

Piano Enthusiast Reviewing Methodology

It doesn't matter whether we are talking about cars, wines, or music recordings, there is simply no perfect method by which to adjudicate the merits of a product and then pass this information along to the consumer without some loss of integrity. With wines the ideal format would be that the consumer could plug into a sensory stimulator that replicates the smell and taste of the product without inebriation as the reviewer extols all the virtues or flaws of each wine. Maybe in a hundred years we will have such a device. With music recordings, the ideal format would allow the reviewer to have plug-in sound bites of every point discussed in the review. Without the consumer being able to experience what the learned critic is talking about, there will always be a disconnect between what is discussed and the information that is received. At present, there is no legal way to have such a music review system. About the closest I could imagine would be to have reviews posted in a YouTube-type format, with the reviewer offering sound-bites of recordings as points are discussed. But the time and energy involved to do this on a comprehensive scale would be formidable. And inevitably the legal teams at some record labels would cry foul and demand that unfavorable postings be retracted. Therefore, given the present limitations, every reviewing forum has a slightly different take on how best to achieve meaningful dissemination of information to the reader.

One advantage of a specialty website such as this is that there are not the limiting constraints on space that the traditional print media have. But too much length can also be problematic, as witness some of my own gargantuan creations. Someday in the future I hope to go back to those 70-page beasts and tidy up the largesse. But in my own defense, the recommendations sections can be considered a sort of executive summary for those who do not desire to probe the issues so deeply. The rest is there for those who are hungry for deeper insights than what can be found in the typical print and online sources. But length itself is of little value without some sort of clearly defined and self-regulating methodology.

In this essay I will discuss the problems of fair adjudication, and ways to make the information presented more helpful to the individual needs of the end-user. I'll discuss my own methodology which, while far from the ideal format postulated above, is about as objective and accurate as possible within the confines of traditional criticism. I'll talk candidly about the pros and cons of other competing sources of print and online music criticism. And I'll also discuss some of the motivating incidents behind the inception and development of this project, and share some anecdotal stories along the way which will help illustrate various points.

When I talk of methodology there are really two separate components involved in the process: how the reviewer listens, and how this information is presented to the reader. In my essay **The Relevance of Music Criticism** I have already discussed the varying degrees of expertise that are evident in the music industry. Some reviewers clearly have more experience than others, and there is no substitute for decades of experience in order to form the basis of a comprehensive comparative context. But even with lots of experience, there are three key issues which must be considered: Has the critic identified their own preferences? Is the critic aware of divisive issues concerning the interpretation of the work? Does the critic offer balanced arguments, or resort to making categorical proclamations?

Regarding the first issue, that of hidden biases, one must know the basis of one's own listening preferences, and not simply talk about recordings which fall within this comfort zone. Besides an understanding of the psychology behind listening preferences (discussed at length in my essay **Listener Psychology: How We Perceive Music**) there is also the matter of person attachment. As I was exploring methods of reviewing back in the 90's I decided to undertake an extensive experiment in blind testing. For an entire week I immersed myself in all the CD recordings I had of the Chopin Preludes, having my wife put on ten different recordings each day, in random order, and the names of the artists unknown to me. Going into the project I predicted that Moravec would emerge as my favorite, because, although I never studied with him, I did participate in a master class with him, playing a set of Chopin Preludes, and I always considered his insights some of the most memorable I received in my education. For years I always played his Chopin recordings and recommended them to everybody I knew. So it was a real shock to me that he did not come out top in my blind listening tests (though still in the 'top tier').

I've been following music criticism since the early 70's and only once have I ever read of another critic undertaking a blind listening test, and that was Farhan Malik writing a comparative survey of the Brahms Paganini Variations in the International Piano Quarterly (Autumn 1999). Just as I had discovered myself he talks about how the process changed his perceptions of how some of the big name pianists and lesser-known pianists actually compare when the names and associations with those names are unknown to the listener. The BBC Radio 3 used to run an interesting program playing several versions of a work with the artist's names unannounced until later, but the limitation was of course that only a few versions could be played, and those usually selected to demonstrate a maximum range of interpretive contrast.

