

Courtiers of the cutting edge

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Kenneth Anderson

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Musical amateurs and amateurism in the age of the professional

Friedrich Wilhelm II, who ruled as King of Prussia for eleven years from 1786 until 1797 following the reign of his uncle Frederick the Great, was a sufficiently passionate amateur cellist, even when on military campaign, to devote, it is reported, at least two hours a day to music, "going so far as to summon two violinists and a violist to his field headquarters to make possible his requisite quartet party". The monarch also played the traditional role of music patron at his court in Potsdam, which resulted in an outpouring of compositions prominently featuring the cello from the greatest composers of the day, including Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and Boccherini. Yet Friedrich Wilhelm's technical skills as a cellist, and not merely his pocketbook as passive royal arts patron, produced some peculiar results. The court's resident cello virtuoso, Jean-Pierre Duport, while far from the first rank of composers, understood that in composing for a monarch who also presumed to play, the "pieces should look difficult (yet be easy)", in the words of the cello virtuoso Anner Bylsma. Beethoven, on the other hand, missed the point altogether; he assumed that a "cello part should be simple, especially for a king, an amateur. Beethoven create(d) a whole new genre: the piano sonata with cello accompaniment".

For a very long time, since at least the time that Western music began to break out as a high art separate from the Church, amateurs were a crucial part of the transmission of high musical culture. The English "consort of viol" players at the time of the Civil War, for example - consisting of both amateurs and professional musicians displaced by Puritan disapproval of music in the church and theatre, who therefore, as Roger North put it, "chose to fiddle at home, than to goe out and be knockt on the head abroad" - played a vital role in the development of such brilliant consort music as Matthew Locke's *Consort of Fower Parts* (c1650) and, perhaps the most profound of the genre, Henry Purcell's *Fantasias for the Viols* (1680). "House music", specifically written for less-than-professionally proficient amateurs, was for centuries a staple of many composers; even today, amateur musicians would be bereft without the lovely but eminently playable Hausmusik of Telemann and many others. House recitals by talented amateurs were similarly part of the transmission and diffusion of high musical culture in the nineteenth century. Nor was this diffusion limited to the upper classes. The genteel tradition of aspiring ladies and gentlemen of the middle classes having at least some music skills at the piano, playing the simpler "classical" pieces or even, for that matter, popular song, was likewise a part of the process of transmission.

Today, however, the amateur as musical player and performer no longer has a significant place in the diffusion of the classical tradition, at least as it is ordinarily conceived in the mainstream world of "serious" music. This may seem radically to overstate matters, given that worldwide, more people than ever play classical instruments and the embrace of Western classical instruments by, for example, Asian societies such as Japan and Korea - and the invigoration of the Western classical tradition it has helped bring about - is nothing short of astonishing. Where would classical music be without those armies on several continents of students of the Suzuki method? Nevertheless, specifically as part of the means of transmitting musical high culture - as players and performers rather than solely student-

learners - amateurs today constitute a fifth wheel on the vehicle of classical music. One fundamental reason is that the historical role of amateurs in allowing wider audiences to hear music performed has been supplanted by the technology of recorded sound. In a world in which recorded music is easily and cheaply available, the classical tradition is most efficiently transmitted not by amateurs attempting Beethoven, but by the Discman, boombox, car stereo, and Internet.

This is, overall, a positive development.

Amateur performance always had enormous limitations; the same limitations that Beethoven and others faced in writing music for Friedrich Wilhelm not merely to admire, but to play.

Amateurs are, well, amateurs; to judge by the music itself, the gap between amateurs and professional musicians has always been large. Even among the first compositions for the cello - for example, the Ricercars (1689) of Domenico Gabrielli, let alone the sublimities of the Bach solo cello suites - there are passages of virtuosity that would tax most amateur cellists today. The gap is wider today than ever, partly on account of the greater number of students entering the lists of classical music and the greater resources of large, wealthy societies to promote the best talent. Instead of exposure through amateurs, exposure to classical music comes through recorded performances by the world's finest players. These players are few in number, and one might be forgiven for thinking that it is actually difficult to hear the core repertoire in recordings made by anyone else.

What, then, does it mean to be an amateur in the world of classical music, or indeed in any field of endeavour, today? Because, after all, the converse of having universal access to the world's greatest performances is that listening today to almost any amateur play, no matter how good, is mildly excruciating. I say this as a particularly unprepossessing but passionate amateur cellist. It is not merely that the amateur can only rarely approach the standards of the professional; that has always been true. It is also that, as listeners today, we practically cannot help ourselves from measuring the amateur against the very finest professionals in the world, the sparse handful of virtuosos who form the core of our CD collections, the ones we listen to most often; the ones with whose affect, phrasings, subtle shadings of mood, nuances of intonation, and rhythms we are most intimately familiar.

Of course, if one is listening to amateurs, one takes account of their amateur status (as against a Yo-Yo Ma, Janos Starker or Peter Wispelway). Arguably, however, that just makes matters worse, because it means we are ever more consciously not listening to music, but conscientiously listening to amateurs. The experience, alas, inevitably recalls the student recital in which the audience is composed of parents, grandparents, friends and relations who are there not to listen to music as such, but to witness a particular amateur's musical progress.

Friends and relations, in this respect, are not so very different from the courtiers at Potsdam who, rest assured, did not sigh and look pained if the King chanced to hit a false note.

