

SINGAPORE SLING

In 2008, at the Chetham's Summer School, I was just about to go onstage to give an in-house evening recital when a man of Far-Eastern appearance approached me. He was carrying a collection of booklets from my own CDs and wanted me to autograph them – possibly fifteen in all.

He was an observer at the summer school, and, it turned out, had already sought the autographs of several of the concert-artists and teachers on the course; he chose to ask for mine within two minutes of going onstage. Under normal circumstances this situation would not arise, because audience members would not have access to the artist immediately before a concert at most venues. However, at the Whitely Concert Hall at Chetham's, the artist giving an impending concert enters the hall by the same door as the audience.

I asked him to come back at the end of the recital for the autographs, as I have found that once one person succeeds in getting an autograph many more tend to follow. Writing with a pen tends to hinder the suppleness of the fingers. I have no memory of how I put this request. Perhaps I was short and impatient or did not explain myself properly because the concert was just about to begin; the audience was a wonderfully attentive but frightening crowd, predominantly of pianists - both young participants on the course and experienced performers and teachers. Thus the concert was particularly nerve-wracking. Alternatively, perhaps he did not realise that I was just about to play, and thought I was just sitting around.

The man did not come back at the end, I forgot all about it, and life continued.

About two years later, I became aware of a website based in Singapore, written by one of the critics of the Straits Times. The author is a piano buff, who spends much of his spare time travelling the world attending concerts, festivals, competitions and summer courses devoted to the piano world, and blogging about them. He also writes program notes for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he practices as a physician in Singapore; how all that is concurrently possible I cannot imagine. From reading his website, he appears to be well-informed and intelligent, a good writer, and enormously enthusiastic - indeed obsessive - about the piano and pianists. This turned out to be the man who had approached me at Chetham's in 2008.

In amongst the highly enthusiastic pieces about numerous pianists, past and present, both famous and with developing careers, there was a reference to the incident at Chetham's: "*.... I spy a thoughtful Peter Donohoe sitting on his own, and requested that he autograph my small collection of CD booklets (of his recordings) I had brought all the way from Singapore. He blithely replied that he hadn't the time and continued to stare into space. I am rather*

disappointed. Only two other musicians had declined my solicitations – Sergiu Celibidache and Evgeny Svetlanov, who were both old and infirm at the time (and both died soon after that). So what's PD's excuse? Fatness and laziness?"

There is then a picture of me, with the epithet *"I ain't got no time for nobody"* in large letters over the photo, and underneath it says, *"The 'timeless' Peter Donohoe."*

Elsewhere in the website, in amongst a posting about autographs, he writes, *"Arch virtuosos like Arcadi Volodos and Peter Donohoe, who simply refuse to do autographs (a gesture of contempt for the very people who support their careers), probably suffer from some hidden inferiority complexes."* So Celibidache, Svetlanov and I are not the only ones, then.

One more reference to me goes *"Over dinner, Peter Donohoe appeared and declared, "I would like to play in Singapore sometime.""* [Again, I have no memory of this, but it is quite possible, as Singapore is one of my favourite places in the world. I have already played there three times, the first time in 1979, since when I have seen the most staggering changes to the great city/state, and would indeed love to revisit it sometime.]

It then says, in bold type, **"Only in your dreams, Pete! Or when I have the time."**

[I am not quite sure what the latter phrase means, but I think we can assume that it translates as 'Not if I have anything to do with it, you won't.' Whether or not he does have anything to do with it, I wouldn't know, but one of the chief critics on the city's main newspaper is bound to have some influence – one of the main thrusts of this post.]

I posted a comment on his blog apologising for the shortness with which I had apparently greeted his autograph request - I obviously had no intention to offend or dismiss anyone who was simply asking me to sign something. Indeed, it is something that happens often that a music lover collects several CDs and would like them all signing, and it always makes me feel very honoured. But there is a time and a place, and immediately before a concert is not one of them.

He did post a rather embarrassed response, 'forgiving me'. However, his original pillorying of my character remains on the site to this day.

There is also included in the series of posts, the following:

"WHO NEEDS MUSIC CRITICS?"

Arts criticism is one of the most misunderstood and "overrated" preoccupation in the field of artistic endeavour. Critics are often either way

off the mark or merely stating the obvious. So what is the true value of an arts critic, or a music critic for that matter?

