

Stop the Press? The Changing Media of Music Criticism

Christopher Dingle and Dominic McHugh

Writing in *BBC Music Magazine* in July 1999, editor Helen Wallace remarked on the rapid decline in space allocated to classical music criticism in British newspapers, notably in *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *Financial Times*, all of which had previously provided extensive, important coverage. ‘Concert reports provide the very oxygen needed to keep a flourishing musical scene alive’, she noted, and ‘[if] an event is ignored, it is as if it did not exist.’ However, she perceived a ‘ray of hope’ in the internet, which ‘has no space restriction: maybe the dawn of a new era is nigh...’¹ Twenty years later, Wallace’s comments seem prescient. Newspapers operate regularly updated websites as a matter of course now, and many of them offer additional content that is not made available in print editions. Online content has helped to sustain the viability of newspapers in the digital age, capitalizing on the tantalising opportunity to report news – and post reviews – instantly. There has also been a proliferation of e-zines devoted to music criticism, starting with titles such as *Seen and Heard* and *Classical Source*, allowing amateur enthusiasts to fill the gap left by shrinking column inches by providing reviews of a much wider range of events, such as complete coverage of the BBC Proms by *Classical Source*; the success of these ventures has led to other sites such as *The Arts Desk*, whose reviews are written mainly by professional journalists. Yet Wallace’s prediction for the future missed one crucial and unexpected component: the advent of Facebook and, particularly, Twitter has taken criticism out of its privileged domain as a specialist activity and enabled the general public to give individual responses to performances based on personal experience rather than perceived qualification. This chapter examines this shift from the primacy of professional music critics in the twentieth century to the impact of

¹ Helen Wallace, ‘A Critical Point’, *BBC Music Magazine* (July 1999), 5.

the internet on how music criticism is generated, disseminated and consumed within the context of earlier developments in the media of criticism and the consequent changing relationship between the critic and those in receipt of their insights. The potential democratization of the process of reporting on concerts in the twenty-first century could be seen as a positive move, reflecting the subjectivity of individual responses to music, but at what cost to expertise, clarity and accuracy?

Of course, it had taken many centuries for music criticism to evolve to its twentieth-century format. The earliest types of criticism were undoubtedly part of oral cultures and traditions, just like the music they would have been discussing. When theories about music began to be preserved in written form on stone, clay and papyrus, they will have been preceded (and succeeded) by questions, discussion and debate. The comprehensive systems of musical theory and philosophy that emerged in ancient China and ancient Greece, to name but two, could not have arisen without such a hinterland and the same was true in the Western European tradition as it became codified. Given the intertwining in ancient Chinese theory and practice of music and the proper functioning of state,² those that might now be regarded in some form as practising music criticism are likely to have been government officials. Whatever their societal status elsewhere, various treatises and other theoretical writings provide much of the existent evidence of the practice of music criticism before the modern era. Nonetheless, as is made clear by Christopher Page in the opening chapter of this volume, evidence of musical criticism and debate about plainchant can be gleaned not just from treatises, but also other literary sources, including letters, chronicles, *Lives* of saints and catalogues of notable figures. A few centuries later, as noted in Carrie Churnside's chapter, to

² Alan R. Thrasher, 'China, People's Republic of: §I. Introduction: Historical, Regional and Study Perspectives; 3. Sources and Perspectives: i) The Imperial Period', *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, available at: www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

these might be added travel journals or diaries. Such apparently restricted and personal items often provide insight into broader discussion.

Nonetheless, it was with the ever-increasing prevalence of published books, pamphlets and polemics that resulted from the invention of the printing press, as well as the subsequent rise in literacy, that music criticism became a relationship between an individual and a potentially broad swathe of their society. As journals and newspapers began to appear in the eighteenth century, various forms of critical writing developed that, in their essence, are familiar today, from reviews, previews and news pieces about performances and works to more reflective articles and longer essays. To these could be added the French 'feuilleton', a genre developed by the pioneering French critic Julien-Louis Geoffroy (1743–1814). Literally meaning 'little page', the term originally meant a part-page, usually a bottom quarter, with a thick black line delineating that it was distinct from news reporting. A term soon adopted by journals in other languages, the feuilleton quickly came to denote a sometimes lengthy, discursive essay, extending across part or all of several pages, in later usage even denoting a distinct publication. Often prompted by a specific performance or work, but ranging more broadly in the manner of what today might be termed a review-article, they tended to be marked by their witty and vibrant language.