After the revelatory Preludes test, I conducted several further blind tests with the Etudes and Sonatas, and then I took my turn and presented blind tests to my wife (Chopin Ballades, Liszt Sonata, and Schumann *Etudes Symphoniques*) and to some of my students (Rachmaninoff Preludes). These comparisons were always interesting but labor intensive in having somebody continuously feed the CD player, so I tried to do a blind testing myself with the CDs turned over, shuffled, and inserted into the machine with my eyes closed. I then assigned numbers with post-its to each CD and didn't reveal to myself any of the names until the end. Even so, I began to learn from the feel of CDs whether they were Decca or DG pressings, and from that based on levels of hiss I could surmise the likely time period of the recording and the performer.

What is important in all this is that after the first blind test with the Preludes I realized just how much preconceptions play into what we think we hear. That first realization was the critical one, allowing me to discover the power of *listening without expectation*. At first the loss of a strong 'personality framework' was disheartening, especially since I had considered favorites such as Arrau and Moravec as icons of greatness. But by listening with complete objectivity, devoid of personal attachment and preconception, I was able to discover my own psychological listening profile, how I followed the musical syntax of performance, and what did or didn't work in establishing an empathetic connection with the performer. I was thereafter able to maintain this newfound objectivity in subsequent listening sessions (even when not listening blind), something that has carried through to this day.

Nearly as instructive was to play the various recordings for other listeners where I sat behind them so that they could not read anything from my reactions. It was interesting to watch their own bodily reactions, nodding or swaying or drifting off into thought, and to hear how they characterized each performance, sometimes in agreement with my own assessment, sometimes

not. Before long, each listener's psychological profile would emerge and hold consistently, whether we sampled Bach or Rachmaninoff.

Upon further reflection, I do believe that some level of preconception helps a listener connect to the music and overcome some of the sterility of the audio reproduction process. In other words, having heard Arrau or Rubinstein live on numerous occasions, I could put a mental image of how they play and move which might explain how an agogic emphasis on the recording would make sense when we could see the performer. For experienced listeners, when we decide to attend a concert by a certain performer we arrive psychologically prepared to be in-synch with the kind of experience we are likely to encounter. When I went to hear the elder Arrau in Austria, I had an idea of what to expect, and that certainly was not going to be anything like what I had heard from Horowitz, Cziffra, or Argerich.

Putting everything in balance I would say that a blind test would be a most worthwhile project for every music lover to undertake at least once (and not with recordings that you know by the back of your hand). Learning how to hear objectively and to recognize one's own preference in performance (macro vs. micro dynamic inflection, strong vs. minimal metric delineation, etc.) is important. But I believe it is also important for listeners (and especially critics) to know the *modus operandi* of a performer in order to put an objective evaluation in context with what might be expected from each performer.

I also believe it is instructive to hear performances side by side, to immerse oneself in the work and to be attuned to every slight nuance. Hearing performances months apart and trying to construct a mental comparison is not likely to yield consistent results. Besides, what was your mood when you heard Pletnev's Chopin Scherzi four months ago compared to Grosvenor's Scherzi you are hearing today?

That covers the first of the three key issues in music criticism, that of hidden biases, though for even more discussion read the essay **The Relevance of Music Criticism** to find out about how the five levels of attachment affect our core psychological disposition. The second of these key issues is that all music lovers, but especially music teachers and music critics, should be aware of what constitutes a valid range of interpretive perspective, and what clearly falls outside of acceptable variance, and, indeed, have a grasp of the primary psychological issues which contribute to these substantial differences in interpretive outlook. I'd say a good third of today's active music critics do not understand these issues, and when it comes to teachers and professors, there is a staggering degree of ignorance on this matter.

