

First Flight

The calypso is a song style that disguises a wicked sense of humour and wit behind a relatively perky exterior. The music is bouncy and sweet, but the lyrics deal with politics and violence — it is a balance of seeming contradictions. Slinger Francisco, aka the Mighty Sparrow, was one of the most famous calypso singers. This release from Smithsonian Folkways collects some of his earliest calypsos, and packed with pictures and information, this disc gives the listener a view into the musical world in the Caribbean in the late '50s. Although all the tracks are shining examples of this musical style, one of the most interesting is "Sparrow vs. Melody Picong," a live recording of a calypso war, where two singers swing back and forth between improvised sung jibes, getting more and more intense, sharp and hilarious. The whole project comes together as an album with the temperament of calypso — a balance of pointed criticism and hilarious witticism, all wrapped up in a musical package that takes you straight to the hot dance halls of Trinidad. (Smithsonian Folkways, www.folkways.si.edu)
Claire Marie Blaustein

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Figure 15 – *Exclaim!* March 2006 – Groove

Peter Glückstein

Goya 1 / Goya 2

Essay

<http://www.essayrecordings.com>

By Claire Marie Blaustein

March 08, 2006

It seems weird to review albums that are really publicity pieces — advertisements for a new club in Berlin, called Goya. But publicity stunt or not, these are great compilations, featuring rare and unknown tracks by artists from all over the globe. A new edition is scheduled to be released every three months, with Goya 1 and 2 currently in wide distribution. What caught my attention first was “Summertime,” done by Angelique Kidjo, which opens 1. This is a gorgeous song, and added to Kidjo’s alto vocals and a pulling beat, it creates a warm sense of summer, but on a sunny shore, rather than Gershwin’s streets of Charleston. The jazz tune “Chauffeur” by the fantastic Nina Simone actually graces 2, along with the Spanish “El Coco” by the Gitano Family. It’s electronic, blues, soul, tango, hip-hop, crossover, and anything else, but despite the differences, a solid but invisible thread connects the whole thing, making it a real album, rather than a compilation. Peter Glückstein, initiator of the project, has created an ambient album with real ambience — a sense of place and difference, all that manages to capture the attention and hold it tight.

Nuru Kane

Sigil

World Disc

<http://www.worlddisc.net>

By Claire Marie Blaustein

April 13, 2006

“Musical Journey” is a pretty trite way to describe any album, mostly because every album is one. But *Sigil*, the newest release from Senegalese guitarist and vocalist Nuru Kane, really has the feel of a personal story – the travels and trials of one man trying to find his own musical roots among the many strains that make up the culture he came from.

Although the CD is billed just under Kane, many of the tracks also include his band, Bayefall Gnawa. The name encompasses just a few of the influences that make up this diverse recording. First is the Gnawa tribe, from whom Kane received his fascination with their trance music and the *gimbri*, their three stringed bass, and second is Baye Fall, a spiritual brotherhood started by Cheikh Amadu Bamba. This influence is heard especially in the lyrics of the songs, which talk about human emotions, morality, and the impacts of violence.

The overall production is light and thin, but with no less depth in the sound for it. It is almost entirely acoustic, and mostly simple arrangements. “Gorée,” was recorded in a single live take, and immediately I was drawn to the sound of blues, of one man with his guitar and a plaintive vocal strain but with a sway from inside the gut string of the bass. There is something in the sound of this song that emulates a heart on his sleeve – completely exposed, completely open. With the feeling of a pin drop in a silent room, it captures the attention and holds it fast, taking us along on his journey.

Café Tacuba
Birchmere Music Club – Alexandria, VA
June 21, 2005

I love going to concerts where I have no idea who I am hearing. There is something about experiencing a band for the first time in a live setting that makes the experience all the more exciting. So when my friend said she had two tickets to see some “cafetacoooba” people, I was all in. Hey, I never pass up a free ticket to anything.

So, after a trek by metro and cab from the safe haven of DC all the way out to Alexandria, we arrived at the Birchmere Music Club. On the way there, I was informed that the group was actually called Café Tacuba, and that they were one of the biggest groups to come out of Mexico in the last fifteen years.

Ok, so I felt dumb. And particularly white, too, being in a space where I was introduced as the token gringo friend, being properly educated in the world of Mexican alt-rock. But once the music started I was swept into the mosh, and the fact that my Spanish skills are no more than rudimentary did not get in my way of singing along to every song that I didn't know.

This group of four guys – singer Ruben "Nru" Albarran, guitarist Joselo Rangel and his bassist brother Enrique "Quique" Rangel, and keyboardist Emanuel DeReal – were all design students outside Mexico City when they started playing together as Café Tacuba. They still have the aura of a garage band, relaxed and comfortable on a stage with a crowd of only about 200, even though last year they celebrated their 15th anniversary with two sold-out shows at Palacio de los Deportes in Mexico City, with 40,000 fans watching.

They are not what most Americans would expect from a “Latin” group. The genre of “Rock en Español” isn't sufficient either – mostly because it only describes one out of every eight songs they play. It does rock, but there is as much ska as hip-hop as tango as bolero as anything else. And they play with so much energy and enthusiasm, that it is a show that even the most reticent gringa can get into. And along with everything else, I learned one very important Spanish phrase that evening – No soy Latina, pero yo amo Café Tacuba.

The following three reviews cover concerts presented as part of the Small World Music Festival in Toronto, Ontario. The festival occurred in venues throughout the city over a two-week period, and brought in artists from all over Canada and the world. I was fortunate enough to gain a volunteer position with the festival so I might attend several of the concerts. For that, I thank Alan Davis, director of Small World Music.

Autorickshaw
 Small World Music Festival
 All Green Theatre – Toronto
 September 30, 2005

Trying to describe **Autorickshaw** is always a challenge. They are a band, but replacing the standard drum kit is a complicated middle-eastern influenced hand drum kit and a tabla. The singer switches languages and styles from moment to moment, and the only harmonic elements come from a tiny white box. The term indo-jazz fusion isn't quite complete for what they do, since there has been plenty of fusion of Indian music and jazz – the improvisatory nature of the forms works well together. This is something new, and different – covering many influences while creating its own singular identity. This is Autorickshaw – Suba Sankaran, vocals, Ed Hanley, tabla, Rich Brown, bass, and Debashis Sinha, drums.

They were performing at the All Green Theatre in Toronto as part of the Small World Music festival, a five-day event scattered in venues across the city, bringing together musicians from near and far and music from every corner of the globe.

Although the first half of the show consisted mostly of songs that would be familiar to anyone who had been to see Autorickshaw before, they become no less enjoyable with repeat listening. The songs are stories as well as music, and especially “Chalanata Blues,” or “So The Story Goes,” which is so poignant in its message of acceptance and the joy of life's journey.

The second half brought both change and guests to the stage – mrdangam player Trichy Sankaran, and jazz guitarist Kevin Breit. The two Sankarans – who are father and daughter – performed one classical work together. It was as astounding to watch as listen to, as his hands flew over the heads of the drum and the speed of the *solcatu* rhythmic singing defied suppositions of what the human voice is capable of. Breit joined in on two tunes – “Vara Sapta Swara”, written by Suba Sankaran and Ed Hanley, which gave him a chance to wander both musically and physically, and then the finale, “Chana”, which was a traditional tune arranged by the band. The combination of these talents is a dynamic thing, and brought the audience to its feet by the end.

Autorickshaw's Juno-nominated release, *Four Higher*, is being released in the US October 11th.

Nawal
Small World Music Festival
Toronto, ON
Lula Lounge – October 1, 2005

The Comoro Islands are in the Indian Ocean, off the eastern coast of Africa. Once ruled by France, they are also known as the “Perfume Islands” or “Islands of the Moon.” And a piece of these distant lands came to Toronto Saturday night, as part of the Small World Music Festival – in the form of singer and songwriter, Nawal.

It is difficult to describe the music – any single word I would choose seems insufficient, or trite. The plaintive vocal cry that started out the set was completely different from the heavier groove created by bassist Idriss Mlanao and percussionist Melissa Cara Rigoli that followed it, and the sense of what the music was shifted from song to song.

Even the influences weren’t something that could be pinned down. At one moment, a snatch of southern Indian could be heard in the vocals, perhaps from her country’s extensive trade on the East Indian routes, and another moment the stronger African rhythms would dominate. But all the time, there was simply the personality of this one Muslim-born African woman, from the Comoros, France, and a larger global culture, that would completely take over the listener.

The linguistic barriers weren’t much of a problem – she sings in English, French, Arabic and Comoran – in part because the longing for peace and prosperity was evident in the tone, and also because the nature of the venue made it difficult to understand individual words anyway.

Lula Lounge is not a quiet concert space, but though some of the coordinators seemed upset that people were eating, drinking and talking during the show, in the end it had no real effect on the spirit of the performance. Music is about life and celebration – it is the one thing that makes us all come together, when words are unknown and sounds are unfamiliar. Nawal brought her life and spirit to the stage, and the audience joined her in celebration.

Sidi Goma
Small World Music Festival
Toronto, ON
Al Green Theatre – October 2, 2005

In this space should appear the review for the third concert, a performance by Sidi Goma. This group is comprised of Black Sidis from Gujarat, who are a tribal Sufi community of East African origin, who came to India eight centuries ago and made Gujarat their home. The concert presented a combination of beliefs and cultures, mixing traditional African musical influences with the Indian musical influences of their new home, creating a sound that exists only in this one small community of people. All of the music was celebratory, and much of it was of a religious nature.

It was with this review that I encountered my greatest difficulty reviewing world music and one that I ended up not overcoming. I could not review this concert because I had mixed feelings about how I should address it. This is not an uncommon problem, as there is often a fear of being unknowingly offensive by misjudging or over judging a performance with deep cultural ties to a particular community.

Writers of judgemental reviews must be cautious, however, because many such programs, including those of Indonesian gamelan and African dance and music, are at least partly religious in nature. If a critic is careless, the review might criticize a religious ceremony in a way that offends those practicing the religion. Indeed, any ethnic program must be reviewed with tact since the sensibilities of the ethnic communities are often different from others, and a naive critic could easily offend someone unnecessarily.¹⁶

I had no desire to offend anyone, and although this was a time when I had done research prior to the concert, understanding some of the history and culture of the people along

¹⁶ Schick, 168.

with their musical practices, I could not see how to truly evaluate their performance. All I could have provided would have been the newspaper equivalent of the program note, giving background information without giving any judgement as to the quality of the performance. I felt that this would do an injustice to the artists, not giving them the same attention or reaction that an artist would expect from a critic attending their show.

I certainly had opinions on how I enjoyed, or didn't enjoy, the performance, but I was conflicted on whether or not my reactions were appropriate. I could not be truly evaluative, because I didn't know in what context I ought to create my evaluation. This was an instance in which problems of context became most apparent, as I was unsure under what expectations I should have had going in to the concert, and what results I should have expected from the experience.

