

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 6 Critics

### Schumann and Berlioz

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Critics

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The same explosion of musical activity into public life that gave rise to the new virtuosity (or found an outlet in it) also gave rise to a new musical profession altogether: that of critic, someone who evaluates music and musicians professionally, for the benefit of nonprofessionals and nonpractitioners.

This last proviso is necessary in order to distinguish the music critics who flourished in the nineteenth century in response to a new public need from other writers about music, such as theorists and pedagogues. Theoretical and didactic writings have existed as long as there has been a literate tradition of music, but they address an audience of professionals, would-be professionals, and amateur practitioners on matters of professional or practical concern. It was a new musical market—new patterns of musical consumption by a broad nonprofessional public—that required the mediation of public advisers and public spokesmen.

The very idea of a “public sphere”—an arena of free speech and debate, a “marketplace of ideas” in which everyone had, at least in principle, a stake and therefore a right to participate—was a novelty in continental Europe. In England it had a longer history, traceable as far back as the time of Handel; but on the Continent it was an idea associated above all with the Enlightenment and the faith it placed in the dissemination of knowledge, and the exercise of reason, as guarantors of political freedom. In the public sphere privileged status was accorded, at least in theory, not to wealth, not to birth, but to persuasiveness; and persuasion, ideally, flowed from expertise. Power flowed to the expert from the ability to influence or even mold public opinion. As the concept of the public-at-large grew by leaps and bounds during the nineteenth century owing to urbanization and educational reform, and as the idea grew popular that ultimate political power resided in it, many vied for the power to shape its views.

The supreme instrument for the exercise of this power in an age of exploding literacy was the press, and the role of musical expert molding public opinion on music and musicians was exercised both in the columns of daily newspapers and in specialized musical journals addressed not only to musicians but to the concertgoing and music-purchasing public at large. To become a public expert and a power in the public sphere of music, one either gained employment at a newspaper or founded a journal. Perhaps the earliest musical journalism that looks like what we now think of as criticism in the modern sense was the columns of Joseph Addison about the London (Italian) opera stage, which appeared in *The Spectator* beginning in 1711. The first specialized music journal was *Critica musica*, published and edited in Hamburg (Germany's main commercial center) by the composer and theorist Johann Mattheson between 1722 and 1725.

Addison, a lawyer and politician and definitely not a musician (although he did write a libretto or two), was the prototype for the “critic as public spokesman.” Mattheson, who was a very distinguished musician indeed, was the prototype for the “critic as public adviser.” The two types have coexisted ever since. Their interests (in both senses of the word) do not necessarily coincide. In the 1940s in New York, for example, the two most influential music reviewers classically embodied the dichotomy. Olin Downes (1886–1955), who wrote for the *New York Times*, was a musical amateur whose previous paid involvement with the art had amounted to playing the piano to accompany exercise classes and singing lessons. Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), who wrote for the *Herald Tribune*, was an important composer who remained active as such throughout his tenure with the newspaper. The one was as militant a public representative or mouthpiece as the other was a public preceptor. It was a rare day when their reviews agreed about anything.

It is Thomson whose writings have remained in print and are considered in retrospect to be a significant ingredient in the history of their times. This may not be altogether fair; Downes, who wrote for the more powerful paper, probably had a more decisive

impact at the time on musicians' careers and composers' reputations. But it is understandable that history has favored Thomson. It is the very conflict of interest in composer critics that claims the attention of history. Their words are inevitably read as advocacy—even propaganda—rather than objective judgment.

This may lessen their effectiveness in the short run, but it serves in retrospect as a lens through which to consider not only their own work as composers, or that of their subjects, but also, more broadly, the nature of the relationship between the creator of musical works and the audience that received them—the relationship, to put it in “market” terms, between producer and consumer. As already intimated in the previous chapter, that relationship was subject to strains during the nineteenth century owing to the contradictions that emerged, not only between the ideals of romanticism and the realities of the market, or between romanticism and Enlightenment, but even within romanticism itself. As a result, composer critics tend to be profoundly ambivalent figures, and fascinating ones.

There were many interesting composer critics over the course of the nineteenth century, including Alexander Serov (1820–71) and César Cui (1835–1918), both opera composers, in Russia, and Hugo Wolf (1860–1903) in Germany. Liszt himself published a good deal of critical prose (often ghostwritten by his aristocratic mistresses, the Comtesse d'Agoult and the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein). There were also, to be sure, some very influential and culturally significant noncomposing critics, including Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904) in Vienna and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) in London.

The birth of modern musical criticism is usually traced to the founding at Leipzig, in 1798, of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (“Universal music news”), a “musical newspaper for the general public,” to give its name the proper nuance. Friedrich Rochlitz (1769–1842), its first editor, was an amateur musician, trained as a theologian, who had worked as a professional journalist and translator before specializing in music criticism. Rochlitz kept his post at the helm for two decades, and became the most influential musical tastemaker in Germany. The journal itself lasted until 1848. The momentous early articles on Beethoven by E. T. A. Hoffmann, which played such a crucial role in defining the romantic outlook on music, were all published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* during Rochlitz's tenure.

Two early composer critics stand out as historical figures by reason of their eminence in both their domains. As it happens, one of them went the newspaper route and the other founded a journal. Hector Berlioz (1803–69) worked regularly as reviewer and essayist for the *Journal des débats*, the leading Paris daily, from 1834 to 1863, and wrote for a number of other publications besides. He did it for a livelihood, and (so he said) reluctantly, since his composing earned him little or nothing until the last decade of his life.

Robert Schumann (1810–56) became involved in criticism at just about the same time. He planned and wrote a prospectus for his Leipzig magazine, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (“New music journal”), in 1833. As the place of publication already suggests, Schumann's journal was intended at the outset as a direct challenge or alternative to the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, which had grown conservative and “philistine,” and hostile to the elite faction Schumann wished to champion. The first issue appeared on 3 April 1834. Schumann edited it single-handedly (and filled its columns almost single-handedly) throughout its first decade. Since 1844 it has had many other editors, and still exists, at least in name.

**Citation (MLA):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 6 Critics." *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press. New York, USA. n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2024. <<https://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-chapter-006.xml>>.

**Citation (APA):** Taruskin, R. (n.d.). Chapter 6 Critics. In *Oxford University Press, Music in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, USA. Retrieved 30 Oct. 2024, from <https://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-chapter-006.xml>

**Citation (Chicago):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 6 Critics." In *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press. (New York, USA, n.d.). Retrieved 30 Oct. 2024, from <https://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-chapter-006.xml>

POWERED BY: **PUBFACTORY**