Classical Music

Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges

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The field of classical-music criticism and journalism faces challenges that are quite distinct from the issues that surround classical music as a whole. Since the advent of the digital age, journalism has encountered crises that have severely affected the financial stability of the business: namely, a twin decline in both readership and advertising. The easy availability of vast quantities of information on the Internet has meant that many readers have fallen out of the habit of paying for news, and most publications have suffered as a result. Moreover, the ability to measure, by way of clicks, exactly how many readers are paying heed to a particular article has revealed that most cultural criticism has a seemingly quite limited audience. Thus, not only classical-music critics but also dance critics, book critics, pop-music critics, and even movie critics have been under pressure to demonstrate the value of their work. Many have not been able to convince editors of their usefulness, and have lost their jobs as a result.

In America, fewer than ten newspapers now have a full-time classical-music critic on staff: a couple of generations ago, the number was in the dozens (Ross, 2017a). In many cities, a general arts reporter is called upon to cover some combination of classical music, dance, theatre, and the art world. In the United Kingdom and Europe, most papers still carry classical reviews on a regular basis, but the space for these has been greatly reduced. Most general-interest magazines no longer employ a regular classical critic or regularly feature stories on classical
music. Those who labor in this field have to confront the possibility that their line of work might vanish altogether.

Why the art of criticism has encountered such a severe drop-off in interest has sparked a great deal of anxious discussion, from which no clear consensus has emerged. It is possible that the audience for criticism was always limited, and click-counting has simply brought those limits to light. But the enormous influence wielded by—to make an eclectic list—George Bernard Shaw, Eduard Hanslick, Virgil Thomson, Edmund Wilson, Arlene Croce, Pauline Kael, Frank Rich, and Roger Ebert suggests that critics have long commanded a large audience and held considerable sway over cultural activity. Alternatively, it may be that digital culture has brought about a fundamental erosion in the authority of the critic. In an age where anyone can articulate critical judgments through social media, the need for expert judgment is perhaps diminished. Nonetheless, it is difficult to believe that as long as classical music continues to be composed and played there will not be a demand for informed discussion of it. The question is what form that discussion will take. Individual reports from two working critics follow.

The View from a Newspaper

Zachary Woolfe

As with large twenty-first-century classical-music institutions, the problem for large twenty-first-century newspapers is one of revenue. For decades, The New York Times, where I serve as classical-music editor and critic, was a print product that paid for its operations through a mixture of (mostly) advertising, (also) subscribership, and (a bit of) newsstand sales. The almost total shift in the consumption of journalism to digital formats—mostly, now, mobile phones—has shaken that model to its core. The trouble is not just on the revenue side. Creating The New York Times is now, and will remain for at least the next few years, a substantially more complex and expensive proposition than it once was, demanding resources for simultaneous digital and print products.

This is the situation in which the Times and competitors like The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal have found themselves. Each paper has its own strategy to try to survive and prosper. While pursuing other potential revenue streams, The New York Times has largely placed
its bet on digital subscribership, hoping that the old reality—for argument’s sake, say it was one million readers paying $100 a month—can be replaced by ten million readers paying $10 a month.

So, the charge that has been placed on everyone at *The New York Times*—not just classical music journalism, and not just culture journalism more broadly, but critics writing on sports, politics, science, business, everything—is that the key to the sustainability of the operation in the long term is a dramatic rise in digital subscribers. The print edition and print readers remain important to us, and we make plans—including a page in the Arts section every Saturday devoted to classical music—with them in mind. But our research shows that most print subscribers are in fact now reading *The New York Times* online, either wholly or in part. And print is not our future; we have to be creating an organization that is going to still be alive in fifty or one hundred years’ time, and that is going to be one that exists ever more fully online.

There are many salient facts about the hypothetical digital subscriber. The person may be located in Los Angeles, and may be in Minnesota, and may be in Toronto, and might be in Vienna, and might be in Melbourne. They all access the same Facebook. They all access the same Twitter. We need to create journalism that people in Melbourne and Minneapolis and Buenos Aires would all be interested in reading frequently enough, and valuing enough, that they are motivated to subscribe to the service.

