

[On the state of arts journalism in the American press]

ENGAGING WITH THE ARTS

Reflections on the State of Arts Journalism in the American Press

(An address to participants in the Goldring program in Arts Journalism, Syracuse University, Sept. 20, 2005)

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By Joseph Horowitz

In *The Fervent Years*, his classic 1941 history of the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman complained about New York's drama critics. They lacked "commitment" and "standards," he said. They weren't "fighters." They failed as advocates.

Clurman was many things: a crucial director and teacher, a writer and critic of immense erudition and breadth, a political activist on the left. *The Fervent Years*, too, is many things – one of which is a case study of the life and death of a cutting-edge performing arts institution, offered as a lesson in futility. The goal of the Group Theatre was to furnish something new: an American repertoire ensemble giving serious plays seriously prepared. In principle, the Group was not a commercial enterprise. In practice, on Broadway, it had to behave like one. Its situation, Clurman wrote, was "basically untenable." Logically, "it would have been proper to quit . . . , but logic had nothing to do with our position. There was nothing for us to do but continue, and make the best of it." Drawing a collectivist moral, Clurman concluded:

The Group could not sustain itself as such because it was isolated. The Group Theatre was a failure because, as no individual can exist alone, *no group can exist alone*. For a group to live a healthy life and mature to a full consummation of its potentiality, it must be sustained by other groups – not only of moneyed men or civic support, but by equally conscious groups in the press, in the audience, and generally in large and comparatively stable segments of society. When this fails to happen, . . . it will wither just as an organ that is not nourished by the blood's circulation through the body.

And here is Clurman on the failure of the drama critics who reviewed the Group Theatre's production of John Howard Lawson's *Success Story*:

When Bernard Shaw wrote about a play, we cannot be sure he was fair or right, but what he demanded of the theatre and its artists and why he wanted these things was always made entirely clear. He was committed, not "independent." He preferred a bad play of Ibsen to the best of Pinero, and the substance of his review was not to assert this, but to make his readers understand the reason. . . .

The reviews of *Success Story* were not bad. If they said the play was "confused," had I not thought and written the same? What made me angry . . . was that so few

reviewers ever came to grips with the play itself. If one of them had written: “We know that what the author wishes to say, and despite the fact that his play vaguely resembles such harmless entertainment as *Counsellor-at Law*, we think it a dangerously false play,” I would have fought the man, but I could not have been angry with him. For a critic such as this would prove himself a man of standards, and, having standards, he would be constrained to defend them; he would himself have to be a fighter. But how combat a force without definition, how carry on a debate with a man who disarms you by admitting his opinions are only a “smattering of ignorance”? Unlike other people, our reviewers are powerful because they believe in nothing.

Having myself once administered a quixotic performance arts institution – the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra of the 1990s – I identify with Clurman’s plight. I don’t mean to imply that what the Brooklyn Philharmonic achieved in those years equaled what the Group Theater achieved in the thirties. But certainly the Brooklyn Philharmonic espoused a radically new template. Recasting the symphonic enterprise as fundamentally educational, we offered thematic festivals that incorporated dance and film, as well as popular and vernacular genres falling outside “classical music.” As Alex Ross put it in *The New Yorker*, we “more or less went off the grid of American orchestral culture.” One of the aims of the Group Theatre, in Clurman’s words, was “the development of an enlightened audience aware and eager to follow the aims of its dramatists, actors, and directors.” When we polled our Brooklyn audience, we found an ally: our subscribers weren’t interested in celebrity performers or familiar classics; they wanted change. But as we could not fill the BAM Opera House with such people twice a weekend, we knew that what we were attempting was “basically untenable.” There was nothing for us to do but “continue, and make the best of it.”

I cannot say we lacked attention in the press. And we received our share of praise. But with few exceptions the critics were not notably invested in standards they were prepared to articulate and defend. They were, I would say, uncommitted to the espousal or rejection of the institutional template we were determined to repudiate.

