



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

### Teaching Note

#### Case Summary

Bias and objectivity are controversial issues even in straight news reporting: Is it possible for anyone to be truly objective? If not, is the concept still valuable as an ideal? What does it really mean to be unbiased when reporting on controversial matters? These questions are even harder to answer when applied to arts critics. What does it mean to be unbiased when the job is to have an opinion?

This case explores these questions through the story of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer's* music critic, Donald Rosenberg. Although a trained musician first, when the case begins he has accrued many years of experience as an arts journalist, writing both features and reviews. The jewel of his beat is reviewing the Cleveland Orchestra, a beloved local institution and one well-known to Rosenberg himself. After writing mostly favorable reviews and a well-received book about the orchestra during the 18-year tenure of Maestro Christoph von Dohnányi (with whom he also develops a friendship), Rosenberg looks forward to reviewing the orchestra under the baton of his replacement, the eccentric Austrian conductor Hans Welser-Möst.

But Rosenberg finds Welser-Möst consistently disappointing and writes a series of scathing reviews of the orchestra under his leadership. By the time Susan Goldberg takes over as editor of the *Plain Dealer* in 2007, Rosenberg has been writing largely unfavorable reviews of the maestro for several years. While Goldberg's instinct is to avoid infringing on the independence of a staff critic, warnings from her predecessor and comments from other paper employees—even Rosenberg himself—lead her to suspect that he may have a personal vendetta against the conductor. Amidst escalating complaints from readers, as well as orchestra members and administrators, who accuse Rosenberg of bias against Welser-Möst, Goldberg and her team of editors must decide what to do about him.

But determining whether or not a music critic is biased proves a tricky matter. After all, Rosenberg is an expert, with years of music criticism under his belt; perhaps Welser-Möst really is sub-par. Orchestra administrators argue that Rosenberg's lack of objectivity is damaging the paper's credibility, but how much weight should editors give such allegations, coming from inside the very institution under critique?

Students follow events leading up to the critical moment when editors must decide whether Rosenberg is indeed incapable of covering the orchestra fairly. If so, should editors assign another reporter to share his responsibilities? Should they ban Rosenberg from covering the orchestra or remove him from the music beat entirely? How much damage has he done to his own reputation as an arts critic—and to the credibility of the paper overall?

## Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussions about the role and responsibilities of arts critics; strategies editors should use to manage them; how critics should handle criticism from their bosses and their publics; and the relationship between a local paper and the arts institutions it covers.

This case was designed foremost to foster debate about the role and responsibilities of an arts critic. Teachers might begin by raising general questions about how writing criticism differs from news reporting and what it means to be a professional arts critic. Different philosophies about what the job entails are raised throughout the case: if the job is to provide an unbiased but informed opinion, what might that mean? What is the proper training for an arts critic—and a music critic in particular—and what kind of information should a critic provide in reviews to justify an opinion? Do a critic's responsibilities change when reviewing live performances versus packaged products, like films or recordings? What about when covering new works compared with reviewing fresh interpretations of old ones? Ask students to consider whether some types of criticism—*ad hominem* attacks, or discussions of an artist's personal life for example—are off-limits for critics, or whether everything is fair game.

The specifics of Rosenberg's case are ideal for introducing some of these questions. What, if anything, did he do wrong? Ask students what steps a critic like Rosenberg should take to ensure that his opinions are not overly influenced by personal tastes or feelings about artists. For example, what guidelines should a critic follow in his relationships with the artists and institutions he covers? Rosenberg is known to have had a friendly relationship with the orchestra's former conductor—is this appropriate? On the other hand, in a small or even a mid-sized city, is it realistic to expect journalists on an arts beat to avoid all relationships with local artists, who obviously share similar interests? Moreover, as we see when Rosenberg loses privileges at the concert hall, access is important and often requires maintaining good relations with sources. But how close a relationship is too close?

