

## On the New Musical Puritanism

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That critical commentary has historically been a very bad predictor of significant trends in composition is a truism. A composer does not, however, need to be aware of this fact to learn very quickly to dismiss most criticism and most critics. Most of us have had repeated experiences of bewilderment resulting from eminently well-composed pieces denigrated as "unprofessional," inspired work rejected as "naive" or "meandering," a composer responsible for decades of musical incoherence lauded for his wit, insouciance, and mastery of structure etc. Insofar as these responses are random expressions of taste, or simple mishearings, journalistic criticism does not merit serious attention. Insofar as there is a pattern to displays of critical enthusiasm or antipathy, these are worth registering not because they reflect on the essential quality of the music under discussion, but rather because they provide indications of how the reality is perceived by the opinion making sector of the musical establishment. And, by revealing those sorts of music which will be likely to receive a favorable, or at least not immediately dismissive reaction, patterns of critical approval or rejection inform programming choices especially given the insecure relationship to contemporary music--one which most performers will own up to, at least after a couple of drinks. The upshot is that critical response

does not just document one aspect of an ephemeral musical present, it becomes, unfortunately I will argue, a guide to what is likely to be performed in the near-term musical future.

These matters aside, what is painfully evident from a day to day monitoring of arts pages is that these are not happy times for concert music. Declining, disproportionately geriatric audiences, cuts in arts funding, an elite intellectual culture which has become deeply suspicious of what it sees as a socially constructed distinction between high-low art forms, these and other factors have precipitated a decade long state of "crisis" which, while having been the cause of much hand-wringing, has elicited few viable solutions. Whether the reports of "the death of classical music" are to be believed is not what I want to discuss here. My opinion, for what its worth, is that the indications are decidedly mixed. Rather, it is the perception of a continual crisis which is important since it is this perception and the response to it which defines important aspects of the intellectual and artistic atmosphere of concert music.

As has been noted by historians since Thucidides, protracted periods of insecurity have given rise to a range of responses, one of which is an upsurge in forms of religious fundamentalism. These have often taken an isolationist form, the most notable example in our recent past being the Reagan era retreat of born-again Christians to "cities on the hill" distant from the corrupting influences of the larger society. Self-segregation has been accompanied by nostalgia for a mythical past of spiritual and moral

righteousness and attempted resuscitation of the "old time" religious rituals and codes of conduct. While by no means sympathetic to these tendencies in the larger culture the classical establishment's reaction to its "crisis," at least insofar as this reaction is articulated in establishment critical commentary, bears close comparison to it. What is implicitly and often explicitly being advocated is a turn inward, away from the chaos presented by the admittedly depressing hyper-commercial realities of current day musical culture. The solution offered by critics, while superficially offering the appearance of a defense of territory is really a retreat to an easily defended, well fortified position: salvation lies in a newly purified relationship of concert music to the canon of masterworks, accepting on faith its "sacred" obligation to provide spiritual uplift and a reclaiming of its traditional role as a moral touchstone within the culture.

A recent Times column by Joseph Horowitz on Shostakovich provides a conspicuous display of some of these attitudes. Shostakovich is portrayed as a virtual saint who "redeem(s) music as a moral force" and thereby serves as "a moral beacon for our times." Also characteristic is Horowitz' evocation of a distant past in which "the equation of great music with spritual uplift was a prevailing article of faith. Music making and music making were cherished as inherently wholesome activities. Concerts were morally empowering." Horowitz is by no means alone in his calls to reclaim the moral authority of music from the corrupting influences of the present. Similar positions staked out by neo-conservatives such as

Roger Scruton are equally explicit on the necessity for concert music to augment its artistic function with moral and spiritual evangelism. Musicians, of course, are themselves are by no means immune to such moralizing. Composers such as Charles Wuorinen and Mario Davidovsky who yearn for the return of the halcyon days of high-modernist purity have routinely impugned the personal integrity of composers who do not abide by, and have achieved a measure of success, by rejecting the severe, serialist expressionist orthodoxies of their predecessors.

I don't mean to be dismissive of these attitudes. Indeed, I am sympathetic to the argument that a form of a musical fundamentalism, if not puritanism, is a necessary starting point for the discussion of the performance of musical masterpieces. For only when the work itself is seen as beyond reproach can the success of the performer in bringing out the work's structural subtleties and expressive intent be evaluated. I should also make clear that I share the deeply held belief that masterpieces need to be continually re-engaged by performers and audiences. The post-canon future cheered on by post-modernists which denigrates the existence of masterpieces is not one I, or any artistically sane person, would want to live in.

