

Thoughts on Evaluating Unfamiliar Music by Walter Simmons

I have been a musicologist and critic for almost 50 years now, during which most of my activity has involved the description, assessment, and—in some cases—advocacy of music composed since 1915. Since there really aren't generally accepted criteria for such evaluations, most critics—not to mention armchair musicologists—offer their reactions and judgments on an intuitive, self-determined basis. Ultimately this becomes a discussion of “taste,” which is often held to be a subjective matter. Some people argue that since taste is basically subjective, the postulation of criteria for making judgments is essentially a misguided and futile attempt to make what is primarily an individual matter appear to be objective, i.e. to give one's personal reactions the abstract generalizability of “facts.”

Before I became a musicologist and critic I was an insatiable reader of music criticism, spending hours in libraries, ploughing through years of journals and magazines, trying to derive the principles that shaped the reactions of dozens and dozens of commentators. This voracious devouring and analyzing of music reviews, one of the primary activities of my teen years, led me to the principles that formed the foundation of my own musical judgments. While I agree that taste is, ultimately, largely subjective, I do believe that it is possible to adduce certain criteria that provide some internal consistency to one's judgments. In this way, a critic can become a reliable guide for those whose own listening experiences tend to align with that critic's perspective, as well as for those whose don't. One learns how to “read” a critic. But what I have observed over the course of decades are judgments—made by both professionals and amateurs—that are essentially invalid because they lack internal consistency or are predicated on false premises. Many of these are addressed in the Introductions to my two books: *Voices in the Wilderness* and *Voices of Stone and Steel*. Since my own taste tends to favor the 20th-century composers who sought continuity with the music that preceded them, these introductions challenge many of the precepts of Modernism that were at one time used to disqualify music that rejected those precepts from consideration as serious works of art. This essay attempts to elaborate and broaden the points made in those chapters so as to address a wider range of observations and fallacies that are rarely subject to close examination.

I start from the position that while taste may be largely subjective, there is a finite number of “tastes” that, while differing from one another, are capable of maintaining a degree of internal consistency. The more reliable and valid musical commentaries either state their criteria or make their points in such a way that the principles on which their judgments rest are clear to the reader. I will attempt to set forth some of the premises on which my own taste is predicated. I postulate three levels of musical apprehension: a) one's reaction to the musical materials (e.g. harmonic language) with which the composer chooses to work; b) one's reaction to the expressive content or meaning that is inherent in the work, which may or may not be intended by the composer; c) one's assessment of the proficiency of the composer's technique in using his/her chosen materials to communicate the expressive content effectively. In this schema, a) is largely subjective; b) is partly subjective and partly objective; and c) is largely objective. Even this simple schema is fraught with assumptions, of which perhaps the most controversial are that music is capable of “expressing” something, and that there is such a thing as musical “content.” There is a school of thought that rejects these assumptions while others fully embrace them. There may be value to both positions, and this is what I mean by the statement that there is more than one valid, internally consistent “taste.” My own belief is that music does express particular perspectives on many aspects of human existence and that these perspectives are what is meant by “content.” While the exact nature of these “perspectives” may be unclear and difficult to verbalize, and listeners may disagree as to just what the “content” is in a given work, these complexities

do not negate the assertion that music “expresses” something, and that something is its “content.” It is the matter of “content” that is at issue when a composition is said to have “nothing to say” or is described as profound, trivial, or any other point on that spectrum.

For example, my own personal preference is for music that draws upon a full spectrum from tonality to atonality and from harmonic consonance to dissonance as means of achieving a broad expressive range. I typically don’t enjoy music that is predictably and uniformly tonal, nor do I prefer music that is consistently and doctrinally atonal, nor do I prefer a language that is largely consonant harmonically, or consistently dissonant. I also prefer music that strives for expressive consistency and structural economy; i.e. the music is “about” something (the “content”), and the progression of the composition contributes to or comments on that “something” throughout, although the surface of the music may exhibit sufficient variety in its specifics to avoid monotony. To use a literary analogy, it stays on the point, without extraneous digressions. I especially enjoy music in which rhythmic asymmetries propel the music forward as contrapuntal development elaborates the argument. I also appreciate expressive intensity, not as a *sine qua non*, but as a preference. My musical assessments are intuitively derived from these values. Other critics may have other legitimate values, to which they are entitled, and their musical judgments should reflect these values.

