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Book Review

Paul Watt, *The Regulation and Reform of Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century England*, RMA Monographs 31, gen. ed. Simon Keefe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). xi + 132 pp. £110.00; $140.00.

One is sorely tempted, when reviewing a book about the ways in which music reviewers review music reviews by other reviewers, to crack wise about self-absorption within the not-so-gentle art of music criticism. However, the scholarship on display in Paul Watt's compact new book demonstrates that the topic is no laughing matter. *The Regulation and Reform of Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century England* provides a cogent and comprehensive overview of the major issues shaping the reform of English music criticism between approximately 1880 and 1925, replete with extensive archival support and a wide range of ideological and philosophical perspectives.

The social status and professional standards associated with Victorian musical criticism – like so many other aspects of English musical life during that era – lagged behind its continental counterparts. Subjective, vague and otherwise unsupported assertions of 'I liked this performance' or 'This is a terrible piece' typified the genre, frequently accompanied by unwarranted abuse and couched in self-indulgent bafflegab masquerading as prose. The vehemence with which early advocates for reform attacked the status quo during the last quarter of the nineteenth century suggests that the appetite for change had been growing within the critical ranks long before the first volleys against it appeared in print. As early as 1876, Leslie Stephen castigated the smug, know-it-all, self-righteous priggishness of impressionist critics – whom he characterized as overconfident young men possessing newly-minted university degrees, but little specialized knowledge of their subjects – calling them 'the most offensive type of human being in the present day'.[1] Four years later, John Stainer argued in a speech to the Royal Musical Association ('The Principles of Musical Criticism') that then-contemporary approaches to criticism were 'either dogmatic or nihilistic and viewed the reporting of personal opinion as an inferior product' (p. 42).

The field was clearly ripe for change, and there arose a sense that criticism needed to aspire to something beyond mere journalism. Critics, so the reform-minded thought, actually needed to be qualified in terms of their musical knowledge (if not necessarily their practical ability), possess a complementarily wide-ranging general education, and be trained appropriately in the mechanics and ethics of writing – none of which, it should be noted, had been a necessary requirement for anyone who wanted to call themselves a critic in England during the previous decades. So powerful was the desire for professionalizing the field that a proposal for a Royal College of Critics was even mooted in 1894, though it never came to pass (much to the relief of certain commentators who scoffed at the idea of such a trade group).

The critical school of thought that Watt positions as the endpoint of these reforming impulses became known as 'new criticism' or 'intellectual criticism'.

[1] Leslie Stephen, 'Thoughts on Critics, by a Critic', *Cornhill Magazine* 34/203 (November 1876): 556; quoted in Watt, *The Regulation and Reform of Music Criticism*, 15.

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Informed by scholarship and the adoption of a disinterested objectivity, new criticism set itself up in opposition to the so-called 'impressionist criticism' of the previous generations, often the province of unqualified or incompetent hack journalists churning out invective-laced screeds that 'traded on the dispatch of [their] own self-referential and self-styled thoughts' (p. 14). In 1891, the *Musical Times* mercilessly parodied the excesses of such writing in a series of articles called 'Essays in Musical Criticism', creating wickedly pitch-perfect takes on familiar critical tropes such as the 'Indiscriminately Eulogistic', the 'Finicking', and the 'Irrelevantly Autobiographic', laying bare the shocking amateurishness that had passed for serious criticism in the previous decades.[2]

The *Musical Times*'s arrows struck their targets in part because, as the editors acknowledged, considerable strides had been made in the realms of music scholarship and criticism over the preceding years. George Grove's *Dictionary of Music* (1879–89), for example, was a symptom rather than a cause of improvements in both English musical literacy and serious musical criticism, and revealed that British readers could (and should) expect better, more considered treatment of music for specialist and lay readers alike. Unlike their generalist or belletrist predecessors, writers who subscribed to the tenets of new criticism adopted manners that 'required not a quick and ill-considered firing of opinion or insult but a construction of a carefully crafted point of view, argument or standpoint underpinned by reason, reflection and, in some contexts, method' (p. 11). Such approaches were necessary to counteract what was seen as the philistinism, provinciality and prolixity that had long tainted the field. Perhaps surprisingly, it was the adoption of anonymity that came in for the harshest attacks. Some critics objected because anonymous writers could evade accountability for libellous or incompetent assertions, but the bigger problem was an ethical one: it was impossible to tell if an anonymous reviewer had a vested interest in the success (or failure) of the work or performer about which they wrote, and they had no obligation to disclose it.

It's fair to say that when Juvenal asked 'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' he did not have such comparatively low stakes in mind. Nevertheless, such issues of ethics and professionalism dominated the landscape of new criticism at the close of the nineteenth century. But although these problems were widely acknowledged, solutions beyond the most general were slow to arrive. Critics like E.S. Dallas and Leslie Stephen, though differing in specifics, agreed 'that criticism ought to be ethical, clearly written and grounded on careful reflection' (p. 41). It seems striking that anyone should argue otherwise, but entertainment rather than edification was the main critical goal when writing for mass publications in the early part of the century, usually for venues in which invective and polemical tirades played significant roles in attracting readers. Not until the publication of Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi's *The Principles of Methods of Musical Criticism* (Oxford, 1923) did aspiring music critics have access to a reference that laid down guidelines for responsible practices within the discipline.

