

The Relevance of Music Criticism

Even though the traditional outlets for music criticism are on the wane, the same basic need for expert guidance remains. This is because the level of knowledge and experience required to truly know what is good and bad in any field requires an investment of time and learning that is beyond the capability of most people. It's not that we don't all have the capacity to become experts in various diverse fields, but in general, we all make choices about what areas will become the focus of our life's energy. And there are varying levels of involvement, sometimes we like to throw ourselves completely at a newfound hobby and find out things for ourselves, other times we have a certain degree of interest but just don't want to expend a lot of energy trying to ferret out all the finer details for ourselves.

As we all know, there is very little resistance to expert opinion when it concerns reviewing cars, or safety and building code inspections, or measuring the carats of a diamond, or any other area where objective measurement can support the verdicts and proclamations of the expert. However, when things venture into the more subjective, be it music, wine tasting, the annual garden competition, or judging ice skaters at an Olympic event, there will always be more resistance, and those who cry 'foul' if the verdicts are not to their liking. Yet, we set up judging tables at wine tastings, piano competitions, or garden shows, not only to cull the best out for public display or to offer hot tips to the consumer, but on the other side of it, those submitting their efforts to adjudication want to be recognized by some authority, or some qualified review panel, for a job well done. Even young children, who all need the unconditional (less critical) support of their parents, take extra pride when a teacher praises their work—without false flattery—for a job truly done well.

In this essay I will present the case for informed opinion as regards the essentially subjective nature of music. I'll discuss the difference between discerning opinion and being judgmental. I'll also touch upon the psychology and hidden biases of listeners and critics, although I have addressed this idea more thoroughly in the essay **Listener Psychology**. Relating to the activities of the critic I have written a separate essay, **Piano Enthusiast Reviewing Methodology**, on the problems of fair adjudication, and ways to make the information presented more helpful to the individual needs of the end-user. I'll be sharing some anecdotal stories along the way which will help illustrate various points.

I'm assuming that anyone reading an essay such as this is an intelligent and inquisitive person who either has a good deal of experience with classical music, or, if new to the scene, is highly motivated and eager to jump right into the deep end. I refuse to dumb down concepts to fit into the typical sound-bite mentality which is so prevalent in the general culture, or to follow current marketing trends which seem to favor the graphic-intensive single-screen formats popular in the various e-magazines. At the same time, I hope that my website is not so dry that it appeals only in staid academic circles.

Ever present in my undertakings as a critic is the need to balance analytical understanding with the expressive intent of the music. That expression, that initial inspired conception which comes to form in any great and universally recognized music, springs from love, humility and spirituality. Compositions that are derived from mere technique always sound one-dimensional and contrived, and fail to ignite the imagination of the listener. Many

performing musicians get caught up in the insignificant minutia of compositional details, as witness the fiery exchange between Alfred Brendel and Charles Rosen over a the tempo of a few transitional measures in a Beethoven sonata. Most listeners wouldn't be affected one way or the other because it's the overall sweep of the movement that they are following.

Thomas Matthews, chief editor of Wine Spectator, has some wise words that apply equally well to wine critics or music critics:

"There's something infinitely depressing about turning a source of joy into a subject of analysis. While you gain a certain kind of appreciation, a certain kind of pleasure by submitting that source of joy to analysis, you really have to fight not to eviscerate its soul in the process."

The question I hear most often is: "why do I need an expert to tell me what I like?" The answer is that you don't. The problem is that the question posed is not really valid or relevant. Life is not exclusively centered around what you like; one must also consider what is good for you. I know I would eat a strawberry sundae everyday if it turned out that it was good for me. But it isn't, and I therefore have to use some degree of moderation. We also know that without prompting, guidance and some cajoling, most teenagers would prefer to read graphic novels, or cruise around on YouTube than read their required literature assignments. "Why do I have to read this crap?" they may wonder in exasperation. They may also wonder why chemistry or algebra are required when they see no need for those skills in their future.

As parents, we may not agree with all the individual choices a teacher makes, but we usually agree with the underlying premise that young adults need exposure to many varied subjects in order to grasp the interrelation of how things work in the real world, and also with the hope that one of these subjects will stick with the youngster and prove an outlet for a career, or at least a life-long interest.