The role of the music critic itself is another issue about which there may be more than one valid position. The role that I have attempted to fill as a critic is one who is deeply familiar with the full range of compositions that fall within the area of the repertoire in which I profess to make judgments of relative merit. Some critics may see themselves more as generalists, while others are more concerned with the quality of performances of a repertoire that is sufficiently established that relative judgments of quality are generally taken for granted, while still others are more focused on the different approaches to interpreting music from eras of the relatively distant past. Within the area of the repertoire that forms my primary interest I attempt to identify meritorious works that are outside the familiarity of most music lovers—professional and amateur—and bring them to the attention of interested listeners by describing them in such a way that the reader can gain a sense of the work’s personal appeal. In doing so, I imagine my readers as those with at least a basic familiarity with what is generally identified as “Western classical music,” and with an interest in enriching their listening experience through new musical discoveries that will appeal according to the criteria that I have embraced. I address listeners who expect to be moved, inspired, stimulated, or otherwise touched personally by a musical work without the need to spend hours of repeated listening in order to derive any meaningful feelings along those lines, even though deriving the full import of such a work is not likely from one hearing. But a first hearing must offer something rewarding to listeners; otherwise, why would they care to delve into it more deeply? Such listeners seek both cultural recreation and spiritual enrichment, as opposed to, at one extreme, intellectual exercises requiring extensive study, or, at the opposite extreme, shallow entertainment that is essentially trivial rather than enriching and deeply moving.

While many composers profess to have little respect for music criticism, and some even refuse to read criticism of their work, composers can learn a great deal about how their music is perceived by others, if they can suppress their defensive vanity. A range of reactions from a number of critics—and from listeners as well—can be even more useful. They may prompt composers to ask themselves just what they are trying to accomplish through their music, as well as who comprises their intended audience, and do they appear to be reaching that audience. Multiple critiques that make much the same points are especially valuable. Again, many critics and composers do not address the audience I identified as my target: Some compose only to please themselves (so they say), others compose as a means of

competing with or impressing colleagues, while still others are aiming for a commercial success, which takes precedence over the notion of an aesthetic success.

Another question that isn't usually addressed is how familiar must one be with the totality of a composer's output in order to make judgments about a particular work? There are a number of factors that affect the answer. For example, with lesser-known composers, few works may be available to hear, so that comprehensive familiarity may be impossible or especially difficult. Nevertheless, I believe that the definitiveness of a critic's judgment should be seen as directly proportional to the comprehensiveness of the critic's familiarity with the composer's output. A related situation that arises is the absence of a "level playing field." For example, negative criticism is much easier to write or state than positive criticism. The reason is this: A new or unfamiliar work is, in a sense, asserting itself as a contender for the "canon." As such, rejecting such a work is the default position. Any number of reasons may be adduced to justify rejecting it from entry into the "canon." But arguing on behalf of such a work requires the critic to take a certain risk in order to justify such acceptance. Rejecting such an advocacy stance is easy because the advocate can be portrayed as "falling for" something that those who seek to appear more sophisticated may regard with condescension. On the other hand, the negative position requires only that the nay-sayer remain unconvinced. For these reasons, when unfamiliar works are given public exposure, negative reactions are encountered more frequently than positive ones, with two exceptions: a) when financial interests contaminate the assessment process; b) when the composer or the work has already received significant praise from influential quarters.

There is another, less obvious reason that unfamiliar works are not really on a "level playing field" with those that are often heard: Composers who live to see their music performed with some regularity have the benefit of learning how effectively their music comes across to listeners. For example, they can hear for themselves whether their orchestration achieved the intended impact—only determinable by hearing an adequate rendition. They can gain a sense from the audience's reactions whether the intended "content" has been perceived and appreciated. On the other hand, composers who have not attained wide visibility through frequent performances may continue composing for decades without having heard how effective their orchestration is, or whether their "content" is perceived. Furthermore, composers who have come to expect their works to be performed are aware that each new work will be heard in light of their previous output, with the expectation that there is a degree of diversity and growth from one to the next. On the other hand, a lesser-known composer who has written, say, a dozen orchestral works, may have heard only a few of them in performance, maybe once or twice before small audiences. That composer, perhaps responding to a commission, may feel that some worthy material in previously unheard works may be worth re-using in a new work that has a greater likelihood of being heard. In this way, less widely heard composers may display a certain redundancy because they have come to expect that little of their music will achieve enough familiarity for anyone to notice or care.

There is an important, but rarely noted, difference between a negative critique and an insulting critique. A negative critique is one that assesses a work according to the kinds of principles noted above, clearly specified, and finds it wanting. An insulting critique uses ridicule, demeans the integrity of the composer, or uses similes that relate the work to some inferior "class" of music (e.g. pop music, movie music, etc.). There is always a great temptation to write an insulting review, as the critic sees an opportunity to make him/herself seem superior to the composer and perhaps has thought of a clever way of doing so. But it is a rhetorical manipulation and there is no excuse for it.