But is this a critic’s job? A newspaper’s role? These are questions as pressing today as when Clurman asked them 60 years ago. Across the land, newspapers are jettisoning their staff arts critics. Concurrently, there are new academic programs in Arts Journalism – here at Syracuse, soon at the City University of New York and at Columbia University. Meanwhile, Columbia has dismantled its National Arts Journalism Program. And the National Endowment for the Arts is sponsoring an unprecedented series of institutes for arts critics from smaller papers, envisioned by NEA Chairman Dana Gioia as a corrective to lowered standards and diminishing expertise. But what are those standards? What is the pertinent expertise? We know there is a need, but do we know what we want?

I fear that, if there is movement here, it may be movement in the wrong direction – that arts journalism in the United States risks being diminished by notions of “objectivity,” “news,” and “reportage”: the epistemological bedrock of American newspaper journalism. Whether these notions are intellectually defensible, whether they best suit the description and understanding of world events, is another topic for another time. That they bedevil arts journalism is my topic for today.

I was rather briefly a *New York Times* music critic, from 1976 to 1980. Personally, I experienced the newsroom as a kind of luxury bunker. Harold Schonberg, the *Times*' chief music critic, enforced rules of disengagement to insure that our views weren't tainted by personal acquaintance with the artists we wrote about. On the other side of Harold's Maginot Line were various pianists, singers, and conductors, as well as the people who administered Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Met. That, at any rate, was the model in play.

Harold was a self-made, Runyonesque character who would have fit on Ben Hecht's *Front Page*. He smoked cigars and played chess. His speech was of the Brooklyn variety. His strengths as a *Times*-man were considerable. He was passionate for music. In print, he was a blunt stylist and deft raconteur: his voice was quickly recognizable. His influence was tangible. But Harold's rules of disengagement, it seems to me, truncated his scope of inquiry, curtailed his practical knowledge, and limited his usefulness to the community of artists he spied from afar. Where did the rules come from? However vaguely, they were assumed to be old and honorable. In retrospect, it was not irrelevant, I think, that Harold himself had never been a performer or arts administrator. The rules, in effect, enshrined his own limitations.

Though there was not much institutional memory at the Culture Department, I have since learned a thing or two about the history of music criticism in the New York press. The first music critic for a major American daily was William Henry Fry, who wrote for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* for a dozen years beginning in 1852. Fry as a composer of consequence – and he never let his readers forget it. He conducted a raging Jeremiad against the New York Philharmonic for neglecting native talent. Fry was a frontline combatant.

William James Henderson – a great name – was the *Times*' first music critic of enduring significance. This was from 1887 to 1902. (He was later music critic for the *New York Sun* from 1902 to 1937.) A writer of refinement and vivid opinion, Henderson was long the central connoisseur of vocal arts among American music journalists. He knew the leading singers of the day and regularly entertained them at his home. He also wrote opera librettos – including one for Walter Damrosch, whose concerts he frequently reviewed.

Henderson's colleague Henry Edward Krehbiel, at the *Tribune*, was widely considered the “dean” of New York music critics. He was a prodigious autodidact, vast in learning, pontifical in tone. He was also, by proclivity and conviction, an activist. Krehbiel was America's leading authority on music and race – an early specialist in what we now call ethnomusicology. In this capacity, he was Antonin Dvorak's de facto advisor on Indian tunes and plantation song. He became chief propagandist of Dvorak's *New World* Symphony. His closest friends included Anton Seidl, who conducted the premiere of that work at Carnegie Hall. With Seidl, he was a leader in the “American Composers Concerts” movement. He espoused opera in English, for which cause he translated librettos. He wrote important histories of opera in America and of the New York Philharmonic, for which he served as program annotator. He proudly and tirelessly promoted an American classical music culture, distinct from its European parents. This was one reason he clashed with Gustav Mahler when Mahler took over the New York Philharmonic in 1909. Krehbiel found Mahler patronizing toward New York, insufficiently attentive to its musical attainments and their proper cultivation. When Mahler died in 1911, Krehbiel wrote an instantly notorious obituary, ugly and vindictive. The case of Mahler and Krehbiel illustrates the risks of engagement; no bunker-dweller would have lost perspective as egregiously as Krehbiel did.