I've discussed all the elements of interpretive variance in other essays, primarily in **Listener Psychology: How We Perceive Music**. In a nutshell, the conveyance of energy levels, whether the interpretive predilection is for micro or macro nuance, is one of the most divisive issues. Phrasing and articulation are probably the second most important, and tempo probably the third. In conducting my comparative surveys I've listed timings for each performance, and found that anything more than a 30% differential between the slowest and fastest version (15% either side of a statistical median point) is going to fall outside of what most listeners would consider an acceptable range of variance. This doesn't mean that the 'outliers' have no value or insight to contribute, but the critic should damn well know and convey to readers when performances are at the very boundaries (or beyond) of acceptable variance. Two examples: I recall reading a review of Michel Block's Chopin *Barcarolle* which the critic found 'on the slow side, but with a wonderful tone quality and relaxed narrative which conveys a luxuriant sense of opulence.' Well,

it is slow and luxuriant, and as an alternative perspective it is worth hearing, but I would have considered it the duty of the review to convey just how far out of the norm the interpretation was. While Badura-Skoda times in at 8:26 and Arrau and Bolet are more relaxed at 9:36 and 9:45 respectively, Block is positively sleepy-eyed and lethargic at 14:23.

More recently, while doing my survey of Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, I listened to a performance by Marc Ponthus that was clearly way out in left field. His *Le Gibet* clocked in at a glacial 9:55 where the average mid-point is 6:10. Given the extreme tempos and the spastic, inchoate *Scarbo*, I read the review which did not even mention or hint that anything was out of the norm. Clearly a case where the critic receives free promotional copies and then feels obligated to only talk up (or make up) positive attributes.

Knowing what the divisive issues are—for Bach it would be phrasing and articulation more than tempo, for Beethoven it would be micro versus macro lines, for Chopin measure-to-measure rubato or line-to-line inflection—can only come from decades of experiences, and this coupled with an innate desire to get to the deepest meanings of artistic and aesthetic expression. Without an understanding of underlying principles of expression it is easy to see how teachers and critics resort to making categorical black-and-white proclamations.

This brings us to the third key point: Does the critic offer balanced arguments, or resort to making categorical proclamations? The first concession to one's own personal opinion is to realize that even composers demonstrate a range of variance in how they perform their own works. As I've argued at length in other essays, these variances will fall within that 30% zone we talked about, and never would we hear a solemn lamentation transformed into a giddy celebratory jig. But there is variance according to mood, energy level, and particulars of the ensemble or acoustics. All musicians and listeners have certain innate psychological dispositions that will affect how they respond to music. Even the most trained conductors, concert pianists or most astute music critics, all have these innate leanings, although with awareness it is possible to be more balanced, or at least be aware of and tolerant of musicians with other tendencies. These tendencies, explored in depth in my essay **Listener Psychology: How We Perceive Music**, may be summarized here as a natural inclination toward metric propulsion, tone color, or structural integrity.

A great majority of reviews I read (I'm talking 80-90%) seem oblivious to the validity of different perspectives. If they like the recording under review they will compare it positively to those performances that they consider the great reference points of interpretation. If they don't like it, they will point out those performances that they consider to be the great reference points of interpretation. The problem, the big unseen elephant in the room, is that if the reviewer happens to like strong metric delineation, all his reference points will demonstrate that very tendency, and he will measure all new-comers by this standard. What needs to be understood is that, yes, within the interpretive tendency for metric delineation there are some that are more successful than others, but what about those interpretive perspectives that are striving more for tone color, or equanimity of phrases? There are also good and bad renderings within those perspectives, but the critic is only using one measuring stick. So he pans a performance that may be the all-time best in terms of structural cohesion, or delineation of tone and texture.

What the critic (and teachers, too!) need to come to grips with is what is the underlying conception the artist is trying to convey, and are they convincing or unconvincing in the realization. The critic's job is only to peripherally address the matter of which type of conception

(and argue for which tendency the composer was likely to have desired to convey) but mostly to address how successfully a performer has realized the particular conception they have decided to present.