Is there a "right" way of writing a review? This session hopes to explode some myths and place music criticism in the context as a positive force for furthering the cause of the arts.

Agree or disagree?

1. A critic is merely a glorified journalist.

2. Anyone can write a critique. The value of a critique is in the content and delivery of its message.

3. Most useful tools: a good command of the language, deep bank of background knowledge, sense of humour.

4. Always get the facts right. Conceal your own ignorance.

5. Comment on the performance and its qualities, rather than on the performer.

6. Open and close with an arresting sentence. The rest is easy. (Attributed to Bryce Morrison)

7. Develop your own personal writing style.

8. Take home for the performer: positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. Everything else is rubbish.

9. Always remember: No artist goes out to deliberately give a bad performance. (Attributed to Dennis Lee)

10. A reviewer continues to grow. With experience comes (hopefully) wisdom."

[This is me, PD, writing now...]:

I believe the answer to most of these is to agree. However, I think the answer to no.1 has to be an exception; a critic is a journalist - journalism should be an honoured profession, and arts journalism is one branch of it. Thus it is not 'glorified'. That political journalism, for example, attracts people of all levels of honesty and integrity to its ranks is entirely paralleled in all other branches of the profession, including that of being an arts critic.

Readers will form their own opinion of the episode described above, so I will not comment on it, other than to say that it highlights the traps of a) being tempted to assume power over things that are way beyond one's role, sometimes for extremely stupid reasons, and b) allowing an opinion of an artist to be based on a personal like or dislike.

A PANDORA'S BOX

There is little more guaranteed to bring resentment to the fore than the subject of critics. It applies to all art forms; in the fields of poetry, literature, theatre, dance, film, exhibitions, TV, rock, pop, and, of course, music and many other disciplines, creators and their creations attract an ocean of critics on the various media, who are in a position to sway opinion, to make or break careers and to create little tinpot empires for themselves.

The issue of critics and reviews is of paramount importance to artists, particularly at the beginning of their careers. Yet little voice is given to how we as performers respond to publicly viewed opinion of our work. Instead, artists hide behind the pretence of it not mattering to them, and the idiotic belief that ignoring the critics renders them impotent. A bad review can hurt a young artist irreparably, whilst a good one can give them a big head. Neither response does anything to help develop the artist's skills, confidence, artistry or career. We need to learn to respond constructively, which includes the ability to put a specious review behind us, to balance and learn from a negative one and to keep a level head when it is a rave.

[As I am a musician, this piece will inevitably revolve around my experience of the music-world, but I am completely certain that the same scenario applies to the equivalent worlds of all other art-forms.]

THE WORST TENDENCIES

There are many exceptions to the following - perhaps even the majority. Unfortunately, as with so many groups, from lawyers to football fans, estate agents to politicians, it is the irresponsible minority who create the reputation of them all. Critics are sometimes self-appointed and untrained 'experts', who are actually totally inexpert in reality. They seem to imply that they know more than either the artist or the audience, and that they represent the interests of the potential consumer, when in reality they may represent their own interests and the media that employ them. Further, with the development of the Internet, there

are many who simply decide to write, uninvited, reviews for global consumption.

They are sometimes so lacking in self-confidence themselves that they hide behind the printed or spoken word in their chosen media outlet, handing out clever negative journalism at the expense of the artist or promoter, or even sometimes of the art-form itself. At the same time as this, in person they cannot express their negative views directly to the artist they are attempting to degrade. They are sometimes capable of publicly lavishing praise on that artist face to face immediately after a performance, whilst fully intending to trash the very same artist the next day.

On the other hand, they will often be swept along by the prevailing wind of hype surrounding a particular artist that they may as well have written or recorded their reviews before the event they are reviewing because their view is so glowing that it becomes a masterpiece of weak-minded predictability.

Such weathercockadoodlery is, of course, a universal tendency; it is simply more dangerous when it is on or in the media, because it is perceived by so many to be the weather itself.

SO WHAT ARE THEY THERE FOR?

What exactly is their function? Well, they are certainly very important to artists and to promoters simply because we all take notice of the general views that they hold, and thus they can make a commercial difference.