As well as the types of format, the proliferation of specialist titles devoted to specific repertoires, genres or instruments naturally resulted in criticism tailored to the respective readerships, with the use of technical or niche terminology not appropriate in newspapers or general musical journals. In essence, criticism of recordings merely added another set of specialist journals, as did the development of criticism in areas such as jazz, popular, folk, world music, and so on. However, broadcasting enabled an entirely new medium for criticism. Prime examples on radio would be the long-running *Record Review* on BBC Radio

3 or the French *La Tribune des critiques de disques*,³ while the BBC's *Juke Box Jury* was a prominent example of television criticism. More recently, publications such as *BBC Music Magazine* experimented with monthly podcasts where various editorial staff discussed a selection of discs.

Once criticism in the form of reviews and articles started to be published, the writers needed to decide how to sign it, with approaches varying from outlet to outlet and policy changing within each publication from period to period making it difficult to generalize for any historical area. However, there are five broad approaches to the authorship of a review: the critic's name; the critic's initials; a pseudonym; signed by role; unsigned. Broadly speaking, the straightforward use of the critic's name increasingly became the norm during the course of the twentieth century, but was not uncommon in earlier times, and was by no means universally adopted early in the twenty-first century. It implies a direct personal responsibility by the critic for the views being expressed, emphasizing that the review has been written by an individual, even though, in reality, it may have been cut or even changed by editors. The use of initials may simply be a device either to save space or avoid needless repetition, with an index providing full names, an approach that was used by *Gramophone* for many years. The critic is readily identifiable, though the lack of a name does create a degree of detachment. In other situations, initials may be used without any identifier, making them akin to a pseudonym. Few readers outside the business would have known that, for instance, 'N.C.' of the *Manchester Guardian* was Neville Cardus, especially in his early years, and even fewer would have realized that he was also 'Cricketer' for the same newspaper.

³ Several editions of *La Tribune des critiques de disques* are available on Youtube by searching the programme title, including a filmed edition from the INA archive featuring a classic panel of critics as well as Peter Ustinov's witty parody of the programme. I am grateful to Julian Anderson for drawing the latter two to my attention [CD].

Pseudonyms have persisted in various guises throughout printed history, ranging from ‘A Ghost’, ‘Peregrine Puff’, ‘Criticus’ and ‘Harmonicus’ in the early days of *The Times*,⁴ via the multiple characters of Schumann’s ‘Davidsbund’, George Bernard Shaw’s ‘Corno di Bassetto’, Debussy’s ‘Monsieur Croche’ and ‘Musœus’ (the still unidentified critic for the *New York American*),⁵ to their prevalence as user names for many contributors to blogs. The use of the pseudonym is often another form of anonymity for the general reader, but one that has some sense of a character attached to it. In many cases, the identity of the reviewer is known to musical insiders meaning that the anonymity does not tend to extend to those affected most directly, but the mask adopted with a pseudonym can also imply a degree of distance. Like a fiction writer, the opinions expressed are those of the character and not necessarily shared by the author.

While the choice of a pseudonym is usually that of the individual critic, other approaches are often dictated by the current house style of the newspaper or journal in question. Although relatively rare in print media these days, it was commonplace until the mid-twentieth century for arts reviews (and other content) in newspapers and journals in some countries either to be completely unsigned or identified with formulae such as ‘from our Music Critic’ or ‘from our Special Correspondent’. The anonymity of either unsigned reviews or simply giving the role often emphasized that, while written by individuals, the views were expressed on behalf of the newspaper as a whole. This is reflected in the language used. Critics have often avoided first person altogether, an approach that not only adds authority to the prose, presenting the pronouncements as fact, but is also usually more succinct. However, in those newspapers where, in keeping with other content, reviews and

⁴ Sarah J. Wynn, *The Emergence of the Music Critic in Late 18th Century London:*

Composers, Performers, Reporters (Memphis: Langford & Associates, 2001), p. 12.