“Movie music,” in particular, is a simile to which critics often resort in order to assert the sort of superiority just described. How often recent music of dramatic character is disparaged as sounding like movie music! But a closer look reveals that to be a largely meaningless comparison. First of all, what is meant by the generic phrase “movie music” is usually the music composed for films between the 1940s and the later years of the 20th century. But even with this qualification, movie music is not one uniform style or “sound.” These filmscores were composed by individuals like Miklós Rózsa, Franz Waxman, Bernard Herrmann, and John Williams, along with myriad lesser luminaries. Most received orthodox musical training and developed styles of their own. Some, like Erich Korngold, already had considerable international reputations before they began composing for film. Their music tended to be rooted in the styles of the late 19th and early 20th century, though often intensified by increased levels of harmonic dissonance consistent with more recent stylistic evolution. However, in composing for films these composers were producing a subordinate element in a work of another art form, for the purpose of enhancing that work. As such a filmscore was not created as an autonomous work of art, with its own integral structure. For this reason, heard apart from the film it accompanies, the score is rarely satisfying; without its own abstract logic, without intrinsically motivated thematic development, it is an incomplete artistic experience. This is the chief aesthetic defect of filmscores—not the musical languages they embrace; there can be nothing “wrong” with a musical language. Therefore, the observation that a particular composition “sounds like movie music” begs the question as to whether its musical vocabulary or its formal structure is being so characterized. The former—which, in my experience, is usually the case—is simply a superficial matter of overlapping melodic, harmonic, and instrumental usages that are not unique to music for films. The latter, however, refers to a formal deficiency and is a more serious and quite legitimate criticism, but is rarely the basis of the disparagement.

This leads to the related concepts of “originality” and “influence.” Originality, in discussions of classical music, is often adduced as one of the primary touchstones of artistic value. It is usually used to refer to works that appear to define their own criteria, and stake a claim to being wholly or largely “new,” by rejecting the aesthetic assumptions and processes of the music that preceded it. When one looks back over the course of music history, it is clear that some composers pursued unique visions of their own, which may have entailed the use of unusual sounds and materials, as well as new techniques and forms that may have seemed strange and unprecedented when first heard. Others preferred to work with familiar materials in already-established forms, while developing a distinctive “voice” of their own. Composers of both types can be found in the pantheon of “great composers.” Examples of the former are Liszt, Wagner, and Debussy, while examples of the latter are Bach, Mozart, and Brahms. But since the 1920s the notion of “originality” has come to loom as one of the primary compositional values—a virtue in itself, and one whose absence is taken axiomatically as a mark of inferiority. As universal as this attitude has become, there is surprisingly little theoretical justification for its elevation among the qualities by which music is evaluated. Music that seeks to be original has a particular challenge to face: comprehensibility, given the use of unfamiliar materials, techniques, forms, and—most importantly—aesthetic principles. But the composer unconcerned with originality has an equally difficult challenge: to provide a degree of individuality, expressive power, and technical expertise to justify working within a musical language that has already produced accepted masterpieces. Being “original,” in itself, is not difficult to achieve. In 1952, when John Cage composed his piano piece, *4’33*,” in which the pianist sits on the bench and plays nothing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the originality of his conception was not difficult to recognize. On the other hand, for a composer like Samuel Barber, a contemporary of Cage, to compose a tonal symphony that uses the same developmental techniques, harmonic language, and aesthetic principles that were used throughout the preceding century AND yet convey the sense of an individual and distinctive musical personality is quite difficult. The originality of

Cage's conception is obvious instantly; but the individuality of the Barber may take multiple hearings to become apparent to the listener. Yet the embrace of "originality" as an indication of artistic value remains unquestioned, and its validity inadequately articulated.

One of the obstacles to the acceptance of music that draws upon the aesthetic principles that preceded it is rooted in a concept from Gestalt psychology. A simple analogy is this: When one makes a new personal acquaintance, one's reaction is often the noting of a resemblance—either physical or social/interpersonal—with individuals one knows well. It may take several additional meetings before the individual features of the new acquaintance become apparent, while the resemblance to previous acquaintances slips into the background. The same phenomenon occurs with exposure to a new piece of music: The listener's first reaction typically involves the recognition of features familiar to that listener from the work of previous composers—if such are there to be found. If the music has clearly embraced a style with a rich past history, it will be similarities with previous examples from that history that are first noticed by listeners. Not until they develop familiarity with that work—and perhaps with others from the same composer—will its individual qualities emerge. When such a composer has eventually achieved that level of familiarity, the central features of that compositional personality will become dominant, while the resemblances to past composers recede into the background. One recalls the often-recounted response of Brahms to a critic who argued that his Symphony No. 1 seemed greatly influenced by Beethoven: "Any fool can hear that." It is also the reason we don't often find listeners complaining that Beethoven shows the influence of Haydn, or that Strauss sounds too much like Wagner.

