

look forward to seeing it evolve over under new leadership in the coming years.

Thank you,
Jennifer Bernard Merkowitz

Letter to the Editor

December 31, 2010

Dear Array editor,

When I opened the PDF of the [latest edition of *Array*](#) back in August, I was tickled to find among the letters to the editor a response from Bob Gluck to my review of his CD [Electric Brew](#). As a graduate student, I remember one of my musicology professors telling me about the back and forth debates that would sometimes ensue in the pages of academic journals as colleagues responded to each other. To suddenly find myself in the midst of such a debate is a genuine thrill! I mean this with all sincerity, something we have to be increasingly sure to state because of internet communication's tendency to default to sarcasm. Fostering an environment where such debates can happen is a vital function of professional organizations and their publications. I will echo Bob's call for such exchanges to be conducted "in a spirit of collegiality and friendship with the goal of engaging ideas". I hope that our open and honest discussion will be good for the discipline

and allow (as Proverbs reminds us) iron to sharpen iron.

I will start by saying that wherever Bob has made factual corrections, I of course defer to his statements. Far be it from me to claim to know Bob's personal history or compositional techniques better than he does himself. I read through the liner notes included with his CD and tried to use the details it provided throughout my review. I also researched his biography using a variety of online sources and did my best to enrich my listening experience with context wherever possible. If I there were any factual errors with regard to his creative process or musical training, I apologize.

Bob's primary critique of my review centers around the thesis that I injected too much of myself into the review. His point was that when "the concerns and judgments of the critic take center stage" the criticism is "[l]ess useful". On this point, I must wholeheartedly disagree with Bob. I feel that a review that simply relays the facts and organizes that information for the reader is more reporting than criticism, and to me it often comes across as flat and bland. It is precisely this type of criticism that I took to be one of the things being brought to light by our current Array editor ("The Future of the Concert Review") and Leigh Landy ("Why Haven't I Written about the Pieces Played at ICMC?"). Computer and electronic music

criticism must (to use Bob's own words) "engage the ideas, sounds and processes that organically emerge from the work of a composer". To me, truly engaging includes an attempt to wrestle with aesthetics, what works and what doesn't.

Injecting oneself into the writing is an accepted form of criticism, most notably by what is known as [New Journalism](#). This form of writing has roots in the 1960s and 1970s, and is associated with such American writers as George Plimpton, Norman Mailer, Robert Christgau and Hunter S. Thompson. I am by no means an expert in New Journalism history or all of its method, but as a reader I am a fan. Readers are invited to compare their experiences with those of the author and determine for themselves if their opinions and response to the work in question might align. By bringing elements of subjectivity to the fore and talking about oneself, the author can be more open about any biases that have informed his opinion instead of pretending to hide behind the veil of objectivity. I believe this is a valid method for addressing the call for enhanced criticism and stand by my use of this tactic in my writing.

Aside from the method of my review, there are three specific points that Bob raises for which I feel compelled to offer a rebuttal. First, he takes issue with my attempts to compare his work to that of

Miles Davis and either misrepresents or misunderstands my point. He states, "Nathan's position is that the standard by which my work should be judged is Miles's original recording." I don't think my position was meant to be this extreme. It is better understood as an attempt to wrestle with the questions of intertextuality that Bob raises himself through the motifs he has excised and connections made in his liner notes. I merely followed these leads as a method of engaging with the material and made comparisons where they felt most natural. Imagine if I were to hear only Stravinsky's *Ragtime* and never investigate what Scott Joplin sounds like. What if I hear Elvis Presley's *Hound Dog* and never bother to check out Big Mama Thornton's original version? If I hear a mashup, should I never bother to give the two source recordings a listen? Personally, I find these types of intertextual journeys to be incredibly rich and rewarding experiences and would encourage such engagement from listeners whenever the opportunity arises.

Second, Bob took issue with my dismissive tone regarding his piece *In the Bushes* and I believe that here he may have a valid point. Instead of engaging the work in question, I took the opportunity to make comments on the mini-trend of "Bush pieces" and questioned the long-term viability of such works once the speeches used as source material are a faded

memory. In fact, I really did not address Bob's work at all and hope that readers did not confuse my critique of the trend for a critique of his specific piece. I apologize for letting my injection of subjectivity distract me from addressing the work in question, but given the biases I outlined perhaps it was for the best.

Finally, Bob mentioned the recording techniques used to capture the duets between the human and computer-generated layers on the Disklavier and the fact that I "[criticize] the recording for not separating these two layers". While I do not think it would be necessary to go to the legendary extremes of Glenn Gould, providing a perspective different from that of a distant concertgoer might help the listener appreciate this interplay of layers more. I will admit that I am a sucker for recordings that put me in the perspective of the pianist; I like the low notes on the left and the high notes on the right. Perhaps this is because I am not a pianist and envy the position of sonic power that pianists have at the keyboard. Regardless, I merely hypothesized that such a change in the listening perspective on the recording might convey the technical feat of this Disklavier piece better than the distant stereo pair did. I'll leave the debate as an exercise for listeners.

I'll end by restating the bottom line: I did not like *Electric Brew*. But I believe

this is an opinion that I can hold without it impairing my ability to write an informative critique for potential listeners. Rather than mask my subjective opinion by feigning objectivity, I chose to frame my review as an essay that wrestled with the question, "Why did I not like this CD?" I followed all of the leads that Bob's liner notes provided, from Miles Davis to the eShofar to *The Rite of Spring* to George W. Bush. In my opinion, I think the reader comes away with a clear picture of the process I went through trying to contextualize and understand this CD. In the end, I was satisfied with my conclusions and stand by them. Of course, readers are always encouraged to listen for themselves and judge the work based on what they hear. However, I doubt that most of them will be able to give as much time and energy to the experience as I did. To engage is hard work!

--Nathan Wolek