⁵ See chapter fifteen for more information about ‘Musœus’.

articles were unsigned or attributed to a role, any use of first person was in the plural emphasizing that the views were corporate as in this 1921 review of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*: 'we must be content to remain outside the movement and to confess that a great deal of the ballet was for us merely a tedious posturing in sight and sound ... we left wondering what on earth all the fuss and fury was about'.⁶

By the end of the twentieth century, many newspapers and magazines had moved to encouraging their critics to include instances of first person singular within their reviews and articles, emphasizing the individuality of the perspective proffered. At the same time as the traditional press had moved more or less wholesale to what might be termed full critical transparency, some weblogs and internet sites were emerging where reviews were either published anonymously or under a pseudonym. Blogs in particular normally lack editorial oversight, thereby rendering the lack of transparency caused by anonymity even more problematic when criticism is unbalanced, inaccurate or extreme.

Alongside the medium of the review, it is also important to consider the changing rhythm in the practice of the critic. While deadlines in journals, with their less frequent publication, have always been relatively leisurely, the competition between newspapers led to a desire to be, if not first, then not behind their rivals in any aspect of reporting. With the invention of the telegraph then telephone, the practice emerged of posting reviews the same evening as the concert so that the review could appear in the newspaper the following day. With print deadlines around midnight, this meant that critics needed to be swift writers, drafting their reviews in the interval or while the music was still playing. This inevitably meant that the first half of a concert usually had prime importance in the formulation of a review. Moreover, if a concert ran late, the critic might leave early in order to ensure the

⁶ [Unsigned], "Le Sacre du Printemps" – Russian Ballet at the Princes', *The Times* (28 June 1921), 8.

review appeared in the early edition of the newspaper as reflected in Andrew Porter's remark that 'the critics of *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* seldom saw the last act of a long opera'.⁷ In order to submit their reviews, critics needed the specialist skills of the journalist for dictating copy over the telephone. The increasing use of computers and email communication in the 1990s actually coincided with many newspapers starting to take a more relaxed approach to getting concert reviews into print. At more or less the same time, and despite the complete lack of any print deadline, online reviews often appeared the same evening. The rise of social media added to the imperative for swift posting with the first review published being likely to be tagged in promoters' Twitter feeds and shared by audience members, who might also add their comments. As a consequence, it was not uncommon for a review to appear on a newspaper website a day or two before it appeared in print.

In addition to the media of the criticism, it is useful also to note the variety of objects of review. For the most part, the chapters in this volume have discussed criticism as it pertains either to musical works or to the performances of musical works, in both cases primarily either in concerts or on recordings. However, some areas have barely arisen or, if they have, this has been implicit rather than explicit. Chief among these is the criticism of musical scores. This is not to fault the contributors to the volume. For periods when scores were the focus, this is so obvious that explicit mention either seems superfluous or does not occur to the writer, while, for those dealing with more recent times, the almost complete absence of such reviewing in any but the most specialized journals means that, again, it does not arise. It is only with the longer view that a substantive shift becomes apparent. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much of the criticism of musical works, possibly the majority in many areas and situations, would be made from reading and playing scores rather

⁷ Andrew Porter, *Music of Three Seasons 1974–1977* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978), p. xiii.

than hearing the work in performance. A significant amount of the discussion of music was not in terms of whether to go and hear a particular work, and not, of course, about buying a recording. Rather, it was about whether the reader would wish to purchase a copy of the music for their own library in order to play it themselves.