And yet Krehbiel met Clurman's criteria. An embodiment of the genteel tradition, he insisted on the moral content of art. He articulated elevated standards for cultural policy and aesthetic behavior, defended them, picked fights. No subsequent New York music critic played so influential a role in the within the city's community of artists. If I had to select a role model for the music critics of today, I would choose Henry Krehbiel.

After World War I, the *Times*' chief music critic was Olin Downes. The *Times* was now the nation's august "newspaper of record," and Downes augustly disengaged from the activities of a Fry, Henderson, or Krehbiel. He had no aesthetic philosophy to speak of. "Our reviewers are powerful because they believe in nothing," Clurman complained. "Be Your Own Music Critic," Downes advised laymen in one 1941 lecture. Downes' antipode was Virgil Thomson of the *Herald-Tribune*, a waspish Francophile aesthete – no genteel uplift for him -- whose reviewing staff mainly comprised composers like himself: Lou Harrison, Paul Bowles, Arthur Berger. (It bears mentioning that many important music critics have been important composers: Weber, Schumann, Berlioz, Wolf, Debussy, and Cui, to name a half dozen.) Thomson was also widely active as a conductor, and was known to appreciate orchestras who hired him in that capacity. The *Tribune* of those days was a "gentlemen's paper" partial to novelty and style. Thomson's predecessor at the music desk, Lawrence Gilman, certainly aspired to be a Baroque verbal stylist. He also happened to be – as I had occasion to discover some years ago – a behind-the-scenes artistic advisor to the New York Philharmonic.

Olin Downes did not formally advise orchestras on repertoire, or conduct them, or compose for them. At the same time, he was no bunker-dweller. He was a public personality, a man of strong opinions. His name turns up on advisory boards and the like.¹ And it bears stressing that, whatever rules of disengagement Downes adhered to, the *Times* Sunday arts pages were open to distinguished practitioners. Harold Clurman's theater manifestos appeared there as a matter of course. George Gershwin wrote for the Sunday *Times*. So did Aaron Copland.

Today's *New York Times* Sunday Arts & Leisure section applies stricter disengagement criteria: contributions from directors and composers, playwrights and painters, actors and pianists are (with infrequent exceptions) apparently disallowed. In any event, they rarely materialize. The rules continue to change, however. When I left the *Times* in 1980 and began working for performing arts institutions, I was no longer able to write for Arts & Leisure. Then Jim Oestreich became music editor of the Sunday *Times*, and I was invited back. Jim made writing for Arts & Leisure a pleasure. Writers could now use the previously forbidden first person, could express opinions. And Jim commissioned distinguished music historians who had not previously written for distinguished newspapers. But conflict-of-interest guidelines remained in place, and when I became Executive Director, rather than Artistic Advisor, to Brooklyn's orchestra, my Arts & Leisure pieces ceased. When I left the Brooklyn Philharmonic, they resumed. Some years later, I wrote an Arts & Leisure article in praise of Naxos records' "American Classics" series. That introduced me to Klaus Heymann, who runs Naxos. I became a consultant to "American Classics." So I no longer write about recordings for the *Times*. And I do not mention the half-dozen orchestras for which I work as a consultant, or the chamber orchestra I've co-founded in Washington, D. C. The more I

¹ In the course of writing this talk, I came across a Harold Clurman piece which mentions in passing Brooks Atkinson's close friendship with Boris Aronson. During the years that Atkinson was the *Times*' chief drama critic (1925-1960), Aronson was arguably Broadway's most distinguished designer; Atkinson reviewed his work regularly.

do, the narrower becomes my Arts & Leisure window. (When I write for London's *Times Literary Supplement*, the same window stays wide open; that the *TLS* doesn't subscribe to American conflict-of-interest guidelines partly reflects different journalistic mores on either side of the Atlantic.)