Instead of producing a review, I placed an entry on my blog, which addressed some of my initial reactions to the concert.¹⁷

Thursday, October 06, 2005

Sticky Situations

I'm a critic, right? It has been suggested to me (in various mocking tones) that my hypercritical nature makes me well suited to this kind of job. In many ways I agree although some of the less complimentary versions of hypercritical may not be my favorite adjectives. I can criticize anything, if pushed.

But how do you criticize something that isn't meant to be performed?

I went to go see Sidi Goma, who played the last night of Toronto's Small World Music Festival. This is a group of black Muslims from India, and their show presented both their religious and celebratory music.

¹⁷ Claire Marie Blaustein, *I Dig Music...* [Blog] (accessed 2006); available from <http://clairemarieblaustein.blogspot.com/>.

And now I come to the problem – how do I write a review of this?

I could just talk about the show in general terms, but that's an article, not a review. I could try and take the music out of context – but the context is kind of the point, here. I could try and put it entirely in context, but it isn't being performed on a holy day in a temple – it's being presented to an audience from a stage. Or I could try and do both, but the contradictions are making my head hurt.

So what can I do?

If I don't make a value judgement, I am being both safe and patronizing – not giving this concert the same critical attention that I would a symphony.

And why don't I just write up some nice short thing about community and happiness and how great the concept is? Because I was bored, for grand swaths of it. An hour of droning in a language I don't understand from a culture that is completely unfamiliar to me can get old. So I can't give a completely positive review to something I didn't entirely like, but I have to make sure that it doesn't get in the way of the fact that it IS a good thing, I DO think it's important, and they DID do a good job, even if I was dozing at times.

It's a sticky place to be.



Sincere there was no expectation other than my own to actually produce a review, I settled for putting my musings in a less formal setting. However, had there been pressure from an outside source to produce and turn in a review, I believe that this is essentially the message I would have liked to convey – that performances of this nature are important, and interesting, but not necessarily enjoyable. I can be truthful in saying that I learned a great deal about a musical culture that evening, but I would be untruthful in saying that it was a pleasant process.

For the purposes of this work, I have created a review of the concert. It is written well after the fact, but it demonstrates an attempt I might have made at navigating the conflicts I felt within myself.

Sidi Goma
Small World Music Festival
Al Green Theatre – October 2, 2005

The Black Sidis of Gujarat are a tribal Sufi community of East African origin which came to India eight centuries ago. Sidi Goma represents a group of musicians from this community, who came to Toronto as part of the Small World Music Festival on Friday.

In a concert of traditional music, the audience was given a chance to witness two sides of the Sidi's musical life. The first half presented a religious ceremony, where a circle of drummers sat on the stage, supplicating the deities of this tribe. One by one, the men would come to the center of the circle and act as soloist, singing the lead in the prayer class and ritual songs. The second half represented a more secular celebration, complete with vibrant costumes and dancing.

It was certainly a fascinating look into the world of this very small and relatively unknown community. However, I felt even more distant from the performance than geography might have suggested. The performers did not speak English well, and once they discovered that most of the audience members spoke Hindi, the principle language of Gujarat, they switched to that for most of the concert. Those few members of the audience who were not familiar with the language were left out in the cold.

My distance from the concert increased as confusion was replaced by exhaustion. This is a difficult area for any reviewer, because I certainly don't feel comfortable criticizing anyone else's religious practices. But as a concert, the first half of the program managed to seem interminable. The chants blended together, and being almost an hour of 12 men sitting on stage drumming was sure to lose my interest after a while. The dancing was more visually engaging and so was easier to take with little or no explanation or context from the program notes or the stage.

In retrospect, it was a very educational experience, and in parts musically engaging. Perhaps in smaller doses or with longer translations the whole concert could have been more enjoyable for everyone.



I believe it was a great deal my inexperience in the area that made me excessively nervous about saying exactly this in a print context. There is pressure from all sides to be correct and careful when dealing with cultures not your own. However, I have come to believe that the risk of being evaluated by a critic as a performer, not a cultural exhibit, is one that the musicians take on the moment they present themselves in a concert setting. I can only approach the music within the context it is presented and evaluate it based on my perception of how successful it was within that context.

My reaction to this concert showed me something else as well. I was reluctant to produce a printed review, so I turned instead to my blog, using the Internet as a space where I could be freer in format, and less constrained by what I believed were the expectations that required me to pass firm judgement. The Internet has opened up a new space for criticism, but the traditions and expectations that exist in print media do not necessarily translate to this area of the written word. The sense of freedom that the Internet can provide has distinct and important effects on criticism, as I will explore in the next section of this chapter.

THE INTERNET

The Internet has changed the way we function as a society – the way we communicate, do work, and understand the flow of information. Because of its intertextual nature, where one webpage offers not only a site for its own content but links to other sites, making any site “potentially connected to an infinite matrix of other URL’s” the user has access to a potentially infinite amount of only vaguely related, but still interconnected, information from a variety of sources.¹⁸ This differs from traditional forms of media, like print or television, in two main aspects – what Ciaran McCullagh terms “democratising of access and democratising of content.”¹⁹ Democratisation does not imply universality, of course – Internet access requires a computer, some knowledge of its functions, and even more basic requirements like electricity. However, for most of North America, the availability of free access to the Internet through public spaces such as schools and libraries has eliminated many of the economic barriers to Internet access, and it takes relatively little technical expertise to access a website and engage in Internet discourse. The democracy of content comes because of the virtually unlimited space the Internet can provide, unlike newspapers and television, which must restrict information based on space and time limitations.²⁰ This allows for space to be given to not only the traditionally powerful organizations such as governments or established media outlets, but also community groups of many sizes, and

¹⁸ P. David Marshall, *New Media Cultures* (London: Arnold, 2004), 47.

¹⁹ Ciaran McCullagh, *Media Power: A Sociological Introduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

even individuals through personal web pages and blogs, which will be discussed later in this chapter. It has become a place where a wide variety of ideas can be put forth, and to some extent, be given equal credence. However, what makes it most interesting is that the ideas being put forth are not necessarily only that of the original author of the text. The democratizing of content has another slightly different affect as well – democracy not only in the sense of equal access, but equal voices. The Internet is unique in that the reader has the ability not just to consume, but to respond within the same forum to what has been written. Many websites support forums, where the readers can discuss and even criticise the work they are consuming. Individual articles might even have spaces for comment blocks attached to them, so that the responses to the work become a part of the work itself. Although power structures between writer and reader remain, they are altered by this ease of dialogue, mimicking a more democratic system, rather than one more dictatorial, where the author’s words are the last and only ones to be spoken on the subject.

One of the greatest issues facing Internet content is that of accuracy. The strength of the Internet as a democratic and open forum for thought becomes a detriment as this also means that it lacks “a mechanism to guarantee the accuracy and completeness of that information.”²¹ Although some sites have the advantage of being associated with an information outlet that has an established mechanism ensuring accuracy, the Internet is still regarded as less patrolled and potentially less accurate than other forms of media. However, the perception of the unreliability of Internet content has not diminished either

²¹ Ibid., 119.

the power of or the public's reliance on the web as a form of communication. In part, this is because this perception is not only known but also accepted, and the users take on the responsibility to evaluate the weight and worth of any particular website, determining for themselves how accurate the content is. This can be facilitated through browsing recommendations sites with links, or even the relative popularity of sites as determined by search engines. Regardless, the first step is reading the site, and determining its value based on content.

In the realm of criticism, accuracy is a grey area, because opinions cannot necessarily be accurate or inaccurate, as they are based solely in the thought of an individual. However, an opinion can be more or less informed, and traditional media (as opposed to the “new media”) served as mechanisms to guarantee the qualifications of the writer. With the importance of publications to the authority of criticism, it is not surprising that web-based content would be seen by some as a threat to traditional critical values. When there is equality among all voices, and everyone has an opinion, how is the reader expected to understand which writers are “true critics” and which are, in a sense, hacks? The consumer, who is already aware of the necessity for self-evaluation of Internet content, will base her perception of a critic on the same thing that she would in any other media – her writing. A critic must distinguish herself based on the quality of her work, rather than relying on other outside indications of authority.

This is not to suggest that the Internet is a critical utopia, where the real abilities of writers shine forth and gain attention free of the constraints of traditional media. Different levels of attention are given to different websites based on many things, only

one of which is the quality of its content. However, the democratising of access means that the user has infinitely more choices on where to access her information as well as the ability to access any of it at any time, and in a sense, create a medium directly tailored to their own interests.



In my case, the availability of so many interest specific sites on the Internet was the greatest advantage of the medium. When I wanted to write about world music, I found getting work with print outlets to be difficult, as there were few opportunities and most would not accept the work of a beginner with little experience. With the web, there were several sites with both a passing or dedicated interest in world music, and all accepted writers who were willing to work for free.

My work fell within three main areas. Web magazines and edited websites functioned similarly to print publications – with strict policies on content and quality and overseen by an editor or editors who have complete control on the content of the site. I created my own blog, which had no authoritative vetting process of any kind; it is a format generally identifiable as the work of an individual and given credence accordingly. Through my blog, I discovered a middle ground – sites that organize the writings of individuals, with some direction but less stringent guidelines on style and content than a typical magazine, online or otherwise, in the website Blogcritics.org.

As I discovered in my writing about Sidi Goma, writing for the web was a different experience than writing for print. Even in the instances where an editor was carefully examining my work, the relative lack of space restrictions and the ability to

direct my readers to outside sources of information through linking allowed a much more varied form of discourse. In general, however, I found that the majority of changes were in my mindset, rather than the format. I entered these projects with an understanding of web media as being freer and less constrained, and therefore I was more willing to take chances with my approach to writing. In the case of my personal blog, I had even more freedom, since it was only my interests and abilities that guided my writing, rather than any outside influence, since I believed that there was little chance of my work being read by anyone. While each website was connected by the structure of the Internet, each is more or less distant from the world of print media, and contains challenges and opportunities unique not only to the web, but to each individual site as well.

WEB MAGAZINES

Web magazines function very similarly to print magazines. There are editors who assign stories or accept pitches, there are copy editors who check submitted texts for facts and grammatical mistakes, and there are often time, space, and format parameters that must be observed.

One such publication is *JIVE Magazine*, based out of Atlanta, Georgia, although as a contributing writer, the physical location of the office is less than consequential. All work for the website is done electronically, through their own submission program built into the site. Even music for review is provided through FTP accounts, rather than mailing physical discs. My work for this site continued while I was in three different cities, in two countries, without ever hindering my ability to submit my reviews and articles and have them appear on the site.

The magazine focuses on tech culture and provides reviews of entertainment products – music, movies and games.