Ask students to consider the critic's responsibilities specifically to *local* artists and audiences. Is the role of the critic akin to that of a local sports reporter—shrewd at times, but overall supportive of the home team? Or does the critic have a responsibility to readers to write reviews that express his honest opinions, even if they are consistently negative? Rosenberg knows his scathing reviews are unpopular, at least among orchestra administrators and a vocal contingent in the community. Students should debate whether a critic should adjust the tone or content of reviews in light of such feedback.

A second major theme of the case is that of editorial management. Historically newspaper editors and publishers have stood by their critics even when they are unpopular, just as they would stand by reporters whose work upsets the status quo. Should *Plain Dealer* editors support their critic's

independence no matter what, or are they right to listen to complaints from the public and the orchestra? On the one hand, editors agree it is a critic's responsibility to provide unvarnished judgment and to inform the public—but does that hold true even when the audience interprets that judgment as unfair and, therefore, uninformative?

At the same time, editors are being pressured by powerful members of the orchestra's administration, which puts them in an awkward position. Editors must consider which will cause more damage to the paper's credibility: retaining a critic widely perceived as biased, or appearing to have sidelined him under pressure from the orchestra. Of course, *Plain Dealer* policy is never to allow sources to dictate their own coverage—but what if naysayers are right about Rosenberg? Students should explore how editors can judge whether a specialized critic is being fair, especially when the critic's expertise far exceeds their own.

Encourage debate not only about what editors should do about Rosenberg at the end of the case, but what they could have done differently along the way to avert the present crisis. At what stages might they have guided him differently or communicated more effectively? For example, should he have been reprimanded for his friendship with the previous conductor? Rosenberg gets a lot of flack when he reports on controversial statements Welser-Möst makes about Cleveland abroad, but his editors had the opportunity to kill the story and instead encouraged him; are they complicit in his declining status with the public?

Finally, the case raises questions not only about the relationship between a specific arts critic and those he covers, but also the relationship between a local news outlet and established local institutions, in this case a beloved arts organization. Especially in small markets, this relationship may be uncomfortably close. For example, the newspaper's publisher is on the board of the nonprofit that runs the orchestra, and staff members attend the same parties. Is this inappropriate? On the other hand, is it realistic to expect newspaper staff to avoid socializing with members of all other local organizations? Answers to such questions are simpler when a paper is covering politics or government institutions, because their mission is to hold such entities accountable to the electorate. But is it necessary for news outlets to cultivate distant or adversarial relationships with arts organizations they cover?

## Class Plan

Use this case in a class on arts reporting, arts criticism, opinion journalism, editorial decisionmaking, or newsroom management.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Is Donald Rosenberg a problem for the *Plain Dealer*? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the question in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions:* The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80–90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) What does it mean to be a fair, unbiased arts critic? Do you believe Rosenberg fits that description? Why or why not?
- b) Critical reviews are often unpopular with audiences, but editors usually stand by their critics. Are Rosenberg's editors right to conclude he is the problem? If so, what should they do about him: replace him on the music beat altogether, bar him from covering the orchestra, or have him share duties with another reviewer?
- c) Rosenberg was a musician first and learned journalism on the job. What do you believe is appropriate training for an arts critic?
- d) What are an arts critic's responsibilities to his/her public? Does Rosenberg do a service or a disservice to his audience by standing by his opinions even as they are increasingly unpopular?
- e) Rosenberg has a distant relationship with Welser-Möst, but was friends with his predecessor, Dohnányi. Is it possible for an arts critic to have a close personal relationship with artists and still cover them impartially? Might such a relationship actually be helpful? Is it fair to expect local critics to avoid all personal relationships with artists they cover, especially in small markets?
- f) Consider the role of an editor managing an arts critic. On what basis might he/she judge whether a critic is being unfair, especially when the critic's knowledge of the art form exceeds the editor's? Did Rosenberg's editors take appropriate steps to make this judgment?
- g) What might Rosenberg's editors have done differently to prevent the situation from deteriorating to such a critical point? Identify specific moments in the case when you believe managerial missteps were made.
- h) Do you believe editors were right to give so much weight to complaints about Rosenberg coming from inside the orchestra and its administration? What about complaints coming from the general public? Should editors be concerned about damaging their credibility (or that of their staff critics) if they give in to these complaints?
- i) Do you believe Rosenberg's negative reviews are a threat to the newspaper's credibility as his opponents contend? Why or why not?
- j) Consider the relationship between a local paper and the arts institutions it covers. *Plain Dealer* and orchestra staff in this case attend the same parties; the publisher of the paper even sits on the orchestra's board. Is this degree of institutional overlap problematic, or is it inevitable in all but the largest cities?

