Music

The Amateur as Critic

Terry Teachout

Of all the changes that have taken place in English-language newspapers during the past quarter-century, perhaps the most far-reaching has been the inexorable decline in the scope and seriousness of their arts coverage. Not only have many newspapers done away with their book-review sections, but several major papers, including the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, no longer employ full-time classical-music critics. Even those papers that continue to review fine-arts events are devoting less space to them, while the "think pieces" on cultural subjects that once graced the pages of big-city Sunday papers are becoming a thing of the past.

It is, I suspect, difficult to the point of impossibility for the average reader under the age of forty to imagine a time when high-quality arts criticism could be found in most big-city newspapers. Yet a considerable number of the most significant collections of criticism published in the 20th century, including Virgil Thomson's *The Musical Scene* (1945), Edwin Denby's *Looking at the Dance* (1949), Kenneth Tynan's *Curtains* (1961), and Hilton Kramer's *The Age of the Avant-Garde* (1973) consisted in large part of newspaper reviews. To read such books today is to marvel at the fact that their erudite contents were once deemed suitable for publication in general-circulation dailies.

We are even farther removed from the discursive newspaper reviews published in England between the turn of the 20th century and the eve of World War II, at a time when newsprint was dirt-cheap and stylish arts criticism was considered an ornament to the publications in which it appeared. In those far-off days, it was taken for granted that the critics of major papers would write in detail and at length about the events they covered.* Theirs was a serious business, and even those reviewers who wore their learning lightly, like George Bernard Shaw and Ernest Newman, could be trusted to know what they were about. These men (for they were all men) believed in journalism as a calling, and were proud to be published in the daily press. "So few authors have brains enough or literary gift enough to keep their own end up in journalism," Newman wrote, "that I am tempted to define 'journalism' as 'a term of contempt applied by writers who are not read to writers who are.'"

Why, then, are virtually all of these critics forgotten? Neville Cardus, who wrote for the *Manchester Guardian* from 1917 until shortly before his death in 1975, is now known solely as a writer of essays on the game of cricket. During his lifetime, though, he was also one of England's foremost classical-music critics, a stylist so widely admired that his *Autobiography* (1947) became a best-seller. He was knighted in 1967, the first music critic to be so honored. Yet only one of his books is now in print, and his vast body of writings on music is unknown save to specialists. How is it possible that so celebrated a critic should have slipped into near-total obscurity?

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* Prior to World War II, English newspapers routinely published thousand-word concert reviews. Today, a typical *New York Times* concert review runs between 400 and 500 words.

In a better-regulated world, Cardus's *Autobiography* would be ranked alongside H.L. Mencken's *Newspaper Days* and A.J. Liebling's *Between Meals* as a minor classic of journalistic reminiscence, one in which the time-honored story of the poor boy made good is told with splendid wit and urbanity:

> I have sold, as well as written for, newspapers. My parents conducted a home laundry; or, not to be tautological, they took in washing. I once delivered the washing to the home and house of the chairman of the Hallé Concerts Society,* delivered it in a perambulator at the tradesmen's entrance. Years afterward I dined with him one night; I was now music critic of the *Manchester Guardian*, and he wished to placate my pen on a point of musical policy.

This is, alas, not entirely reliable, for Cardus loved a good story too much to tell his own without adding embroidery. Yet the unadorned truth, as Christopher Brookes revealed in *His Own Man*, a 1985 biography of Cardus, would have been impressive enough in its own right. Though Cardus, who was born in Manchester in 1889, exaggerated his early poverty, he was in fact the illegitimate son of a part-time prostitute, and it appears to be no less true that he completed only four years of formal schooling. If his childhood was not quite Dickensian in its deprivations, it was still a working-class life of the sort well known to those familiar with the bleak annals of Victorian history.