In 2000, JIVE Magazine launched its website with a mission to cover electronic culture, music, games, and entertainment in a way unlike any other webzine or publication in existence. In 2002 JIVE printed its first issue with the same intense focus on *content, content and even more content*, written by and for the young adult, college student and post college consumer.²²

Being a volunteer publication, I was given some freedom of content, and selected topics and music that I felt fell within my areas of expertise. My articles were all about music, although in a number of different contexts – for example, my first significant article was

²² *Jive Magazine Media Kit*, [PDF] (accessed 14 February 2006); available from <http://www.jivemagazine.com/advertising/JIVEMAGAZINEmediakit.pdf>.

on music in video games – and occasionally there were opportunities for me to focus on genres closer to my areas of interest, particularly world music. Over my year’s tenure with the site, I produced several CD reviews and feature articles. Overall, the experience was nearly identical to my work for print publications, besides the near instantaneous publishing since my works would be posted within a day of completing them, and the ability to interact with my readers and fellow writers within the forum of the site.

Particularly notable for web content was the strength of editorial influence. Despite being a part of the “free discourse” of the web, *JIVE* is a magazine, and as such, had policies on the nature of its content. When reviewing a CD from a band called Liquid Blue, I produced a vehement trashing of music that I deemed to be not only bad, but also offensive. I had no compunctions about being strong in my opinions, as I had for my *Washington Post* articles – I did not feel the same restrictions on my abilities to speak freely in a web setting. I wrote the review, but when it was posted, I found that it had been not just edited, but actually changed – completely mitigating my initially strong opinion of how poor I believed the album to be.

I was, of course, incensed that my work had been altered without my permission. However, the advantage to web content was that I could go back and fix the article, as opposed to print, where once a work is published there is little short of a retraction that can be done to change it. A few emails back and forth with my editor, and I was able to re-post the review, although not in its original form. What is included here is the final version of the review that is archived on the site. Although *JIVE* brought me closer to the freedom of Internet discourse, it was far more effective at teaching me the restrictions of

print media. I would not truly embrace the Internet until I began to blog, as I will discuss in the next section.

Liquid Blue

Album: Supernova

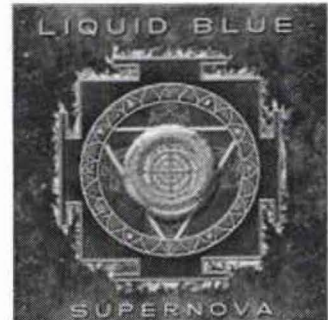
Label: Deep Blue Records

Genre: Indie-World-Pop

Release Date: Available Now

Posted: 04/12/2005

By: Claire Blaustein



Buy this at Amazon.com

Liquid Blue has this to say about their vision: "Music can be a catalyst for change...Popular music can be targeted to our base instincts or our highest ideals. Liquid Blue strives for the higher standard." This is high order, but certainly an admirable one. Their latest album *Supernova* starts out well enough instrumentally, with the first track developing a modal echoing vocal call over some kind of chant and then moving into a modified electronic beat with two twangy string instruments and a distinct *tabla* (an Indian drum that is capable of a variety of pitches and inflections). Unfortunately, at that point they start singing.

There is nothing wrong with music with a larger purpose – we have few more powerful modes of communication. It just helps if they can do it well. A clear message is good, but in this case the lyrics are so blatant that it can take a lot to actually appreciate the message. Take the closing stanza from the song *If You Gotta Ask*: *Can't trust those politicians, who are slaves to special interests It's all about the money But don't blame the Armed Forces, they are not the sources They're heroes either way.* Not one "drip" of subtlety here, especially given the delicacy of the message being conveyed. When ideas and debates of this magnitude are reduced to flat out statements it somehow begins to smack of either mishandling, or propaganda.

The music is fine, if not groundbreaking. It's definitely up-tempo pop, and for the most part the Indian-influenced elements do add a new dimension and seem handled well enough, although a bit more incorporation into the song would be nice – the Indian sounds tend to reside only in the longer intros and breaks, and completely disappear once the singing begins. This compartmentalizing could also cause some issues with labelling the music, because it takes a lot of musical sensitivity to really call something world-fusion, rather than occasionally-Indian-sounding-pop. Also, the clear distinction does nothing to forward their ideas of world cooperation and peace, since the music can carry that message as well as or better than what is actually being said. Perhaps with a bit more musical effort, and a greater reach toward real commentary, Liquid Blue might live up to their own standards.

Rating: 2 out of 5 liquidy drops ²³

²³ <http://www.jivemagazine.com/review.php?rid=972&rtid=2> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

Punditry with the PunditZ²⁴

Written By: Claire Blaustein

Posted: 09/29/2005

Photography: Anushka Nadia Menon

MIDival PunditZ is overcoming all sorts of boundaries— they bring together sounds of Indian classical and folk music and their electronic beats and loops, they've brought classical musicians of incredible calibre to collaborate on their recordings, and they are the first Indian Electronica band to be signed to an international label. Now they are touring North America with their new album *MIDival Times*, bringing their unique music and performing style to fans here.



Gaurav Raina and Tapan Raj are the two DJ/producers from New Delhi who make up MIDival PunditZ. They met in grade school, but drifted apart from each other. They also drifted from music, since Gaurav became an architecture student and Tapan an IT specialist. But in 1994 when they met again, Gaurav was also moonlighting as a radio DJ, and Tapan was an engineer at a New Delhi recording studio where the radio station booked time. They were both running around on the dance club circuit and weren't overly impressed with the purely imported sounds they were hearing coming over the speakers. They wanted music they could relate to, that had a sense of place in their own culture. And in 1997, they formed MIDival PunditZ.

Although they have been the first of their kind to make it big, especially on an international scale, there are certainly other artists within the Indian electronica genre. But, Gaurav thought that they had something unique.

"Well, a lot of artists like the MIDival PunditZ are representing a similar kind of sound, but what sets us apart would be the fact that we are from India, and we were brought up there and we live there. So our experiences and our influences are ...[different from] a lot of other people who make this kind of music."

The group is devoted to their heritage, and the music is a true blend of Indian sounds and western influence. "The setting or actually the shell that it all sits within is electronic. And what's inside, the soul of the music is Indian."

The music is a blend – a mix of soundscapes and pulsing rhythms, of sweet melodies and infectious beats. It draws you in and wraps you up, and is laced with the sense that these guys are for real. They aren't mimicking anything, they aren't overlaying anything, they aren't grafting anything – they are bringing the music they love and the place they come from together, and making something new.

Their first, self-titled album from 2002 clearly had the touch of their heritage on it, but it still had more of a club sound – more towards the electronic end than the Indian. But they want their

²⁴ <http://www.jivemagazine.com/article.php?pid=3724> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

albums to be a diary of their lives, a demonstration of their development. Since then the PunditZ has branched out, still working on the Tabla Beat Science project that brought them to the attention of many people here in the US, and also bringing their talents to Bollywood film scores and even South Indian classical dance. And so, their second album released in April 2005 – MIDlval Times – took their sound and their fusion to a new level. It brought together the electronic shell and the Indian soul through their own talent and a laundry list of collaborators, including Anoushka Shankar, Zakir Hussein, Ustad Sultan Khan and others.

“The experience was fantastic, it was something we had always wanted to do.” Tapan said. “And I think that the success of our previous album, and also that we have not been understood as only DJ’s, a lot of people in the classical music community have started looking at us as producers as well with a certain sensibility towards Indian classical music. That we’re not just trying to remix stuff, that we’re trying to create – or take the traditional music...into a new scape.”

Classical Indian music is an incredibly demanding art, and one that has in the past been insulated by its long sense of tradition. But, the PunditZ were surprised by how willing these famous musicians were to collaborate with them.

“It was kind of an eye opener for us, that even these established musicians, who are considered to be all-stars, and don’t really collaborate with a lot of people, but they were extending their vision onto our music, and they were ready to collaborate.” Tapan said. “They were very flexible, and were very open to our ideas, so there was a good exchange of ideas between what the PunditZ can contribute and along with what these musicians themselves can contribute...You can see the kind of songs that have been put together – it kind of shows a good mix of both aesthetics – the DJ and producer aesthetic that the PunditZ brought to the table, and also the classical, traditional aesthetic that these musicians have brought.”

But collaborating with classical musicians causes a problem. Neither Tapan or Gaurav have a traditional classical music education, and in India, this is incredibly important, because the training for musicians is so strict and so thorough. There is plenty that they may not know, but Tapan sees their lack of formal training both as a problem and as a help to creating music.

“I think it has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages, is of course that there will be certain terms, or certain rules and guidelines that we will not understand. Because if you are an instrumentalist, you have 8 or 10 years of practice behind them, and only then will they go to the stage. They won’t go to the stage at all, and they’ll keep practicing until they are at a certain grade for their playing. So you know, there are certain rules that you learn in that duration of time. So that is kind of a disadvantage [for us].

But it is also an advantage, because you know...we don’t have any rules, we are just trusting our ears, and we are able to bend certain rules and maybe make something new, and even so that some people who are making such music by the book, they think that ‘yea, these boys are bringing something new to it, they are adding an edge to it’ and it’s acceptable and it’s very good, and people are liking it. So maybe we are, because our lack of knowledge of all the rules, are kind of on an advantage as well.”

People are liking it, and the album has been getting a lot of attention. But it isn’t just the recording – the duo has headed out to the clubs of North America for a live tour.

With such highly produced music, a live experience may not seem so important, but the PunditZ have created their live signature – “Cyber Mefil.” Mefil is an Urdu word that means a gathering where people come together to share their art, and a MIDlval PunditZ show brings the audience closer to the music through an atmosphere that combines visuals with the music to complete an

immersive experience. And this concept has taken off, and become a rallying point for the Asian Underground.

Now, the PunditZ wants to share their art with an even wider group of people. “What we’re trying to do is stretch western audiences towards Indian sounds, and to stretch Indian audiences towards modern, electronic, Western music.” Gaurav said in a press release for the new album.

The PunditZ are visiting cities like Houston and Vancouver where they have never been before, and Tapan hopes that new audiences in new places would help their music spread.

“Yeah, earlier when we have been touring in the US and Canada, most of our crowds have been Indian or Asian audiences. Because, you know, that was the community that was supporting the kind of music we do.

But we get that in India, playing to Indian audiences. So, I think we’ve already got recognition and are known as musicians in India and of course we want to stretch out our audience, the base of people who listen to us. **So, I think our goal – the goal of any musician, is to get his or her music to as many people, to all kinds of communities, across the world.**”

Related Links:

MIDival Punditz – <http://www.punditz.com/>

Six Degrees Records – <http://www.sixdegreesrecords.com>

Cyber Mehfil – <http://www.cybermehfil.com/>

JIVE review of *Midival Times* – <http://www.jivemagazine.com/review.php?rid=1026&rtid=2>

Cyril Morin

Album: Western Pansori

Label: Milan Records

Release Date: 2005

Posted: 08/06/2005

By: Claire Blaustein



Buy this at Amazon.com

When I'm going to write a review, I usually put the music on my Mp3 player so I can listen to it on my way to and from work. The first day I picked up this album – Western Pansori, by Cyril Morin – I was sitting on the train at 6 AM. I put in my earbuds, and a small voice whispered “Don't be worried...you will succeed...you will be famous”.