In newspapers they contribute to an ‘arts page’, a feature that is noticeably absent from the majority of the tabloids, and is only included in either respectable national dailies or local papers whose job it is to report on everything to do with their community. Thus, the ‘arts page’ is deemed by some as a statement of elitism on the part of both the paper and the reader.

If, as a student, you are lucky enough to receive a good review of a public performance promoted by the institution in which you are studying, it reflects extremely well upon that institution. Thus the student’s credibility within the institution is boosted by what is perceived to be an endorsement from an expert on the outside – an endorsement that will be viewed by many.

If you enter a competition, at virtually any stage or level from local to international (at which equally international careers can be started), you are usually required to send copies of reviews to support your application.

If you receive a string of good reviews for whatever you may have performed or recorded, it can boost ticket and CD/DVD sales, and sometimes help convince

promoters and recording companies that they would benefit commercially from continuing to use your services, and persuade certain other artists that they would benefit from coat-tailing on your career. If, however, you receive a string of bad reviews, a certain part of the public will be inclined to desert you, the promoters and recording companies may dump you, and other artists will be inclined to turn away. In both scenarios, the private views of those responsible will tend to be side-lined by the prevailing wind, whichever way it may blow. Of course, there are examples of certain artists who almost rely on a guaranteed trashing of their worth, on the basis that no publicity is bad publicity. However, the vast majority suffer greatly when reviewed badly; it undermines their self-confidence in future performances, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Thus, we may be forgiven for thinking that their function is to influence the music world at large over the artistic validity or otherwise of whoever is the subject of their attentions. This will inevitably have commercial implications, and the critic may be subject to pressure.

The instinctive desire for self-importance (a universal primitive instinct that is growing alarmingly in all directions in the wider modern world) - the socio-pathic desire for unquestionable and unchallengeable power over others the temptations must be enormous, mustn't they? After all, we learned from the Leveson Inquiry that some journalists have often been guilty of the most appalling hypocrisy, attempting to influence election results for nefarious reasons, handing out bribes for access to information they had no right to, tapping phones illegally, and riding rough-shod over the feelings - and careers - of politicians, public figures, crime victims, movie stars and members of the Royal Family. Why should arts critics behave in a better way towards their subjects?

A BENEVOLENT INFLUENCE

Well, actually they do - or at least most of them do. In the same way that we cannot lump all artists together and give them the same labels, we cannot do it to anyone else either, including critics.

Like the slime-balls who were found out by a process that led to Leveson brought the reputation of journalism down to an all-time low, the few completely ignorant and power-hungry arts critics that exist bring disrepute to the profession as a whole.

Similarly, the small number of artists who are divas or ego-maniacs makes public expectations of us all rather unfortunate. One could apply this principle to all manner of things; I think most of us know that most police are honest, most football fans are non-violent, and most Russians are not ex-members of

the KGB and present members of the Russian Mafia. At the same time, most competition jury members are doing their best to be fair in an almost impossible situation, most conductors are reasonable people trying to produce the best possible performances and who respect orchestra members, and most orchestra members love music. Discuss....

Whilst we can all relate laughable experiences (first, second or third hand) at the hands of critics - there are some of my own below - some have over the years contributed hugely to musical taste (not peddled it, as they are reputed to claim they avoid doing for ethical reasons).

They have often helped to promote artists in whom they believed - sometimes against the prevailing opinion of other critics.

They have regularly been particularly constructive when they themselves have either been performers to some degree in their own right, or have combined their music journalism with research, or writing in book form or broadcasting about music. These people are of course themselves subject to the judgement of their own colleagues, and so have a good idea of what it is like to be the reviewee, which might well change their perspective on how to write about others. However, the main point is that they are constructive people by nature; they are themselves on the side of the art-form to which they have devoted their professional life, they write in order to further that art-form, and are often embarrassed by the activities of some of their own colleagues.

[Just as an aside, perhaps the parasites who fed off the tragedies of others who were brought to our attention at Leveson would have been better behaved if they had experienced being at the receiving end of a fraction of what they were shovelling.]

Without doubt some of the greatest writers of books on music have been critics. For example, Paul Griffiths, Michael Kennedy, David Fanning and many others have written superb analytical and historical books on various composers and their music.

