

The Washington Post

LET'S REVIEW THOSE REVIEWS: Getting the Critics' Perspectives

BY GREG WAXBERG

Get an insider's view from music critics themselves about their thought process during a performance and while writing about it afterward.

They sit in the audience to evaluate your performance and then write, their articles later appearing online, in newspapers, or in *Opera News*. On the surface, their opinions seem to have the power to make or break your singing career or, at the very least, to influence the next person who could hire you. They are “voices from above,” as it were, judging what you have worked so hard to achieve. But should singers be nervous about critics and their reviews, or are critics performing a valuable service?

To begin answering those questions, the first step is to understand what journalists consider the role of a music critic. “A critic’s first job is to support the art form,” says writer, singer, and actress Joanne Lessner, contributing writer to *Opera News*, who prefers “reviewer” to “critic” because “critic” implies dissatisfaction. “A reviewer has to keep an open mind and consider any negative impressions within the larger context of promoting the art

form. Critics can too easily advance the notion that classical music is boring, incomprehensible, or irrelevant.”

Other reasons for their jobs? Editors expect candid reports so their publications maintain credibility. The public wants guidance about how to spend their time and money. Artists deserve fair and honest assessments. Critics can help maintain established, factual standards (correct notes, proper pronunciations, and intended settings, for example) by calling out performers and directors who *don't* maintain standards. The public can be educated about basics of classical music, and a company can receive informed feedback about its productions.

Often, critics cite readers as their specific audience. “I re-create for the readers the experience of being at the performance, allowing them to decide if they would like to go to another performance in the run or if they want to watch for a performer in the future,” says composer, conductor, and writer

Gregory Sullivan Isaacs, chief classical music and opera critic for the online arts magazine *TheaterJones*, covering North Texas.

Washington Post Classical Music Critic Anne Midgette puts it simply. “Tell a story about the performance,” she says. “Figuring out the story is one of the critic’s biggest challenges.”

In his reviews, *Baltimore Sun* Fine Arts Critic Tim Smith tries to explain his reactions and conclusions. “I do not care if people agree with me, only that they understand my thinking. I want a performance to speak to me, to engage my senses, to touch my heart or invigorate my brain. Singers who gloss over words or forget to connect phrases into cohesive statements will probably not be able to do that.”

Knowing that critics are sitting in the audience, you might wonder what is going through a critic’s mind during a performance. Two overwhelming responses prevail: a desire for a great evening that moves and entertains

them, and the fact that singers should not be thinking about critics *at all* but about communicating the music to the audience. "I want to be blown away and be surprised," says *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Classical Music Critic Sarah Bryan Miller, a former professional singer. "I'm looking for good things."

Smith's mind often wanders to singers of the past. "This does not mean that I am automatically comparing the live event to a recording or the memory of a previous performance," he says. "While all my favorites are rolling around in the back of my head, I am determined to approach every performance with open ears. I hope the singer will reach me in some meaningful way, make me a believer, and make me want to hear that voice and that styling again."

Since critics sometimes have the unpleasant task of writing negatively

about a singer, are they ever concerned that a negative review could hurt a singer's career? "The power of critics is exaggerated in many people's minds," Midgette says. "I'm not writing for people in the business, and a critic is on thin ice if he or she develops an inflated sense of his or her own importance in the minds of the people who make hiring decisions." Echoing her sentiments, *Opera News* contributor Willard Spiegelman observes that "every artist has good and bad days, so a single review seldom makes or breaks a career."

"Younger singers can be most helped or harmed by a review, so that's an immense responsibility [on the critic's part]. I try to be as generous as I can," Miller says.

Smith never writes anything that he would not say directly to a musician. "That ought to be a standard attitude

in the profession," he says. "[But] it's not. I once saw a very prominent critic do a quick about-face from a reception when he saw someone he had panned. That said, a critic cannot be overly concerned about a musician's feelings."

Similarly, Lessner's attitude has changed over the years. "I was concerned about this question when I started writing reviews, but I started writing in volume and nothing happened—no angry letters, no withdrawals from contracts," she says. "The impact is more personal than professional. I don't think any one critic or review can take down a singer—and that's as it should be."

So, we know what critics think about the potential effects of negativity in their reviews, but perhaps the more urgent question is whether singers should be concerned about negative reviews or if they should accept them as part of the



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business. The answer essentially boils down to three options: ignore them altogether, read them and see what you can learn (keeping in mind that each review represents the opinions of one person, sitting in a specific location for one performance, writing for the reader), or read them and forget about them, developing a thick skin for what people say about you. Several negative reviews, however, could indicate a problem that needs to be dealt with.

