

Who'd be a Music Critic?

by Geoffrey Norris

“Wow! All those free tickets!” Such was the familiar reaction when, in response to the conversational gambit “What do you do?”, I admitted that I was a music critic. There would often be follow-up questions such as “Have you met Take That?” or “What do you think of Lady Gaga’s latest single?”, to which I humiliatingly had to answer that you could write on the head of a pin what I know about pop music. One famous TV soap actress uttered “Yuk!” when I told her what I did. And a relatively well-known singer made the sign of the crucifix with her fingers to ward off the devil incarnate, until she realized that I had written very favourably about one of her recitals. It was the word “critic” that stuck in people’s craw, as it does in mine, for it subconsciously implies negative criticism and carping. Given that I had an overarching awe and admiration for 99.9% of the artists I heard on the concert platform and in the opera house, I always felt that another word would be better – commentator, perhaps, or observer, or reviewer? But it said “Chief Music Critic” on my *Daily Telegraph* business card, so that’s what I was.

For a decade or so after university and post-graduate research I had been contributing reviews to *The Musical Times* and other periodicals while working, successively, as an editor on the new, 20-volume *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, then as lecturer in music history at the Royal Northern College of Music, and then at Oxford University Press as editor of its scholarly music books. I was also doing a fair bit of broadcasting for BBC Radio 3 and the World Service. Then one evening at the London Coliseum in 1983 the chief music critic of *The Times* asked if I would like to join his team (that’s how recruiting was done: no adverts for jobs, just a metaphorical tap on the shoulder, rather like being sized up for the secret service). I wrote for *The Times* – very much as a “stringer” or part-timer – for about six months until *The Daily Telegraph* asked if I would like to jump ship and be a full-timer for them. I remained with the *Telegraph* for a quarter of a century.

In those early days, it was all typewriters, carbon paper and Tipp-Ex. Our routine was strict. We wrote all our reviews immediately after the event for next morning’s paper, with a rigid deadline of 11 00pm and a specified number of words. If the concert was in London and within

easy reach of Fleet Street, we would go back to the office, do a lot of pacing around and tap out a top copy and two carbons on an ancient Olivetti, then hand the review to the night editor who would take it to the print room to be set up in lead type. If the concert was elsewhere in the UK or abroad, as it often was, reviews had to be dictated down the phone to the copy-takers, sometimes entailing interesting tussles. You might, for instance, be reviewing a piece by Krzysztof Penderecki and start spelling it out – K for kilo, R for romeo, Z for zulu – only to be interrupted by an irritated voice saying, “I know how to spell Krzysztof Penderecki.” Then moments later you might cite a work by Elgar and carry on dictating, only to be hauled back with the question “How are you spelling Elgar?”

If I reflect on that time with a certain rose-tinted wistfulness, there is no doubt that things became less of a hassle with the advent of computers. New technology ultimately signaled streamlining for the newspaper industry, so our paper no longer kept on a sub-editor just to deal with late night reviews and our deadlines were pushed back to 11am the next morning - until, that is, the 1995 BBC Proms season. That was the year in which, through the standard Darwinian process of death and dismissal, I was appointed chief, and my editor decided that we would in future review every single one of the 80 or so Proms on the night. We were by then computerized, but this was before the general rollout of wi-fi, so it was a question of dial-up or copy-takers. Nor did the Royal Albert Hall have anything resembling a press centre, so we were assigned to a series of empty spaces and, on occasion, to the Royal Retiring Room, a somewhat drab and dispiriting workplace but with the distinct advantage of having its own very regal lavatory. Even when in subsequent years the transmitting of copy became easier, these were often hair-raising times. Proms are frequently much longer than ordinary concerts. If they finish by 9 30pm it’s a welcome rarity giving you 90 minutes to write and file your copy. But it was often 10 00 or 10 30, and on one occasion, 10 45, leaving only a quarter of an hour to write and file 350 or 400 words. Afterwards you would be strolling down to South Kensington tube, the phone would ring and the sub would be asking you for 25 more words, which you had to crouch down and write in the middle of the pavement.

Did I enjoy it, though? Of course I did. It was the most wonderful job that anybody could have. The joy of hearing great artists and of spotting young talent, and being able to write about it, was consistently fulfilling and rejuvenating. As to the criteria for reviewing a concert, the moral and legal issues, critical responsibility, the necessary preparation, the thinking up of a first sentence, the language of music criticism, the discipline of writing to length and to time – these are now topics about which I lecture to my students rather than subjecting myself to them night after night. Do I miss it? It certainly felt odd when I left the paper in 2009, not going to 15-20 concerts a month and having evenings at home, but now I just go to concerts I want to go to. And these days the riposte to that “Wow! All those free tickets!” is quite truthfully that I buy my own.