This little ghostly pep talk certainly freaked me out. At that or any hour of the morning, having little voices inside my head is a fairly upsetting thing. But then the track relaxed into a mildly cloying beat with a really beautiful flute quotation from Debussy's *Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune*. And my morning commute went from an everyday event to a complete sensory experience.

The album is extremely diverse – moving from tracks like “Don't be Worried” to much melancholy pieces like “Stranger Days” which pulls in howling winds and sliding strings to create a darker ambience. The classical influences are clear, both in the quotations like the Debussy and the sense of complete orchestration that flows throughout the album, but are solidly supported by the electronic beats.

There are also a few vocal tracks, most of which feature crooning Indian melodies, and one unfortunate ballad, “Lean on Me”, that sticks out like a sore thumb among the nebulous and open sound that the rest of the album creates.

Morin is best known as a film composer, and this album has the same basic effect. Western Pansori is an eclectic and beautiful album, filled with poignant and disturbing moments, but it does seem to work better when placed in a context. It is a film score with no film – so the listener has to create their own. Even one as mundane as a morning metro ride.

In this age of the iPod, it seems like everyone is plugged in – looking around on the metro, half of the ears are filled with those innocuous white buttons. Everyone is walking through life with their own personal soundtrack. I wonder what their little voices were telling them?

Four out of five Pansori's (a type Korean song that tells a story)²⁵

²⁵ <http://www.jivemagazine.com/review.php?rid=1164&rtid=2> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

DuOud

Album: Wild Serenade

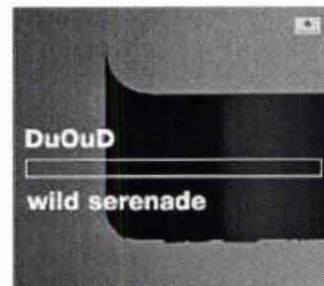
Label: Indigo

Genre: World

Release Date: Available Now

Posted: 04/10/2005

By: Claire Blaustein



Buy this at Amazon.com

If you were to judge a book by its cover – or in this situation, a CD by its case – *Wild Serenade* by DuOud would leave little impression. Composed of muted browns and blacks, the abstract slipcover gives no hint as to what lies inside. With no liner notes, the interior gives no further hints, showing only two grim looking men on one flap and a distorted image of the peg boxes of two string instruments on the other. However, as soon as the CD begins to spin, the listener is engulfed by a flood of different timbres and colours unlike anything they have probably heard before.



DuOud is a duo of oud players from Paris, Mehdi Haddab and Smadj, who have taken the traditional Middle Eastern lute and brought its sound into their world of contemporary electronic music. They have altered it much like changing an acoustic to an electric guitar, and perform on top of Smadj's engineered beats and background. The result is a sound that is hypnotic but energizing, using both the groove of an electronic beat and the virtuosic traditions of oud. Don't mistake this disc for your typical Global Club album, with vague references to an ethnic-sounding melody line over a pounding house beat.

This album takes the origins of the oud, the rhythms and modes of traditional music, and uses them to create a sound that is more reflective of the backgrounds of the performers. They grew up in a musical culture that contained as much hip-hop as Algerian rai. Their compositions meld the two generations of music together and create the next one, forming a sound that is blended, rather than grafted together.

The tracks themselves fall within a wide spectrum between acoustic and electric. *Ne Yalan Soyleyeyim* is just the oud playing a beautiful acoustic melody. *For Nedim*, begins with a traditional violin taksim, or improvisation, then shifts to a swaying groove with touches of Indian tabla among the beat. *Chase* not only has the most pounding rhythms, but also distorts the electric oud to sound like a wailing guitar.

Saying that this album breaks boundaries would be assuming there were any present in the first place. For Mehdi Haddab and Smadj, all the disparate musical elements are simply aspects of their musical lives. Although it may sound trite to say it, we live in a global community, and music is changing to reflect that – becoming not fused but created anew in the image of who we are and where we have come from.

5 out of 5²⁶

²⁶ <http://www.jivemagazine.com/review.php?rid=967&rtid=2> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

BLOGS

The blog is defined by format: a “frequently updated webpage with dated entries, new ones placed on top.”²⁷ The blog, or weblog, is generally considered to have emerged in the late 1990s, and initially, they were used primarily as an internal web commentary, providing links to other websites and areas of interest. Therefore, blogs originated as a process of criticism, a personalized guide to the vast information swamp that is the Internet.

These weblogs provide a valuable filtering function for their readers. The web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for them. Out of the myriad webpages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling.²⁸

The blogger is acting as a critic of the Internet, by putting forward the material that might be of interest, in the same way that a music critic points out performances or recordings of note by reviewing them. Gradually, rather than just criticizing and filtering the – , blogs have expanded to include commentary on every subject – some restricted to the author’s personal life, others dedicated to a topic or topics, web-related or not.

Although the Internet as a whole is a potential threat to traditional modes of criticism, first devaluing the publications which have historically been the main source of cultural capital for the critic, and then potentially granting capital to a far wider range of writers through democratization of access, blogging has received the greatest brunt of the critical field’s disdain, because it embodies the most free and instantaneous manner of

²⁷ John Rodzvilla and Perseus Publishing, eds., *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002), ix.

²⁸ Rebecca Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," in *We've Got Blog*, ed. John Rodzvilla (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002), 8.

distribution available. It completely negates the necessity of a print publication, or even print format in web space like the edited online magazine, and the difficulty of getting work published is no longer an issue, as instantaneous self-publishing becomes the norm. This would appear to devalue not only criticism, but also the traditional publication.

Weblogs destroy this intrinsic value [of the publication], because they are a platform for the unlimited reproduction and distribution of the written word, for a low and fixed cost. No barriers to entry, no economies of scale, no limits on supply.²⁹

Traditional published objects take a great deal of money and effort to create, and the weblog requires little of either. Blogs undermine the market gatekeeping inherent in traditional publications, by eliminating the filtering process of economic necessity, because even in instances where the writer is unpaid, there is still a monetary investment made in their being printed at all.³⁰ The resulting fear is that if a reader can easily access a free source for critical evaluation, they will turn to that rather than making the effort to seek out the authoritative bodies of the critic and traditional mass medium.

The fact that the blog has no economic restrictions on production is certainly problematic, but the larger issue that the disappearance of the print barrier creates is the loss of requirements and standards of skill. The writer may be qualified or not, articulate or not, but still the forum is open to them, and by being published, even in the most superficial sense, their words are granted a degree of authority, of capital.³¹ There is no

²⁹ Clay Shirky, *Weblogs and the Mass Amateurization of Publishing* [Blog] (3 October 2003, accessed 14 February 2006); available from http://shirky.com/writings/weblogs_publishing.html.

³⁰ Pamela J. Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), 63.

³¹ Our society still values the printed word highly enough, and the Internet is a recent enough development, that clear divisions have not yet been entirely drawn between different sources of “printed” text. Therefore, even the blog retains a shadow of the authority that a newspaper might command.

process of justification, and no assessment of ability by any outside source, be that newspaper, magazine, or even edited website. Without any of the trials of print, web critics can still maintain some semblance of authority over their readers. The question becomes, if anyone can be a critic, and with all of the material in the unifying space of the Internet, how can one differentiate between the work of a “true” critic and the work of someone else?

It would be possible to say that one cannot. There is no immediate and recognizable distinction between one blog and another. Since blogs are individualized, they would rarely have association with some larger or established institution which might lend them capital. Even the elements of design and layout that might act as some indication of relative value have been essentially negated by the presence of websites like *blogger.com*, which offers pre-fabricated templates for bloggers.³² This negates the need for any significant web knowledge, and with the widespread popularity of such sites with everyone from completely inexperienced bloggers to people like Alex Ross of *The New Yorker*, it makes it even more difficult to distinguish immediately between one blog and another.³³ The greatest danger is that along with this equality of visuals and position might come a sense of equality of content, as Robert Harris, critic for the *Globe and Mail*, discusses:

It worries me tremendously in the blogging world, and I sound like an old fuddy-duddy, but I hate blogs, I really hate them. Because it makes it seem like everyone’s point of view is equivalent. And that’s a falsehood – everyone’s point

³² <http://www.blogger.com/> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

³³ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise* [Blog] (accessed 15 April 2006); available from <http://therestisnoise.com/>.

of view is not equivalent. Everyone's right to have a point of view, to have a blog? Undeniable. The quality of what is on the blog is not.³⁴

If the visual marker is negated, relative quality and authority can only be established clearly in one place. It is the quality of what is on the blog – the writing that is being produced, the thoughts being put forward, that gives the writer the authority to speak, to blog.

Just as with print criticism, digital criticism garners authority by being read. A blog that is read only by close friends and family, and has no wider distribution, has no more authority on the web plane than a Christmas newsletter has on the print plane. It is a matter of keeping the readership interested and involved – because only through being read can any writer gain authority, collect symbolic, or in this instance, digital capital. In order to attract readers, the blogger usually has to address topics that would appeal to a wider audience and to write in a way that would be attractive to a variety of readers.

Although part of the freedom of blogging is the writer's complete freedom of content – that even if the blog has a particular thematic center (focusing on music, art, television, etc.), at any moment the blogger can decide to write about whatever subject catches her interest – this does not mean that she will do so. “Keep in mind that weblogs have their own established audiences who expect certain things from each owner.”³⁵ If a punk rock blog has a loyal readership, it would do damage to that if the writer decided to switch suddenly to talking about The Care Bears, as the writer would be failing to meet

³⁴ Claire Marie Blaustein, "Interview with Robert Harris", [Interview], 15 December 2005, Toronto, Ontario.

³⁵ Cameron Barrett, "More About Weblogs," in *We've Got Blog*, ed. John Rodzvilla (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002), 30.

the readers' expectations, and potentially damage any capital that the blogger had developed from influencing these interested readers. Therefore, the effective blogger will have a consciousness of a readership, which intrinsically alters her methods of writing, just as writing for print publications of different types changed the way I performed classical and world music criticism.

The presence of a readership changes the ways in which the writer blogs, but blogs also change the way the reader receives criticism. Because it is understood that the writing is produced by an individual, rather than an organization, it is assumed that the works therein are reflective of one person, with their own biases and beliefs. Since individuality is in the foreground of the entire process, rather than disguised in an object that presumes objectivity, the reader is completely aware of the personal biases of the blogger, and can judge her words accordingly.