I fight against this tendency myself. For example, I think that what Argerich does in the cadenza of the Schumann Concerto is utter nonsense, but I have to think twice about actually using those words as a basis for a categorical dismissal of what she does. Therefore I have to carefully describe the different interpretive approaches for the cadenza that we hear in a variety of recordings, some emphasizing a rash and headlong surge of energy (Argerich), others who apply the brakes in order to convey a questioning and tormented sense of indecision (Perahia), and others who emphasize less emotional distress and more the compositional structure of the various textures (Backhaus). I prefer Backhaus, but I can clearly see why some listeners prefer the exhilaration of Argerich. It is my duty as a critic to describe the nature of the performance, the interpretive tendency, and to finally make a discerning judgment based on that. In this case, among physically exciting renditions (completely plausible depending on Clara Schumann's energy level on any given day) does Argerich do a good job? Yes. Among her various recordings, which one shows the most strengths and least faults according to this conception? Probably the version with Harnoncourt. It doesn't matter that on most days I would greatly prefer Backhaus over Argerich to recognize that Argerich does a superb job within her conceptual framework. Sometimes, I also enjoy putting on her recording with Harnoncourt and cueing up the last movement of the concerto for a bit of energy-boosting fun.

This is why besides picking an overall **Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording** in each survey I also suggest the most convincing interpretations which derive from differing conceptual perspectives. I don't just talk about the first, second, and third choices which all fall within the same conceptual framework. As I said, I have to be on guard myself that my own enthusiasms and irritations don't unduly affect a more objective observation of interpretive perspectives. But, it really bugs me that other critics could care less about anything other than their own narrow viewpoint.

Over the decades I have maintained a notebook which tabulates how often a critic has provided insightful and helpful reviews, or how often they have offered misinformation or resorted to unilateral proclamations. Obviously I'm not going to mention names of those who I have little respect for, but on the positive side I especially commend the efforts of John B. Young and Jeremy Nicholas who almost always offer up insight and interesting perspective. I have also enjoyed the frank and sometimes impertinent viewpoints of Donald Vroon (editor of the American Record Guide). I also feel a keen kinship with Italian writer, Piero Rattalino, even though our writing styles are completely different. I haven't been able to find much of his writing that has been translated to English, so, someday, I'd like to facilitate having more of his writing translated to English. Although some commentaries in piano forums have found his effusive language 'hilarious' I read beyond the poetic prose to the deeper metaphysical meanings he explores. In any case, his use of language is hardly as florid as Cortot's, who is also interesting to read.

There are several general procedures I hold to when I undertake my comparative surveys. First I gather all the historical mono recordings and listen to them as a group, then I'll listen to my LPs as a group, then I'll tackle CD transfers from the pre-digital stereo era, and finally, the more recent digital recordings. To go back and forth between the sound worlds of 1944 Gieseking and 2011 Grosvenor is just too jarring. I do all this without reading reviews that might influence my own receptivity. After this first round I then read the guides and re-listen if my own reactions

weren't as positive, and I play these against my top contenders. Final recommendations are then played back over four or five different audio systems to get a complete picture of the range of impressions listeners are likely to have.

I'll talk about this in more depth in my separate essay on audio reproduction, but my own listening impressions range from electrostatics with OTL amps, to dynamic speakers with solid state amps, to the car stereo system, Beyer-Dynamic DT-990 headphones, an old pair of Advents in the basement and sometimes even my 1991 vintage Sony boom box. Why do I do this? The type of sound one hears, immersive or detached, close and palpable or distant and remote, all effect how we enjoy the music, and some listeners have very strong reactions one way or the other.

In deciding on the Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording I try to pick a version that sounds convincing on all types of playback systems, then I offer differing suggestions that may appeal to listeners with more specialized preferences. For example, in the survey of Messian's *Vingt Regards*, the reference pick was recorded in a medium acoustic, while the two alternative recommendations were recorded in a reverberant concert hall and in a dry studio acoustic. The only time I had any qualms about sound-quality being an issue with a reference pick was with the survey on the Brahms D-minor Concerto. The re-mastered EMI recording with Barenboim and Barbirolli sounded absolutely spine-tingling in its intensity over the Monitor Audio speakers and through the Beyer-Dynamic headphones, but sounded less impressive on the planar speakers, and muddled and uninvolved on the old Advents. In this case, the difference was between goose bumps and chills, and well, wondering how on Earth this recording ended up being my top pick from 88 recordings. In the end I went with the Barenboim because the positive experience on some playback systems was so dramatic, and I simply made note of the discrepancies observed with some playback systems.

