

[On why I quit the *New York Times*]

REFLECTIONS ON THE *TIMES*

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By Joseph Horowitz

-- I --

Near the end of my four and a half years as a *New York Times* music critic, I was scheduled to review a flamenco guitar recital. I protested that I knew nothing about flamenco guitar. That doesn't matter, advised a colleague: "We're all generalists here"; I should simply report my "impressions."

A personal rumination of some length – what it felt like to attend my first flamenco guitar recital – might have qualified as a conscionable (and probably useless) journalistic exercise. But I was allotted "six inches" – fewer than 300 words. A review this short had to be pithy, not ruminative; the critic had to know more, not less.

Worse: in those days – 1976 to 1980 – *Times*' critics were not permitted to write in the first person. We pontificated from on high, or resorted to constructions like "this listener" or "this writer." So personal rumination was doubly out of the question,

A mildly annoyed editor permitted me to skip the flamenco guitar recital. I went home pondering alternative sources of income.

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Rummaging through my old *New York Times* reviews and assignment sheets I find that in 1978 the paper had five fulltime classical music critics and one stringer. (Today, there are three classical music critics and one stringer.) As many as 37 classical music reviews ran per week. (Today, there are usually fewer than 15). As the stringer, I had no designated off-days and frequently wound up covering more concerts than anyone else – up to seven a week, and sometimes as many as three on a single Saturday or Sunday.

Typically, I was assigned debut recitals or concerts by lesser-known artists in search of becoming better-known. These reviews (unlike any in today's *Times*) were short and technical – more for musicians and music-businessmen than for the newspaper-reading public. A stuffy specimen, from October 27, 1980:

Even in an era of high digital achievement among pianists, it is rare to encounter a player who can negotiate the coda to Chopin's F minor Ballade with as much clarity, power and velocity as Leon Bates mustered Saturday afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum. Rarer still is the artist who can carry off as wise an interpretive touch as Mr. Bates applied at the close of the piece: rather than opting for sustained

or increased ferocity, he slightly muted the culminating chords in order to add breadth to the tragedy.

In fact, Mr. Bates's concert was impressive from start to finish. The facility and easy power of his fingerwork were quickly established as foregone conclusions. At the same time, he is an elegant player, with a keen ear for color, and a flair for poetry as persuasive as his bursts of fiery extroversion.

In Ravel's "Miroirs," which tests concentration as well as agility and tonal resources, Mr. Bates effortlessly sustained the slow-motion imagery of "Une Barque sur l'Océan." In four of Rachmaninoff's Etudes-Tableaux (Op. 39), the explosions were superbly timed and ignited. Two Schubert impromptus were gently sculpted and provocatively detailed.

The program also included Edward MacDowell's "Keltic" Sonata, which Lawrence Gilman once found worthy of comparison to Beethoven. Today, its heroic easily sound clattery and cliché-ridden, but not in performances as imaginatively shaded and incisively organized as Mr. Bates's.

In one of the Schubert impromptus – Op. 90, No. 4 – Mr. Bates misaccented some of the right-hand figurations. In Mendelssohn's "Rondo Capriccioso," an encore, he abused his technique, burying the poetry under a fusillade of octaves. Otherwise, one could only submit. At the age of 30, Mr. Bates, who was appearing in New York for the fifth time, would be misleadingly labeled a pianist of unusual promise. He has arrived.

More commonly, the news was bad, as on the following December 4:

Of the Russian émigré musicians who have flocked to New York in recent years, more than a few represent a Romantic performance tradition that sanctions extravagant interpretive liberties. Sometimes, the apparent effect of such lineage is to perpetuate habits of inspired subjectivity especially welcome in the West, where they are little cultivated. Sometimes, the outcome seems merely provincial. Xxx Xxxxx's pianism Monday night at Carnegie Hall, regrettably, mainly fell in the latter category. . . .