And while people in all of those places care about what’s going on in New York, a center of many industries, and particularly culture, they do not—and I don’t blame them—care about every single quartet performance in every single church on the Upper West Side, the “beat” that was once *The New York Times*’ bread and butter, back when it was a fundamentally local paper, as opposed to a fundamentally global one. Those fifteen or twenty performance reviews per week, roughly four-hundred words apiece, often fluent and informative but by and large moderately—read: blandly—positive, simply get lost in a digital environment.

Writing now takes different paths through that digital ecosystem. Pieces are either promoted on *The New York Times* homepage or on the Arts or Music section fronts; there’s Twitter, there’s Facebook; there are various other social networks in which links are being shared; there’s Google search. The emphasis is therefore on the ability to write and
package pieces—in terms of the headline, the tweets, the photos that all support the text—so that The New York Times can promote them on its platforms and people will want to share them on those never-ending feeds. They exist through and on social networks.

The print newspaper is an amazing technology for many small aspects. It comes in one package, and there is so much serendipity involved in reading it: the layout creates little pockets of content that works especially well. Super-urgent and just-keeping-up things coexist, and are received in a single oomph, delivered to your doorstep. Whereas in an environment in which URL after URL of news story is flung out into the ether to rise and fall in readership individually, we see much more vividly which are the things that people are actually reading. Any kind of story requiring incremental coverage—a small business piece, a little report on a farm bill’s journey through Congress—is generally trouble. Again, not only classical-music writers are having to change their methods of approach.

The New York Times does not expect classical coverage to get the same sheer readership numbers as stories on, say, Beyoncé or Trump, but we have demonstrated that even esoteric articles can have striking success in this digital environment. One of our recent popular successes was a 1000-word feature about a three-hour drone piano piece composed by Randy Gibson, consisting only of the note D (Walls, 2017). And reviews are still an integral—perhaps the integral—element of what we do. What is key is a sense of intention, of curation. No longer do we have the luxury of covering things out of habit or responsibility, merely because we’ve done so for years and years. If there is not a sense of urgency behind the journalism we’re doing, we shouldn’t be doing it.

What I have told The New York Times’ critics—and myself, as one of them—is that we should be going to more and writing about less. Our writers might not be writing about everything they see, but they’re taking it in, making decisions, synthesizing it. And if they see something and want to say something, it remains The New York Times’ job to give them the platform to say it, whether it’s an artist at the Met or at a tiny space in Brooklyn.

What this strategy requires is skilled, experienced critics, who are going to a broad range of performances. And it requires creativity and flexibility, not just in terms of content, as ever, but in form. Is the right
way to cover a performance a preview? An interview after the fact? An interview before? A standard review? A brief description of a particularly memorable moment, packaged with other such “moments”? Inclusion in a later piece about a certain composer or playing style? Performances are not created equal, and we shouldn’t treat them all the same way. All in all, the major struggle I now perceive as an editor planning *The New York Times*’ classical coverage is the recruitment of capable writers, not the lack of opportunities for them once they’ve begun to contribute.

What keeps me up at night? I worry about missing superb rising artists. But our commitment to “seeing more and writing less” will allow us to be at many of those debut recitals, ready to write about performances and performances that excite us. Yes, those cursory mentions—“the poised young bassoonist” and the like—that often end up in the first sentences of artists’ bios will be fewer and further between. But we will not be abnegating our responsibility to be looking for special young musicians; if anything, devoting ourselves to “curating” the classical scene has amplified our sense that one of our key responsibilities is to bring to our readers the talents that we think might define the future.

One way to do this is as follows: Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*’ chief classical critic, recently attended a few debut recitals, and instead of taking the old approach (which would have resulted in a 300- or 350-word review of a concert), we decided it would be better to concentrate on a larger point that had struck Tony. He had noticed that more and more artists, especially the ones that he was admiring, had made New York debuts with quieter, more poetic repertoire rather than key-pumping bombast—the idea being that everyone can play everything now, so no one needs to prove their technical bona fides. So he reviewed the recital performances, but his piece had the feel of an essay. And the headline—“How Should a Musician make a Debut? Try Going Low-Key”—issued a broader invitation to the readership, making a more sweeping statement about the field and the way it’s changed (Tommasini, 2017). The article became more than the sum of its parts.