Even as adults when we no longer have the authoritative hand of our parents over us, we don't just blissfully give in to every passing temptation, or spend our entire day engaged in passive entertainment. We have discovered the benefits of differed satisfaction, and also the need for personal responsible and restraint or else the very fabric of society is threatened. Law and order; how to get along and share the sand box. Not just me, me, me.

Maybe we spend a few hours learning what the real issues are before we go to the voting booth. Maybe we read what Consumer Reports has to say about some new cars before we head off to a dealership for a test drive. We take satisfaction in knowing we've done a little homework, and thus have a greater degree of confidence in the decisions that we make: what we buy, where we eat, where we choose to go for a vacation.

Without edification and constant renewal of our store of knowledge and experience we become stagnant. To take this path of least resistance is to just exist passively, without contributing to society, or providing for our own best interests in the future. Perhaps with unlimited funds to throw away, and little or no personal responsibility for anything, life would be different.

In the meantime, we have evil music critics to contend with. (Who, *me??*)

As concerns music criticism, the need for guidance, and the dispensation of opinion, I'll share a story here which will demonstrate certain realities. During the time in the 90's that I spent managing the classical section of a large record store, I made a habit of observing the

dynamics of customer and staff interaction. I always gave my staff members plenty of leash in terms of how they interacted with customers, and if they were enthusiastic about recommending a recording that they honestly enjoyed, I stayed out of the way. On one occasion we got in a new release of a Beethoven Ninth for our store-play library. One of our part-time college students had been going back and forth between the showroom and the downstairs storage area, so I know he had only heard passing snippets of the recording, and hardly with any degree of focus. Before long a customer came in asking for a good recording of the Beethoven Ninth. With his easy smile and typical swagger, our young staff member recommended the new release as the best he'd ever heard. Now, mind you, not only had he not heard the entire performance, or even really listened closely to begin with, but the only other Ninth he was familiar with was the Szell recording we had in our play library. When the customer asked if this was really the best recording available, our staff member confidently heaped on the superlatives, and even quoted from some of the press release on the recording. The customer had no reason to suspect that our staff member really didn't have any basis for making a comparative proclamation, so they marched right over to the check out with the new recording. As it turns out, it wasn't a bad version, but not one that I would have counted among the top ten, or recommended as an only recording of the work. Even back then we must have had nearly sixty versions of the Ninth in our bin, and for him to say without hesitation that this new release was the best just quietly struck a nerve in me. In my case, I had heard maybe 55 of the sixty versions we had at the time and every time I recommended a certain version I always wondered in the back of my mind what those other five were like. What if I missed the one truly miraculous version? Or, my own opinions aside, what if one of those five would be the 'perfect' version for the customer? Therefore, I'd usually frame my recommendations as the best I'd heard and back it up with a positive citation from Penguin or Gramophone. Thus, I suppose, is the key difference between the young student with a successful future in sales, and the ever-searching, ever-doubting incipient music critic.

So, yes, it struck a nerve because, for me, a recording can never be too good for the great masterworks; I want people to hear the best possible representation of these works. Even if there isn't a single 'best' version, we can still sort performances into classes, a top group of performances, which, while offering different perspectives, are nonetheless of a universally recognized high standard, and middling group, and a lower group that first-time listeners should avoid (else they form the wrong opinion of the work). I remember when I was a student and the only LP recording of the Schubert Sonatas in the school library were those lame recordings by Walter Klein on Vox. Those boring renditions turned me off to Schubert for years until I heard Brendel play Schubert and the light was turned on.

There are two points to be made here: first, people are easily sold with a smile and sense of confidence, because, as I said before, they don't want to expend a lot of energy trying to ferret out all the finer details for themselves. This is the expedient manner of commerce. Buying a CD, or bottle of wine, is not that much of a financial risk, compared to buying a house or car or grand piano. But the small choices we make aren't necessarily inconsequential in the long term. A mosquito bite isn't all usually all that life threatening, yet once bitten we actively take measures to avoid getting bitten again, because we know the irritating discomfort that ensues. Same with a bad experience at a restaurant; probably won't eat there again. That could be why, despite all the easy rapport and quick sales of our energetic young staffer, the more experienced members on staff (such as myself) were always the ones to get the repeat business from satisfied customers.