Though I reviewed no flamenco recitals, my competence (such as it was) varied widely according to the instrument and repertoire at hand. One night – when not reviewing – I saw the movie "Hud" on TV. Melvyn Douglas is a cattle-rancher. Paul Newman is Hud, his headstrong son. A federal inspector – a small, dour man – announces that all the ranch's cows are infected with hoof and mouth disease and must be destroyed. Hud protests. "Don't blame the inspector," Melvyn Douglas says. "He's not a bad man. He just has a bad job." That's me, I thought.

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Reviewing concerts for the *Times* grew routinized. The repertoire was numbingly redundant. Carnegie Recital Hall (today's Weill Recital Hall), where most debuts took place, was a dungeon for recitalists, so dry and loud a full success was nearly impossible. As I have

subsequently discovered, certain artists advanced professionally thanks to my reviews. More often, I inflicted damaged feelings on young artists whose dreams of advancement were naïve, not least because there were (and are) too many classical musicians and too few jobs and performing opportunities.

In fact, I discovered that I did not believe in most of the concerts the *Times* reviewed – the same pieces again and again in performances that themselves became homogenized. In 1979, I surveyed the piano recital programs in five New York halls and discovered that the core repertoire spanned barely 50 years: “The endpoints are mid-Beethoven – the “Waldstein” and “Appassionata” sonatas, both written in 1804 – and mid-Liszt – the B-minor Sonata, *Funerailles*, and Mephisto Waltz No. 1, all written by 1860.” I explored this discovery in a two-part polemic, “The Trouble with Piano Recitals,” for *Keynote Magazine* – a publication (long defunct) which welcomed first-person ruminations. I wrote:

No one is denying that the warhorses furnish opportunities for brave rhetoric and ingenious technical stunts. Generations of pianists have seized these opportunities and made them matter. Today, however, the opportunities are fewer and less frequently seized. There are two reasons.

Reason number one is that . . . the warhorses have been preposterously over-exposed, and their recklessness and ardor neutralized . . .

Reason number two is that fewer pianists than ever before know how to handle the warhorses properly. . . The Romantic performance tradition is dying or dead.

In sum . . . most piano recitals are superfluous affairs. And the older and more familiar the warhorses become, the odder will become the ritual of ceaselessly parading them in public performance.

My article was read with interest by one of my *Times* colleagues. “But why didn’t you write it for us?” he wanted to know. I was incredulous. Was the *Times* the place to declare the obsolescence of the concerts it assiduously reviewed (and which, by 1979, were not reviewed elsewhere)?

Obviously, the weight of influence wielded by the *Times* weighted what could be written. Or, rather, the critic had a choice. He (there were no shes) could – however clumsily, in the third person – disclose his unmediated opinions and reactions, and ignore their impact on readers and artists. Or he could write in consideration of such impact, and modify his opinions and reactions accordingly.

I modified my opinions and reactions accordingly. I suppressed my disapproval of most concerts. Even reviewing concerts of which I most disapproved, I would typically drop a quotable line or sentence into the mix.

Xxxx xxxx, who appeared in recital Saturday night at the 92nd Street Y, is a flutist with many virtues. Her playing is agile, intelligent and alert. Her presence is poised and unpretentious. On this occasion, however, Miss xxxx’s tone was never truly under control, and the resulting impurities and inconsistencies hindered her ability to mold and inflect the notes.

Or:

A young yet seasoned artist who began her career as a teen-ager, Miss xxxxx opened the evening boldly, with Schubert's great C minor Sonata. This was a fastidiously fingered yet precariously plastic performance, full of writhing rubatos, portentous hesitations and pronounced tempo changes.

One could appreciate Miss xxxxx's effusive response to the sonata's wealth of drama and melody, but the cost was considerable. . . .

Given her fervor, instinctive musicality, sophisticated ear and superbly trained fingers, Miss xxxxxx is a player with many gifts. But at present, she apparently needs a riper interpretive framework in which to apply them.