Generally the quality of the recorded sound is readily apparent and easy enough to characterize. Therefore, I was really taken aback that a noted British reviewer confessed he does all his listening on a portable boom box type system, and that furthermore he considers any discussion of sound or audio reproduction to be an esoteric topic best reserved for "hi-fi nuts." I'll soon be posting an essay on home audio and offering a candid appraisal of my recent experiences shopping for audio.

Thus far we have explored the conditions and environment of how the reviewer listens: objectivity, experience and context, and the vagaries of playback systems. Now we move on to how information is presented to the reader.

As I've said, I've followed music criticism since 1972, and have subscribed to just about every publication possible: Stereo Review, Musical America, Ovation, Fanfare, American Record Guide, Gramophone, Fono Forum (German), Diapason, International Piano Quarterly, Piano News (German), BBC Music Magazine, all the various guide books (Penguin, Gramophone, NPR, etc.) and audio magazines such as The Absolute Sound and Stereophile which also have classical music reviews. In the essay, **The Relevance of Music Criticism**, I talk about the exasperation I have with the Penguin and Gramophone guides only talking about the few recordings they recommend as best. Which versions did they listen to arrive at this conclusion? How do I know if the version I like is the one version they didn't listen to? Obviously this wouldn't be an issue if I were content with everything they recommend, but too often there just isn't enough description to arrive at an informed decision. I guess that's another reason why I have accumulated so many versions of

every major work so that I could decide for myself which ones I like best. That's also the major reason for undertaking the surveys; I needed a list to remind me which ones were my favorites. Often my memory would have me pulling the ones I had a strong negative reaction to!

Through the years I've seen many formats tried. At one time, I believe it was Ovation magazine, recordings were evaluated by two critics, sort of like a musical Siskel & Ebert, sometimes in agreement, other times at odds with one another. The ones which received positive reviews from both seemed to be a sure bet. The French jury system (*La Monde de Musique*) also seemed an interesting solution to the vagaries of individual writer's quirks until you realize that a vast majority of top-rated recordings were by French artists on French labels. Hmm. There is inevitably some nationalistic favoritism evident in almost every publication; Americans tend to hold a special fondness for Fleisher and Szell and naturalized American artists, the Brits have a soft spot for the wartime efforts of Myra Hess, and always a kind word to say about Solomon, Ogdon, Curzon or Terrence Judd. Some of that is of course justified, but to always make comparisons with these National icons seems less than objective. Same can be said of the French, German and Italian press.

But wait, there is a certain logic to defend this practice. The reason why many American critics seem to wax poetic about Serkin, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Szell and Cleveland, and others, is that these were the performers they heard in the formative youth, and whose records they bought when they were first venturing seriously into the world of classical music. Appearances by Anda, Giesecking, Michelangeli, Richter and others were infrequent and did not leave an imprint on the musical culture as to what was normative in music performance. Also, in defense of the Brits, the primary arena of culture is London, and so Penguin and Gramophone and the BBC Music Magazine will often make reference to performers who were active in London because that is what the readership is familiar with. In sum, these somewhat skewed perspectives we see in every country, really even down to individual cities as cultural centers, reflects who played there, who heard them, and the desire of the publication to create a meaningful bond with their readership.

The American Record Guide has periodic overviews of composers where they will get all the primary contributing writers into a group huddle and try to arrive at some sense of which versions of major works they like best. The idea was worthy, but in practice they were often talking past each other, throwing out names that some had heard, others not, and in the end whatever few names emerged as having more than one person recommending it was usually given mention. But given the space limitations, it is hard to characterize a recording in less than a sentence, often in just a few choice descriptive adjectives. And again, as with Penguin, I often noticed that some of my favorites were not even mentioned. Had nobody heard them? I suppose what made these overviews worth reading was the sideline commentary and summary written by editor Donald Vroon. Whenever I think that I've been too harsh or not politically correct I look back to some of the things he wrote and I wish I had the boldness to be so forthright myself!