Bryce Morrison, Jessica Duchon, Ates Orga and Chang Tou Liang have immersed themselves in the world of pianists and piano music in particular, and in music in general, to such a degree that many pianists of all ages and stages seek their advice and even employ their services to explore their immense experience and pick their brains. I have certainly done the latter, and found it most revealing. Earlier, the great late Harold Schonberg wrote tirelessly about pianists, including in his magnificent book, 'The Great Pianists'.

The composer and Daily Telegraph music critic Anthony Payne brilliantly reconstructed Elgar's Third Symphony - a masterpiece of creativity.

That is not to mention institutions of the past such as George Bernard Shaw, Hans Keller, Neville Cardus etc. whose writing outside the world of music reviews is famously searching and enlightening. Going further back into the past, music critics included Robert Schumann and Hector Berlioz, no less. The list goes on and on of great commentators who made a positive difference.

Whilst all these writers have occasionally been extremely critical of certain performances (including, in many of the above cases, some concerts of my own) when surveyed overall, their work is extremely enlightening, positive and fair. Above all, it is confidently independent of the prevailing wind, and if one puts one's pecker away, one can learn huge amounts from their reviews.

In recent years, many unpaid reviewers have emerged on the Internet. Some of these have been very thoughtful and helpful. That they have not been commissioned to write gives them a decidedly different approach, and for the most part the new medium has promoted very responsible, fair-minded and thoughtful pieces. There will always be exceptions, but they prove nothing, as always. A pianist and piano teacher herself, Frances Wilson has become a highly informative presence on the Internet, with her constructive and enthusiastic reviews of countless pianists under the name of 'The Cross-eyed Pianist'. Such commentary is always welcome, even when it is negative, because the people writing are doing it for a positive reason.

In other words, we are, or at least we should be, on the same side – the side of music and the lovers of that music.

Some links to the above:

Paul Griffiths <http://www.disgwylfa.com/>

Michael Kennedy <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/artists/ae756b01-c246-4396-b140-8b4fd39e329f>

David Fanning
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Fanning_%28musicologist%29

Bryce Morrison <http://www.brycemorrison.net/>

Jessica Duchon <http://www.jessicaduchon.co.uk/>

Ates Orga <http://www.atesorga.co.uk/>

Chang Tou Liang <http://pianofortephilia.blogspot.com/>

Harold Schonberg http://www.tutorgigpedia.com/ed/Harold_C._Schonberg

Anthony Payne http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Payne

Frances Wilson (The Cross-Eyed Pianist)

<http://crosseyedpianist.wordpress.com/>

Hans Keller

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/music/research/proj/keller/index.aspx>

IRRELEVANT? ABSOLUTELY NOT.

That many artists say they never read their own reviews has always interested me. I have always been very anxious to know what the critics have written about what I do, whether it is a local newspaper or the New York Times, positive or negative. I cannot imagine being able to refuse to see it. Perhaps some are genuinely able to ignore it, but I suspect there are many who pose on the basis that they wish to display contempt for anyone who has the nerve to say anything negative about what they do. Thus, they will also miss the positive things that are said about them, which is a shame. I cannot claim to have read all my own reviews, but I have certainly tried. The only occasions on which I haven't were when I had left the area of circulation before publication – often to another country.

It is entirely natural to believe a critic to be a great writer if he or she writes glowingly about what one does, and the ones who don't to be ignorant idiots or worse. But, for the greater good, we must fight our own instinct for survival. We have to accept that what they say, positive or negative, is a natural gut reaction to everything about us - not just the way we played that day, but the overall perceived persona, which can include all manner of things about us. These range from simple things such as the way we played the last time we were there and our previously released CDs, to our age, our appearance and presentation and many, many other things.

If we believe the positive things that are written or said about us, we have to be prepared to believe the negatives as well. We have no right to presume the unassailable authority of our performances; all we have the right to do is to disagree on a rational basis with what is written about us, as all the critic has the right to do is the same in reverse. The oft-felt knee-jerk response to a bad review that the critic has no right to a negative opinion because they cannot play the music in question themselves is invalid and specious. I was a beginner when I gave up the clarinet, but I know when and why I prefer the playing of one clarinettist to another, and I would be able to write it down very coherently. Further, I never have played the oboe, but I still have valid opinions about oboists, and not just because I have conducted several orchestras. All an educated music lover has to do is to listen regularly to a variety of performances to form a valid musical critical opinion; the rest is down to whether or not you can write coherently and whether or not you have a decent character.