Though not every *Times* critic is similarly tortured, such tortuous excursions remain apparent in *Times* reviews. When Ben Brantley reviews an expensive revival of the *The Music Man* that is undone by a central casting error, he takes pains to praise everything else. If he were writing for another publication, he could allow himself the bad review the show deserved. In fact, as a matter of responsibility, *Times* critics have to embrace mainstream taste. The chief *Times* drama critic who does not appreciate conventional Broadway fare does not long remain the chief *Times* drama critic. (I am thinking of the short tenures of Stanley Kauffmann and Richard Eder.) Concomitantly, there is an inherent tendency to dismiss or devalue what is experimental or idiosyncratic.

In music, the *Times*' purview has always showcased the city's central institutions of concert and opera. When there was more than one New York newspaper that influentially covered the arts, it was Olin Downes at the *Times* who relished the Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera, and Virgil Thomson of the *Tribune* who chose to ignore or denigrate both in favor of alternative venues and dissident agendas.

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Every summer, I would collect my reviews and attempt to re-read them, hoping for the best. Come September, I was again ensconced in the newsroom. It had the comforting feel of a bunker. Outside, at Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center, I was exposed to a world I did not know. *Times* critics, then as now, were discouraged from compromising their "objectivity" through too close acquaintance with the artists and institutions they wrote about.

These strictures, to be sure, were sometimes fuzzy and erratic. Writing profiles for the Sunday Arts & Leisure section was an approved opportunity to interlope. In 1978, I profiled the pianist Claudio Arrau on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday. The piece as I delivered it contained such reverent reflections as:

His hazel green eyes are windows to his moods. When he is pensive, they cloud and look away. When an enormous German Shepherd named Rex, nearly 15 years old, lumbers over to greet a visitor, they harden with annoyance. "Go away, dear," he tells the dog. "Go to your mistress." The creature does not budge. Arrau's

eyes bulge to circles, his mouth contracts with impatience. He whips around towards the back of the house. “Ruth! Ruth! Call Rexie. He is bothering us!”

Arrau’s full attention registers with stark force. His speech is slow, grave, and punctuated by moments of silence. “My playing is more intense now,” he says. “The expression is more concentrated than before.”

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Arrau guards the purity of his environment. He shuns parties and crowds, and distrusts machines. . . . He doesn’t drive, and he cannot operate a phonograph . . .

“There has been such a flood of mediocrity in the field of interpretation in the last 20 or 30 years, since maybe the deaths of Schabel and Fischer, of the great musicians,” he says, and winces. “Now we have pianists by the dozen. There is such a search for quick success. I think the current practice of young pianists playing late Beethoven is a little absurd.”

I fought with the editor of the section, who insisted that I write “Mr. Arrau.” I protested that so venerable and eminent an artist was not a “Mr.” The *Times* Stylebook of course prevailed.

But this was my break-out moment. I began a book about Arrau and – a year later -- quit the *Times*. Eventually, I crossed over into arts administration. As Executive Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra (reviewed by the *Times*), I was not allowed to write for the *Times*. Since leaving the Brooklyn Philharmonic in 1997, I have resumed writing for Arts & Leisure.

The *Times* is a changed place. Arts writers and critics can now say “I.” No longer are there stacks of Debuts in Review. John Rockwell, as Arts & Leisure editor, has abolished the distinction between the “Classical Music” and “Popular Music” pages. I can even call Claudio Arrau “Arrau” – but that’s because he is dead.

-- II --

After *Conversations with Arrau* (1982) I wrote a more ambitious book: *Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music* (1987). This was an act of therapy, an exorcism: smitten by the Toscanini cult, I had as a teenager turned into a nerd. I needed to understand why – and why classical music generally had in the late twentieth century become so hermetic. My books continue to travel backward in time. *Wagner Nights: An American History* (1994) finds solace and inspiration in the 1890s, when classical music in New York was at its peak: progressive and purposeful. Standards and taste were clearly delineated. Two tasks predominated: to propagate and absorb Wagner’s “Music of the Future”; to generate an American canon of symphonies and opera, songs and sonatas suitable to an “American school” of composition and performance. Both tasks were effectively pursued by the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, by the National Conservatory of Music, by the conductor Anton Seidl, by the composer Antonin Dvorak on leave from Bohemia. The musicians, the institutions of performance, the

audiences benefited from a grand consensus regarding what music mattered and why. The keynote was meliorism.