Because the weblog editor can comment freely on what she finds, one week of reading will reveal to you her personal biases, making her a predictable source. This further enables us to turn a critical eye to both the information and comments she provides.³⁶

This places the readers in the role of critic as well, by asking them to make judgements on the quality of writing and validity of opinion in the work.³⁷

With this active involvement of the reader, I am lead to the biggest difference between web and print media – the ways in which the writer is aware of her audience.

³⁶ Blood, 12.

³⁷ This is the same process that must be gone through for any piece of criticism, but laid open to more direct scrutiny through the absence of any justifying force, such as a publication.

The writer of the blog has an incredibly accurate picture of how many people are consuming their work, since site statistics are easily available.

When I write for a mass-market publication, I have no idea how many people actually read the article. When I blog I can see the statistics. My words in print are just a few out of tens of thousand, and as ephemeral as newspaper or glossy paper. [Paul] Andrews explained, “as a newspaper writer, you know you’re reaching a broad audience, but you don’t get the feedback effect.”³⁸

The concept of “feedback” is not limited to knowing that the work is being viewed by others. As part of the democracy of content and access in blogs, a standard feature of most blogs is the ability for the reader to leave comments – to give their own feedback and create, in a sense, a blog on the blog. The writer knows not only that people are reading, but what they think about it – if they agree or disagree, if they found the writing helpful or not, and if the subject was one that interested them. This is entirely different from print media, where criticism is most often a unidirectional line of information, extending from the writer to an imaginary reader. In the virtual world of the web, ironically, the readers are more tangible than they are in the physical world of print media.



In his essay *Why I Weblog*, Brad L. Graham presents the primary reason why most people create blogs.

The aforementioned need to publish: I get off on seeing my words in print. My first byline in a daily newspaper almost made me wet myself with glee. More

³⁸ Glenn Fleishman, "Been 'Blogging'? Web Discourse Hits Higher Level," in *We've Got Blog*, ed. John Rodzvilla (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002), 110.

than that, I like the notion of leaving my words behind – even given the relatively ephemeral nature of the web – for others to find and enjoy.³⁹

As a relatively new writer, I had few outlets for that gleeful feeling, and was incredibly desirous of them. The blog offered an opportunity to explore not only a new medium, but new types of music in a format where the content was restricted only by my interests. I entered into the project with the idea that the blog would serve more as personal practice, and the belief that very little of it would ever be read. This would change as I became more adept within this medium, and also when I discovered additional ways to promote my blog, gaining a wider readership, particularly through a space that combined the attributes that I enjoyed from my personal blog in a format that allowed for a multiplicity of voices, and significant promotion and distribution throughout the web – Blogcritics.org.

³⁹ Brad L. Graham, "Why I Weblog: A Ruminantion on Where the Hell I'm Going with This Website," in *We've Got Blog*, ed. John Rodzvilla (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002), 36.


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[GET YOUR OWN BLOG](#) [← PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT BLOG →](#)

I DIG MUSIC...

VIEWS AND REVIEWS OF MUSIC, FROM CLASSICAL TO THE NOT-SO CLASSIC.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2006

Indie fun

The Brampton Indie Arts festival was this weekend, and after last year's show, I had a little trepidation about going. It's always a mix, of course - but the 30 minute Jazzerize routine sort of put me off.

It has looked like the downer of the evening was going to be "cowboys and indians", an improvisator combination of indian classical dance, jazz piano, and mime. Yes, mime. However, this turned out to be the highlight! It was brilliant - an entire hour of incredibly complicated storyline, played out in multiple characters by one brilliant physical actor, Anand Rajaram, with a narration and piano by former Blue Rodeo member Bob Weisman. Go figure that.

The one thing I don't get about indie is the appeal of low production value. It seems inherent in the genre that things be rough, unpolished, and occasionally amateurish. I understand the desire to get away from the capitalist oppressive music business, but I don't see how that means accepting things that simply aren't there yet...Still in developmental stages. I'm not saying that all of it is like that, but there is an appreciation for the half-hewn I don't get yet.

The other thing that seems prevalent is a desire for the childish. There is an innocence about indie, a unadulterated joy, while battling with a "I'm more indie than you" attitude which must always be projected. The yearly MC for this festival is curtains, the loveable puppet. It's pomo at it's best - a juxtaposition of incredibly random elements, that come together to make...Indie.

This will take some more exploration, but those were my initial thoughts.

Oh, by the way - check out Friendly Rich and the Lolipop People. Rich organizes the festival, is totally brilliant and deranged at the same time, and the band is the indie/classical music geeks dream come true. An 11 part band with harpsichord, bassoon, drum kit, and banjo. What could be better?

POSTED BY CLAIRE AT 11:17 AM [0 COMMENTS](#)

MONDAY, JANUARY 30, 2006

ABOUT ME

CLAIRE MARIE BLAUSTEIN
HAMILTON, ONTARIO, CANADA

I am an aspiring music critic and writer. I got my start the way most critics do - by being a failed performer - but I hope to be a force for the light and lighthearted in the otherwise dismal universe of classical music.

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[January 2006](#)

[February 2006](#)

Figure 16 – "I Dig Music..." <http://clairemarieblaustein.blogspot.com/>

My personal blog is hosted by Blogger.com. It took approximately 10 minutes for me to create, from signing up with an account, choosing a template from the options available to me, and then entering personal information to complete my profile. As soon as I had completed the setup process, I was ready to begin adding entries.

Thursday, August 18, 2005

Purpose

As a new and aspiring writer, the avenues I am able to take to get my work published are sadly few and far between. The fact that I am masquerading as a properly uptight classical musician make this even more difficult – my dark and secret love of the eclectic and pop don't fit in to my otherwise stodgy outward persona. So, therefore, my ranting and raving about music of all kinds, with no regard to genre, will be housed here.

Welcome to my musical schizophrenia.⁴⁰

posted by Claire at 11:34 PM

This reflects the dual purpose of my blog, and also my discovery of the possibilities of an individualized publishing medium. Through the process of working with this medium, I discovered that it had several advantages over my experience with print, or even print-like spaces on the web.

First and foremost, there were no length restrictions. On the web, my entries could be as long as several pages, or as short as a single sentence with a link. Either of these could serve the purpose of the entry equally well and fit within the broad scope of my blog's purpose, since my space was as limitless as the possibilities for topics.

Secondly, there were no restrictions on content. I could write reviews, certainly, but this

⁴⁰ This is a link to a New York Times article, "Neuron Network Goes Awry, And Brain Becomes an iPod" by Carl Zimmer, Published: July 12, 2005. This described a medical condition, also called musical schizophrenia, when a subject gets music stuck in their head to potentially mentally debilitating degrees.

was my first opportunity to write opinion pieces in the most direct sense. These would be my musings on musical subjects, on everything from education systems to my personal experiences, and not limited to a discussion of any particular genre. The intertextuality of the web experience, the ability to direct readers to other piece of information that might be of assistance was also a great advantage. I could link directly to the bands I was discussing, or to audio clips of their music to use as examples if I felt the need. The web is a primarily print environment, but offers multimedia possibilities that would be impossible in any other medium.



For the purposes of adapting a hypertextual interactive media for a noninteractive print media, I have left all text that would have been hyperlinked underlined and added footnotes to reference the locations of the links.

Monday, August 29, 2005

To blog, or not to blog...

In this age of the instant publishing, anyone can express an opinion, and have people read it. You're reading this right now, aren't you? Some music blogs out there are by people like me – professional critics. Others are from everyday people, who simply have something to say. So, what makes my opinion any more valid than theirs?

Nothing.

Well, not entirely nothing. As far as my blog over theirs, there isn't much to distinguish them. There is no process – no vetting for who can say what online. No one is endorsed, so there is complete equality. But equality in mediocrity hardly means much.

I have to distinguish what I say through content and context. Both what I write, and establishing where I am coming from. So, my credibility comes from outside of the blog – a name that is attached to actual print pieces.

So, why bother doing this? Why blog at all?

Because the thing that gives me the authority to say what I please is the last place I can ACTUALLY say what I think.

Take, For example, a review⁴¹ of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra I wrote for *The Washington Post*. I was completely incensed by the performance of the cellist – and my first draft of the review basically slapped him into oblivion.” He was being disrespectful and childish – goofing off during the performance. I was also deeply bothered by a woman sitting behind me, who rustled a plastic bag during the whole thing, and then proceeded to not only have her cell phone ring, but answer it, simply to tell the person several times that she couldn’t talk – the music was too loud.

Of course, very little of that made it in to the paper.

Oh, I still whipped the cellist a bit – but it was hardly the vicious tongue lashing he deserved. But a rant like the one I wanted to write has no place in a paper like that. If I had just been writing for the Internet, I could have said what I liked. But who would have cared?

With print, although I was restricted by space and a responsibility to the paper itself, my words had a far better chance of reaching the source – that the cellist, or someone who knew him, read the piece and took it to heart.

But it is still cathartic, occasionally, to be able to say exactly what you want, without holding yourself to any standards but your own. That is the wonder of the blog – so that things I write or think that don't belong anywhere else can have a home. So that I can represent myself, not a paper or magazine, and exactly what I think.

This is just me.

Posted by Claire at 7:37 PM



Wednesday September 28

Just Another Friday Night

I went to a bar on Friday, and came home with my head ringing and a sore stomach from where I'd been elbowed.

...

Thought I'd been in a fight, eh? Well, no, not so much. Actually I was in a far more dangerous sort of altercation - a dance floor.

MIDlval PunditZ - a duo of DJ's from New Delhi - gave concert in Toronto was held at the

⁴¹ “The BSO, treading Lightly and Brightly” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/15/AR2005071501816.html> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

Gypsy Co-Op, a small-ish club on Queen Street. Really cute place - nice tables, good drinks, comfortable atmosphere. But not really suited for the kind of music that would be playing, or the sort of dancing that I was about to experience.

Now, if you've read other entries of mine, you understand that I am, despite my best efforts, a rather stogy classical musician. So, understand that my comments come from someone not a part of the electronica scene, but observing it for the first time.

1) Why does everyone face the DJ?

Ok, I understand that they are "performing," but for goodness sakes, there is really nothing to see. There is a guy who just stands at the front of the room poking at some boxes and weaving and bobbing his head like he's had a bit too much to drink. So, why are we compelled to watch

2) boundaries and personal space

You're feeling the music, that's great. Swaying, dancing, all fine. But trying to emulate some kind of flailing sea creature with your arms is neither attractive nor practical. One, that's how I got a nice elbow to gut, and two, you are in a small confined space, with many warm people. Consistently raising your hands above your head may not be the best idea.

3) volume levels

Again, the old lady in me comes out. But really, in a constricted space, with no need to project, is it necessary to project music at such a decibel as to cause physical pain? Bass levels can be adjusted to project the beats just fine, and in Indian electronica, wailing vocals are the norm. Definitely painful at a volume level that made my beer look like the glass of water in Jurassic Park.