The second point is that most people have no reluctance in giving a personal endorsement to something even though they may have very little comparative experience about it. In a sense, a person needn't have extensive experience eating at various Pashtun restaurants in order to post a glowing review on a consumer feedback forum ("we had such a great experience here"). Maybe the restaurant is really quite sub-standard compared to the others, but maybe that level of quality is still sufficient that the average consumer can have a positive experience. And there are other mitigating factors, such as maybe this Pashtun restaurant is the only interesting ethnic restaurant in a neighborhood otherwise dominated by burger joints. Even so, I have some issues about giving free license to overly-enthusiastic endorsements...

By praising, or even just passively accepting, sub-standard performance, we inadvertently siphon off resources from parties or individuals who are doing good work. Every dollar spent at the joint just skimming along with minimal effort is a dollar that isn't going towards rewarding the efforts of somebody who cares and does good work. In the broader scheme of things (at the macro level), the natural laws of capitalism and free market enterprise work well enough to keep the fit moving along and kill off the weak from the herd (thus spake Ayn Rand), but at the micro-level there are often adverse effects. Being a fit competitor in the market doesn't always mean being the best, because as we all know, there are plenty of unscrupulous practices going on behind the scenes.

Let's look at this micro-level close to home. Let's say there are two Pashtun restaurants, one is closer to where we live, but they cut corners, use left-over produce, mix in day-old preparations, and don't have a very keen culinary sense; the other is a further eight miles away, the chef insists on the freshest and best quality ingredients and takes pride in his culinary skills. From a marketing point of view, since both charge about the same amount, and both pay about the same commercial square footage rent, the one that cuts corners has a more comfortable profit margin, while the other one is always fretting about paying the monthly rent.

Let's say two different customers visit the sub-standard joint which is conveniently near where they live. One who doesn't know the potential of the cuisine finds the food and service lackluster and pretty much decides that not only do they not need to revisit this establishment, but they form the opinion that they don't care for Pashtun cuisine and will probably not experiment any further. The other customer is, likewise, hardly a culinary expert, but happens to receive an above-average preparation with ingredients that were freshly delivered. She finds that the food "hits the spot" and is delighted with the experience, so she posts a glowing review on the consumer forum. What has happened is this: one customer is turned off for life, the other one has now written about her positive experience which may actually attract away customers from the locus of the restaurant with the better food. Now, those customers who know better may then post contrary opinions on the forum, but maybe they are the type who just shrug it off and say nothing. It could take a long time for the natural market forces to decide which one is more worthy, and meanwhile the good one has gone out of business.

This is why we need the intercessionary efforts of the food critic who will give a nod of approval to the good restaurant and thus draw our attention to destinations that might be worth a little extra effort to get to. With this kind of support and positive word of mouth, the quality-conscious entrepreneur may begin to build enough capital to open a second location nearer to where you live. More specific to the music industry (if you've grown tired of the food analogy) when I do my comparative surveys I hear plenty of recordings that are just barely

competent, and a few that can hardly be considered professional. Most of these sub-standard recordings come from small independent companies, but sometimes even the major labels can disappoint. So let's take a look at how recordings come into being.

One common myth is that if there is a CD by a well-known artist on a major label, then it must be good. The fact is that recording companies often ask artists to fill in gaps in the label's catalog, and perhaps this is repertoire that the artist can play competently but without any real conviction or distinctive insights. Or maybe the record company puts together two promising young artists to record a violin and piano sonata, but somehow there is no chemistry and the performance is lackluster. In concerto recordings, engineers working in unfamiliar venues may get balances wrong, and this can have an impact on the end result. Not everything can be hit out of the park or even played for a home run. There are many reasons why record companies just throw out product and hope to at least recoup their costs. Then there are the small independent companies who sometimes have quirky ideas about things and will become fascinated with a certain performers with equally quirky ideas, and they hope to capture a niche segment of the market. The thing is there are no disclaimers on quirky or lackluster or poorly-recorded CDs. You might end up with the equivalent of the Walter Klein Schubert Sonatas.