And the critics mattered. Henry Krehbiel of the *Tribune*, a prodigious autodidact, was the Matthew Arnold, arbiter of uplift. William J. Henderson of the *Times*, a leaner, less grandiloquent stylist, humanized Krehbiel's agenda. His ringing endorsement of Dvorak's advocacy of plantation song as a music for all Americans is among the most prescient and empathetic achievements in the history of American musical journalism.

Krehbiel, Henderson, and their colleagues in the press had acres of space: reviews of 2,000 words and more were commonplace. And they were active participants in the cultural community they observed. Henderson's home was a regular gathering place for leading singers and pianists, composers and conductors. Krehbiel, a tireless student of folk and ethnic music, was Dvorak's de facto artistic advisor on the *New World* Symphony. Krehbiel's closest friends included Anton Seidl. Beginning in 1896, Krehbiel was the Philharmonic's program annotator (and Seidl was the conductor).

After 1900, times were less halcyon. Krehbiel and the Philharmonic's new conductor, Gustav Mahler, quarrelled over a program note for Mahler's First Symphony and became enemies. After World War I, Krehbiel and Henderson – and their ideals of ennobling art – were estranged from the new modernism. The cultural consensus that had buoyed their efforts broke down.

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Krehbiel died in 1923, Henderson in 1937. The next generation of New York music critics differed from the armchair aesthetes of the late Gilded Age, with their Old World educations and fine-honed preferences. Olin Downes, the *Times*' senior music critic from 1924 to 1955, was no Matthew Arnold. A populist, he advised audience members, in a 1941 lecture, to “Be Your Own Music Critic.” He enthusiastically followed popular taste.

The “best art,” Henderson had opined, “will not command a large public.” James Gibbons Huneker, of the Old Guard, had winced at the “glaring badge of popularity”; he complained, in 1918, that newspapers had “lost their personal flavor” and called “ridiculous” any critic “setting up an effigy of himself and boasting of his ‘objectivity.’” But Downes appealed to “facts.” Sanitizing objectivity was his epistemological beacon; versus the sensationalism of the Pulitzer and Hearst dailies, it was the *Times*' imprimatur of respectability.

Did Downes (a popular lecturer) actually maintain an objective distance from New York's world of artists and orchestras? I have no idea. But he grew dangerously out of touch with contemporary trends. He likened post-*Sacre* Stravinsky to “dead or dying European musical pottage” and Mahler and Schoenberg to “elaborate and decaying” Old World culture. He revered Sibelius, whose earnestness reminded him of Beethoven, and whose optimism reminded him of America. He quarreled in print with Schoenberg. With Sibelius, he pursued an idolatrous private correspondence.

When in 1893 the New York Philharmonic performed Dvorak's *New World* Symphony at Carnegie Hall, New York's critics rushed to Dvorak's box to congratulate him. Had Wagner visited New York, they would have organized dinner parties in his honor. In the late nineteenth century, Wagner's music dramas and Dvorak's cultural nationalism were

vanguard tastes. The critics' third-person omniscience was supported by their confident interpretation of music's trajectory and its necessary future. In Olin Downes, the third-person style grew awkwardly querulous (try having an argument in the third person). By the 1970s, when I was made to adopt it, the third person was a terminally embattled posture of objectivity. There was no cultural consensus to gird it. The mainstream, or what was left of it, was too diffuse.

Today, in an even more variegated and confused cultural environment, first-person opinion is inescapable even at the *Times*. Logically, this concession allows or even dictates a more engaged critical presence. Granted, the risks are real (witness Krehbiel's poisonous feud with Mahler). The risks of "objectivity" may be greater.

The arts are in flux. So should be arts criticism.