The notion of "originality" has produced a number of related and equally misunderstood concepts. One of these is this matter of "influence." What is actually meant by the term "influence" when applied to music? When a listener notes a similarity between two pieces of music, the next question is often, Which came first? If piece A preceded piece B, then piece A is often said to have "influenced" piece B. But what does that mean? Does it mean that when piece B was written, its composer had piece A in mind, and tried to imitate it? Or does it refer to a process that is unconscious? Is it assumed by the fact that piece A preceded piece B that the composer of piece B even heard piece A? Then what actually constitutes influence? Influence can exist at many different levels of abstraction. For example, Tchaikovsky adored the music of Mozart, and readily admitted the impact of the latter on his music. But does one listen to a Tchaikovsky symphony and think, "Ah, sounds like Mozart"? Not very likely, because the influence was more the matter of a perceived spiritual affinity than of an audible resemblance. In my experience, composers acknowledge the influence of predecessors based largely on abstract formal matters. For example, the influence of Beethoven on Brahms is more a matter of the latter's adopting a similar notion of what a symphony should be expected to accomplish, as well as motivic and developmental procedures developed by the former, rather than by one's "sounding" like the other. But what I have observed is that when a listener points to "influence," what has frequently been perceived is something quite concrete: a turn of phrase, the pattern of a handful of notes that the listener identifies with a similar or identical pattern in the music of a preceding composer. Yet such momentary overlaps occur throughout the repertoire of music, whether or not the composer of one passage was familiar with the work of the other. But if by "influence" we mean that the creation of the later work was somehow dependent on the precedent set by the earlier one, then superficial and largely coincidental moments of overlap have no logical connection to what is meant by the term. This issue then begs the question, Is the apparent influence of one composer on the work of another a deficiency to be denied or avoided? Is Beethoven's stature diminished by the fact that he was clearly influenced by Haydn? Is Bach's stature diminished by the fact that he drew upon forms found in the works of Vivaldi? Few musicians would answer in the affirmative. Yet when an unfamiliar piece is introduced,

resemblances to previous music are usually the first points to be observed, and are then held to indicate some sort of deficiency, often with a “gotcha” implication.

The evaluation of new or unfamiliar music is not simply a matter of intuitive, “seat of the pants” observations. It requires a thorough familiarity with centuries of musical repertoire, an understanding of the aesthetic principles upon which historical styles were predicated, and a comprehensive knowledge of the area of the repertoire in which one claims special expertise. It also requires a philosophical foundation reflected in the criteria used to evaluate a musical work, along with stringent analysis of and justification for those criteria. And it requires ruthless honesty—with oneself as well as with one’s readers. During the 19th century in Germany, the music world was strongly divided between those who championed the works of Wagner, said to be “the music of the future,” and those who defended the more traditionally-styled music of Brahms. The esteemed critic Eduard Hanslick took a strong position against the works of Wagner. The fact that Wagner was eventually hailed as one of the greatest composers of all time (as, however, was Brahms) tarnished the reputation of Hanslick and subjected him to ridicule for many years after his death. Perhaps the most negative consequence of the Hanslick phenomenon is that critics became so timid lest they fall victim to similar retrospective derision that they have “bent over backwards” to find virtue in any innovative music that appeared to be attracting attention and praise, while denigrating music that seemed content to retain traditional techniques, forms, and principles. It is this craven, thoughtless—and, in many cases, dishonest—exalting of innovation at the expense of traditional values that led during the 20th century to the vaunting of composers and compositional approaches that have proven to be stillborn—aesthetic dead-ends—and, ultimately, led to the estrangement of music lovers from the creative fruits of their own time, and their retreat into the endless re-hashing of a repertoire that was once stimulating, but has become moribund from over-exposure.

The situation with regard to “originality” has softened somewhat since the mid-1980s. A number of composers who appear motivated more by giving voice to their individual perspectives than on appearing “original” have won major awards and commissions, and their works have been rewarded by auspicious performances and recordings. Nevertheless, much prestigious attention continues to be directed toward those who can be proclaimed as doing something “new.” And many reviews continue to indulge in the same kinds of unquestioned assumptions in making their judgments. Although composers and performers are often fond of dismissing comments in the press as inconsequential and irrelevant, this is wishful thinking. The audience for classical music tends to be educated and well-read. Their responses to unfamiliar music are strongly shaped by the opinions they read and the assumptions underlying them, lacking in theoretical rigor though they may be. I encourage listeners to read such opinions critically, challenge those predicated on questionable assumptions, and hold critics to a higher standard in making judgments.

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