Obviously, I worry about our responsibility to the music field. The sense I get from many conversations with artists, managers, impresarios, and presenters is that *The New York Times* coverage is meaningful less in terms of attracting audiences than in attracting (and keeping) donors. Particularly for smaller groups, the Internet has provided many ways to
stimulate ticket-buying and keep a sizable amount of interested people aware of activities and events. But donors, by and large, are of the age and class for whom mention of an artist or company in The New York Times has been for decades a seal—even the seal—of approval. Some people still think that if it wasn’t mentioned in The New York Times, it didn’t happen. When the Cincinnati Symphony, say, comes to Carnegie Hall, it’s the result of intensive fundraising work, and many givers expect a The New York Times review as part of the package.

I don’t have an easy answer regarding how organizations should handle this period of transition as those expectations change, other than to clearly elucidate an artistic vision to donors and to have frank discussions about how the media environment has shifted.

The View from a Magazine
Alex Ross

Since 1996, I have been the music critic of The New Yorker. Before that, I served for four years as a freelance critic at The New York Times. It is difficult to generalize from my position: I am one of two classical critics still writing regularly for an American general-interest magazine. My colleague Justin Davidson, at The New York Magazine, is the other, and writes about classical music and architecture/urban design.

Many of the challenges that Zack describes above also apply to the magazine field. The New Yorker still has a strong subscriber base; indeed, it has more subscribers than ever before. These readers seem generally content with the format of the magazine as it has existed since the 1920s, although it has undergone many changes along the way. Thus, we feel less pressure to reinvent the magazine’s identity. However, the magazine has experienced a fall-off in advertising, as has almost every other publication. The magazine’s website, in particular, has become the focus for a wider range of offerings, which are designed to broaden the magazine’s reach and attract more advertising.

I find myself in the lucky position of writing more or less the same kinds of reviews, at the same length and with the same frequency, as I did when I joined the magazine two decades ago. Each year I produce fourteen columns and three or four longer pieces, in the form of essays and profiles. I travel often and report periodically on American and
international events. I also write twelve or so commentaries for the magazine’s website. I have always felt that my role is not to respond overnight to musical events, in the style of a daily newspaper critic, but to step back and survey the entire field, intervening as a kind of color commentator. I attempt to assemble a portrait of the musical world piece by piece, in mosaic fashion. I alternate between major events at big institutions—the magazine wishes me to report regularly on the latest ups and downs of the Met and the New York Philharmonic—and the activities of smaller groups, unknown young composers, enterprising projects in unlikely locations. In June, 2017, I wrote about Renée Fleming and Alan Gilbert’s farewell appearances at the Met and the Philharmonic (Ross, 2017b); in the same month, I went to Rangely, Colorado, to see a defunct water tank that has been converted into a hyper-resonant performance space (Ross, 2017c). That zig-zag motion between the famous and the obscure exemplifies my mission.

In other ways, my work has changed. In 2004, I started a blog, called The Rest Is Noise, named after a book that I was then in the process of writing. I initially saw this as an amusing sideline, but it turned into a fresh medium of critical expression, as I joined the wave of blogs that proliferated in the early aughts. Such activity has now subsided, as energy has shifted toward social media, but the rapidity and flexibility of communication on the Internet has changed the way I work. In particular, I have tried to take advantage of the technological ability to incorporate audio and video samples into online pieces. I’ve also profited from the international scope of conversations across blogs and, more recently, on Twitter. On social media, one finds considerable attention paid to questions of diversity and social justice in classical music. Those themes have assumed increasing prominence in my writing. Although the Internet can be an incomparable medium of distraction and stupefaction, it can also shove to the forefront issues that staider journalistic and institutional cultures have kept in the background.

What the future holds is impossible to know. At times I have the feeling that journalism as we have long known it is in terminal decline. I like to joke that I am a member of a dying profession covering a dying art. But the vigor of analysis and discussion among musicians like Jeremy Denk (Denk, 2013) and musicologists like Richard Taruskin (Taruksin, 2009), some of whom write for newspapers and magazines, suggests to
me that critical voices will continue to emerge, whether or not full-time professional criticism survives. Institutions in every part of the music field should be asking: how can we maintain the public conversations that critics have long led? How can we train musicians and composers to speak and write effectively about their work? Music criticism has always been a limited affair: writing about music, talking about music, is far wider in scope, and more essential to musical life than many people realize. In the coming years, I hope to pass along whatever experience I have gained in the hope of keeping that conversation vital.

References