After the recording process, the next step is promotional marketing and the reviewing process. Record companies send out review samples to legitimate reviewing forums hoping for positive reviews with juicy one-liners that they can quote. In traditional print journalism, every editor knows the interests and specialties of his contributing writers. Let's say a writer has expressed an interest in the piano music of Chopin, and has made frequent reference to Rubinstein and Horowitz, which he has listened to for decades. The writer seems to know what he is talking about and crafts well-written reviews. So the editor sends along a new recording of Chopin by Evgeny Kissin. The reality is that despite being a well-educated person, and an attentive listener, this reviewer really has a very limited basis for making comparisons.

Let's say I review the same disc, but I have heard dozens of versions of the work, heard dozens of versions in various concert halls around the world and have even had a go at playing the music myself to understand where all the hidden difficulties lie that pianists try to hide. This latter issue, of knowing the problematic passages in piano performance, is something only a player can know, and although it only rarely pays dividends (perhaps 5% of the time) it is yet another tool of discernment which forms the basis for a comprehensive comparative context. I remember the first time I heard this come into play when I heard Perahia's *Mephisto Waltz*, and I thought, "Ah-ha, he has trouble here just as much as I do," so my ears were able to pick up on the those micro-hesitations and less articulated passages. The point here is that irrespective of who is the more clever writer, my opinions are derived from a greater range of experience than the writer who is not a player, and who has more limited comparative experience. Even though I've heard Rubinstein and Horowitz live, maybe somebody else comes along who has even greater experience than I do, perhaps somebody who actually heard Cortot and Hofmann when they were playing, therefore having an even greater basis for making comparative proclamations.

So the question then is: what is more important, experience or objective outlook? Passion or methodology? Well, a person hearing a work for the first time may give an honest and unbiased opinion of the work, but that would be a subjective appraisal lacking in discernment. True discernment requires great experience in order to declare a relative value. Another wine writer, Matt Kramer, said this: "Judgment is the ability to put into context whatever you are

tasting and tease out a greater meaning, an understanding that is more than simply an analytical dissection of a wine's attributes or deficiencies." For example, a wine may taste good, but totally like any other Barolo from the region of north Italy, in which case, the experienced critic must point out that the wine lacks *typicity*, and somebody expecting the taste and food pairing characteristics of a classic Barolo would need to be warned that the wine is not truly representative of its type. We can say the same thing about Glenn Gould's Bach. It may be good, and it may deeply affect millions of listeners, but it most certainly is not like anything Bach conceived.

Blind judgment would declare that Gould's Bach is invalid, yet true discernment, having that ability to put things in context, allows us to recognize his genius and we relegate his unique conceptions to the category of "alternative perspective." In that regard, it most certainly has value.

Even the most experienced listener may fail to recognize innate biases, and we'll get to that in bit. For the reader, the most informative advice can only come from a critic with experience and comprehensive basis of comparative context. Somebody who only has a very limited basis of comparison is not somebody whose opinions I am going to take seriously. Yet, even the reviewer with the most extensive experience may proffer advice which may not align with the reader's.

I maintain a notebook which keeps a running tabulation of critic's reviews and the percentage of times I thought their reviews were insightful or misleading. This doesn't mean that I entirely avoid reviewers who consistently recommend versions that I don't like. For example, I rarely agree with critic Jed Distler, and even though I know his verdicts may irritate me, I still find his reviews well-written and usually with some interesting point worth pondering. His fellow reviewer at Classics Today, David Hurwitz, I almost always agree with, yet since our outlook is so similar, I find that his writing is so much 'preaching to the choir' and rarely challenging. Of course, if I weren't a reviewer myself, as a consumer interested only in making a wise investment, it would be important for me to realize which of these two writers has the best track record for dispensing advice that is in my own interest (i.e. something I'm going to like). For me, that would be Hurwitz, somebody else may align more with Distler.

This brings me to a sore spot I have with many of the mainstream sources of reviewing. A critic may rant or rave about a recording under review, and perhaps make a few comparisons with other well-known recordings. But let's say the piece under review is the Liszt Sonata, and they exclaim that it is the best version they've ever heard. Well, how many versions have they heard, and which ones specifically? Whenever I read the Penguin Guide I'm somewhat exasperated because they only talk about the top few recordings that they recommend. We are supposed to trust in their sage wisdom based on years of experience (which I can respect), but we have no idea exactly what versions they've heard to arrive at their conclusions and pronouncements. Maybe they missed the one recording that I think is awe-inspiring and better than the versions they recommend, or maybe they did hear it and found it not to their liking, we just don't know one way or the other.

