

# REVIEWING CRITICISM

by Hillary Hauser

**T**here had never been a *Götterdämmerung* like it.

It was the last act, and Valhalla had burned, the Rhine overflowed, and the entire earth was in the process of being obliterated. After a thunderclap and rib-shaking rumble, an unspeakable blackness overtook the National Theatre in Munich.

Then light dawned amid heavenly music, heralding a new world of peace and beauty. As the light grew, the players on the stage walked, entranced, toward the light.

They all wore modern street clothes.

As the curtain fell, the audience leaped to its feet in immediate response.

They booed.

It was a shocking scene; everywhere in that elegant opera house, tuxedoed, white-haired gentlemen hissed and roared. When the director of the opera came out to take his bow, the booing reached a crescendo from every corner of the auditorium.

The next day, the music critic for a Munich newspaper explained the uproar: the lovers of *Götterdämmerung* didn't like anyone messing with the traditions of their beloved opera. Those people wearing modern clothes in the last scene should have been in the traditional Wagnerian shield and garb. Never mind that the director chose modern dress to convey the timelessness of Wagner's message about peace in the world. The review in the Munich newspaper considered all sides of the controversy, enlightening the reader on Wagner's original motive and the message of the opera for today's listener.

Any critic in his chosen field—whether opera, ballet, theater, painting—has a specific role. He is a battering ram of information, an intelligence agent who offers a measuring stick of comparison. A music critic, for example, has heard countless versions, historical and contemporary, of a piece of music being performed and knows what is intended in the music. He will tell you if the performer has missed the original intent, or if a performance

has been enveloped in so much fanfare it has lost the heart and soul of the music.

Critics hold a peculiar position in the arts. They are at once scorned and respected, ridiculed and esteemed. Sometimes they are considered fools, not often suffered gladly, and yet in other instances, their review can have an influence out of all proportion to the fact that it is, finally, an opinion. But because a critic's taste is often not that of his public, his view is often derided by artist and audience alike.

"You show me a critic who's loved, and I'll show you a critic who's not doing his job," says *Los Angeles Times* classical music critic Martin Bernheimer. Bernheimer, a Pulitzer Prize winner for outstanding music journalism, doesn't mind admitting that he has stacks of hate mail on his desk. He says he doesn't care what anyone thinks about what he writes. His only aim is to have his readers understand why he feels the way he does about a certain performance. "A critic is not an agent of the chamber of commerce," he says. "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."

Perverse is how many art lovers and audiences find critics. There are many myths and beliefs about critics reflecting that sentiment. One is the popular notion that critics will always disdain a performance that the audience likes; that they will consistently and deliberately write bad reviews for performances they deem popular and, therefore, of low quality. Another common prejudice is that critics are merely failed artists of the art they critique. There are any number of famous quotes by famous people (presumably stung by bad reviews) that echo these themes.

Some critics have, in fact, been known to reserve good marks for only a few artists. But for the most part, critics would deny they were the harpies and nay-sayers that some have accused them of being. A critic is more likely to think of himself or herself as the fabled

boy who shouts that the Emperor in the parade wears no clothes. What everyone loves, the critic may pronounce as a fraud—but often for good reason. Most music critics, for example, have been educated as musicologists, extensively trained in the music they write about.

There are art lovers who argue that no particular good is served by negative reviews, and there are many non-purists who can enjoy the offerings of the moment. Why throw mud on a performance in which the performer is doing his or her best? they ask. The reason given: if art is to remain pure, performances must remain pure, too. The critic provides the measuring stick by which to judge, and one of the functions of a review is to refine taste and educate the public on what they should look for in a performance.

It is here, though, that the other side of the story emerges. For all the complaints about them, critics can be quite powerful. People unsure of their own likes and dislikes about a performance or an artist, or any aspect of an art, may find themselves agreeing with the critic no matter what the critic writes. And many people who attend a performance or art opening read a critic's comments to see if their views coincide with those of the expert.

Bernheimer, however, says he writes *not* for the people who attend a performance, but for those who are not there. Art lovers, he says, need to have more confidence in their own perceptions. Bernheimer says he has often been asked during intermission how a performance rates. "They've heard it, and you've heard it, and they ask if it's any good. I say, 'I don't know, I haven't read the review.'"

