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Henri Temianka Correspondence; (bernheimer)

Henri Temianka

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Description

This collection contains material pertaining to the life, career, and activities of Henri Temianka, violin virtuoso, conductor, music teacher, and author. Materials include correspondence, concert programs and flyers, music scores, photographs, and books.

Keywords

Henri Temianka, Martin Bernheimer, March 26, 1967, newspaper, chamber music, recreation and entertainment, culture, camaraderie, virtuosity in musical performance, music critics, discontent, Arthur Rubinstein, Zubin Mehta, orchestra, soloist, Henryk Szeryng, violinist

March 26, 1967

Mr Martin Bernheimer
Music Editor
Los Angeles Times

Dear Mr Bernheimer:

Nothing could be more futile than to argue with a music critic about the quality of a performance. You dislike it, I like it, and no amount of words can solve that impasse. Thus, while I disagree with your judgment about last week's Philharmonic concert, I want to write not about your opinions as much as about an attitude which I find in most of your reviews and most glaringly in the one that appeared on the 24th. I am afraid this will be a long letter for it has accumulated over a long period of time.

As the main music critic in L.A., holding a position of the greatest importance in the musical life of a great city, you have made yourself a predominantly negative and destructive factor. I am talking of your reviews only, mind you. Your general articles on musical parties are frequently excellent, but the moment you write a review, you assume the attitude of a mean teacher handing out good and bad marks. That is not what reviewing is about. Let the great Rubinstein give a glorious concert, but play a few wrong notes in the course of the evening, and it apparently would kill you to refrain from harping on "his clinkers". What for? to show what marvellous ears you have? or that even the greatest musicians are human? By all means write about mistakes if they pervade a performance and affect the total impression, or if mentioning them serves a musical purpose. In all other cases (of which there have been too many in your reviews), it is just lack of respect for the artist, lack of human feeling, needless cruelty and - pardon me - ridiculous vanity.

You will say that your musical standards happen to be so high that you cannot compromise them and be bothered with little things like human considerations. But music in all its phases is immensely human, and without human sympathy you can never do it justice. That is exactly the trouble: your reviews sound as if you hated people and had become unable really to enjoy music. One pictures you as coming home after a concert and asking yourself, "now let's see, what is it that was bad tonight". You ought to be a faithful reporter before being a judge, but the result of your attitude is reporting that is completely misleading. With all the little bad points you pick out so carefully, it is impossible to guess the overall character of a performance. It may have been a very great artist playing under par, but still being a great artist, or a routinier giving his very best: one cannot tell from your reviews. The picayune details blur the whole. I will admit this: your reviews usually have a nice musical form - a-b-a. A: A problematic evening. B: Many things were very good. C: Too bad there were so many shortcomings. Or vice versa. A: A very good concert. B. But lots of things went wrong. C. On the whole, very good.

All this is exemplified in your latest review. As if you wanted to make up for 11 weeks of starvation without a chance of giving Mehta hell, you used every paragraph to give it to him this time. "It turned out to be a rough - even ironic - homecoming". Aside from the malice - what sloppy writing. What is an ironic homecoming? "...the music had precious little to do with the Toscanini tradition". Great music by Mozart has little

to do with the Toscanini tradition? Just how nonsensical can you get just for the sake of making a nasty point? And how precious, that "precious" little! "...his orchestra played a secondary part throughout", why not praise Mehta for that? He shunned display and put his orchestra modestly in the service of a masterwork; but to say that would have spoiled your review. "A nouveau-riche exhibitionist", just for having a solo violinist plus the vocal ensemble. I suspect that timing and availability may have had something to do with this, and as a good reporter you should have tried to find out the facts first. The next paragraph shows one of the frequent instances where the schoolmaster who will not let a single wrong note pass unnoticed is much less critical toward his own style: "...another work utilizing similar forces (i.e. the Bruchner Te Deum)." The schoolmaster does not know the difference between i.e. and e.g. Now you turn from A to B: "None of the foregoing should imply that it was a bad concert." Next: "Szeryng had some surprising stridency (of both tone and pitch)". I have heard of strident tone (although I heard no strident tones on Friday), but whatever is strident pitch? If you mean off-pitch, it surely did not sound so on Friday. Now comes a climax of malice (or ignorance?). Mehta, too, should have known better about the ghostly cadenza? Since when is the cadenza any of the conductor's business. Everyone (except you?) understands that if there is a tasteless cadenza, the soloist, and no one else, is to blame. I insert a brief intermezzo of agreement: bravo to what you say about soloists' encores. But then again: the Dies Irae "crackled" - what a caricature of a description! And while I am criticizing your frequently inept choice of descriptive terms, let me plead with you to retire, at least for a while, that ubiquitous "no-nonsense", usually yet employed as a term of praise.

As for your overall opinion of the performance, I can only disagree with you, quite obviously with most of the audience on my side. It was not the traditional, soft Viennese performance, but it was a devoted, unified conception, superbly executed, and the total impression was deeply stirring. After a total listening experience probably twice as long in years as yours, I am easily as snobbish and hard to please as you. If I come away from a performance saying, God, what great music, then I must respect and admire the devotion and the skill that produced such an impression, even if it was not completely my type of performance. If I were a critic, I would try to express this, but you would not.

What made this review of yours so inaccurate and therefore offensive is that you stressed, quite properly, Mehta's return, but in exactly the opposite way from what one could not help feeling. For 11 weeks, we had a parade of guest conductors ranging from rather awful all the way to excellent. Seen against this background, it was electrifying to feel the impact of an exceptional conducting personality, whose genius one is bound to feel even in his occasional failures (to which the Mozart Requiem surely does not belong). And yet, not a word about this, not a word either (that is, not a good word) about the peculiar, exciting quality that the orchestral sound assumes whenever Mehta conducts.

The following, final point is only tangential to my subject, but I mention it as one of the frequently annoying features of your reviews. You miss no opportunity to display your musicological knowledge. No doubt you know more about Aufführungspraxis than many of the performers, but I suggest not to take that superior knowledge quite so seriously. I follow musicological writings as part of my business, and I see how performance practice theories keep changing. Scholar A proves today that you have to trill this way, and B tomorrow proves that he is all wrong. It is all very confusing for the Buchstabenfresser. I would, therefore, suggest much greater leniency in this respect and would limit myself, if I were you, to the most basic rules, leaving the rest to

the quality invoked by so many 19th-century writers - taste. The trouble is that "scholarly" musicians are too often anemic performers, and that the great performer by his very nature is averse to historical pedantry. I should be happy to hear historical accuracy (within limits) and vitality combined in a performance, and sometimes they do come together, but usually one has to choose between one and the other, in which case I would rather settle for vitality.

I have said more than enough, and I am sorry that I have not had the skill to say it and make my points without using such terms as "mean, nasty, picayune". You will no doubt protest that such motives are far from your mind, but please remember that it is usually our greatest weaknesses which we are least aware of.

Sincerely,

Copy to L.A. Philharmonic