Far from disappearing with the advent of recording, there was, if anything, an increase of the sale of scores and consequent critical discussion as significant numbers of the resulting new audience for music invested in scores to follow while listening to their records. However, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a marked decline in the sale of musical scores, along with a concurrent disappearance of music shops from many high streets. The reasons for this significant change, which started long before the appearance of the internet, are not entirely clear. One unsurprising result, though, has been that the notion of reviewing scores has gradually disappeared from most areas of music criticism. Even in 1969, Hans W. Heinsheimer, director of publications at G. Schirmer, was bemoaning the disappearance of music reviewing from a host of music journals:

Once in a while one thinks nostalgically of the prewar European situation, when musical magazines such as *Die Musik*, *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, *La Revue musicale*, *Musica d'Oggi*, and a considerable number of similar publications in Austria, Scandinavia, Holland, Czechoslovakia, and Poland reviewed every important new score ... All this is gone, though some regular reviewing of printed music is still done in England, particularly in the *Musical Times*.⁸

⁸ Hans W. Heinsheimer, 'A Music Publisher's View on Reviewing', *Notes Second Series*, 26/2 (December 1969), 229. [226–230].

By the end of the century, reviews of music had also disappeared from journals such as *Tempo* and *Musical Times*. With the notable exception of *Notes*, reviews of scores now tend to appear primarily in magazines devoted to specific instruments or instrumental families. Heinsheimer also observed that, while book publishers spent as much as 10 per cent of their promotional budget on review copies, the number of outlets was so small for music publishers that review copies were often not even included in calculations, accounting for around 0.1 per cent of the budget.⁹ In the UK, music publishers will often set aside just half-a-dozen promotional copies, and even that seems generous in many cases.

Another area of music criticism that is easy to overlook is reviewing books about music. Although rare, music book reviews are not entirely absent from newspaper columns even today, and are regular features of magazines such as *Gramophone*, *Opera* and *BBC Music Magazine* as well as scholarly journals. On occasion, music books have even won generalist literary awards, relatively recent examples being the second volume of David Cairns's Berlioz biography (Samuel Johnson Prize and best biography in The Whitbread Book Awards) and Alex Ross's *The Rest is Noise* (*Guardian* First Book Award). It should also be remembered that there are objects of review where the music is often thought of as secondary. Opera will be reviewed by a music critic, but ballet and dance critics will not be primarily musical in their training. Similarly, musical theatre will usually be reviewed by theatre critics. In each of these areas, though, it is not unheard of for a music critic to review them, sometimes even in addition to the dance or theatre critic. For example, when English National Opera includes a Broadway musical in its season, the music critics who would normally review the company's work usually attend that production too. A consequence of this is that they often project negativity into their assessments, perhaps because of their own discomfort about the assignment or impatience at the displacement of art music by a popular

⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

genre; the assessment of a theatre critic, accustomed to reviewing musicals regularly in both the West End and the subsidized sector, may be quite different. By contrast, it is extremely unlikely that any film, television programme or computer game would be covered by a music critic unless the subject matter itself was musical. Nonetheless, these are all areas of significant musical activity that increasingly attract scholarly investigation, but are largely overlooked in terms of critical attention unless the music is divorced from its usual medium and placed in a concert setting.

Furthermore, while reviewing recordings is now part of the critical furniture, it is rare that broadcasts are considered, whether on radio or television. It may seem obvious that this should be the case since it is surely better to have a review from a critic who actually attended an event, but it could also be argued that the critic might benefit from reviewing from the perspective that the event is experienced by the overwhelming majority of its audience, numbering many times that in the hall or opera house. In 2010, the website *Musical Pointers* reviewed a number of that year's BBC Proms from the broadcast or using the 'listen again' function, while a quotation from a 2009 review of the HD cinema broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Aida*, published on the site *Musical Criticism*, was used for promotional purposes on the Blu-ray release of the same broadcast by Decca, hinting at a shift towards the legitimization of both the broadcast as the subject of a review and online criticism as a marketing tool by a major record label.