At the same time, it needs also to be understood that a climate defined by musical puritanism, virtually by definition offers less than optimal, indeed arguably the worst possible conditions for the reception of contemporary music. In particular, the numerous

forms of contemporary composition which are in one way or another impure-which draw from influences and sources outside of the art music tradition and which have at their core a problematic or ambiguous relationship to high and low cultural categories--are a certain casualty of the closing of ranks around a few masterworks, above reproach in their formal perfection and moral authority. As an admirer of much recent music which might best be described as "mongrel", to borrow historian Anne Douglas' useful term, I have seen how the bunker mentality of establishment concert music institutions has been a serious obstacle preventing a great deal of compelling work from finding an audience.

To see how these attitudes play out in critical practice two recent pieces by the New York Times most aware and perceptive critic Anthony Tomassini are worth examining. A column of Nov 3, 1999 finds Tomassini taking aim at the recent practice of amplification in opera halls. What is revealing about the column are not his reasonable, if predictable, objections but rather his using the occasion for a wholesale banishment of all forms of electronic sound. He refers to the use of unamplified sound and natural instruments as "a defining characteristic of classical music." Concert halls should function, according to him, as "virtual temples" where "devotees worship natural" sound. More significant than the liturgical form in which Tomassini couches his attack is the possibly unintended collateral targets it is directed at, namely, that in banishing from the temple all music produced by electronic means, he places beyond the pale a significant fraction of twentieth century

music including acknowledged masterpieces such as Messaien's Turangalila Symphony, Crumb's Voice of the Whale, Davidovsky's Synchronisms, Stockhausen's Gesang der Junglinge not to mention numerous minor works by major composers such as Harbison's Bermuda Triangle (for amplified cello, saxophone, and electric organ) and Martin Bresnick's Conspiracies (for flute and tape). It would probably not disturb Tomassini that insodoing he also consigns to the dustbin recent works by "downtown" composers such as Michael Gordon and Glenn Branca, but it might give him pause to consider that he is placing outside of the realm of "classical music" the composers associated with the French spectralist school (Kaiah Saariaho and Gerard Grisey, among others) whose work has received a highly enthusiastic reception from establishment critics.

In the January 25 "critic's notebook" column opera again provides the pretext for similar puritanical rejectionism by Tomassini. This time, however, it is not just purity of means but purity of style which brings the critic to the barricades. All attempts at a synthesis of the American musical theatre and European operatic traditions have been failures, he claims. Furthermore such failures are predictable owing to the "perils" which await composers "blurring the line behind musicals and opera." In supporting these dubious propositions, he is forced to undertake a number of exercises of twisted logic the most contorted of which is an attempt to find grounds according to which Sondheim's Sweeny Todd can be construed as not "blurring the line" but entirely "true to the Broadway tradition." Its "spiky dissonances" and "musical

complexities," qualities which are "defining characteristics" of opera, according to Tommasini, are explained away, because while sufficient to "engage an advanced college seminar in composition" they are "submerged." In particular, one dissonance "provides a haunting harmonic nudge to (a) mournful melody, and makes a telling (dramatic) point." It does not take a musicologist to recognize that this description could apply equally to the harmonic practice of operatic composers from Mozart--even from Monteverdi--to Debussy. Rather than consigning Sondheim to the aesthetic pigeonhole to which Tommassini consigns him, these practices, and others, reveal him to be precisely the sort of line-blurrer that Tommasini claims is doomed to failure.

The context for these general strictures against musical boundary crossing is an attack on a single work which attempts such a synthesis, John LaChiusa's "Marie Christine." In heaping invective on "Marie Christine," ("its words are lame," "the rhythmic swing is stiff," "rather than sounding intricate, the music just seems labored") Tommasini accomplishes nothing other than to sabotage his larger point. For insofar as each criticism is correct, the possibility that a composer of the requisite skills making the attempt might be successful increases further. Indeed, that the defects of Marie Christine are apparently obvious leads one to believe that the problem lies not in the conception of the work but in its execution. It is not written in stone that those attempting to merge opera and musical theatre must "lack a real melodic gift" or be "self-taught" or that their "word-setting must be "faulty." All the obvious

deficiencies in "Marie Christine" could be seen as reasons for optimism that a compelling and sophisticated work of its general type could be written by a composer prepared to negotiate the challenges.