- k) Consider the specific responsibilities of an arts critic when covering a local arts organization. Is his job like that of local sports writer—at times critical but ultimately supportive of the home team? Or should a critic be brutally honest even if his reviews consistently demoralize the artists and their fans?

### **Suggested Readings**

David Hajdu, "Condition Critical: Can Arts Survive the Poison Pill of American Consumerism?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2009.

SYNOPSIS: This essay provides an excellent overview of the state of arts criticism during the period in which this case takes place. Veteran arts journalist David Hajdu argues that arts critics are now under pressure to write what is essentially publicity for the products and performances they are reviewing, and thus to avoid unpopular or truly critical reviews in favor of largely positive, thumbs-up/thumbs-down assessments that are of immediate utility to consumers. He notes that many classical music critics, in particular, are tending to engage in a kind of boosterism because they see the art they cover as endangered. Hajdu presents these approaches as a troubling change from a former era in which it was believed that writing essayistic, reflective critiques (be they positive or negative) was the best way to ensure the health of the art form. However, he quotes others who argue that the nature of criticism is always in flux, and that greater participation by artists and audiences online may actually improve the field.

[http://www.cjr.org/essay/condition\\_critical.php](http://www.cjr.org/essay/condition_critical.php)

### **Perspectives on the role of the arts critic:**

Maurice Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, New York: The New Press, 1998.

SYNOPSIS: Consult this collection of essays by prominent arts and culture critics for a range of perspectives on the role and responsibilities of critics at a time when cultural historian and editor Maurice Berger argues they are in flux. Contributors include Arlene Croce, bell hooks, Joyce Carol Oates, and Wayne Koestenbaum.

Robert Hilburn, "What does it take to be a good music critic?" *Artists House Music*, September 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In this short video, the former pop music critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, one of the most influential writers of the genre, reflects on what it means to be a good music critic. He argues that having strong opinions is essential, but that critics must explicitly justify these opinions in their reviews—otherwise a review is useless to the public. He also advocates thinking of the review process as an ongoing dialogue with readers in which they are implicitly invited to make their own judgments.

<http://www.artistshousemusic.org/videos/what+does+it+take+to+be+a+good+music+critic>

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Jonathan Jones, "On art blog: art criticism is not a democracy," *Guardian*, June 25, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: A fine arts critic for the *Guardian*, Jones's take on arts criticism is more blunt than that of many of his colleagues: he believes critics' opinions are generally more astute than the general public's and, unless they do their job well, mediocre art will proliferate. Arguing that critics are not made but born with the instinct, he proclaims, "A critic is basically an arrogant bastard who says 'this is good, this is bad' without necessarily being able to explain why. At least, not instantly. The truth is, we feel this stuff in our bones. And we're innately convinced we're right."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2009/jun/25/art-criticismjonathan-jones>

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Anne Midgette, "The Classical Beat: Do Critics Matter?" *Washington Post*, July 1, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: In this blog entry, Midgette, classical music critic for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major outlets joins the fray and offers her own take on the role of the music critic. She argues that pandering to popular tastes is the last thing critics should do; instead, their role is to foster dialogue and debate, often by championing opinions they know are in the minority. She believes critics should cover all aspects of what is going on in a particular artistic arena, rather than just offer quick and easy guides to how audiences should spend their money.

[http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-classical-beat/2009/07/do\\_critics\\_matter.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-classical-beat/2009/07/do_critics_matter.html)