Another rules change: When in 1980 Lorin Maazel was named director of the Vienna State Opera, I was sent to interview him for a daily *Times* story. As a *Times* music critic, I knew something about the Vienna opera and its administrative travails. I enjoyed doing the piece. Around the same time, a colleague on the music staff complained bitterly of being assigned to interview a singer in the news for whom he had no special regard. Harold, as chief critic, had avoided all such assignments as a matter of principle. The inconsistency of this situation admitted two alternatives – to muddle through, or to create a new species of “arts reporter” to handle “arts news.” The paper has since pursued this second option. I have heard a *Times* culture editor declare: No more “free rides” for artists and arts organizations. They are to be treated with the same skepticism and scrutiny as City Hall or the White House. And I notice other major papers – the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* – also hiring arts reporters distinct from critics and reviewers.

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Let us consider, for a moment, a “hot” music news story of recent vintage. In early 2003, the New Jersey Symphony dramatically purchased 30 rare violins, violas, and cellos for \$18 million from Herbert J. Axelrod, a pet-care magnate well-known for his passion for old fiddles. No American orchestra had ever done anything like this for its players. Then Axelrod was indicted for tax fraud. Though the fraud charge was unrelated to the New Jersey Symphony instruments, questions were instantly raised about their actual worth, which Axelrod had put at \$49 million. The appraisal of rare violins can be a subjective and conniving enterprise. Appraisers for the orchestra had reportedly assessed the collection at \$15.3 million to \$26.4 million. Meanwhile, Axelrod fled to Cuba, then Germany, where he was arrested. In 2005, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison. An internal New Jersey Symphony investigation disclosed that board members had not been informed of the lowest appraisal. Adding spice to the story were various statements to the press and refusals to comment hinting at internal dissension on the orchestra's board, and between the board and the staff.

All this was copiously reported in the *Times*. Having worked as a consultant for the New Jersey Symphony since 1999, I was not a neutral observer. I fear that the spotlight cast on the Axelrod affair has damaged the orchestra's reputation and overshadowed less-publicized accomplishments. More recently, another arts story embarrassed another orchestra: when the Baltimore Symphony announced that Marin Alsop would become music director, it was discovered that most members of the orchestra felt she had been chosen precipitously and without sufficient input from the players.

Whatever the merits of the reportage of these two widely rehearsed incidents, they both risk a loss of perspective. This is, to be sure, a difficult time for American orchestras, and the reasons should be of concern to newspapers and music-lovers alike. But they are less visible – less easily or dramatically converted into “news” -- than indicted musical philanthropists (of which there have been more than one) or disgruntled musicians (of which

there are plenty). In the business, a much discussed conundrum is the “three-legged stool.” Historically, American orchestras are administered with no clear hierarchy of authority. Rather, the music director, the board chairman, and the CEO are more or less co-equal. More recently, the players in many orchestras have been newly empowered: a shaky fourth leg that may or may not help. Even more troubling is the surfeit of “product.” Most American orchestras give far too many concerts – more than they can effectively market, more than they can readily pay for. Inadequately staffed and funded, administratively tangled, they lack the time and resources to plot artistic policy – or to manage a complicated rare-instrument transaction, or a time-consuming music director search.

I was enlisted to discuss the Baltimore appointment on a Washington, D. C., radio station. It was understood, beforehand, that I had no informed specific knowledge, but could talk about larger realities complicating the lives of orchestras. On the air, however, I was pressed for an opinion on Marin Alsop. When I declined, my interlocutor assumed I was being coy. It proved impossible to comfortably articulate the kinds of issues that symphony professionals talk about.