While we're talking about the Liszt Sonata, the *International Piano Quarterly* once featured a "Collector's Guide" to the Liszt Sonata. They offered a discography of some 224 recordings, with recommended versions printed in bold. This makes it look like the reviewer had heard all these recordings, but if you read the text, the reviewer listened to sixty versions and recommended five from among those. For my own survey I listened to 186 commercial

recordings, plus my private radio broadcast collection, and with some apologies listed another fifty-some that I hadn't yet got around to. Imagine, at about a half hour each, that's over 94 hours of listening, plus going back multiple times to re-hear final recommendations, not to mention the innumerable times over the years as I've heard and seen performed this work to formulate my extensive background experience. Somebody else may come along and listen to 300 versions and my hat would be off to them if they maintained their sanity! The thing is, it should be the goal of critics to hear as much as possible before making categorical proclamations, yet this is obviously not the case.

The typical unqualified commentaries and diatribes posted on YouTube don't have any comprehensive basis for making such proclamations. It is clear that recordings made by the elder Arrau and the young Argerich are going to be conceptually very different, and likely to appeal to listeners with different psychological dispositions. Yet these rabid fans consider that their own favorite is the only one worthy of expressing the music. Those passive and phlegmatic types who try to referee from the middle simply fall back on the lame line that there are no right and wrongs in music because it's all just subjective opinion anyway. Yet, even allowing for a range of latitude in tempo or energy level, it is clear that some interpretations come closer to the composer's intentions than others.

Obviously, even composers can have a substantial range of moods and energy levels depending on their metabolism level, and this would reflect on the choice of tempo or energy level with which they would play the music. Beethoven himself was known to vary certain details from performance to performance because there is not a single solution that can address every circumstance of ensemble, acoustics, or even mood of the day. Yet, the expressive intent of the music would not undergo a wholesale revision of its underlying creative intent. Something conveying sorrow and loss would not suddenly transform into a coy soliloquy with a fanciful dalliance of mid-phrase pizzicatos. Those elements would be foreign to the overall creative conception. It is my job as a critic to recognize the legitimacy of various approaches, but also recognize that regardless of perspective, regardless of the energy level or underlying *artistic intention*, certain performances pull it all together better than others.

Now, sure, at a dinner party the composer might have fun and parody himself or Liszt or some other pianist and do funny things with the music, but these are not serious attempts to derive expressive satisfaction from the work he has created. Yet, I do hear such revisionist 'parodies' in my comparative surveys, and many of these are never, or not sufficiently, called out by the critics.

Let's say Chopin has had a cup of coffee and is really feeling his oats, so he lets loose a fast and vigorous rendering of one of his etudes with almost reckless abandon. Later that night, after a glass of wine his metabolism is at a low point, and the tempo is one-third slower than before, and with slowing cadence at the end instead of the decisive snap-and-crackle cadence he played before. Between the two renderings we see a substantial range of moods, though in each case, relative thematic, structural and articular characteristics remain the same. In other words, his forte may be more vigorous after the coffee, but even at night, the forte is still relatively louder than the mezzo-piano, legato passages do not suddenly transform into pizzicato pixie dances. This is what we would call an extreme, but conceivably viable, range of authentic expression for this music. However, if Gould comes along and plays safely within the middle zone of tempo and energy level, yet transforms all the legato phrases to a detached articulation with no rubato or overall dynamic arch to the line, we can safely say that that

would fall outside the accepted range of variance. It would be the critic's duty to forewarn consumers that the recordings are highly individualistic and not rendered to true style. The differences between a slow Arrau and a brisk Argerich may define the very outer limits of variance, but we cannot outright dismiss either approach in the same way we could with Gould. This is one of the duties of the music critic, to describe the characteristics of the performance and evaluate whether they fall within acceptable range of variance.

