

A critique of criticism

BY HILLARY HAUSER

There is this well-known story among classical musicians about the German composer/conductor Max Reger sending a letter to the writer of a bad 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," he wrote.

Things haven't changed much since the 19th century, in that many (if not most) artists disdain critics, if not the process

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of criticism itself. They feel criticism, the business of dissecting, evaluating and analyzing, runs counter to art. One builds, the other tears down.

The role of a reviewer is a dubious one. He is supposed to be 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, has sabotaged himself with sloppy technique, or if a performance had been enveloped in so much fanfare it has lost the heart and soul of the music. The reason for this exercise is given: If art is to remain pure, Performances must remain pure, too. One of the functions of a review is to refine taste and educate the public on what it should look for in a performance.

Herein lies the issue: What should we, and the critic, look for in a performance? At the heart of this question, I believe, is the very big difference between heart and mind, soul and intellect. A perform-

ance may be technically perfect and intellectually right, but it may lack soul. I have sat through countless such performances, and while one can say the performance is right, I believe it fails if it fails to touch the heart. I also believe a strict musicologist, a critic who lies in wait for any deviation from perfection, sets himself up to miss everything that might be soulful.

I am reminded of the late, great pianist Jakob Gimpel, whose master class I at-

tended for almost 20 years. Twice a month we met at his home in Los Angeles, where piano music was played, dissected and replayed. Many of us attended an all-Chopin recital by the immortal pianist Arthur Rubinstein at the Los Angeles Music Center. Rubinstein had a memory lapse in which an entire section of an etude was omitted. During the intermission several Gimpel students were making critical comments about the performance when Gimpel approached. Tuning in on what was being said, he remarked, simply, "How can you criticize a sunset?"

I have since wondered: Was Gimpel referring to the sunset of Rubinstein's career? Or was he saying, How can you, having beheld a glorious sky of blazing orange and purple, complain about a wisp of smoke that trailed across a corner of the picture?

Some believe a critic will deliberately write a bad review just to call attention to himself, an attempt at self-importance. Maybe this is so. I do not believe performances should be glossed over, but there is a very big difference between constructive and destructive criticism, and if a critic has the misfortune of having to write something negative about a performance I believe he should try to make his comments as constructive as possible. An example: Some time ago a well-known critic wrote that an international ballet star should consider hanging up his cape. How much more

would it have taken to say, instead, how one might remember with a bit of nostalgia the dancer's glorious leaps in former days? Similarly, what joy is there in writing that a conductor is hard of hearing? Just to be clever? Art, being in itself the opposite of destructive, has no relation to such viciousness.

Many people think classical music is an intellectual exercise. While there is much to know and understand about it, this music

is, ultimately, nothing but heart. A performance, in my view, succeeds if the heart is moved, and anyone, educated or not in music, can rely on his own judgment in such matters. In the meantime, those of us with some years of musical training will do well to realize that the business of writing reviews is an art, too, and if there are flaws to be mentioned we'll remember to base our comments on heart rather than phony intellect. It is unfortunate that the latter tends to sway the public far too often.



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