Bernheimer says the listener's impression of a performance largely depends upon the listener's experience. "Take a Beethoven symphony. 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 you might not get the interpretation you want. What's special for Harry Smith may not be special for me. It doesn't

Illustration by David Povilaitis

mean I'm right and Harry Smith is wrong."

It has been said more than once that some critics write negative reviews just to be noticed. However, most professionals will tell you that having to write a negative review is just as disappointing to the writer as it is to the audience reading it. A good review can bring people to a performance in droves. A bad one can keep them away. For that reason, stage actors in New York traditionally stay up all night after a performance to wait for the reviews to appear in the early morning papers. The reviews can be the final word on what they have done.

Yet Bernheimer says a performer worth his salt should not be dissuaded from his career by a bad review. He recalls a letter written by the composer/conductor Max Reger to the author of a negative review of one of his works. Reger announced that he was about to read the criticism while attending to private matters in the bathroom. "I have your review in front of me, and in a moment I'll have it behind me," Reger wrote.

Martial Singher, the great French baritone who now teaches at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, California, related the first review he received after joining the Paris Grand Opera in 1930. A critic wrote that Singher's voice was weak, that it would never transcend the volume of an orchestra. Singher laughs about that review now. Still, he believes that when an artist or performer receives a bad review, he should get over his initial disappointment, then "try to understand and get a profit from it." Furthermore, he says, a critic should have the courage to say what he genuinely feels. He should be independent and speak with an open mind.

The composer/pianist Elmer Bernstein (who wrote the scores for *Walk on the Wild Side*, *Man with the Golden Arm*, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Magnificent Seven*, and more than 30 other movies) said he took a cue from a critic who commented about his overpedalling in one section of a piano piece. Comments on interpretation and technique, he said, can be invaluable to an artist.

What the critic feels about a work of art is usually based on knowledge, education, background, and—most importantly—the amount of art to which he has been exposed. Critics will listen to countless performances of one piece of music. They will study the written music to determine what the composer intended with a phrase mark, rest, or particular measure. The main idea a performer must keep in mind, most critics agree, is the original intent of the composer. In other words, if Beethoven wrote a particular passage of a piano sonata in connected *legato*, it had better not be played in disconnected *portamento*.

At the same time, critics have to keep pace with changes and evolutions in music, says Bernheimer. What was customary of music in 1910 is not necessarily called for in today's performance. Interpretation—style, tempo, rubato—has undergone enormous changes over the years. Such changes are similar to

what has transpired in the acting profession, according to Bernheimer. For example, the dramatic thunderings of John Barrymore in the renowned Hamlet soliloquy, "To be or not to be," is in stark contrast to Laurence Olivier's later whispering of it.

One source of a critic's power is his or her credibility, which is most easily established by remaining unswayed by surrounding viewpoints. The best critics are those who can distill their genuine feelings about art without regard to national tradition, politics, or personal affection for a performer. Sometimes, this stirs up a public hornet's nest.

Not long ago, Bernheimer published an unwelcome opinion that a dancer in the Kirov Ballet was so-so. The Russian troupe had arrived in the United States amid fanfare and happy announcements about art serving as a political bridge between the two superpowers. When Bernheimer indicated that the prima ballerina could have done a little more on the stage, he received stacks of hate mail from people accusing him of being hypercritical and insensitive. According to some detractors, Bernheimer should have soft-pedalled his views for the sake of international relations. Bernheimer did not agree. Public aspiration for a political break in the Iron Curtain, he said, is an issue separate from ballet.

Bernheimer disregards his own political background for the sake of pure commentary. Born in Munich in 1936, he was three 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 and politics are politics. If I think *Tristan* is a masterpiece, I think the composer of it is a master."

This singleness of purpose allows Bernheimer to state his views on either side of the fence without being dismissed as biased. Recently, he wrote that he found Franco Zeffirelli's filmed version of Verdi's *Otello* to be a chopped-up mess, and in another review, he stated that Rudolf Nureyev might consider hanging up his cape. Readers balked and stormed at these comments, but they respected what he said.

Art is art, and the purity of seeing art as such is the height to which the true critic aspires. It demands a self-dependence of the sort described by Matthew Arnold in one of his great poems, "Self-Dependence":

And with joy the stars perform their  
shining,  
And the sea its long moon-silver'd roll:  
For self-poised they live, nor pine with  
noting  
All the fever of some differing soul. □

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