That such a boy should have grown up to become a music critic for the *Guardian* is one of the more improbable occurrences in journalistic history—though it is still less probable that he should have started out as the *Guardian*'s cricket correspondent, and continued to cover the game even after he took over the paper's classical-music beat. Indeed, it was as a writer on cricket that Cardus would always be most familiar to the public at large, eventually becoming so well known in that capacity that he was written up in *Time* in 1949. To the extent that he is remembered today, it is for such collections of his cricket dispatches as the posthumously published *Cardus on Cricket* (1977), the only one of his books to remain in print.

A self-taught writer who earned his youthful keep as a public-school cricket pro, Cardus talked his way onto the staff of the *Guardian* at a time when that paper prided itself not only on its reflexively liberal moralizing but on its extensive coverage of the arts. Within two years, he had become the *Guardian*'s chief cricket writer, but music was his first love, and from 1927 on he doubled as its chief music critic, reviewing concerts as "N.C." in an elaborately Edwardian style identical to the one he employed as "Cricketer."†

In both roles, Cardus was primarily interested in colorful personalities. He wrote about such musicians as Sir Thomas Beecham, his favorite conductor, in much the same way that he wrote about great cricketers, sketching their characters with a fluent blend of impressionistic description and polished anecdotage that not infrequently sounded too neat to be quite true.

Here, for instance, is Cardus's version of a dinner with Beecham at the Salzburg Festival:

> In a corner of the restaurant a little string orchestra was playing music—no tin-can stuff, but soft waltzes; and a number of elegant personages were dancing. "God!" ejaculated Beecham, "stop that noise!" He called for the *maître d'hôtel*. "How can I demonstrate to my learned friend here, the beauties of Schubert's music if that damned strumming goes on perpetually? Please have it silenced."

Perhaps it happened just like that, perhaps not, but as the Italians say, if it isn't true it ought to be. And when Cardus described a concert with the same impressionistic gusto, one felt inclined to say the same thing, for it was his great gift to convey the essence of a musician in phrases so vivid that the near-complete absence of technical specificity almost always goes unregretted (if not unnoticed). When he writes that Arturo Toscanini's conducting of Brahms sounds like "a sort of gigantic musical wheel revolving in a ruthless groove," or that Fritz Kreisler's violin playing "reminds me of a beautiful face that would be even more beautiful if it were lined or wrinkled," you take his point at once, and relate it effortlessly to your own memories of the performer in question.

No doubt, Cardus wrote that way not only because he could but because he had to. His musical training consisted of a year's worth of voice lessons, and the flipness with which he dismissed "score-reading critics" leads the attentive reader to suspect that his own abilities in that line were severely limited. But there were few limits to his responsiveness to the music and musicians he loved, and when he was on form, it was easy to go along with the admiring self-appraisal in his *Autobiography*:

> From the moment I gave up executive ability in music, I was free to cultivate the art of listening—which is an art *sui generis*. . . . For the critic of music should be the most enlightened and unprejudiced listener; it is his job, his full-time job, to hear and to receive music with a highly sensitized mind, governed by psychological and aesthetic insight. He is an artist with experiences in music his material.

Had Cardus taken the trouble to be born a quarter-century earlier, he would been the perfect music critic, Bernard Shaw's only peer, and it is possible that his work would be as well remembered today as are the

* The Hallé, founded in 1858 by the pianist-conductor Charles Hallé, is Manchester's professional orchestra.

† The *Guardian*, like most English newspapers, did not yet allow its writers to sign their work with their real names.

concert reviews Shaw wrote in the 1890's.

But Cardus was a romantic *pur sang* who with few exceptions cared only for the music of the late-18th and 19th centuries.* Unfortunately, his chief period of critical activity coincided with the emergence of the modern movement in music, about which he too often wrote with the complacent incomprehension of a philistine—an attitude that was widely shared in England between the wars. When Béla Bartók gave the English premiere of his Second Piano Concerto, Cardus wrote in the *Guardian* that "Bartók composes as though he owed the world of music a grudge. . . . The piano snaps away like a spiteful maiden aunt. It is tedious and crude." Even a work as accessible as George Gershwin's *An American in Paris* provoked him to suggest "a 150-percent tariff against this sort of American dry-goods."