Online criticism has been shown to have numerous benefits: speed of delivery to the reader, limitless space, the ability to provide hyperlinks between related articles, and the provision of a forum for voices – both artists and critics – that might not otherwise have the opportunity to be heard or represented. For a time in the 2010s, *The Guardian* and *Sunday Times* would print additional reviews to those appearing in the print version of the newspaper, proving that the internet can enhance and complement print publications rather

than automatically supplanting them. But with this scope comes a variety of dangers. The pressure to provide reviews as quickly as possible can lead to mistakes and a lack of reflection (though this was also a pitfall of the old practice of phoning in reviews the same night). The lack of a word limit can encourage writers to lose focus and concision, instead providing a stream of consciousness and endless minutiae; by contrast, print critics are typically skilled in getting to the point and summarizing overall impact within a set word limit. Reliability is a further problem, where the plethora of opinions expressed between the many print, website and blog reviews for a major concert or production can obscure a sense of recording an event. On the other hand, arts organisations are encouraging the general public to bypass critics when the reviews might not be quotable for marketing purposes. For example, email advertising for the 2018 revival of *Carmen* at Covent Garden used positive audience tweets rather than newspaper quotations to encourage ticket sales, and each of the company's productions now has an official Twitter hashtag (starting #ROH) to encourage 'trending' and make the performances noteworthy events regardless of traditional media coverage.

To some degree, therefore, everyone's a critic in the digital age, and there can be a healthy aspect to enabling open debate rather than relying on a small group of critics from a limited demographic (one that may well not represent the whole audience adequately). One example of this is the scope for the readers of a review then to engage immediately in critique of the critic, often through comments facilities on the site in question. While the dangers of intemperate comment rapidly became apparent, leading many sites either to remove such comments or add moderation facilities, when working well this enables the review to become a starting point for what at times can become a dynamic debate. In some cases, the critic will engage with such comments, either to rebut a point, clarify a misunderstanding, acknowledge an error or oversight, or simply to make further points in what has become an intriguing

discussion. Whatever the quality of the comments, this personal engagement between critic and readership marked a substantial shift from the anonymously published review with response only being by a letter, which was unlikely to make it into print. The irony is that, while the critics for newspapers and magazines are now named, those making comments are frequently either anonymous or go by a username that is essentially a pseudonym.

This freedom can also lead to criticism being replaced by fandom, which has the potential to facilitate nuance and detail but also obsession. Online criticism is often used to shape personal identity, such as in *parterre box*, which was published in print form (with the subtitle *the queer opera zine*) from 1993–2001 but has taken on a much more popular and influential role as a website in news/blog format that actively encourages reader interaction. The *Barihunks* blog similarly addresses a mainly queer audience, but its focus on the visual signals an arguably negative trend in classical music criticism of a greater emphasis on image at the expense of the music.¹⁰ This may be a reflection of how art music has gravitated towards elements of marketing and even production similar to popular music, where imagery and iconography are of prime importance; in recent years, classical music albums have similarly often featured the products of elaborate photo shoots and performers are more heavily styled than before. Many classical artists now have a significant online presence, especially when they are signed to a major record label, and the links between online reviews, artist websites and album downloads can be vital in selling records. Yet websites run by fans of performers can arguably lead to invasive levels of detail about the artists' whereabouts and activities. One such site devoted to the baritone Simon Keenlyside provides a calendar disclosing all his performances, allowing readers to know where he is in the world at any point, while more pernicious examples are increasingly prevalent. Meanwhile, more serious attempts at online criticism can encounter difficulties in obtaining press accreditation to gain

¹⁰ The site does, however, produce a charity calendar annually to support young artists.

access not only to tickets and recordings, but also the artists themselves. The interviews given to the traditional press to preview concerts and opera productions have often proved vital to understanding and framing those performances, so the need for online journalists to have this kind of access to write previews can be vital, if not always forthcoming.

