



Theme & Variations

BRUNO BORRALHINHO

Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions. Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

Writing (and thinking) about music

How many times do we hear in the music backstage or in a simple cup-of-coffee-conversation between friends, that we instrumentalists, singers, conductors or composers, do not care a bit about concert reviews of any newspaper. The ones that say good things are weak and reveal a certain capitulation of those who write it, probably even some lack of knowledge base to point the finger at this or that. The ones that just say bad things are destructive, unfair and hurtful, and the author certainly does not understand the subject because he has never really stepped on stage. Those that say good and bad are of no interest because they are intended to please Greeks and Trojans and are often contradictory and doubtful: after all, did the critic like or dislike the interpretation?

But is it not true as well that the same people who regard critics with such distrust and repudiate such a craft for representing almost a betrayal of the musical class, are sometimes the first to decorate their résumés with quotes – if there might be any – flattering and laudatory about their career or any own prodigious interpretation? Sometimes even

FEATUREDGUEST

Norman Lebrecht



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Norman Lebrecht is an unavoidable reference in international music journalism. Author of over a dozen highly successful books, he has received major literary awards in the UK and Italy. He was a columnist for The Daily Telegraph, editor of the London Evening Standard, and currently writes columns in The Critic and The Spectator. He is the author of the famous blog Slipped Disc.

quoting authors who somewhen were potential mercenaries but, suddenly, understand a lot of the matter because they now claim that we are the successors of Liszt or Paganini.

To talk about this world, more or less parallel or integrated, of writing about music, I could not imagine a more interesting guest than Norman Lebrecht: in addition to other arts and skills, he is especially known as a historian and journalist who researches and investigates, as a commentator who analyses, thinks and judges, or as a novelist who imagines and creates. He prefers to define himself as «writer and historian», in a way «music commentator and analyst», or simply someone who is interested in «questions that people do not ask themselves, or ask themselves less than they should».

«There is a very limited amount of time between the cradle and the grave, and I am impatient to do as much as possible of the things I love to do.» Norman Lebrecht

He chose to write about music because music remains one of the great mysteries to unravel, a *creatio ab nihilo*, while he has always been intrigued by the fact that the music industry is «not only inefficient and corrupt» but also «a comedy of errors». He does not go much to concerts or chooses very carefully the performances and recordings he listens to because he hates routine and vulgar ones: «what excites me is the absolutely exceptional, but also the extremely mediocre, because we usually learn more from the bad than from the good».

Controversy and polemic are part of his work, in his case even a brand image. In a recent article in *The Critic*, for example, Lebrecht did not hesitate to write that the New York Philharmonic has not been able to pick the right conductor since Bernstein, referring to current music director Jaap van Zweden with the ironic question «yes, who?». In our conversation, he adds concerned that «this orchestra has mismanaged its chain of music directors over several decades and is, even so, the most important and powerful orchestra in the United States». Likewise, he regards Sir Simon Rattle's recent departure from the London Symphony Orchestra as «a betrayal» and claims about the rapid succession that «the musicians panicked and soon knelt to Sir Antonio Pappano». With these certainly controversial examples, Lebrecht intends to question and call attention to the figure of the musical director and the cultural and social responsibility that this position should represent in relation to the city, region and community in which it belongs, in contrast to the modern and possibly futile dance of nominations motorised behind the scenes by the most powerful and greedy artist agencies.

«Sometimes it is necessary to have a watchdog to ensure that corruption does not persist.» Norman Lebrecht

«If the prime minister of Portugal nominates his own cousin, who has no experience and knowledge in the field (or even if he has it), to direct the opera in Lisbon, I hope you will send me the story before the Portuguese press, and you can be sure that I will write about it» he says. Despite everything, Lebrecht categorically admits: «I am not looking for controversy, I just

try to present arguments. If controversy happens, I am very happy, but it is not my main concern».

His Slipped Disc is the most read classical music news site in the world. With more than two million monthly readers, it is a successful phenomenon in the field of classical music and a living proof that writing about music is important and captivating. On Slipped Disc, Lebrecht even invites readers to comment on the news, columns or articles he publishes on a wide range of subjects, and the five hundred daily comments confirm the interested participation of readers. On the most delicate issues, he admits that «after all, it seems I am always touching a nerve».

«Yes, there are legal threats... but someone has to do this
and I am prepared to take the risks.» Norman Lebrecht

His intense research work resulted in numerous important publications, of which I allow myself to highlight "Why Mahler?" (2010), "The Maestro Myth" (2001) and "Genius and anxiety" (2019). His novel "The Song of Names" (2002) even reached the big screen in 2019 starring actors from the Hollywood stardom. But what kind of feedback does the controversial «music analyst and commentator» receive himself and what kind of impact does such a versatile and multifaceted work, but always challenging and assertive, bring about?

Lebrecht emphasizes that «the world of music is very conservative», so it is not surprising that «some people sometimes react with anger, although never with violence». Half joking, half serious, he confesses: «I have not received death threats for a long time». The comments he receives are generally professional, but they do not keep him awake. «There are probably some people in the music business who won't talk to me, but that rather makes my day longer than shortens it».

Shaping a conclusion and because the motivations and purposes of the column Theme & Variations coincide, very modestly but in considerable portion with the causes of Norman Lebrecht, I allow myself to leave in the air a sentence by my distinguished guest about the art of writing about music and the like: «it is important to validate the truth with facts but, above all, to encourage readers to think about the truth». Let's think then and see you soon.