Where Cardus shone, by contrast, was in his responsiveness to the long-unfashionable music of the late Romantics. He was one of the first English critics to recognize that Mahler was a major composer and to crusade for the acceptance of his work, just as he consistently held that Elgar deserved to be taken as seriously as Richard Strauss, and that his music was complex to a degree unappreciated by younger musicians who dismissed it as quaint:

> For all his Continental accents and gestures, Elgar is English and Edwardian, unmistakably English of his period, but—and here is the subtle point—with a curious and contradictory side to him. At times he turns his vision inward to a fugitive realm of fancy, reflective, poetic, and sometimes of a sinister or inimical order or taint.

But that was as far as he was willing to go. Even a modern piece as approachable as William Walton's First Symphony seemed to him marred by its "insistent rhythm and harmonic emphasis, with an obvious disinclination to be easeful, quiet, and simple," while the best he could say about Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, perhaps the greatest opera of the post-World War II era, was that it had "moments of genius." For him, the rest of the 20th century was a closed book.

Because Cardus's tastes were so conservative, few took him seriously when he attacked the hermetic modernism of such avant-garde composers as Pierre Boulez in language that now seems prescient: "Listening to *Pli Selon Pli*, I could not relate the varied succession of aural phenomena to music as my musical intelligence and senses recognize music." By then a lifetime of reaction had exhausted his credibility, and little attention was paid to his later reviews for the *Guardian*, whose increasingly unsympathetic editors were disinclined to give him the space he had once taken for granted. "Last week," he lamented to a friend in 1969, "they cut my notice of the Hallé, in the Festival Hall, in half with no attempt to see what might be taken out here and there. No; the notice was chopped into two, like a butcher cutting a weekend joint."

IS THERE ANY chance that Cardus's criticism will enjoy a posthumous revival? The prospect seems remote. Journalistic tastes had changed long before his death, and postmodern readers have little use for the richly upholstered Vicwardian prose in which he specialized. Moreover, the amateur tradition in music criticism has been in headlong retreat ever since Virgil Thomson first showed the readers of the *New York Herald Tribune* that a trained musician could write about music every bit as stylishly as a professional journalist. As a result, today's classical-music critics are expected to have precisely the kind of technical training that Cardus's generation disdained.

Still, it is just possible that a well-edited collection of his concert reviews might succeed in bringing him to the attention of a new generation of readers unaccustomed to the kind of critic capable of remarking that "I hope I have never written of music except as one who is constantly bowing the head before the miracle of it."† For all his good humor, Cardus took music as seriously as that sentence suggests, and believed passionately in its power and significance. Moreover, he also believed that the only way to write about it meaningfully was as a reflection of the working of man's soul:

> I do not find music "abstract," a series of propositions; an elusive Thing in Itself. Music is for me all the composers who have created it; a symphony is as much a part of Beethoven as the voice and mind and heart and humors of my best living mortal friend. . . . When we listen to music, if we listen properly, we take part in a communion; we taste the body of genius, enter into the mind of the man.

Needless to say, such an essentially romantic view is no more in vogue today than the old-fashioned prose in which it is couched. Yet something vital disappears from criticism when its practitioners are unwilling to approach music in this way—the same something that is palpably present when Neville Cardus remarks, as he did in a 1935 review, that Sir Thomas Beecham "expels plainness. The merely respectable and competent perish in his presence." If this be romanticism, let us have much more of it.

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* Late in life he appeared on the BBC series *Desert Island Discs*, whose guests chose the recordings they would take with them to a desert island. His picks were Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, Schubert's "Unfinished," the Prelude and Liebestod from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*, and Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*.

† Part of the problem is that only a few dozen of Cardus's 2,000-odd *Guardian* pieces about music have been collected in book form. *The Delights of Music: A Critic's Choice* (1966) is a slender volume consisting mainly of concert reviews from the late 30's. *Talking of Music* (1957) contains longer essays written in the 50's. *Cardus on Music: A Centenary Collection* (1988) is a poorly edited selection of reviews and essays that focuses on composers at the expense of performers, steering completely clear of Cardus's modern-music reviews.