Whatever the relative merits and challenges for music criticism and critics in the daily newspapers and online, there is one key difference. Writing about music on a reviewing website or, for that matter, a music magazine, is for a readership that already has a degree of interest or enthusiasm. No such assumption can be made with newspapers (though it frequently is). People do not generally buy newspapers for music alone, but to be informed about everything from politics to literature to cookery. Each person will have their own preferred elements within their preferred newspaper, but will often also at least glance at other things to see if they are of interest. In other words, print newspapers have a much greater degree of passing trade not available to the specialist journal or website. The latter are generally preaching to the converted within a ghetto.

Given the nature of this book, it is worth considering the possible implications of all this for those studying music criticism. It is already clear that developments of recent times, notably broadcasts and electronic media, will pose substantial challenges to future historians. On the one hand, the permanence and means of preserving such media are still far from clear. It is too soon to be certain of the extent to which the vast amount of material on the internet, in particular, will be maintained, curated and conserved in a practicable way for future generations of scholars. Even the most secure and well-established sites are barely two decades old and computer coding has changed significantly in that relatively brief time. On the other hand, if all the newspaper, magazine and reviewing sites, personal blogs, podcasts and even individual emails are archived in some way, along with the increased availability of existing historical sources, the amount of material to traverse and filter in order to make any

kind of historical sense of even a narrow area of music criticism will be overwhelming. Nevertheless, there are issues with the archiving of traditional print media, for many newspapers printed several editions each day, meaning that a review submitted late may not appear in a morning or early afternoon edition. Since digital archives only preserve one edition, it is far from certain that all content has been archived. Moreover, there are also new possibilities with electronic media, notably the rise of computer-aided approaches such as corpus linguistics, in which the prevalence of key words can be charted across vast amounts of material in order to chart developing trends.

Concerns about the decline in the quality and/or quantity of criticism may be almost as old as regularly published criticism itself, and from the earliest days part of the impetus of criticism has been concern about broader musical, cultural or national decline. This may make such voices analogous to the Gauls in Goscinny's Asterix books, whose recurrent anxiety is the sky falling on their heads. Norman Lebrecht's *Who Killed Classical Music* concludes that the field of music and thus, presumably, musical writing is already dead, implying his subsequent remarkably robust career – including overseeing a popular website, *Slipped Disc* – is a form of literary necrophilia.¹¹ Nonetheless, the mere fact that critics have cried wolf about the decline of their profession on numerous previous occasions does not of itself mean that the existential concerns of some at present are necessarily unfounded. The expansion in the quantity and scope of music criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries outlined in many of the preceding chapters was relatively rapid in historical terms. It is possible that it could contract with equal swiftness. Barring extraordinary societal changes, this is unlikely to be across the board, but it is certainly conceivable that one or a combination of types of critical format, criticism of particular genres, or critics in a particular

¹¹ It is, of course, debateable whether what Lebrecht means by classical music corresponds to others' understanding.

region may suffer a precipitous decline. Indeed, that has arguably happened already in some areas. Certainly the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen significant cultural changes in many countries, while there is an ongoing transformation of the news media due to television and the internet. The developments of recent years may have the whiff of the Wild West about them, in that there is seemingly unregulated opportunity in remarkable new areas of activity, but also sharp practice. The situation was similar when newspapers and journals were first appearing, and for some time after.

It is tempting to say that whether the arrival of the internet and subsequent upheavals in the printed press are regarded as disastrous or creating new opportunities merely reflects whether the observer is a pessimist or optimist, seeing the glass as either half-empty or half-full. However, it is more pertinent to remember that wine was previously drunk out of pewter, clay or leather goblets, cups and tankards. Moreover, as generations of students will testify, if the glass breaks, another receptacle will be found. One lesson of this volume has been that whenever and wherever music is made, in whatever genre, there will be those who wish to discuss, describe and debate it, argue, attack or advocate it, read, reflect and write about it in whatever medium is available. They may or may not be paid or labelled a music critic, they may or may not write or speak eloquently, and they may or may not be perceptive and insightful, but, whether on paper, on the airwaves, on a computer screen or some medium not yet conceived, music criticism will continue.