Also, as an observation, I'd like to describe the complicated mating ritual of the phish dancers - people at concerts who tend to be like the flailing octopus I described earlier, but with little sense of rhythm or balance.

The male begins to sway and curve his arms at odd angles. His too-small t-shirt stretches with his exertions but he forges forward, planting his feet firmly and continuing to gyrate his upper body. The female begins to notice. She turns, her long dreads preventing any interlopers from coming closer as they whip those in a two foot radius. She approaches, and begins to mimic his movements. The two continue to gyrate and flail until they have warded off all enemies, who have fled fearing for their lives, and they are free to dance alone, completely off the very distinguishable beat.

So, what did I think of the concert? I'm still not entirely certain. I really like their new album, *Midival Times*, but I have to say that hearing it live didn't do much for me. It's dark, it's sweaty, as far as I could tell the mixes were rather uninspired, or certainly didn't lend much of anything to what I had heard on the CD. But, there is a certain allure to be part of a teeming mass, that moves together (out of necessity as much as anything else). But I left an hour into their set, and I'm not sad for it.

I preserved my ears and avoided a black eye, so a good evening all in all.

posted by Claire at 12:01 AM



Monday, October 31, 2005

Vienna Teng @ The Drake Hotel

I have never felt so ahead of the curve – one of my favorite artists, Vienna Teng,⁴² has apparently just had her CD released in Canada. I first saw her in Pittsburgh about two years ago, as part of the Young troubadour tour. Then, out of the blue here she is, playing in Toronto.

To call her just a singer/songwriter is a sort of misnomer, especially given all the wispy and irritating stereotypes associated with that term. She is a storyteller, a poet, and each song creates a new world and narrative for the listener to explore.

Her voice is interesting – when trying to come up with adjectives for it, I've been rather at a loss. It is neither sweet nor smoky, not poignant nor forceful – it's just...Vienna. It has every bit of her personality wrapped up in each note, and the clear delivery is perfect for her textually intricate songs.

It's a small band – just Vienna on piano, with a small drum kit behind and a violin and a cello to fill out the sound. The strings add a richness that I don't think would come with a standard guitar/bass duo, and the voice of cellist Marika Hughes blended perfectly with Vienna's.

The concert wound through a series of characters and lives – a confused girl unsure of her choices (*Shasta*), A trucker on their way home (*Homecoming*), and a soul passing from this world to the next (*Passage*).

Passage is sung completely acapella, and even in an informal setting it manages to silence the room with force of sheer presence. Every eye is focused on this lone figure behind the piano, on her every breath and nuance, and silence reigns for moments after the last breath has passed.

It was a fantastic concert, over far too soon as the audience wound their way out at precisely 10 PM. But, the joyful feeling continued as we got in the car and immediately put in the CD, journeying home through the worlds of Vienna Teng.

posted by Claire at 9:40 AM

⁴² <http://www.viennateng.com/> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

Part of my freedom in writing for my blog was my understanding of my limited distribution. I was less concerned with influencing my readers, as I believed I had none. However, I was constantly surprised at how far my words traveled, and most particularly when it reached the person I was talking about. I made a post about a music festival that I had attended, a friend read it, and forwarded it on to the organizer. I received an email from him, and was reminded of how easy it is for information to travel within this medium, and the democratic nature of access and response. My work became part of a dialogue between not only myself and my readers, but myself and the artist in question. Had I written the same material for a print publication, which presumably reaches a wider audience, I feel it would have been significantly less likely that this interchange would have occurred.

The more this continued to happen, the more my mentality about my blog changed – it added a layer of care to my approach, since I became aware that the writing was not simply a personal exercise. This led me to think more seriously about how to draw in more readers, in that eventually I realized that for the object to be of any real interest to me or anyone else, it would have to be discovered on a wider scale. I wanted the exposure of mass media, with the freedom of web publication. To that end, I discovered and started writing for Blogcritics.org.



Blogcritics.org is a website devoted to “superior bloggers on music, books, film, popular culture, technology, and politics.”⁴³ It has taken the individualized format of the traditional blog, and created a website that has all force of multiple voices and many of the trappings of print media – an outside organizational and editorial structure, and cultural capital on a wider scale.

More than 50,000 daily visitors rely upon Blogcritics.org -- the famously "sinister cabal" of more than 1,100 bloggers -- for the latest news, opinions, and reviews on music, books, film, TV, popular culture, technology, and politics. Blogcritics.org is a filtered microcosm of the blogosphere and a full service news and reviews source, covering all aspects of contemporary culture and society.

Blogcritics.org is a new kind of online magazine, an interactive community in which writers and readers from around the globe talk about stories, issues, and products. If it's happening in the world – from global political issues to obscure rock bands, from the latest best selling novel to the TV shows that aired last night – Blogcritics.org has it covered.

Bloggers publish their stories at Blogcritics.org because of the immense value and benefits that are offered. Blogcritics.org writers gain an exponentially higher level of visibility than they could ever achieve through their home blog or website alone. That increased exposure often leads to increased traffic and enhanced search rank.⁴⁴

The main site maintains the traditional blog format – dated entries, with the newest ones first. There are also subsections with areas for music, books, film, politics, sports, gaming, and “sci/tech,” science and technology. Each writer on Blogcritics maintains an individual blog but also posts their work in this forum. Some elements of individuality are missing from this “online magazine,” since it does have the limitations of being a publication with a specific message and encompasses the opinions of many writers.

⁴³ Eric Olsen, "Welcome to Blogcritics.Org!" Personal Email, Claire Marie Blaustein, 12 December 2005. blogcritics-owner@yahoogroups.com.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

However, many of the blogging elements are the same – an individual resource, the limitless space of web publishing, and, surprisingly for any type of magazine, little editorial interference. The editorial staff checks all posts before they go up on the site, but these checks seem to be mostly superficial: making sure that links are functioning, headlines are in the proper format, and checking for significant grammatical errors. The editors are not checking the work for opinions or restricting posting based on what the reviewer says.

Unlike a print magazine, there are no real restrictions as to what can be addressed. The website offers a listing of available promotional materials, provided by companies (demo CDs, movies, books, etc) that writers can request to review, but we are under no restriction to select from that list. There is no singular front that needs to be presented here – no continuity of ideas or ideology. It is simply a collection of individual discursive threads brought together in a blog on blogging, providing the reader with a critical overview of “superior blogging” on the net.

Through my work with the site, my writing was getting far more exposure than I ever might have imagined. My reviews were being redistributed on websites beyond Blogcritics, and because each entry was also linked to my personal blog, my blog also became searchable on Google. I started to get feedback in comments from people I did not know, both through the site itself and also on my own blog. I was becoming a part of this community and receiving the affirmation that my words were being consumed. As was the intention, I was also afforded a new outlet for my work with world music, and discovered an interested readership for that subject matter within this new medium.

Through four different CD reviews, I was particularly able to further explore the potential for a reviewing space with unlimited word counts, which was a rare experience in my work thus far. I still needed to regard a readership, but because the nature of blogging still retains some semblances of the writer being the only authority determining content, I was also finally able to raise some of the cultural issues I had been contending with in my academic work. I did not need to concern myself as greatly with either brevity or publication parameters, and the results stretched my abilities as a writer, providing opportunities for me to stretch my literary legs a bit further.

CD Review: *Four Higher*, by Autorickshaw

December 14, 2005

Claire Marie Blaustein*Four Higher*⁴⁵

Autorickshaw

For most Americans, Canada may be the 51st state, the upstairs neighbour to a really great party, and that place where the drinking age is 19. I know; I live here. But something that Canada might not be appreciated enough for – an incredible musical soundscape, which produces unique artists and innovative sounds.

One of them is Autorickshaw – made up of Suba Sankaran, vocals, Ed Hanley, tabla, Rich Brown, bass, and Debashis Sinha, drums. The term Indo-jazz fusion isn't quite adequate for what this Toronto-based band does, since there has been plenty of fusion of Indian music and jazz – the improvisatory nature of the forms works well together. This is something new, and different – covering many influences but retaining its own singular identity.

The tracks on the band's *Four Higher* CD are a variety – original compositions mixed with jazz standards rediscovered in Autorickshaw's style. "Caravan" is a personal favorite, with an incredibly groove bringing the real rolling of the dunes to the tune.

Of the originals, "Saraswati", dedicated to the goddess of the arts, starts off with a moving bass line from Brown, and then is mirrored in a swaying vocal and tabla – it makes you close your eyes to be enveloped in its richness.

The band has been gaining a lot of ground in Canada over the last year, but the album was just released stateside in October, and the band will be traveling to New York in the coming months for the International Association of Jazz Educators conference. Hopefully this will mark the first of many appearances south of the border.

See more reviews and my musings at my blog⁴⁶: "I dig music..."

Editor's note: This work of yours now has another venue for success – and more eyes – at the Advance.net Web sites⁴⁷, a site affiliated with about 12 newspapers.

*One such site is here*⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0002TLBTS/002-0438142-7659211?n=5174> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

⁴⁶ <http://clairemarieblaustein.blogspot.com/>

⁴⁷ <http://www.advance.net/> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

⁴⁸ <http://www.cleveland.com/newslogs/musicreviews/> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

CD Review: Putumayo World Music – *The Caribbean and Asian Lounge*

January 16, 2006

Claire Marie Blaustein*Putumayo Presents: The Caribbean*⁴⁹

Various Artists

As a music critic and general music snob, compilation CDs were always kind of dangerous ground for me. So the first time I was given a CD from Putumayo World Music, my nose immediately began to rise, but Putumayo has far more to offer than the standard "most relaxing album in the world" fare.

Putumayo has gained a reputation for their socially aware CDs – not only that most of them give a portion of their proceeds to charity, but that the company tries to seek out artists who will not be familiar to those of us in the North American musical climate. This is hardly deep ethnomusicological exploration, great insight into the traditional musical culture, but the Putumayo motto of "Guaranteed to Make You Feel Good" definitely fits with all of their albums, which speak perhaps more to the groove than the mind.

The Caribbean offers a mix of all the wide variety that this region has to offer: Cuban *son*, Jamaican *reggae*, Puerto Rican *salsa*, Dominican *meringue*, Haiti's *compas*, and others. Music of this area shares an irresistible rhythm that comes from the strong African influence throughout the region, and the album leans heavily towards dance styles and tunes. Whether the style is an updated pop-influenced sound like those or acoustic roots based sound, all of the music is about motion – the motion of styles from Africa and elsewhere to settle in these islands, and the motion that the rhythms inspire. Especially in this cold weather, they make you want to move – both your body and to the warm sands of the islands.