[Having said that, one is reminded of a quote from the great maestro Erich Leinsdorf: "A critical musical opinion is like an arsehole; everyone has one."]

HOW TO REACT?

The truth hurts: it's as simple as that.

We artists need to be able to respond to a review of any kind by trying to weigh up whether or not there is some truth in what is being said by the critic. Although we are ultimately the best judge of our own performance, because we are the only ones who know how we intended it to go, as opposed to how it actually did go, we are rarely the best judge of the degree of conviction we communicated.

If one regards receiving a good review as having survived the scrutiny of the reviewer, and a bad one as having been found out, one will probably have a nervous breakdown after the first few years' concertizing.

If one regards a good review as an addition to a portfolio to be used for promotion and not to be believed, fair enough. However, in this case, whilst the bad ones are ignored and discarded, the good ones are sent out to promoters in a trumpet-blowing exercise that will mostly inevitably lead to their ending up in a waste-bin. The artist learns nothing from either of them. The obvious fact that most reviews are mixed - certainly the most worthwhile ones tend to be - makes this process rather difficult, selective, and ultimately dishonest. [Altering something in the vein of "*One might have been forgiven for expecting that Bloggs would have given a brilliant, deep and insightful performance. Sadly, he didn't,*" to "*.....Bloggs.....a brilliant, deep and insightful performance.....*" is an old trick, and one that does the artist no credit, and rendered his promotions package unconvincing. Promoters are on the lookout for dotted lines..... In any case, nowadays the critics are on to Bloggs and his agents, and will always try to word their reviews in a way that Bloggs cannot distort like that.]

The way I recommend taking criticism is to take it as a compliment that the critic writes about you at all, to consider the views expressed, and to act upon them or reject them as seems appropriate. If the review is balanced and fair, it is more credible if it is not an out-and-out rave. There is nothing more lacking in credibility than a review that makes it seem like the critic is in love. If the review is negative, one must try not to take it personally, and to see if the critic has a point. If so, work on it. If not, move on.

Sooner or later we performers have all had bad experiences at the hands of critics. Occasionally they will have been gleefully harsh, and demonstrated personal contempt. However, I have only ever responded once to what I

perceived to be that, by writing to the editor asking him to refrain from sending a particular reviewer to any of my future concerts. The editor complied and the critic has not reviewed me at all since it occurred (now almost twenty years ago)

Also, many years ago (about 35...) I wrote a steaming response to a reviewer who spent almost his whole review wondering why on earth I was stupid enough to choose to include a piece of such a pitifully low level of invention as Messiaen's *La Fauvette des Jardins* - a piece I adore, and was one of the first pianists to play it after its composition in 1972. I felt affronted on behalf of the composer, and I still believe that it was completely out of bounds for the critic to trash the choice of work, rather than to write about the performance of the recital as a whole. In the event I did not send the letter, as it was so angry that I knew I would regret it.

The only other time was when I had put my neck on the line for a particular make of piano for a very special recital I was giving in London, and the piano maker let me down to such a degree that I will always avoid his pianos in future if I can possibly help it. It was a very prestigious series that included concerts by Barenboim and Pollini, amongst others, so press interest was enormous. There were nine reviews of that recital, almost all of which were sympathetic to my having to battle with an almost unusable piano, and balancing that fact with the way the concert went. However, there was one in which the critic took the opportunity to be smart-arsed and gleeful at the expense of everyone involved. I did take the futile step of writing to him to protest, and his response was to write back saying, amongst other arrogant comments, "I have said what I have said". I.E. "Tough."

On all other occasions I have suspected that there might have been some truth in what they wrote - either that or they were displaying such arrogance that they were not worth the time of day, but the latter are few and far between.

Another possible reason for a negative response from the press is that the sub-editor has edited the review, and the overall impression given was not intended by the critic. If that happens, the tendency will probably be to cut the fair-minded section and leave in the more immediately obvious eye-catching criticisms. For that reason, I believe many savvy critics arrange their original scripts accordingly, as they will otherwise sometimes feel mortified by the finished result.