Of course, I also have my own experiences with the backroom politics of publishing, and more than once had an interview or review refused because the record label in question didn't advertise with the publication. One of the major American publications finally got caught out on this very issue of withholding positive reviews for advertising dollars. I was also briefly involved in concert management and there the politics are even more cutthroat. Not to make an exposé here, but more than once I had artists who were refused engagement because the conductor of the orchestra was with another management agency, and this rippled on down to even the non-profit

events run in town which were all dominated by artists from this conductor's management agency. I was also once called in to consult on a concert idea and met with a member of the board of a major American concert series (as in one of the top five, not saying which one) and I was astounded to find a complete lack of knowledge about who the top talents of the day were. The BBC Music Magazine had just run a special edition on pianists, the greats from the past, the twenty-five best presently active, and twenty-five young artists to keep your eye on. This director had only heard of a few names from this list of the twenty-five greatest pianists active today. I believe the process is more open and more informed in Europe, but in America, based on what I've seen, these board directors are selected for the amount of big-bucks they can bring to the table from the corporations they represent. Well, enough of that depressing topic.

Now we have firmly arrived in the era of digital online information. One of the first I began to follow was EnjoyTheMusic.com primarily for the audio equipment reviews but also for the occasional interesting review of classic recordings. What made it unusual was that all the equipment reviewers were required to give ratings in 16 evaluation parameters, each on a 100-point scale. There were guidelines for each of the testing parameters and this ensured that all the reviewers were playing from the same sheet of music as they each addressed the same performance criterion. This system was later dumbed down to a 1-5 scale with fewer parameters, and finally abandoned altogether, at which point I lost interest. The classical music reviews still have a three point rating system, each on a 1-5 scale in the areas of performance, enjoyment, and recording quality, but the guidelines for reviewers are obviously too vague when old mono recordings get a rating of three or four out of five for sound quality.

ClassicsToday.com has also given some thought to how to ensure consistent evaluative standards. They give ratings on a 1-10 scale for both performance and sound quality. Reviewers are also encouraged to cite what they consider to be a reference recording of the work under review, so that readers may make the same comparisons. As editor David Hurwitz says, readers may take the advice of critics that seem to be sympathetic with the reader's own taste, and ignore the advice of the ones whose perspective runs in a different direction. There is easy access to their review archives and much is available for free. I would advise looking for a few recordings that you know and see which of the reviewers seem to respond in a manner sympathetic to your own tastes. David Hurwitz and Jed Distler are the two primary reviewers for the repertoire I tend to be interested in, and while I almost always agree with the assessments of Hurwitz and seldom those of Distler, this doesn't mean that I avoid Distler's reviews because there are often insightful tidbits of information to be gleaned. The reviews are well-written, but limited to single screen length, so hardly as comprehensive as the surveys that I offer. I know it's merely a reflection of space limitations, but it does annoy me when they throw out a list of names that they consider to be better, but offer no reasoning as to why.

To recap ideas expounded more thoroughly in the **Listener Psychology** essay, as I undertake each comparative review I keep in mind two primary considerations: what is the likely range of acceptable interpretive variance based on all evidence we have of the composer's style and performance tradition, and what is the likely range of reactions from listeners based on their own unique psychology? The former I try to address in the overview commentary, the latter I deal with in the reviews and interpretive analysis sections. The primary defining characteristics of performer inflection are energetic disposition (micro versus macro), phrasing and articulation (the very enunciation and stress-emphasis of the core musical elements), intervallic-hermeneutic implication, and empathetic connectivity. How each listener responds to these elements of musical expression depends on their own psychological disposition.

Understanding all this, being open-minded to a variety of musical perspectives doesn't mean that all performances are equally valid. This is where discernment is critical. A listener may respond to a more overtly rhythmic performance, and that is fine, but of the performers who have the inclination to emphasize rhythmic vigor, which ones pull it off better, both technically (without inconsistent application of metric stress or lapses of technical proficiency) and interpretively (projecting rhythmic vigor without sacrificing other key structural elements).