Asian Lounge is a totally different kind of album – "a collection of cross-cultural fusions and laid-back beats inspired by the musical traditions of Asia." I don't want to value one type of album over the other, but I do feel that it's important to make clear the difference – *The Caribbean* is a CD that explores the music of a region, *Asian Lounge* is essentially international music – inspired by musical traditions, but mixed with pop and electronic beats that have their basis in western traditions but are slowly becoming a world spread musical medium. If you are looking for traditional examples of any of these national styles, this is not the place to go, but with that disclaimer in mind, *Asian Lounge* does offer a wide variety of new and different soundscapes to explore.

The first thing that comes to mind with most Asian fusion is the Beatles and George Harrison being influenced by Ravi Shankar, and while a considerable proportion of the album devoted to music from India, a few tracks bring in other countries: one in particular by Japanese artists Yoshida Brothers, who have turned the traditional banjo-like *shamisen* into a source for musical fusion. It is unfortunate that a greater balance couldn't be struck, but there is some attempt made at variety of sound, at least within the narrow spectrum of "lounge"...whatever that means.

Putumayo offers as wide a variety of albums as there are places for them to come from – and their library is well served by these two new additions, sure to please any burgeoning world music

⁴⁹http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect?tag=pageturners0c&creative=373489&camp=211189&link_code=as3&path=ASIN/B000C7OQNI (Accessed 12 April 2006)

fan. Think of them as the cliff notes to global sounds – a primer for what's out there beyond our own billboard top 20.

See more of my thoughts on these CDs and other musical musings at "[I Dig Music...](#)".⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <http://clairemarieblaustein.blogspot.com/>

CD Review: Sergio Mendes – *Timeless*

February 15, 2006

Claire Marie Blaustein*Timeless*⁵¹

Sergio Mendes

Sergio Mendes is one of the biggest names of Brazilian music -- huge back in the '60's and '70's, with hits like "Mas Que Nada." Legends like him never entirely fade from the musical scene, as they are admired and emulated by those who come in following generations. One of Sergio's admirers is will.i.am, of the Black Eyed Peas, who is quickly becoming a legend in his own right. Now, these two mutual admirers are coming together in *Timeless*. It's an eclectic mix of sounds and collaborators -- including Erykah Badu, Justin Timberlake, Q-Tip, Stevie Wonder, and of course, the Black Eyed Peas.

Brazilian samba and North American hip-hop seem meant for each other. It's not a new combination, since there has been so much recent success for Latin influenced hip-hop groups in the states. They share qualities of rhythm, a dance-ability and a sense of purpose and drive that make them blend better than music from four decades apart might.

"Let Me" captures the easy groove of bossa nova, and the light jazzy swing of both the melody and lyrics have a feel of relaxation about them; combined with the voice of Jill Scott, the warmth spreads further. At the other end of the spectrum, "Fo'-Hop" is much more intensely rhythmic, both in the beats and in the vocals by Guinga and Marcelo D2.

"Mas Que Nada" is by far my favorite -- probably because the source material is so immediately recognizable and dear. This release marks the 40th anniversary of Sergio's initial release, which was the first Latin-crossover hit. The new hip-hop elements just bring it to a new generation, but make the chorus no less catchy. For fans of Sergio's, this album will be a reinvention of some of their favorites, and for those unfamiliar, just a well produced Latin hip-hop album -- enjoyable either way.

Timeless is a big thing to reach for -- music with no boundaries on popularity. No music is actually without time -- each generation has had music that suits it, that was popular then. But as long as it keeps coming back, keeps being updated for a new time and place, continues to be reinvented by talented artists of new generations, it will be forever with us. It will become truly *Timeless*.

Read more about this CD, others, and my musical musings at "[I Dig Music...](#)"⁵²

⁵¹http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect?tag=pageturners0c&creative=373489&camp=211189&link_code=as3&path=ASIN/B000AA4ML8 (Accessed 12 April 2006)

⁵² <http://clairemarieblaustein.blogspot.com/>

In this last review, I was given a compilation CD from the *Rough Guide* series, which prides itself on promoting lesser-known artists to Western world music consumers. In this instance, I found much of my material in the liner notes, where the writer had taken some positions I did not feel were entirely accurate in describing world music. In a print setting, I most likely would not have had the space to make that a central issue to my discussion of the CD, nor would it have fit my editors' expectations of my review. Here, however, my freedom served me well, as the discussion could become about more than just the musical material.

CD Review: *The Rough Guide to Urban Latino*

February 26, 2006

Claire Marie Blaustein

*Rough Guide to Urban Latino*⁵³

Urban Latino is a broad genre, and this new release from the *Rough Guides* is an attempt to bring the concept of world music beyond the folk side of things, and bring forward music of urban areas, and especially artists who otherwise wouldn't otherwise get attention here. It does a fair job touching on styles from all over, and is a good introduction to a variety of styles, with some great features, particularly data tracks including an interview with Chris Moss, who compiled the music and wrote the liner notes for the CD.

Of course the tracks are a mix, and what you like all depends on personal preference. I'm not a huge *reggaeton* fan, but the *cumbia* tracks are really wicked, and the songs that bring together multiple styles, from salsa to western pop, are diverse and interesting. The sounds vary from what a listener might immediately identify as "urban" to things that do sound more traditional to our ears, but it's all music of the streets of these cities and towns, and hopefully broadens ideas about what urban music means, as well as Latino.

In the whole package, the only thing I found really problematic was actually in the liner notes.

"Apart from savvy virtuoso who tout their arts in Europe, most Latin Americans don't think of their music as world music or ethnic music. It is just music, and it's simply a question of choosing a disc from the many genres on offer at the local *disquerias*."

⁵³ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000E41KQK/103-6998775-9907843?n=5174> (Accessed 12 April 2006)

Of course it's just music. It isn't music of the rest of the world – it doesn't come from anywhere else, it came from there. The presumption that the music that westerners deem to be "world" (a term with enough problems because thinking about it, pop from North America is really part of the world too) would be considered that by those making the music as anything other than their own is just silly.

The CD begins with such a positive and broadening message of introducing westerners to popular music from other countries – helping them to understand that it isn't folk, that isn't all bouncy and happy, and that it can even be dark and dangerous – but by drawing a line that says that their pop music will be somehow intrinsically different from ours, besides the obvious differences in styles and musical content, doesn't do much to forward real understanding.

Close your eyes and listen, and the CD brings new sounds and ideas about what is out there in the world. Just don't expect it to be quite so far from home.

For more of my reviews and general musical ponderings, visit my blog – ["I Dig Music..."](#)

☞ CHAPTER THREE ☞ TUNING IN TO RADIO

For all of their differences, all of the venues of musical criticism I have discussed thus far share the medium of the printed word. However, there is another location outside of print media that has long been associated with the discussion of music – the radio. Radio is unique in critical spaces because of its temporal nature, one that directly incorporates the sound of music into its format. Because of this, it requires a vastly different approach to production, both of the writing itself and the performance of criticism. However, these attributes also make it uniquely suited to bringing together the vastly different genres I have chosen to discuss here, for radio can make connections through the ear that the eye could only begin to grasp.

The intrinsic differences between radio and print media necessitate a change in the writers approach. Radio lacks the permanency of print – it comes and goes as quickly as music does. The work must be conversational and flow logically, since the listener has no ability to go back and reference statements made earlier in the piece. The consumption of radio is generally considered to be passive, compared to the active practice of reading, so the writer also needs to be aware that the listener's attention will most likely be divided between the piece and something else, like driving, cooking, or cleaning. The writing also needs to grab the attention well enough to distract the listener from their task long enough to hear the piece. However, the most important difference is this:

Remember that your “copy” is really a script. Like the scripts actors use, it’s there to help you sound as if you are speaking, but the less the audience is aware that your words were ever written down, the more effectively you’ll communicate.¹

In print criticism, the steps of creation and transmission to the audience are one and the same – the written form in which the work begins is also the one in which it is received. With radio, the writing serves as the formative process, but the product the listener is consuming is the delivery of the writing, not the writing itself.

This brings the idea of criticism as a performative act into a completely new light. As I discussed earlier, all criticism is performative – a process of creating the personality of the author in the writing, and also of performing that role through the work. But the creativity of delivery, of crafting a phrase, is never more noticeable than when taken off the page and put out on the airwaves. Richard Ouzounian, critic for *The Toronto Star* and former host of CBC’s *Say It With Music*, discussed this performance in terms of theatre:

Doing good radio commentary is being an actor, writer, and director all at once. The writer is controlling the content, the director is shaping how it comes across, and the actor is selling it.²

In radio, the tone of voice can be as important as the content, since the acting is what makes the greatest impact and what has most potential to influence the listener, and therefore generates the most authority.

When acting, as when writing, the performer generally has an idea of who will receive the performance, of who the audience is. In my print work, I had used the idea of

¹ "Next Generation Radio Training Guide," (National Public Radio, Summer 2005).

² Claire Marie Blaustein, "Interview with Richard Ouzounian", [Interview], 18 January 2006, Toronto, Ontario.

a community or a mass to describe my readers. Radio is also a mass medium, and obviously directed at a group of listeners, but given the conversational nature of the writing, the performer must balance the idea of the mass with a vision of the individual listener.

For radio, it's a little different, because with radio you essentially visualize exactly who you're talking to, because your tone of voice becomes an essential component of how successful you are. If your voice becomes too strained, or too formal, it basically destroys the image you're creating, which is one of informality and intimacy.³

The connection between performer and audience, the feeling of a conversation, creates the sense of intimacy that is so often attributed to radio. Radio is an intimate experience, enjoyed in the privacy of one's home or car, where there is a voice who is speaking directly to you, and it is this connection that drives the changes in the writing and in the delivery. However, it moves beyond that, and this illusion of the individual recipient plays out in the ideology of the medium as well.

When National Public Radio was being developed, it had a mandate that rejected the idea of its listeners as a mass market.

National public radio will serve the individual. It will promote personal growth; it will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness.⁴

Obviously, there is no way to reach listeners as individuals, as one program has potentially millions of listeners on a daily basis. However, what is interesting here is the

³ Blaustein, "Interview with Robert Harris".

⁴ Ralph Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America : A Political History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996), 90.

acknowledgment of differences within the mass, and a support of diversity in the listening community. Although public media actually has a fairly narrow demographic, one that is mostly older, professional, and highly educated, where seven in ten have advanced degrees, and almost all have graduated from college, it still contains in its mission an ideal of variation and a respect for difference.⁵ This has in part manifested itself in a pursuit of the less heard voices, a desire to bring forward the fringes – to promote that which rarely or never appears on commercial broadcasting. Therefore, public radio has become a space for niche markets and marginalized genres of music.

Public radio was once the refuge for programming aimed at niches too small to interest commercial services. In most communities, only public radio provided niche music such as classical, opera, jazz, blues, folk, bluegrass, big band, or gospel.⁶

Although Mitchell goes on to describe how these genres are moving into satellite and Internet radio as well, they still maintain a strong presence in public radio formats.