There was one critic who wrote a pretty dismissive review of a London violin and piano duo recital that I gave in 1980, and to whom I was sorely tempted to write. However, I had just been taken on by the great artist manager, Howard Hartog, and his advice was to never get involved in altercations with the press. Later on this reviewer became one of the world's greatest recording producers, and most of my CDs made for EMI were produced by him. In person he was

one of the most genial and collegial people I have ever worked with - a superb and fastidious producer in every way, and enormously supportive when necessary. We became firm friends, and the review was discussed several times over. We came to the conclusion that he had been right, and again, that I had learned a lot. I will name him - Andrew Keener - because I have been a great admirer of his since I got over his lousy review.

Not being arrogant or egotistical is as important to the art of music criticism as it is to the art of performance, and in the end the music comes first and the critics and the artists are on the same side; if either of them believe otherwise, they are demonstrating exactly what my Singaporean friend was referring to when he wrote about hidden inferiority complexes.

It would be nice to think that a good critic would be able to accept criticism, or be prepared to debate what they have written. That ability is rare, but perhaps that is partly because very few artists are prepared to discuss something that might lead to them having the face the truth; thus critics are on the whole not used to the situation. The majority of artists of any kind are inclined to completely dismiss the whole profession of critical opinion as worthless, whilst at the same time sending and posting their best reviews to anyone and everyone.

A couple of quotes:

"Asking an artist how he feels towards critics is like asking a lamppost how it feels towards dogs" - Christopher Hampton.

"Pay no attention to what critics say. No statue has ever been put up to a critic."
- Jean Sibelius.

Despite my admiration for Hampton, and my adoration of the works of Sibelius, I cannot agree with these sentiments; they smack of simply being unable to accept any challenge to the authors' greatness, which is something they themselves would benefit from.

There was a period in the 1970s when one of the London orchestras had a policy of printing critiques in the concert programs, written by a representative of the orchestra, reviewing the reviews of the previous concerts. When I first mentioned it to one of the orchestra's management team, they said that the intention was to make the critics think more carefully before they wrote, as they would get it in the neck back a week later if they said something stupid. The policy was later dropped, which I was again curious about. The reason given for that was that it was felt that the policy gave the critics the impression that what they wrote mattered. I think it is regrettable, for the simple reason that what they write does matter. To pretend otherwise is to refuse to face up to not being

considered perfect. As implied above, when they rave, all of a sudden they matter, don't they?

EXTENDED POWER

Perhaps because local papers are about local communities, reviews in local papers are generally more supportive of the community event that made a visiting artist's event possible than are nationals. This tends to be even more the case when a major but non-capital city is represented internationally by an orchestra or an opera company. All the other major cities of the UK find it difficult to make their voices heard above that of London, and the cultural scene is an obvious example. Thus there is far greater effort made in their respective newspapers to establish the validity of the local cultural events.

In my youth, the direct involvement by Michael Kennedy in the fortunes of the Halle Orchestra, fuelled to some extent by Kennedy's personal friendship with Barbirolli, but more significantly by his belief in Manchester as a major international cultural force, formed a significant media boost to the orchestra, and served to give The Halle and its followers confidence.

I believe that Chris Morley's personal interest in the success of the CBSO – particularly since 1980 - has greatly informed his reviews in the Birmingham Post, and has again contributed enormously.

It is interesting to compare this with corresponding equivalents in the USA. Outside the major centres of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles etc. the comparative isolation of the cities in that huge country can tempt a local critic into feeling that he or she has more power than is appropriate. There are horror stories about certain American critics of the past who have openly tried to dictate what goes on, including in the case of orchestral policy, not just who should be booked or blocked as guest conductor or soloist, but indeed who should be music director or even CEO.

I have worked a lot in the USA, and it is my intention to blog about my overall impressions of that extraordinary country some time soon. In the meantime, for all that is wonderful about it, there does exist an excessive amount of media power, and perhaps this manifests itself to a degree in the arts pages of provincial newspapers. By comparison, critics in Russia have very little commercial influence, and for obvious reasons had even less in Soviet times. [The situation in the latter is not of course to be confused with the famous demolition of many great Soviet composers by the likes of Zhdanov, which were politically and ideologically motivated acts.] The same is true to a lesser extent in the Netherlands. The pattern emerges that the better educated and culturally aware the public is the less powerful are the critics. The conclusion is

drawn, again, that they should not have power, but that they and the artists should and must be on the same side.