Now, let's say somebody discovers some lost tapes of Gould playing Chopin Nocturnes. It's not inconceivable that some listeners might be highly interested in hearing how he would play such repertoire, and a small percentage of these listeners might actually respond positively, especially if they have never cared much for Chopin before. But they would have to realize that their opinions fall well outside the normative range of mainstream interpretation. And just to be sure I've made my point, such a listener may also stubbornly hold that they know what they like, and they like Gould's Chopin, and they don't care if all the critics say Arrau or Moravec are better. It's fine to have individual tastes, but it's really crass and narcissistic to insist that your favorite, the one everybody else loathes, is the best thing since sliced bread. Historical and stylistic context, informed opinion, reasoned arguments, and some degree of social skill should all be requirements before somebody stands up on a soapbox and starts spouting off.

The concept of context can apply to the historical circumstance of how a composition came into being, but for the purposes of this discussion I want to focus on how the critics considers a recording in context to all the other recordings of the same work. Sad to say, but many music lovers, and an especially high majority of professional musicians and professors that I know, have only one single recording of major works. They may have one Beethoven Ninth, one Liszt Sonata, one Rachmaninoff Third that they stick with year after year. If they just happen to get a dud, or one of these revisionist interpretations that completely misrepresent the music, and they are never inspired to listen again, many times they just assume that maybe it's the music that doesn't speak to them. Sometimes, maybe decades later, they'll hear a live concert that brings something to life, and exclaim in wonderment that they never knew the music was so great.

My dictum is that for every major work (consult any of the 'top-fifty' or 'top-hundred' lists that appear in various classical music guide books), each listener should at least hear three different versions to be sure they've got a fair idea of what the expressive range of the music is all about. If you hear the Beethoven *Pastoral* (Symphony or Sonata) once and declare that it is not to your liking, you really need to hear a faster or a slower version, and try listening at a different time of the day before you close the book on it forever. And of course, one should never really close the book on anything, because as we learn and evolve, our own 'context' changes and with this the perspectives we have on music.

This dictum assumes, of course, that one has a desire to really understand classical music. If I hear a twangy country-western song sung by Willie Nelson and don't like it, I don't need somebody telling me that I really need to hear the live Houston Astrodome version, or the lost unexpurgated version from the original studio session which 'anybody in the know' would consider to be superior. There are certain genres of music that simply fall outside my milieu of interest, both for aesthetic and philosophical reasons. But if I know I like Beethoven, and there's one Bagatelle that I just don't appreciate, I'm going to study the score and listen to numerous versions of it before I start going around town telling everybody that Beethoven blew it on this one. In this case, being informed falls within my natural area of interest.

Once you have made a serious effort to understand, and have considered the music, or the performance of the music, within its context, then it's okay to say that it is either a favorite, not a favorite, or of only middling interest to you. Many music writers continue to pontificate that any masterwork you don't like is merely a masterwork that you don't understand. I disagree; not all works are gleaming masterpieces, and if we hold everything in equal regard that demonstrates a lack of discernment. Many composers have had serious misgivings about some of their own creations, and even Beethoven had favorite sonatas and some he wished to forget. In my surveys I share freely my own opinions about which movements that I consider pure genius or others that are more 'problematic,' and this based on informed, carefully scrutinized consideration of context. As I've said, not everything the great composers wrote is a masterpiece, there were also some duds along the way.

The same applies to great performers. Pick your favorite, but not everything Gould or Richter or Arrau played was always up to the standard that they were capable of. In my essay on Listener Psychology I talk about how people get stuck in loops of associative confluence which is how we end up with this cult of personality worship. For myself, there is not a single composer or performer whom I so revere that I can turn a blind eye and say they are without fault. I take everything on a case by case basis. Of course, this also isolates me to a degree, because I'll never enjoy the fun and fellowship of being in a fan club.

Fan clubs and the cult of personality worship. How do these things happen? I talk about some of these issues in my essay **Listener Psychology**, but let's take a closer look at how we develop attachments that can become hidden biases in our outlook. Don Miguel Ruiz, Jr. has written an interesting book which addresses this issue, it is called *The Five Levels of Attachment*. I'll paraphrase here some of the concepts, and put them into the context of musical preferences. The five levels of attachment are:

- Level One: The Authentic Self
- Level Two: Preference
- Level Three: Identity
- Level Four: Internalization
- Level Five: Fanaticism

At Level One, we swim with the flow of life, observing and experiencing stimuli about us with childlike innocence and curiosity. At this level we have no preconceptions beforehand, and carry with us very little lingering resonance other than to note, perhaps subconsciously, whether we like or dislike the experience. The first experience touching a hot stove, or the first time we taste ice cream, or perhaps the first time we hear a symphony orchestra.

