The Role Of Music Criticism In The Digital Age

A lecture by Adam Baruch and Discussion Panel
Hevhetia Showcase 2019
Košice August 17, 2019
What Are We Talking About?
Music Criticism vs. Music Journalism

**Music Criticism** is the intellectual activity of formulating judgments on the value and degree of excellence of individual works of music, or whole groups or genres. It is a branch of philosophical aesthetics concerned with making judgments about composition or performance or both. It is mostly associated with reference to classical music.

**Music Journalism** is media criticism and reporting about music topics, including popular music, classical music and traditional music. Journalists began writing about music in the eighteenth century, providing commentary on what is now regarded as classical music.

With the rise of the internet in the 2000s, music criticism developed an increasingly large online presence with music bloggers, aspiring music critics, and established critics supplementing print media online. Music journalism today includes reviews of songs, albums and live concerts, profiles of recording artists, and reporting of artist news and music events.
The Dilemmas

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture”

Criticism always seems to founder on the same small handful of basic problems. These problems are essentially philosophical. They appear to be insoluble. They are aggravated not only by the esoteric nature of music but also by the psychological mystery surrounding the very act of criticism. Are there any “standards” in criticism? If so, can they be defined? Are they objective or subjective? If the latter, can they possibly be true? These questions are fundamental. They disclose the full range of the philosophy of criticism.

Musical criticism has a primary aim: the evaluation of music. How does the critic set about this difficult task? The scientific school of criticism holds that he apply certain standards to the work in question. His evaluation is the result of testing music against his critical yardsticks and observing how far short it falls. According to this view, a value judgment is like a prize to be won by careful, objective, intelligent effort. This is an attractive notion, particularly among critics. It fosters the view that the critic is in a position of authority, and that he possesses the means to arbitrate over the creative artist. Unfortunately for criticism, there is nothing to suggest that this is anything but an illusion.
A difficulty confronting all critics concerns the subjectivity of their observations. Since music is perceived subjectively, so the argument runs, does this not reduce criticism to mere personal opinion? And if this is so, what makes one critic’s opinions any truer than another’s?

The crucial question facing every critic is how to demonstrate the truth of his reaction. Yet all critics cannot be right; many are diametrically opposed to one another. It is no wonder that musical criticism has been described as stuck at the litmus paper stage: critics take a dip into music, and one sees what color they turn. Plainly, criticism remains indistinguishable from mere speculation until the critic develops the means of confirming the truth of his views. If he wishes to develop such means, it is to the theory of criticism that he must turn.

Meanwhile, a definition of musical criticism emerges: Criticism is the rationalization of intuitive musical understanding.
Issues In The Theory Of Criticism

A masterpiece is not a matter of chance, nor is a mediocrity. Both are symptomatic of deep, far-reaching principles.

If the practice of criticism can be reduced to one thing—expressing value judgments—the theory of criticism is essentially one thing, too—explaining them using the following criteria:

- **Unity** - All the elements fit together into one coherent continuity
- **Medium** – The choice of instrumentation
- **Thematic Chronology** – The order of the separate parts
- **Economy** – The amount of detail (less is more?)

Criticism And Performance

The criticism of performance is the most public, and publicized, aspect of a critic’s function. It is also the least important. Unfortunately, what particular critics think of particular artists accounts for most contemporary music criticism. Performing artists are obliged to rely on these critical notices if they are to secure further work, even though neither critics nor artists like it. The box-office economics of performance are so delicate that bad publicity, or no publicity, can wreck artists and management alike.
Moral Issues

The music critic’s code of honor

Writing for money

Professional journalists, music critics included, write for a living. Although there is nothing wrong with this per se, this fact can, and often is a serious limitation as far as objectivity and freedom of expression are concerned. Music critics are under pressure to write about artists or review albums which are selected by their editors and more often than not are not at liberty to be truthful in fear of repercussions.

Negative criticism can be devastating

Negative criticism can have a heavy impact on the subject involved, both personal and professional. Musicians can and often are deeply hurt by negative criticism, regardless of the fact if the criticism is fair or not. Extreme case of negative criticism can have implication of the mental state of a musician or their entire career.

Getting personal

A music critic should under no circumstances become personally involved in his writing and should always keep a distance, like other professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.) from the subject. Being systematically vindictive or ill wishing is not only morally wrong but also completely unprofessional.
The digital age
It’s not the changes, it’s the swiftness of change

Virtual world

Our reality became truly digital with the turn of the Millennium. Suddenly we all, whether we realize it of not, completely lost touch with reality and crossed over into virtual existence. Our contact with other humans became limited to absolutely necessary and our digital profile id how the rest of the world sees us.

Collapse of authority

This virtual reality we live in lost the long-established frame of reference and traditional values, which were replaced by virtual pseudo-values. Doctors were replaced by Google and teachers by Wikipedia, and the authority – philosophical, scientific, moral or even religious collapsed completely. The clueless internaut has no way to distinguish between truth and fake or good or bad since any digital information he is exposed to is as reliable as any other.

One big cloud

The virtual reality digitized everything for us: books, paintings, films and of course music, storing it somewhere on a vast digital cloud. The human race is being “liberated” from tangible things, replacing belief in God with belief in a cloud.
Music criticism now

Highly increased availability of information and opinions

Big data

The accessibility to information and the amount of information is increasing exponentially and with it the total confusion as far as the possibility to find meaningful data. The amount of available music, both in physical and digital form is today far greater than ever before.

No filters

The traditional role of the music industry, which served as a natural filter in the past Century, limiting the amount of available music being produced for mass consumption, is no longer with us. Since the amount of music produced can not be limited It is for music criticism to take over the role of filtering of not what is being played and recorded but of what is being listened to.

In transition

The virtual reality we live in is a transitional stage as far as our Culture is concerned. We can only speculate as to the future of music, but if we, as music critics, wish to influence it, it is our responsibility to preserve the aesthetic values of music and make sure they survive the transition.
More reading

The internet offers many excellent articles about music criticism in the digital age – here are some of them:

The Types of Music Criticism You Should Be Paying Attention To

Music criticism in the digital age

Is There a Future for Music Journalists and Critics in the Digital Age?

This Mess We’re In: Music Journalism In The Digital Age

Music Journalism in the Digital Age

The Death of the Critic?: A Roundtable on the Future of Music Criticism in the Digital Age
The Soundtrack Of My Life

Adam Baruch was born on December 17, 1951 in Chorzów, Poland. Both his parents were Holocaust survivals. He was exposed to music at an early age, especially to Rock and Jazz. He immigrated to Israel in 1967. He is married and has one daughter. He lives in Kiriat Haim, a suburb of Haifa.

Adam is a graduate of the Technion (Israel Institute of Science and Technology) in Haifa and later other academic institutions and holds degrees in Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science and Education. In parallel to his music-related activities he also maintains a professional and academic career in computer sciences and software development.

After immigration to Israel in 1967 he continued his jazz activities and developed jazz contacts with artists, writers, educators and organizations all around the world. He published many articles about jazz music in the leading jazz magazines, such as "down beat", "Jazz Journal International", "jazz forum", "Jazz News International", and many others. Adam continues to write about music and over the years published over 6,000 album reviews in many publications and on his music-related Internet sites. His internet site, called “The Soundtrack Of My Life”, on which he publishes his reviews has over 8 million visitors and is one of the most respected sources of information about music on the web.