

Bernheimer speaks his mind

By Hillary Hauser
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'YOU SHOW me a critic who's loved, and I'll show you a critic who's not doing his job.'

So says the Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic of the Los Angeles Times, Martin Bernheimer, who must be doing his job very well, since many of his readers send him hate mail.

In Santa Barbara to participate in a four-day musical symposium, the outspoken expositor of every musical thing from "Aida" to "Die Zauberflote" said he would "prefer it if everyone loved me, but that's not why I'm here."

Bernheimer reflected on his widely read, often controversial career at the Music Academy of the West, during a break in the meeting of the proposed UCSB Institute of Vocal Research and Performance Practice.

His part in the symposium proceedings was to play nine recordings of the popular aria, "Una furtiva lagrima," from the Donizetti opera, "L'Elisir d'amore," then let his listeners know which version he liked best and why.

A critic has 'got to be a missionary, crusader, teacher, policeman, rabble-rouser — and you have to have the courage of your convictions, no matter how perverse your convictions may be.'

Bernheimer knows what he likes. And although he doesn't care if his readers agree with him, he strives to have them understand why he feels the way he does about a certain performance.

That is a type of caring many of his disapproving readers may miss.

For all his not-so-dolce chops and cuts, Bernheimer's demeanor is the opposite of what one might expect: the gray-haired but youthful journalist is not out to slice performers, traditions, audiences and interviewers into little bits.

However, in looking for the "one performance in 25 that puts me in orbit," Bernheimer speaks his tack-sharp mind.

A critic is not an agent of the Chamber of Commerce, he said.

"You've got to be a missionary, crusader, teacher, policeman, rabble-rouser — and you have to have the courage of your convictions, no matter how perverse your convictions may be," he explained.

When Bernheimer rabble-rouses, he is sometimes the fabled boy who shouts that the Emperor in the parade wears no clothes — what everyone loves, or pretends to love, Bernheimer may pronounce as a fraud.

Institutions, national tradition and politics don't stop him from speaking what he genuinely feels about a musical performance.

When he recently published the lukewarm news that one of the dancers in the Kirov Ballet was so-so, he received a ton of hate mail from people accusing him of being captious, caviling, carping, nit-picking and otherwise hypercritical.

Bernheimer doesn't care. Public aspirations for a political break in the Iron Curtain, he said, is an issue separate from music.

"I'm not out there to say something is wonderful because 6,000 people applauded, but because I applaud," he said. "No one ever became a critic because of humility."

Bernheimer said listeners could have more courage of their own convictions, too. Often, he is asked during intermissions how a performance rates.

"They've heard it, and you've heard it, and they ask if it's any good," he said. "I say, I don't know. I haven't read the review."

A reviewer doesn't write a review for the people who have attended a performance, Bernheimer said. "He writes for the people who are not there."

And since the beauty of music is often in the ear of the listener, Bernheimer said the value of a performance largely depends upon one's experience.

"Take a Beethoven symphony," he said. "If you're hearing it for the first time, you may be bowled over. If you're hearing it for the hundredth time, you're listening for interpretation and



News-Press photo by LEN WOOD.

Pulitzer-winner Martin Bernheimer: A critic is not an agent of the Chamber of Commerce.

you might not get the interpretation you want. What's special for Harry Smith may not be special for me. It doesn't mean I'm right and Harry Smith is wrong."

Critics also have to keep pace with changes and evolutions in music, Bernheimer said. What was the custom of the musical day in 1910 is not necessarily called for in today's performance. Style, tempo, rubato — interpretation — has undergone enormous changes over the years.

Such changes are similar to what has transpired in the acting profession, he explained. For example, the dramatic thunderings of John Barrymore in the renowned Hamlet soliloquy, "To be or not to be" is in stark contrast to Sir Laurence Olivier's later whispering of it.

A major goal of the proposed UCSB Institute of Vocal Research and Performance Practice is to catalog and make accessible to the public an enormous archive of vocal recordings now at the university.

This, Bernheimer said, would allow researchers and singers to compare operatic singing techniques and styles that have evolved over the years.

Bernheimer said a performer worth his salt should not be dissuaded from his musical career by a bad review.

He recalled the famous letter written by the composer/conductor Max Reger to the writer of a negative review, which said, "I have your review in front of me, and in a moment I'll have it behind me."

"I don't know of any career that's made or broken by critics," Bernheimer said.

Bernheimer said he got into his profession "by mistake."

After receiving his bachelor's degree from Brown University, he completed graduate courses at the Munich Conservatory in Germany. Returning to the U.S., he studied musicology and stage direction at New York University, where he received his master's degree.

All the while, he free-lanced critical pieces on musical performances for various newspapers.

"They said, great, and asked for more," Bernheimer said.

After writing reviews for the New York Herald Tribune and the Saturday Review, Bernheimer joined the staff of the Los Angeles Times in 1965.

He won the Deems Taylor Award (ASCAP) in 1974 and 1978, and in 1981, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for outstanding music journalism.

The fact that Bernheimer studied in Munich may be the strongest statement he will ever

make about music being apolitical.

Born in Munich in 1936, he was 3 years old when his father was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp. His family fled Germany after the elder Bernheimer was released in 1939.

Commenting on the fact that the German composer Wagner is sometimes boycotted by Jewish performers, Bernheimer said, "Art is art, politics are politics. If I think 'Tristan' is a masterpiece, I think the composer of it is a master."

Of all his musical subjects, Bernheimer likes opera the best, "because it is the rare occasion when drama and music meet."

"When an opera is good, it's sublime, because it deals with the basic human emotions," he said. "But when it's bad, it's hilariously funny. Some of my best and some of my worst nights have been at an opera."

Bernheimer, who lives in west Los Angeles, has four children,

ages 16 to 21 and including one set of twins, by a 22-year-old marriage.

None of his children, he said, are classical music lovers.

"If I put a gun to their heads, they wouldn't go to a symphony with me," Bernheimer said. "They love rock and roll."

He can take the music of today "in very small doses, if you turn it down."

"It's my fault, not theirs," he said. "It's a matter of condition, education and delicate eardrums."