Classical music is a very common format for many public radio stations, with 340 stations airing significant amounts of classical music in 2002.⁷ More recently, world music has also entered this list as a genre with a similar lack of commercial radio interest and greater presence within public broadcasting. Programs like *Afropop Worldwide*, which features popular music of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas, started out in 1988 at the very beginning the world music trend, as an NPR program. The CBC has *Global Village* and *World In Performance*, and since each independent radio station has

⁵ Leslie Peterson, David Gioivannoni, and Jay Youngclaus, *Audience 98: Public Service, Public Support* (Audience Research Analysis and Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1999), 21, Report.

⁶ Jack Mitchell, "Lead Us Not into Temptation: American Public Radio in a World of Infinite Possibilities," in *Radio Reader*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 406.

⁷ Mike Janssen, "Diminuendo," *Current*, 16 Feb 2005.

control over its programming, there are also countless local shows devoted to world music.

Combining the presence of niche markets with the radio's unique abilities as a medium, particularly its temporal and aural nature that so completely mimics the music it presents, there develops a space that can not only promote the music, but is further able to combine and explain the connections between disparate and lesser known genres. The radio is uniquely able to provide a space where one program, which functions as a single "print" space like a review or column, can feature a wide variety of music. And more and more often, radio stations are turning towards programming that offers diverse musical influences.

In part, this change is inspired by economics. Genre specific shows could potentially alienate listeners – pushing them to change the station to avoid an hour of music they are uninterested in. Richard Ouzounian cited this reasoning for the cancellation of his own program.

[The CBC] in effect said to me that we're trying to eliminate heavy genre shows...to get away from ghetto programming. They want people to get brand loyalty, and hopefully like everything on the network.⁸

If a listener does not like a particular program, they are more likely to change the station than if they do not like a single song. Variety programming allows for more consistency of listening, and seeks to ally the listener with the station or network rather than the program. Public radio is turning to a system that more closely emulates format radio, although rather than sticking to a single musical genre like Top 40 or Adult

⁸ Blaustein, "Interview with Richard Ouzounian".

Contemporary, public radio has almost created a genre of its own that includes music, news, and other programming to appeal to its very narrow target audience. “Public” is a format all its own, and the amalgamation of musical programming attempts to create continuity of listening within the format.

Economic upside or not, there would be little ability to change were the medium not uniquely suited to this kind of diverse programming. Since the medium is suited to music, it can more easily express connections between pieces of music than print. Robert Harris is host of the CBC program *I Hear Music*, which is a show that “ranges across the musical map from one week to the next, from the classics to jazz to Broadway to pop to world music, and back again.”⁹ He explained that a listener can be presented with incredibly disparate pieces of music, and hear the connections if they are given a direction in which to listen.

In radio, we have an enormous advantage that there are all sorts of aural links between music that can be exploited much more easily in sound than intellectually. I could write a piece that tells you that the same diatonic structure lies at the basis of classical music and rock and roll, but man oh man, the piece would be so weird, and hard to understand, and abstruse. But you just put on two pieces of music – a piece of Mozart that uses I-vi-IV-V, and then a rock solo....we have the ability to mix and match on radio that’s astonishingly fertile.¹⁰

Radio can do the explaining for you, by allowing the ears of the listeners to understand the similarities, rather than trying to rationalize them through print. When the music can be heard, rather than imperfectly described, there are far greater possibilities for the work to transcend genre boundaries.

⁹ *I Hear Music on CBC*, [Web Site] (accessed 18 March 2006); available from <http://www.cbc.ca/programguide/program/?program=I+Hear+Music>.

¹⁰ Blaustein, "Interview with Robert Harris".

Although it is difficult to speculate about the potential social effects of a space where disparate musics coexist, I do believe that by making aural connections there is the potential for disassembling some of the intellectual hierarchical structures placed around different genres. By placing disparate and differently valued musics in the same space, there is the potential for them to not only be equated musically, but also socially. There is no way that a single change can intrinsically alter the way we perceive musical genres, but when they can be equated actively, there is some hope for making them also equal in our estimations of their relative worth.



My personal experience with radio came from an internship with NPR during the summer of 2005. I was hired to assist with their classical music program *Performance Today*, which presents recordings of live concerts from around the country and the world. As part of the staff, I was expected to produce short scripts for the program, giving me an opportunity to experience firsthand the differences in writing for radio. Additionally during the course of the summer, the interns produce a one-hour news program entitled *Intern Edition*, which is entirely written, produced, and assembled by the intern staff. For that program, I, along with an intern producer and audio tech, produced a piece entitled “The Dark Side of the Music,” which was meant to explore music that represented or had connections to evil.

Writing a paper that can be read in the three and a half minutes that was the length of the final product would probably have taken at most a single day. However, adding in the element of sound meant that the prospect became infinitely more complicated. For

this one piece, I spent over 36 hours in the studio, recording and mixing the final product, which did not include the weeks spent selecting the music and writing and revising the script. Included here is the transcript, but it really represents only a fraction of the final piece. My writing was designed to guide the listener through the connections between the pieces, rather than be the centerpiece of the work. The words became secondary to the sound, both of my voice, and of the music.

Intern Edition 2005

"The Dark Side of the Music"

Claire Blaustein – Reporter, Patricia Li – Producer, Vahan Baladouni – Audio Engineer

<Berlioz – L'Enfance du Christ – Trio for two flutes and harp> **[Duration:0'10"]**

Ah, music. It has been called a divine gift, a blessing, and even the angels play harps and sing.

<fade under – John Williams – Theme from Jaws>**[Duration:0'05"]**

But what happens when music is..well...evil?

Composers may get their gift from a higher power, but they certainly don't restrict themselves to holy topics. Countless pieces of music have been inspired by the forces of darkness.

In Jaws, it isn't just the idea of blood and big teeth that makes this scary – the sound itself is threatening. <replay theme here > It's creeping closer, closer, closer...

John Williams didn't invent that trick. <start music> In Modest Mussorgsky's Night on Bare Mountain, the demons that haunt Saint John sound a lot like a certain aquatic menace.

<Mussorgsky – Night on Bare Mountain>**[Duration:0'30"]**

This kind of chromatic motion, where the notes creep along in very small intervals, definitely lets you know that something BAD is coming.

But there one thing far worse – one interval so dark, so demonic, so dissonant, that it could only be called – the diabolus in musica – the DEVIL'S INTERVAL.

<Liszt Dante Sonata – very little, 0:10>**[Duration:0'15"]**

In the Renaissance era the tritone – those pounding downward jumps – were banned by the church for being too dissonant. And anyone who used them were suspected of heresy.

It might have been scary stuff in the 16th century, but today our ears are used to dissonances like that . So, new compositional techniques in the 20th century upped the ante a little bit. <fade in> Like American composer Henry Cowell, in The Banshee.

<Cowell – The Banshee 0:25>**[Duration:0'30"]**

The howling cry of the Irish demon Banshee means death is coming for someone. Cowell recreated it by scraping the interior strings of a piano with metal.

<music fades out>

Music theory and technique may be pretty frightening subjects, but they aren't the only way to portray evil. Material from another source, like a poem, can bring out the devil as well.

<start music here>

Ravel's Scarbo from the suite Gaspar de la Nuit is based on a poem by Aloysius Bertrand, which describes the maniacal cavorting of an evil dwarf.

<Ravel – Gaspar de la Nuit – Scarbo> **[Duration:0'30"]**

"Oh! How many times have I seen and heard Scarbo...buzzing somewhere in the shadows of my bedroom, and the scratching of his nails raking down the length of the silk curtains around my bed!"

The devil has many forms, and wears many disguises, and some of them are terribly appealing.

<fade out>

In the same way, not all music that is associated with evil actually SOUNDS evil.

<Paganini – Caprice #1>**[Duration:0'15"]**

Some believed Niccolo Paganini sold his soul to the devil. In exchange he became the greatest violinist the world had ever seen. But the music he wrote for himself doesn't really sound that evil. It was just so devilishly difficult that he could not have come from anywhere else but the dark side.

<music hot until cadence>

And trading one's soul to the devil is not just something musicians can do – anyone can do it! <music in> In the story of Faust, the aging academic gave up his soul in exchange for getting everything he'd ever wanted, and what he wanted, was the love of the young Marguerite.

<Liszt – Waltz Mephisto>**[Duration:0'30"]**

Franz Liszt used this story for his Mephisto Waltz, and here the devil takes on pleasant guises to tempt the beautiful young woman.

It's the beauty of this music that makes it so dangerous, because Marguerite is taken in, and her dance with the devil ends up driving her mad.

<transition to "madness" section>

And Liszt, like Paganini and Faust, had his own flirtations with the devil. But his soul bought him fame as the greatest piano virtuoso of all time.

<crossfade>

In music, as in life, the concepts of good and evil are hardly set in stone – nothing is necessarily as it seems, or in this case, sounds. But whichever end of the spectrum the music represents, it is definitely a force to be reckoned with.

<Williams – Star Wars – Darth Vader Theme>**[Duration:0'10"]**

For NPR's Intern Edition – I'm Claire Blaustein.

∞ POSTSCRIPT ∞

I could not complete this work about criticism without referencing the adage – “writing about music is like dancing about architecture – it’s a stupid thing to want to do.”¹ There have been times during this process that I have been inclined to agree with this. In understanding power structures, I was forced to lose my utopian vision of the critic as educator, bringing musical enlightenment to the masses. In understanding the nature of authority, I lost a sense of the critic as unquestionably powerful. However, these are hardly losses, as the process has led me to greater understanding. Power is a part of everything, the space in which my words appear is as important as the words themselves, and my interaction with the music goes far beyond simple passive listening. Opinions are relative, power is relative, genre boundaries are relative, and positions in any field of production are relative. All the elements are active and dynamic, and for all that their interactions have left me occasionally stupefied, the dance has been a fascinating one.

This process began as my quest to be an informed critic – to understand not only the music I was discussing, but also the societal impact of my work. What I have come to believe is that criticism is the first step in creating a historical record – the front line report of what music is and what it means. Even in this age of recording, where the music can be “recreated” at a later date, there is only one place where the experience of being in the concert space, of being a part of musicking, can be recorded, and that is in

¹ This quote has been attributed to such varied personalities as Elvis Costello, Frank Zappa, and Clara Schumann, with no conclusive evidence for any of them.

text. However imperfect a practice, criticism has a role to play in the world of musical study, as a first hand account, a primary document in musical history.

Just as criticism cannot be removed from the musical process, neither can musicological and sociological study be removed from criticism. It reflects the music as well as the culture in which it is experienced, encapsulating in its limited word count much information that surrounds the musical experience – transmitting understanding of the music as well as expectations of how much the reader might understand, the extramusical conflicts facing the musical community, and the hope for its continued growth into the future. At its best, criticism should be a space in which all of these influences –the music, its history, and the way we think about it – can meet and be transmitted to the public, so that they can share in a different perspective of their own musicking.

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