These reviews display the underlying basis of criticisms of much contemporary music undertaken in other pieces by Tomassini. It lies behind Tomassini's dismissive treatment of Steve Reich, a composer who, in embracing vernacular styles and ethnic traditions has fashioned distinctly impure works of undeniable profundity. Of course, some composers are allowed occasional, furtive intercourse with "the music of their youth," indeed this is the subject of a Tommasini piece from a year ago. But, as I noted in a letter taking issue with the column, these are allowed only so long as the composers carry appropriate academic credentials and only if the infection has not spread too far into the actual body, heart and soul of the works.

I should note that Tomassini's form of puritanism is comparatively mild by Times standards. The Times' Cotton Mather seems to be James Oesterreich, sure to brandish his hickory stick at the introduction of any sign of levity or moral laxness into his hairshirt musical culture. His recent attack on a lovely, if slightly misproportioned work by the brilliant young composer Derek Bermel is typical: Bermel is criticized for "developing bluesy notions hardly worth a sideways glance," a criticism which would have force only if Oesterreich had given an indication in his previous reviews

that any "bluesy notion" is worth taking seriously by a composer. The Times' Paul Griffith is, of course, infamous among my generation of composers through his characterization of us as notable primarily for our insignificance ("Where are the Composers under 50?"). That Griffith's ignorance is selective is apparent from his coverage of the five days of last year's Bang on a Can festival, an internationally known celebration of works by younger composers which specializes in issuing a direct challenge to the orthodoxies for which Griffith has served as a mouthpiece for three decades. That Griffith regards as non-composers those who do not endorse his catechism was indicated by his having ignored the entire festival save the single concert devoted to the hermetic modernism of the septuagenarian Iannis Xenakis. Finally, into this mix one must include the Times ayatollah Bernard Holland, whose recent jeremiads range from ruminations on music's inability to compete in profundity with the grunts of hippopotami, the squeals of hyenas and the jabbering of baboons to increasingly bizarre fatwas holding a "mediocre" generation of composers responsible for the dispensing of musical "toxic waste."

Confronted with this phalanx of reaction at the nation's newspaper of record, it is not surprising that many composers have given in to more than the usual despair when they contemplate the hostility of the musical present. While I find the increasing sense of resignation and futility among composers troubling, I should make clear here, however, that in reviewing these reviewers it is not my objective here to strike back at critics who have subjected friends and

acquaintances (and myself on a few occasions) to a certain amount of public discomfort. Rather my intention is to focus on the underlying attitudes which make a climate of reaction predictable.

These attitudes are, I maintain, to some extent the disease for which they claim to be the cure. In responding to a "crisis" which is partly of its own making, the critical establishment has reinforced concert music's status as the Blanche Dubois of artistic disciplines: its sensibilities too delicate to escape unblemished from any contact with the crass realities of our time, its traditions too refined to be accessible to those who do not feel the call to "worship" at the "temple of great music." Spiritualism and bland moralism provide weak cornerstones on which to construct a constituency for either canonic masterpieces or for new music which has pretensions to artistic, as opposed to commercial, value. Such foundations, as Joseph Horowitz pointed out a decade ago in these pages, offer an easy refuge for those whose low-impact engagement with inoffensively performed warhorses is taken for an experience of religious ecstasy but is nothing more than the satisfaction of yet another commercially manufactured want, like a leather interior or brie cheese. The sacralization of classical music also provides orchestral P.R. departments with the fodder and encouragement for some of the most offensive and cynical commercial hype foisted on the public in recent years as what is being hyped is not just a musical product but spiritual and moral redemption through music.

If the critical establishment wants to be part of the solution and not the problem, it needs to learn that the inherent strengths of the art music tradition, ones which reside within the music itself and not in its packaging, are, if properly nurtured, sufficient to ensure art music's presence--not as a mass market commodity, but as a living testament to artistic values which are themselves profoundly at odds with and subversive to a culture drunk on consumption and acquisitiveness. It is somewhat of a paradox that in losing faith in the power of music as music, and by substituting for it a dimly definable spiritual essence at its core critics are insuring its demise as a viable adversarial presence within the culture.