At Level Two, we discover that acquiring and remembering knowledge of our experiences helps us interact more fully with the world around us. How we use this knowledge, the yes and no choices we make in life paint the portrait of our life. Let's say we attend a soccer game, and either arbitrarily, or because everybody else in our family is, we decide that rooting for one team makes the game more exciting. We have temporarily invested some of our own energy into the outcome of the game. But win or lose, once the game is over, we don't have any lingering passions about the outcome of the game and may discuss the dynamics and of the game with impartiality with somebody who rooted for the opposite team. The focus here is on the passing enjoyment of the game.

At Level Three we are no longer passive and impartial observers but decide to let our knowledge begin to form the basis of how we identify ourselves in the world. We take the passion of the game home and begin to identify with a favorite team, or having attended several symphony concerts now we decide that Beethoven is our favorite composer. We seek the company of others who share our interests. When somebody asks “what are you?” and you answer a policeman, a musician, a NASA scientist, then you are responding by identifying yourself with the specialized knowledge that you’ve developed. You identify yourself as a musician, or fan of this team, or somebody who likes German Riesling.

At Level Four our desire to seek the company of others who share our interests now extends to exclude those who don’t. Freedom of will is subjugated by the need to fit a certain group or ideal.

At Level Five we have a rigid attachment to an idea and excessive intolerance of opposing views. Interests, passions and sense of identity are now replaced by obsessive fanaticism.

In my essay on **Listener Psychology** I talked about the Chilean woman who could only listen to Arrau. At first this started out as a sense of identity in that they both shared the same heritage, but later it evolved into level four and almost level five intolerance for anybody but Arrau (because after decades of imprinting upon her aesthetic perceptions her opinions about how music should sound were irretrievably ‘fixed’ to Arrau’s manner of playing) .

Ruiz talks about how closely we identify our self-image as being tied to the specific knowledge we have acquired. This knowledge becomes a mask by which we identify ourselves and by which others recognize us as a distinctive individual amongst seven billion souls on the planet. “We construct the mask of our identity by becoming the embodiment of our acquired knowledge in the form of our passion. This is a mask based on our preferences in life.” But he also cautions that our true authentic self is more than just the mask we wear. For example, if Claudio Arrau had tragically lost his hearing and could no longer identify himself as a concert pianist, or otherwise engaged his love and knowledge of music, would he have been a lost soul without purpose? Doubtless such a cruel tragedy would have dealt a severe blow to his sense of identity and taken away the great passion of his life. But, his Authentic Self would have found other outlets such as his interest in gardening or collecting primitive artwork. And people would have still acknowledged him for the accomplishments and contributions he did make in music before the tragedy.

I know that if I could no longer be involved in music (which, since I was a toddler, has been a lifelong passion) I would quickly fill the void with other hobbies, passions, and interests which now have only peripheral engagement in my life. The idea of Authentic Self is not to revert back to the childlike innocence, or purify ourselves against passions and whatever sense of self-identity we wish to take. If all I did was eat, poop, sleep, wake and meditate, that would pretty much negate my belief that we are here for a reason, and specifically, taking corporeal form for a reason. That reason is not to zone out and purify ourselves against passion, but rather to actively engage passion with the utmost zeal. Corporeal existence is all about the senses, and this in balance with our innate intelligence which gives us a species-unique perception of self-awareness.

This sense of purpose requires that we make choices about how to expend our life’s energy. If the passions become too imbalanced with the long-term interest of the organism, then the passions have become too obsessive. The concert pianist or professional soccer player may take every measure to avoid making mistakes, and may spend hours every day to train against

inadvertent mistakes, but if a mistake is made, they should never question their value as human beings, or the overall good they do to contribute to the edification, enlightenment or delightful entertainment of others. On the other hand, true passion and sense of identity would not allow a person to just shrug off laziness or inattentiveness, and say “oh well, I’m still a child of the Universe, and the universe doesn’t really care about making scores, or playing Chopin beautifully.” Everything in balance. If our desire to excel at something can make others feel good about what we do, then it is good. We all desire to be accepted in the community and by excelling in the area of our passion we may be able to contribute something edifying to the community.