As it happens, the concert surfeit has a fascinating and paradoxical history. As in American foreign policy, good intentions sometimes lead to bad results. In my recent history of classical music in America, I write:

In 1966 the Ford Foundation initiated an \$80.2 million infusion for orchestras. The orchestras, in turn, had to raise twice that amount in matching funds. In combination with pressure from [musicians], the new money steeply increased the number of concerts. In 1960, full-time, twelve-month employment was unknown. By 1970-71, six orchestras had agreed to 52-week contracts, and another five had contracts of 45 weeks or more. This new frequency of performance was not audience-driven. It may be safely assumed that neither Beethoven nor Brahms, in music-obsessed Vienna, remotely envisioned a diet of three and four symphonic performance per orchestra per week – or up to 171 (the New York Philharmonic in 2000-2001) . . .

Many who played in American orchestras now attained a respectable living wage for the first time. Whether they knew or admitted it, the victory was Pyrrhic. Scrambling to manufacture new “services” promised by a new agreement, orchestras created new concerts that could not adequately be planned, prepared, sold, or assimilated. Many were underrehearsed summer programs, children’s programs, or pops programs, or exhausting “run-outs” to high school auditoriums. . . .

Between 1960 and 2000, the New York Philharmonic’s budget grew from \$2 million to \$34 million . . . In combination with precipitously rising costs, excess concerts dictated a new orchestral function: marketing. The intensified audience search, itself expensive, mandated . . . a dense scaffold of merchandising activity behind which many an orchestra plotted to standardize its product . . .

Not so long ago, virtually all American orchestral musicians, even New York Philharmonic players, needed additional employment to make ends meet. And they were truly under-paid. But there is no inherent reason an orchestra should be expected to furnish a “living wage.” Of course, turning back is tough. Resourceful orchestras are seeking ingenious ways to reduce the number of “services” guaranteed to the players. Or they’re exploring a

strategy of “service exchange” that would reduce concert work in favor of school visits and the like. Musicians’ unions are naturally resistant. Meanwhile – as with the New Jersey and Baltimore Symphonies – attendance is spiraling downward: the over-supply of product increases. In a Darwinian crunch, orchestras rush to obtain rare violins, or a popular conductor, that other orchestras may want.

I would like to see newspapers like the *Times* tackle this complicated story. But I suspect that arts reporters, crafting “balanced” accounts from the outside, may not be the ideal conduit. Could we not borrow a page from the Sunday *Times* of yesteryear, when George Gershwin, responding to bemused reviews of *Porgy and Bess*, wrote 1,500 words in explanation and defense of his “folk opera”? Or when Harold Clurman, in 1931, used the Sunday *Times* as a pulpit to promulgate the Group Theatre’s aims and needs? Could not the *Times* orchestrate a counterpoint of insider views? There are still many readers who care about the future of our orchestras. Not so incidentally, the *Times* would be also be fostering dialogue and understanding within the fractured symphonic community.

For that matter, I would love to read John Adams on music in the Sunday *Times*, or Mark Morris writing on dance, or Martin Scorsese on film. True, these essays might prove self-serving. Certainly, they would be subjective. But arts coverage in the press, even arts “news,” is riddled with subjective calls: how to frame a story, whom to phone, what comments to include or omit. Why not an Arts Op-Ed page: a forum of opinion from a range of distinguished practitioners?

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Clurman’s *The Fervent Years* is an account fired by urgency – by the fervor of the thirties, its bouts of political turmoil and pangs of social conscience. Today we again live in urgent times for the arts. Our postmodern cultural life is in flux; the old hierarchies of “high” and “low” have crumbled. For American classical music, flux dictates new questions about the format of a concert, or the purposes of an orchestra, or the boundaries of the repertoire. What is “classical music” today? Can we even employ this tarnished term with any confidence or ease in seeking a place for the onetime “high arts” amid MTV, soundbites, and the web?