“Stepping into the public arena carries not just risk but a tacit willingness to put up with reviews, even if they sting,” Smith says. “Being truthful about oneself is a trait every artist needs to develop. If the singer’s ego doesn’t allow for honest self-evaluation, and if his or her friends and colleagues are reticent to say anything, a review might be the only source of information.” He quickly adds a caveat, however—because of individual tastes, a critic could make a big deal out of something that really isn’t a problem, so “the singer has to learn to dismiss the reviews that don’t make sense.”

Miller offers the advice that, by reading critics, you will understand their tastes and points of view. “Unless someone is completely off-the-wall, don’t argue with them. Your voice is you, and some people aren’t going to care for it.”

One action you must be careful of is twisting a critic’s words to convince yourself that they are saying something

negative, when that is not the case. “To my mind, ‘X took a while to warm up, but in Act II delivered a magnificent aria’ is a positive review—and could be a negative one to some singers,” Midgette explains. “One reason for what some have seen as my blunt approach to criticism is that I learned early on that writing with an eye to how a performer will take your work is a fool’s errand, because the performer will often find a way to construe things as negative that you honestly never meant that way. And please don’t focus on one clause or unfortunate word choice that seems to contain a barb.”

It is probably safe to say that you will rarely read a review that is “all good” or “all bad.” Each review, in some way, contains elements of both. When it comes to balancing positives and negatives, the critics have different perspectives. Miller and Lessner always start with positives. “Sometimes, you have to be gently discouraging and offer constructive criticism. This is especially true for younger singers who are not established,” Miller says, while Lessner adds, “I’m very aware that there’s a person with feelings reading my words. If there are negatives, I try to address them in a straightforward, somewhat practical manner—a negative opinion can be hurtful, so I try not to compound that by being insensitive.”

Other critics say that the review is all about the story and their reactions

to what happened. “Equivocation is the downfall of classical music criticism and a reason that so much writing about music tends to be tepid,” declares Midgette. “Music reviews should be written in the same direct language as movie reviews, rather than using specialized language and jargon. Instead, all too often, we get an ‘A for effort’ rating of not-very-good performances. One of a critic’s big jobs should be to call out mediocrity and to reserve strongly positive reviews for truly memorable performances.”

Isaacs, while not specifically looking to balance the pros and cons, does try to find something to praise if, in general, he feels a performance is not going well. “There’s always *something* to praise,” he points out. If a performer had a problem that was too significant not to mention, “I’ll consider *why* there was a problem—the wrong repertoire, in bad voice that night, maybe needing new training or a new concept of what they’re singing.”

Smith has observed that the performances themselves usually do the balancing, so his reviews will naturally reflect that balance. “I often find myself making a point of writing something like ‘still . . .’ or ‘however . . .’ to acknowledge that, for example, a singer had [a problem with] tone but still shaped phrases eloquently or vividly conveyed the character or the mood,” he says.

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Then there is the notion that some audience members will want to read an expert's account of the same performance. "One tries to be kind as well as honest, but it is the critic's job to tell the truth," Spiegelman says. "Audience members who have shelled out big bucks for tickets deserve the best [reports]."

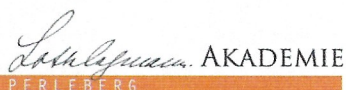
Speaking of audience members' and critics' reactions to the same performance, both groups *should* be told, prior to curtain time, if a singer is not feeling well but performing anyway. If that is the case, critics will take the illness into account.

"Should" is emphasized, because that announcement does not always happen. "I remember a lieder recital that was not terribly impressive," Smith relates. "The voice was rough, phrasing dull. On my way out the door, the singer's wife told me her husband was unwell. Why not tell everyone before the performance, begging indulgence?"

Lessner remembers a similar misstep. "An announcement came after the tenor cracked on his high note," she says. "I might have given him a pass, but he didn't sound sick otherwise, so the announcement came off as an excuse. At that point, the crack was fair game. I can understand the hesitation about making a preshow announcement—you don't want to think the audience is listening for problems. But I believe people are inclined to be understanding."

Perhaps now those reviews you see online and in print probably do not seem as threatening as they once did. Critics really *can* be on your side—and they just might convince someone to attend your next performance.

Greg Waxberg is an award-winning freelance writer. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com.



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