RUMBLED

There are several legendary examples - some probably apocryphal - of critics being found out for having written reviews without attending the concert. The usual way of discovery is when the program changes or the concert is cancelled at the last minute. This is patently abysmally unprofessional behaviour, and not amusing in any way. It is very depressing that anyone supposedly interested in the arts, or even in their job, could do such a thing. It is particularly low-life behaviour if the review is a negative one.

A slight variant on that behaviour is when a CD is reviewed without the reviewer listening to it. I was told by someone who was himself a critic that this goes on widely, and that the justification given is that there are so many CDs to review that they don't have the time to listen to them all. Just remember that next time you buy or avoid buying a CD on the recommendation of a review.

Again, I am certain that it is a small minority who indulge in such behaviour, but they are the ones who let down the reputation of the profession as a whole, and there is no doubt that the music world - the music itself, the artists, promoters and commentators alike - would be better off without them.

NO PUBLICITY ETC....

It is certainly true that we artists benefit more from a bad review than from no review at all. That no publicity is bad publicity is a cliché, but a true one, and a strong negative review gives the reader something to disagree with. It certainly never did the extraordinarily brilliant Lang Lang any harm to receive a string of scathing reviews; it merely formed grist to the mill, because Lang Lang seems to be able to treat such reviews as if he is brushing off an irritating bluebottle - a level of self-confidence one can only admire. Of course, the negative reviews are more than balanced out by a plethora of rave reviews, and so the phenomenon marches on.

Having said that, in the 1990s there emerged in London one of the most damning reviews ever published. It was of a pianist who was subject to perhaps more marketing hype than, at the time, had ever taken place before. It elicited a very funny letter of retaliation from the pianist. This letter's content was leaked by the newspaper and distributed through most of the major London agents to anyone who wanted a copy. Sadly I have lost mine, so I must to some degree

paraphrase, but my memory of the immortal words of 1997 is reasonably good. If anyone has a copy, it would be extremely welcome in the comments section. Many thanks in advance.

The thrust of the letter was to accuse the critic of being in love with the artist, that this desire remained unfulfilled and had led to extreme rage, manifesting itself in this terrible review. The phrase, "The next time you feel so strongly about an artist, I suggest that you acquire a life-size picture of him to stare at, and that perhaps a little masturbation might be in order, rather than the total demolition of the artist's work," sticks in the mind, as it is such a gem.

I confess to great admiration for the critic's courage in writing what many people – particularly other pianists, of course - were thinking. At the same time, I also have a great deal of admiration for the pianist's response, which was a damn sight wittier and more memorable than the concert under discussion.

Having said that, under normal circumstances I don't really recommend that artists engage in altercations with the press. These were not normal circumstances.

BAD HABITS

Although my intention here has been to put the critics' case as well as that of artists, I have to say that there are some reviewers' ways that really get up my nose.

One example is when something extraneous occurs at the concert with which the critic can fill the review, leaving no room for any comment about the performance. One such example was of a performance of the Schumann Concerto I gave with the Philharmonia Orchestra in the mid-1990s. Yes, this concert was a big deal to me because the Philharmonia is a great orchestra, the conductor, Wolfgang Sawallisch, one of the greatest I have ever worked with, and the venue the Royal Festival Hall. In addition, the repertoire was music with which I would normally not be associated with. Thus, the review was eagerly anticipated by everyone involved. In the event, something was wrong with the air-conditioning in the roof of the RFH, and it was producing a slightly distracting tinkling noise, so one of the critics took the opportunity to talk about the air-conditioning, reflecting that it had been impossible to listen to the music. I wonder what he imagined the experience of actually playing the music had been like - which was actually that we on the stage were able to concentrate to the degree that the performance went very well. It was patently a tactic that served to help him avoid actually discussing the performance. Impressive....

On another occasion, I have read a review of a performance (this time by another, very fine pianist) of the Grieg Concerto with the CBSO, written by a Manchester-based critic, in which the busy traffic on the M6 Motorway and the driving rain that had blighted the critic's journey to Birmingham took up most of the piece.