Here is a summary of the "Preference Profiles" which I use as a basis for my own reviewing:

Physical. Combines elements of what Carl Seashore describes as the Temporal- and Dynamic-oriented listener. Strong meter, rhythm, energy, and upbeat presentation of the music is the dominant characteristic of this listener. This is the type of listener described above who favors strong rhythmic vigor in music.

Emotional. Combines elements of what Seashore describes as the Qualitative- and Tonal listener. This listener is more sensitive to mood and atmosphere (Gestalt) of the work, and also to timbre (tonal color). These type of listeners favor a sensual and opulent sound.

Intellectual. The Ansel Adams types who look for perfect balance and find color and sensuality a distraction. Many listeners with a prominently intellectual approach align themselves with the formalist school of analysis, with its emphasis on form, proportion, and minimal distortion or interference from the performer.

Empathetic Connectivity. When the music finds the listener in a receptive state, and the performer establishes a sense of Affective Attunement, and the listener allows both into their "safe zone," then arising out of a neutral basis in Aesthetic Emotion, the performer can then direct in subtle measures through continued pressure points a more vivid emotional experience, or through subtle indicators of emotional detachment, a more cool emotional climate which focuses our responses to more objective and analytic perception. Performers who can stir responses one way or the other have a higher degree of connectivity.

Hermeneutical Implication. Whether the performer's perspective is physical, emotional, or intellectual, do they convey a convincing understanding of hermeneutical implication and maintain a consistent point of view, or does the accent slip here and there to reveal a disconnect of underlying musical intention?

Gestalt. Do the combined elements of the pianist's articulation, phrasing and pedaling within a given acoustic space give the listener a sense of immediacy, or of more distant remove; a sense of Zen-like oneness and connectivity, or a sense of transcendent expansion of the self? Either perspective may be valid, but I make an attempt to describe one or the other in order to help listeners find performances that they may better connect with.

Now, how I fit all this good intention into a viable format is still a work in progress. As astute readers may have noticed the exact format for my comparative surveys have evolved from the first ones to the present-day offerings, and they will continue to evolve as I find ways to improve. I have tried many things that will not be repeated because they were just too time consuming. Imagine the time just listening to 186 versions of the Liszt Sonata, plus repeats listens on all the top contenders, then to write a cogent overview and provide a table of recordings that I reviewed. I'm always looking for ways to be more efficient with my time without compromising the important essentials that must be conveyed. My goal with each survey is to provide a basic

framework that by way of occasional updates will never go out of date. I envision that all the work put into the Liszt Sonata survey will be just as valid in 15 or 20 years as it is today, because the recordings don't go away, only new ones appear every now and then. But the foundation has been laid so that it will be easy to plug in occasional updates.

What are my goals for this website in the future? First off, to shorten the length of these beasts, not merely because of the time in writing them, but in the time for reader's to digest all the information. I'm not sure how plausible this goal is but I'd like to find a comfortable format wherein all the surveys fit comfortably into about ten pages apiece. Some of them are now 70 or 80 pages! I have about 120 major works slated for comprehensive surveys to be completed in the next 18 months, after which I will probably return to some of the earlier surveys for updates and to tighten up some of the largesse. Meanwhile I have three books all underway, most notably a consumer guide on pianos which is already nearly five hundred pages and with the end only just in sight. I will probably make this a download option to help defray the costs of travelling around the world numerous times to visit piano makers and spend time with artisan piano craftsmen.

Besides the piano reviews I have a keen interest in applying some of this same methodology to audio equipment reviews. As with record reviewing I find the lack of consistent standards most distressing. I also have issues with so-called Golden Ears who pontificate on which components best reproduce piano music yet couldn't tell the difference between the sound of a linear-scale Bechstein and an augmented-scale Steinway if their life depended on it.

As I've mentioned here and there in my writing, if readers have any good ideas on how to make the surveys more effective, more user-friendly, please send me suggestions via the website contact. Despite all the flaws and room for improvement, I still believe that the surveys and essays are a valuable resource for serious music lovers, and there's really nothing else out there which can compare at this level.

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