



## Dissonance: the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and its Classical Music Critic Epilogue

In February 2008, Cleveland *Plain Dealer* Editor Susan Goldberg invited Music Critic Donald Rosenberg to a meeting. Also attending were Assistant Managing Editor Debbie Van Tassel, John Kappes (Rosenberg's direct editor), and Managing Editor Debra Adams Simmons. Toward the end of the meeting, Goldberg proposed that reporter Zachary Lewis help with classical musical coverage. Rosenberg agreed to the change. Since Rosenberg was covering dance as well, he welcomed an extra hand.

The editors agreed that Lewis would write an extensive profile of Conductor Franz Welser-Möst that would touch on the highlights of his six years with the Cleveland Orchestra. In mid-April, Goldberg further decided that Lewis would review all Cleveland Orchestra performances conducted by Welser-Möst for the remainder of the 2007–2008 season and then at the orchestra's summer venue, Blossom Music Center.

In early June 2008, the Musical Arts Association, which oversaw the orchestra, told the newspaper that it had a major announcement to make and asked the editors to send Lewis—not Rosenberg—to cover it. They suggested it was an exclusive and explained that Welser-Möst wanted to talk to Lewis. No one at the *Plain Dealer* was pleased with the request. It smacked of "reporter shopping"—an effort by those reported on to select which journalist would write about them. Nonetheless, the editors reluctantly agreed, with one caveat: if the newspaper found out it was not an exclusive interview, the deal was off.

Upon arrival, Lewis discovered that there was no "exclusive." It was a standard press conference. Lewis called his editors to give them a chance to send Rosenberg, but as Lewis was already there he stayed. The MAA announced that it had extended Welser-Möst's contract, originally set to expire in 2012, to 2018. Lewis called in quotes from the announcement to Rosenberg, who wrote up the story. The two amicably shared a byline.

That summer, Editor Goldberg and AME Van Tassel noticed that Rosenberg was still approaching his beat as he always had—writing mostly reviews and not doing enterprise stories

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appropriate for Page One. Meanwhile, the Sunday arts section had been redesigned to include new features. “The other critics were stepping up to the plate to do more general features for us—more trend stories,” Van Tassel says. “They were covering the news from their beats. Don was still kind of stuck in his way of doing things.”<sup>1</sup>

In late September, with the orchestra’s 2008–2009 season on the horizon, Goldberg reexamined Rosenberg’s record. With Welser-Möst now in Cleveland for another 10 years, she questioned whether Rosenberg could continue to cover the Cleveland Orchestra. On September 17, 2008, Goldberg told Rosenberg that he would no longer write about the orchestra, but the rest of his beat would remain unchanged.

On Sunday, September 21, the *Plain Dealer* published a note to readers in its arts section: beginning Monday, Rosenberg would be the newspaper’s arts and entertainment reporter, and Lewis its classical music critic. Ted Diaidun, the newspaper’s ombudsman, a week later wrote a column about the reaction from music critics from around the country.<sup>2</sup> Many had rallied to Rosenberg’s support.

On December 12, 2008, Rosenberg filed a lawsuit against his employer and the Musical Arts Association (MAA), the orchestra’s governing board. The lawsuit contended that the newspaper had discriminated against Rosenberg because of age, that the MAA had sought his ouster as music critic, and that its executive director, Gary Hanson, had threatened him. The lawsuit also stated that both parties had defamed him. The following month, the newspaper forbade Rosenberg to mention the orchestra (or anyone associated with it) in his stories because, as Goldberg put it, that would constitute a “gigantic conflict of interest.”<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg’s lawyer then amended the lawsuit, adding a retaliation complaint.

By the time the trial began on July 12, 2010, Rosenberg’s lawyer had dropped all claims against the newspaper except for age discrimination and retaliation. All claims against the MAA remained intact. On July 31, a Cuyahoga County judge dismissed the retaliation complaint, stating that there were “no material facts to dispute.”<sup>4</sup> On Friday, August 6, 2010, the jury decided in favor of the *Plain Dealer* and the MAA. In October 2010, Goldberg was named executive editor for *Bloomberg News*. Rosenberg continued as an arts and entertainment reporter for the *Plain Dealer*.

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Debbie Van Tassel in Cleveland, OH, on December 15, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Diaidun, “Orchestra critic’s removal incites newspaper critics,” *The Plain Dealer*, September 28, 2008, p. G4.

<sup>3</sup> Goldberg in testimony from *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio. All further quotes from Goldberg, unless otherwise attributed are from this testimony, July 19, 20, 30 and August 2, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Scott, “Judge dismissed PD reporter’s retaliation complaint,” *Plain Dealer*, July 31, 2010 p. B3.