I read a review of myself playing and conducting a concert in Newcastle, written by a London critic, in which the fact that the City Hall complex also houses a swimming pool and multiple restaurants completely overshadowed any mention of the concert. The main point of noting this was that one could smell chlorine in the concert hall. The travelling expenses from London to and from Newcastle, plus hotel, were very well spent on that, I am sure you will agree.

There was also a review of an excellent performance by the BBC Philharmonic of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, in which the critic filled more than half of his piece talking about the fact that the A string of the cellos had not been tuned down to G sharp for the final chord, as written in the score. For those unfamiliar with this chord, it is designed to be a percussive pitchless thud – almost a noise. In the meantime, preceding this chord there is approximately thirty-five minutes of some of the most exciting and difficult music ever written, most of which was overlooked in the review. Not only that, but I am assured by many cellists that it is normal practice to ignore the instruction to tune the A string down to G sharp, as there are only two bars of three-four time in which to do it, and in the context of the tutti sounds the same anyway.

See what you make of this, dear reader: during the Shostakovich Centenary in 2005, I put together a recital program of which the first half consisted of Prokofiev's Sonatas Nos 1, 2 and 3, and the second half Shostakovich's Sonata No 2 and Prelude and Fugue No. 24. At one venue, I repeated Prokofiev's Sonata No. 3 as an encore at the end of the program. After it was over, I was introduced to a critic from a national daily. He wanted to meet me in order to ask me what the encore was..... All I could do was to try save his embarrassment by saying "Oh, it was by Prokofiev" and somehow managing to turn away before he asked me exactly what.

Another critic's habit that drives me nuts is that of putting the single most important fact about the performance - I.e. who the artist was - in brackets. One of my very earliest reviews was in a national daily and included this - and I was distraught by it - "There then followed a performance of Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2 (played with spirit by Peter Donohoe)." That was it! No further mention of soloist, conductor or orchestra. It would take a true genius to play Shostakovich 2 without spirit – it would be akin to having the ability to conduct an unexciting performance of *Le Sacre*, or a small-scale performance of *Guerrelieder* – i.e. it wasn't worth saying at all. Having said that, that concert

was on the evening of 22 November 1975 - the evening on which I first met my future wife (during the interval) so in retrospect it didn't really matter at all what the critic said.

CONCLUSION – WE ARE ALL ON THE SAME SIDE..

Having said all this, I am generally very indebted to the community of music critics who have attended my concerts over the decades and generally written very helpful comments.

I would not consider quoting any of the good reviews I have had - I will not go down the road of using the Internet to impose on you a hagiography of myself; I do not want to lose you - my readers. Suffice it to say that I have been very lucky over a very long period, and I have a lot of critics to thank, not only for their positive comments, but also their critical observations. And, no, this is not me trying to stay in their good books, before anyone thinks it; I really mean it. Some have been appallingly grandiose, prejudiced, unreasonable, ignorant, and pretentious and a waste of printed paper, and that includes some very complimentary reviews. But they have been in a very small minority; most have been very helpful and welcome.

PS

I will tell you that I am sometimes very proud of the really stinkingingly awful reviews I have been at the sticky end of. Once the shock has died away when they are really bad, one can try to evaluate whether or not one can learn anything. Then one can discard the boring ones, and preserve the real corkers as sources of amusement. The second quote below is from one of my favourites, and I often re-read it whenever I am feeling unusually pleased with myself over something I have done - it brings one back to earth. The other quote is simply one of the most delightfully descriptive and apt phrases about a piece of music I have ever read.

"There then followed a performance of Messiaen's Canteyodjaya. Listening to Peter Donohoe play this piece is rather like going through a car-wash without a car." - Miles Kington in The Times.

"It was a bad night for Rachmaninov down at the Hollywood Bowl." [The first line of a scathing review of a performance of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto I gave with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Neeme Jarvi on tour to L.A. in 1994 - I sincerely believe that to have been one of the three best performances of anything I have ever done; the orchestra and conductor were fantastic (even more than they had been in Detroit a few days before, when the same program was reviewed very nicely), and the Hollywood Bowl is a very

special place with a great atmosphere. The rest of the review was also terrible, but not really quotable in the same way as the opener.]

As I wrote earlier, the truth hurts: it's as simple as that. And it applies to the critics' feelings too.

If you have been, thank you for reading this.