The point I want to emphasize (as does Ruiz) is that our passions in life and our sense of identity must be guarded against intolerance and fanaticism. The minute we close the door on life’s experience, think we know it all, we begin to stagnate and eventually atrophy. So, I acknowledge that my passion for music and sense of identity puts me in the Level-Three category, with some less-passionate Level-Two preferences, and an occasional lapse into Level-Four. But I always remain open-minded to new experiences, new opinions within a changed context. The important thing for a reviewer is to know what his/her potential points of bias are, and to help readers sort out issues which can easily become divisive expressions of intolerance.

Much of this discussion has proceeded on the premise that readers, who may not otherwise spend umpteen hours divining which version of a work they like best, rely on experienced critics to point out worthy performance by which they may derive enjoyment and edification. However, not everybody is really interested in finding the ‘best’ that falls within mainstream interpretation. I have known listeners who truly delight in discovering perverse interpretations. I see postings on YouTube and commentaries in discussion forums where people talk with glee about performances that I have found entirely unsatisfactory. They seem to get a vicarious thrill from hearing music fall apart at the seams, from pianists who lose control or give in to manic bursts of total abandon. It’s as if these listeners were in some ways rebelling against what they perceive as the constrictive ‘law and order’ of classical music. I’m not talking about party records here, where we can all get a chuckle out of some impulsive performance quirk that didn’t quite pan out. No, these people aren’t laughing, they actually enjoy the crazed and wild-eyed performances that I find appalling. Here are a couple examples: “Notes be damned, listen to how she throws herself like a ravenous tigress at the keyboard.” Or: “This is amazing, listen to how Ogdon goes ape shit all over this!” I’m baffled by these kinds of responses. This is the gladiatorial blood-lust that made Gould leave the concert stage.

Others become easily bored with what most would call appropriate performance practice. If the music has become that boring then there is a serious disconnect in how they are listening to the music. I still have recordings that I first heard over forty years ago, and they are still as thrilling as ever. Of course, I have thousands of recordings that I play in rotation, but let’s just say, no matter which particular version I’m listening to I am always deeply moved by the Bruckner Seventh. The kind of listeners I’m talking about, based on some individuals I’ve actually interacted with, have lost their love for classical music but are stuck in some sort of loop that they can’t get out of. One pianist is well known in all piano stores throughout the East Coast where he regularly shows up crashing and banging his way through ‘approximations’ of the Chopin Etudes. I find this prostituting of good music to fit the whims of abusive moods to be most distressing, and in a couple points in my life I’ve had fits of rage or depression and have done similar things. But I always felt so terrible afterwards, this using

music to vent raw emotion for no edifying purpose (here I would argue that this is healthy self-balancing, rather than beating up oneself for being unworthy over some mistake or misdeed as we talked about above). Yet some make such a habit of this that they can hardly sit still and patiently listen to anything. The music has become completely external mechanics to them, without its intended expressive *spannung*. I have to admit that this is one area where I have yet to discover the underlying psychological motivation. As such, I cannot pretend to be a helpful guide, nor would these kinds of listeners desire any kind of guidance.

In summary, I hope I have sufficiently conveyed four key thoughts:

1. We all need expert guidance (myself included) and can even learn from writers with whom we may not always agree.
2. Reviewers should be aware of divisive issues and help readers to understand what falls within or outside of the acceptable range of variance. The acceptable range of variance is almost never more than a 30% differential in timing, and the critic would have to have access to an extensive comparative base in order to determine the appropriate context.
3. We should all ponder the levels of attachments that we form, and what consequence those attachments have for people we interact with. We should always seek to challenge our own preconceptions.
4. Not everybody is interested in the 'best' and some of their outrageous opinions reveal a deep psychological or aesthetic disconnect. It is very difficult to reason with such individuals.

Please read the essays on methodology and listener psychology, which together give a more complete picture of the issues explored on this website. Thanks for being an interested and informed reader; together we can hope to keep the standards of the arts high for future generations to experience the wonder of classic music.

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