In Europe, governments have traditionally played a key role in shaping the course of culture. In the United States, the course of classical music has been shaped by individuals of vision or – in the absence of such individuals – by the vicissitudes of the marketplace. Our early musical visionaries were wonderfully numerous. Anton Seidl, whom I previously mentioned in conjunction with Dvorak, was one: a missionary and prophet for Beethoven and Wagner, and for the American cause. Theodore Thomas, with his itinerant Thomas Orchestra, brought world-class musical epiphanies where no orchestra had gone before. Henry Higginson, who invented, owned, and operated the Boston Symphony, was a colossal force for change. In a later period, after World War I, fewer American classical musicians pushed for new frontiers: Leopold Stokowski, in Philadelphia, and Serge Koussevitzky, in Boston, were exceptional examples. But for the last half century, such individuals have been few and far between. To chart our way in muddled times we don’t need more marketing gurus and fund-raising geniuses – their place in the arts, as in politics, has grown grossly inflated -- but a new generation of tastemakers. We need fresh ventures – the kind that, like

Clurman's Group Theatre, are inherently precarious. More than cultural watchdogs of the press, on the look-out for malfeasance and incompetence, we need activist critics like Henry Krehbiel, eager to ally with enlightened practitioners.

Bob Freeman, Dean of the School of the Arts at the University of Texas at Austin and for many years Director of the Eastman School of Music, uses the metaphor of "islands" to describe the fragmentation of American classical music today. Insofar as I continue to write as a music critic, I am, so far as I know, the only critic who annually attends the conferences of both the American Symphony Orchestra League and the Society for American Music (the latter comprising historians of American music). The critics and the music historians do not know one another; they occupy different islands. The critics have at best, I would say, an arm's length relationship with administrators and managers on the orchestral island.

The considerations and priorities I am proposing carry implications for training as well as for policy. Ideally, arts critics should – like Clurman – have some personal experience both with the world of performance and of arts administration. It seems to me that, for that matter, they should know as much as possible, rather than seek to ward off prejudicial knowledge. All knowledge is prejudicial.

Briefly, a final topic. Outside New York City and other urban centers, the role of the arts critic and arts writer is changing fast. Small and mid-sized papers are replacing critics of music, theater, or dance with generalists, or with arts reporters who are not permitted to write reviews. A second observation: judging from my participation in the NEA's music critic institutes, the vast majority of our present-day arts journalists, critics and reporters alike, do not even aspire to a personal style. Rather, they gravitate toward what Carla Carlton, Arts and Entertainment Editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, calls a "faux style" -- short sentences, short paragraphs, simple ideas -- innocent of any aesthetic dimension. The sources of the faux style, I am told by its practitioners, are three: their teachers at Journalism School, their editors, and their own propensities. The faux style is conditioned by a newspaper etiquette overstressing "objectivity." Arts writers should be stylists – it's part of their equipment. I appreciate that newspapers of diminishing circulation fear that ambitious criticism alienates readers. But writing that is boring is even more alienating.

My remarks about arts journalism this evening have focused disproportionately on music journalism, because that is what I know. I have focused disproportionately on the *New York Times*, because that is the paper I know best; it is also the American daily that matters most, and that most cares about the arts. With the disappearance of its many competitors – in particular, of the *Herald-Tribune*, which did things differently – the *Times* today carries an unreasonable arts burden through no fault of its own. And I do not wish to imply that the *Times* arts critics and writers are necessarily insensitive to the concerns I have expressed: Tony Tommasini, the current chief music critic, is an informed advocate who regularly takes sides on issues that matter.

The disengagement rules I have scrutinized have changed before and can change again. The challenge is to strike a balance between ideals of fairness and the aspiration to lead opinion and taste. One consequence of disengagement is that it can breed suspicion and mistrust. To the extent that it seems aloof, the *Times* can seem forbidding. In fact, I feel I am nearly violating a taboo in proposing – as I am – a constructive public dialogue on how the *Times* and other American dailies can best deal with the arts. "No group can exist alone,"

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Harold Clurman wrote. The life of culture links many groups, he said, including the audience and the press. Each potentially strengthens the others. I believe that.

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