Watt has clearly taken his subjects' exhortations to heart, pairing a clear and direct prose style with a truly impressive command of the relevant bibliography, including the extended trawling of archives from many obscure or defunct British periodicals. The breadth of documentation he provides, both in primary

[2] 'Essays in Musical Criticism', *Musical Times* 37/635 (January 1896): 16–17; 37/636 (February 1896): 87–8; 37/368 (April 1896): 232.

and secondary contexts, confirms that the trends and tendencies he examines in the book are neither obscure nor outliers, either from a practical or theoretical sense. In addition to this extensive Anglophone literature, Watt has also carefully reviewed various approaches to critical theory and methodology from French and German contemporaries, with particular interest given to the philosophies of Émile Hennequin (1858–1888), whose writings played an important role in shaping Ernest Newman's mature critical worldview, and to the practices of Newman himself, a figure Watt has treated at length elsewhere.[3]

Newman was among the first new critics who actively sought to educate and inform his readers rather than to amuse them, and in doing so he aimed to raise the standard of both musical knowledge and critical prose. Practical examples of such higher standards were also observable from other critics of the later nineteenth century – including Percy Buck, Cecil Forsyth and Henry Chorley – but they were far from unified in their theoretical or stylistic aims and assumptions. This is one of the strongest aspects of Watt's approach to his subject, because he does not fetishize the reforming intent that undergirded new criticism at the expense of its widely varied (and sometimes problematic) practical applications. Chorley, for instance, was one of the first authors to employ what became known as the 'comparative method' in *The National Music of the World* (London, 1880). Its principles included 'the careful use of data, the marshalling of facts, and the considered interpretation of facts, none of which were new by the late nineteenth century' (p. 94), practices hitherto largely absent from the field of musical criticism. However, Chorley's own application of this model was deeply flawed. His assumptions about western music's intrinsic superiority, a perspective shaped by racist beliefs about non-western cultures, precluded the very objectivity to which he aspired.

In other cases, critics ignored certain goals closely associated with new criticism, such as clarity and simplicity of prose, because these ran counter to their interest in other qualities. Such a stance can be seen in Newman's defence of Hector Berlioz's dramatic loquacity, presumably because its variety and colour presented such a strong contrast to the prose stylings of his English contemporaries, and therefore presented a desirable alternative to them. But this apparent virtue could also be rendered a vice, as demonstrated in Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895; originally published in German as *Entartung* in 1892). In it, Nordau vehemently criticised Richard Wagner's prose stylings as 'absurd, incoherent and muddled' (p. 73), going so far to take it as evidence of the composer's own emotionally stunted development. It should be noted, however, that Newman and Nordau approached their subjects from diametrically opposed perspectives. Newman openly admired Berlioz as a musician and a writer, while Nordau called Wagner 'the last mushroom on the dunghill of romanticism',[4] suggesting a somewhat less enthusiastic starting point for the treatment of his subject than Newman for his.

Yet in all these cases, and despite the inconsistent and highly varied manners in which reformist aims could be pursued, the seriousness with which new criticism adherents like Newman and Nordau (among many others) treated music writing as a discipline could not be disputed. Their critical methods could be characterized as elitist – that is, providing what they thought the public needed rather than what

[3] Paul Watt, *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017).

[4] Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from the German 2nd ed., with an introduction by George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 194.

it wanted – but many late-century guides to criticism appear to be decidedly populist in their aims. Time and again, such primers exhort writers to focus on brevity, clarity and directness of prose in order to improve their overall accessibility, and the publication of multiple essays and guidebooks specifically aimed at female critics suggests a growing (if sometimes grudging) acceptance of new and unfamiliar voices within the field. By 1926, Basil Maine was able to assess the contributions of 12 leading critics (including Edward Dent, Robin Legge, W.J. Turner, Richard Capell and A.H. Fox-Strangways) for a series of articles in *The Musical Times*.[5] In them, Maine concentrated on the different ways in which these writers were able 'to highlight logical thought, scholarship and a good writing style as hallmarks' (p. 101) of the now widely established reformist practices cultivated over the last several decades, and the resulting elevation of the field's respect and influence.

For those scholars obliged to deal with Anglophone music criticism from this era, Watt's assessment will clarify and explain many of the apparent contradictions in style, tone and method commonly found in print journalism, whether from newspapers or more specialist publications, which in turn will shape the manner in which we understand their significance, meaning and application. It is a most welcome contribution to the field, and will be a valuable resource for readers interested in literary theory, historiography, music criticism and the history of ideas. It is therefore a great pity that the book's absurdly high price – which, at $140 USD, breaks down to $1.06 per page – will severely limit its audience. This is prohibitive not only for individuals, but increasingly for libraries, more and more of which are forced to confront the academic Scylla and Charybdis of rising costs and lowered budgets. As the number of publishers catering to the interests of scholars who work in the field of British music shrinks, it behoves those that remain to ensure that scholarship such as this remains affordable and accessible to the widest readership possible. Without that, we risk returning to exactly the situation from two centuries past that Watt has so effectively evoked, and which free platforms like Twitter and Facebook can so easily enable: a critical environment in which the loudest, crassest and least qualified voices are allowed to substitute for actual knowledge and expertise.

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[5] Basil Maine, 'Personalities Among Music Critics I: A. H. Fox Strangways', *Musical Times* 67/996 (February 1926): 119–20; 'II. M. D. Calvocoressi', 67/997 (March 1926): 216–17; 'III. Edward Dent', 67/998 (April 1926): 307–8; 'IV. Francis Toye', 67/999 (May 1926), 402–3; 'V. Richard Capell', 67/1000 (June 1926): 506–7; 'VI. Robin Legge', 67/1001 (July 1926): 597–8; 'VII. Alfred Kalisch', 67/1002 (August 1926): 694–5; VIII. W. J. Turner', 67/1003 (September 1926): 788–9; 'IX. Ernest Newman', 68/1007 (January 1927): 27–8; 'X. Edwin Evans', 68/1008 (February 1927): 122–3; 'XI. H. C. Colles', 68/1009 (March 1927): 219–20; and 'XII. F. Bonavia', 68/1010 (April 1927): 317–18.