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Guardian classical music critic

Critics from The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Sunday Times and Opera magazine join Opera Holland Park for an event where you pose the questions. Is arts criticism under threat? How has the role of an opera critic changed since the advent of blogging, online publications and social media? Does size matter in casting? Must every show be accessible to first timers? Have we really 'had enough of experts'? Opera Holland Park's Director of Opera, James Clutton, General Director, Michael Volpe, and Research and Repertoire consultant, Anna Picard, are joined by Hugh Canning of The Sunday Times, Rupert Christiansen of The Daily Telegraph, Neil Fisher of The Times, Erica Jeal of The Guardian and John Allison, editor of Opera Magazine, for an evening in which you pose the questions. About the participants Rupert Christiansen has been the opera critic of the Daily Telegraph since 1996. He is also the author of several books on opera, including Prima Donna and Faber Pocket Guide to Opera. Neil Fisher is deputy arts editor and music critic for The Times. He joined the The Times in 2004 and may have met more opera divas than Giles Coren has had reasonably priced suppers. He also contributes to Gramophone and Opera magazines. Hugh Canning has written about Classical music & opera for The Sunday Times since 1989. He also sits on the Editorial Board of and writes for Opera magazine. Erica Jeal is a music critic for the Guardian and Deputy Editor of Opera. John Allison is editor of Opera magazine and music critic for The Daily Telegraph. He was born in South Africa and completed his PhD while working as assistant organist at Cape Town cathedral. Since moving to London in 1989 he has authored two books and has also held positions as music critic on The Sunday Telegraph and The Times. We've detected that JavaScript is disabled in this browser. Please enable JavaScript or switch to a supported browser to continue using twitter.com. You can see a list of supported browsers in our Help Center. Help Center Amongst arts reviewers, music critics are perhaps held in least esteem by those they write about. A critic's occasional benevolence is more than often offset by a more rampant desire to highlight an artist's weaknesses. It is hardly surprising, in return, that music critics in particular are often demonised by those they write about as failed musicians, or ones who simply could not make the grade. Those who play do; those who can't write. Yet, critics have an important place in our cultural life - although one perhaps not as important as it was twenty years ago or earlier. The situation in the UK is not unlike that in the United States: critics once wielded considerable power through the pen, being influential enough to build concert halls or fire conductors. Orchestra managers would never admit it, but in London during the 1980s and 1990s it is not improbable to conclude that a swathe of bad reviews did lead to the subsequent replacements of Giuseppe Sinopoli at the Philharmonia and Franz Welser-Most at the London Philharmonic. Since then, critics have lost their influence as movers and shakers, in part due to philistinism amongst arts editors and decreased critical coverage in newspapers. Moreover, the decline of classical music is irrevocably linked to the rise of popular music - and the nefarious (and probably incorrect) belief that this is what readers want. In part, critics have only themselves to blame. At one time they were true champions of classical music; today, it is difficult to see that they are. Once they rescued neglected composers; today they rarely do. Critics of the older generation, such as Michael Kennedy, once of the Daily Telegraph but now at the Sunday Telegraph, were instrumental in making people re-appreciate composers whom today we would find it almost impossible to believe were once so undervalued: Mahler, Richard Strauss, Bruckner, even Berlioz and Brahms, amongst the immortals. Today, however, these same critics are entombed within a time vacuum, barely able to comprehend advances in musical tastes let alone write with any authority about new music. Kennedy is perhaps more honest than most, but read a review by him and his ambivalence towards new music is amply visible. Where once critics were revolutionary they are now increasingly conservative in their tastes, and it is this very conservatism - in matters of music as well as style - which diminishes the influence of a profession little admired. There are exceptions to this entrenched conservatism but very rarely does a critic take it upon himself to champion new music. Andrew Clements at the Guardian is one exception, as is Peter Grahame Woolf, founder of these pages, whose reviews of international new music festivals receive coverage in the UK only through the pages of Seen & Heard. He was also one of the first to introduce the music of Scelsi and Utvolskaya to a wider British audience. When writing the mission statement About Seen&Heard, he took on board a rallying cry emanating from the BBC's own journal, where the Editor of BBC Music Magazine (now chief music critic for the Observer) had highlighted the crisis in music reviewing. Deploring how serious music was being squeezed out of the Dailies, classical music was "the first to fall victim" she concluded. "Only the Internet offers a ray of hope; maybe a new era is nigh after all". In almost every respect it is a cry which has been stifled. Age is a factor, though a complicated one. Kennedy is 75, as is Peter Woolf, yet their approaches to new music are poles apart. The obverse is also true - a small coterie of younger critics whose interests rest solely in rescuing from obscurity music which would remain better buried. Most London based critics (and New York ones, for that matter) are in their fifties, or older, with only the Guardian seemingly encouraging a younger generation of music critics. From this, almost in protest, has sprung the Internet, with a younger and more precocious type of critic, and one often unwilling to worship at the sacred cows of musical tastes and convention. If there is often a uniformity of opinion in the printed media it is often challenged on the Internet where disagreement functions as it should. It is a fallacy to argue, for whatever reason, that most Internet critics are in any way less knowledgeable about the music or performers they are reviewing than their newspaper rivals. If anything, the Internet serves to give readers more judicious and provocative reviews based on a particular reviewer's passionate commitment to music, often missing from those of well-paid newspaper critics, for whom life has become perhaps a little too comfortable. In so many ways the Internet may be the precipitate factor in re-inventing classical music criticism. Those literary writers and cultural critics, whose expansive reviews were once the bedrock of musical criticism, but who have subsequently been replaced by today's critics - limited for space yet still full of verbiage - may well reappear. The Internet offers the opportunity for editors to commission reviews from those people who made musical criticism what it once was: musicians and composers themselves - an opportunity likely to be overlooked by today's arts editors. A review by a latter day Schumann or Virgil Thomson may be the exact impetus needed to reverse the decline in both classical music and in music criticism. It may not in the end replace newspaper criticism but will challenge the convention that newspaper criticism is all that matters. That often expressed opinion that the Internet is the home of freedom of expression, and critical objectivity, is one of the essential parameters for the future of music criticism, if indeed it is to have a future. One distinguished London critic has told me of the conspiratorial discussions during intervals at opera performances in which critics openly agree on a unanimous verdict on a production. I don't find it unbelievable: read the reviews and there is often a unanimity of expression. Open the editorial page of Opera and you will notice that the editorial board is comprised of every major London music critic. This is not a healthy environment for music criticism to flourish. It reeks of sterility. The recent decision by the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden to restrict press ticket availability for Internet reviewers is perhaps less indicative of the wish to sell the seats for hard cash than it is a desire to stifle broad based critical opinion, particularly when the Internet offers global readership possibilities against the parochialism of newspapers. It is even more ironic when one now considers that those very newspaper reviews (often highly dismissive) are themselves available on the Internet via either the papers' own web sites or from centralised sites such as The Opera Critic. It is a decision which smells more of fear than it does of common sense, and is almost antipathetic to what every other major arts organisation is doing. A major re-evaluation of music criticism is required if the genre is to reclaim any of the prestige it once held. This calls for a critical re-examination on behalf of critics themselves, of the arts organisations which allow them to practice their profession, and of the readers and musicians who are the consumers of what we write. Not an impossible task, but one which, I suspect, will go largely unheeded in some quarters. Marc Bridle Editor, Seen & Heard, November 2001.

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