But the "student" model of the amateur can mean two different things. On the one hand, an amateur is someone who is in training; someone who engages in musical activity in the process of seeing whether they have what it takes to become a professional. Although too narrow a view - what about the grown-ups like me who are obviously not in the process of "becoming" anything, not even becoming weeded out? - it is also clear that in classical music much student training is organized around exactly this principle. The amateurs (really, the children) are, on a nationwide basis, the raw materials out of which future professionals are

sorted. A city's local conservatory, for example, provides the "best", ie most professionally oriented, musical training, in which the programme of study revolves not around music or musical skills per se, but instead around the conservatory's recital schedule. Musical skill is acquired almost as a side-effect of preparing for the next recital, on something like the competitive sports model of training for tournaments. Some amateurs thrive on this model of musical training. But unlike competitive sports, in which winning is legitimately a goal for its own sake, music does not self-evidently have "winning" as an aesthetic goal, but rather only as an exterior marker of other aesthetic values. In that sense, neither the student in training to become a professional nor the competitive sports model of music training captures what, at least in music and other aesthetic avocations, many amateurs are looking for.

On the other hand, the student-learner model of amateurism is also about training oneself to be the best participant that a non-professional can be - an active listener, say, with ears trained by the experience of modest executancy, of learning how to play. Much music education in schools is on this model - the curriculum of "music appreciation" - but the playing which it involves is not for its own sake; it is, rather, in order to understand performances by others.

Certainly musical appreciation is a sizeable benefit which amateur musicians reap.

Equally certainly, it is not what drives amateurs, especially adult amateurs, to listen or to play. Our condition as amateur players is defined by the fact that our reach exceeds our grasp, our desires exceed our gifts; and yet we march on, not because we desire to be professionals, nor even to listen, but to play. This fact, amateurism as the sheer delight of playing, is more subtle than it might seem. Wayne Booth, the prominent American literary critic, has written the only sustained study of the interior experience of musical amateurism in recent years, *For the Love of It: Amateuring and its rivals* (Chicago University Press, 1999). It is part memoir and part elegy to a form of life in which his musicality remained in the margins simultaneously of his own professional life as a professor of English literature and that of the professional music world. *For the Love of It* succeeds as a meditation on the tension between the centrality of music in Booth's life, both inner and social, and its marginality. Music is a central, guiding passion. Yet in another sense, the professional sense, it is at once peripheral to him and he to it.

Booth came to the cello in his thirties with prior music lessons as a youth in the wind instruments, but no experience in strings. He is refreshingly practical in his approach; he chose the cello over the piano and the violin because (especially in those years in the 1950s when the cello was less appreciated than it is today) there were fewer cello players and so the instrument put him in greater demand in amateur chamber ensembles. Music for Booth is not finally about scholarship, or about listening, it is about playing -and his book is really a reflection on the inadequacy of our modern reduction of the "love of it" to simplistic notions of mere "pleasure".

It causes the reader to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the pleasures involved in making music; the satisfaction in playing well, the pride one takes in learning a difficult piece or passage or technique, the buzz in one's fingertips and the sense of completeness with the bow when the turn is done just right, the pleasure of playing with others, the comfort of a shared society, the joy of not just hearing, but making, the music, the wonder at the notes lingering on the air. These are, Booth insists, distinct and distinctly experienced pleasures. And when he says that amateurs do it for the love of it, that is not the end of the matter, but rather the beginning of understanding the neglected varieties of pleasure within the human experience and how, within amateur music, they combine together, the abstract and the

visceral, the head and the gut, to make the activity, for those of us who seek to do it, irresistible and - it is not too strong a word - sublime.

What Booth does not address, however, is the larger world of music itself, and how the collapse of the amateur as performer is part of the complicated shift in relations between musical professionals and their audience. For the Love of It is a work fundamentally about the interior experience of an amateur striving to play the most traditional canon of traditionally serious music, the ones "everyone" learned about in those first years at the piano. It therefore engages not at all with contemporary music, or with the avant-garde in any form. Booth, who as a literary theorist was on the cutting edge of criticism throughout his career as professional and professor, would no doubt say, with blunt practicality, that such music is not playable by amateurs, even good ones, and that anyway it's neither attractive nor beautiful: the professor comes to music as a respite from the professional cutting edge in his own field, not to carry it from vocation into avocation.

By contrast, "Bloody Amateurs", the latest issue of the quarterly music review Unknown Public (which includes text as well as CD), is written and produced by people for whom music is not a respite from something else, but at the centre of their lives in a way altogether different from Booth. The essayists in "Bloody Amateurs" are concerned with the amateur as performer, yes, but for all the discussion of what it means to be an amateur, the role and value of amateurs, the dignity and authenticity of the amateur, really the discussion is about what, instead, it means to be a professional. The debate, in other words, is over what it means to make music central to one's life and still, as a consequence of professional decisions, be on the margins at the same time. The condition of these artists differs fundamentally from Booth in that however central music is to his interior or social life, his identity as a professional in the world of literature and criticism means that he has no anxiety over what his place is in the world of music professionalism. Whereas for the "Bloody Amateurs", because they are so often artists on the cutting edge, music is central to them, yet they are not central to music, at least not as it is conceived in the realm of commercial, commodified, mainstream, "serious" music. The result is a certain anxiety that sometimes emerges as bravado about being an amateur.

The most striking essay in "Bloody Amateurs" is Joanna MacGregor's on Charles Ives (1874-1954). Ives understood after graduating from Yale that "he would never make a professional musician. Rather than compromise his radical, rugged and abrasive style, he picked a conservative profession (insurance), made a million, and composed at weekends, rarely hearing his music performed." Ives is the role model for many of the artists in this book, and yet despite the sneers of "amateur" status implied in comments by Elliott Carter and Aaron Copland, it would be hard to characterize him as anything other than a dedicated, consummate professional.

Far from being an amateur, at least in the sense that Booth means it, Ives's artistic professionalism was so complete that it denied him the possibility of compromising it for any kind of commercial success.

Looking to the example of Ives, it seems to me - a simple amateur in the ordinary sense - that the essayists and musicians in "Bloody Amateurs" carry too many misplaced worries about the democratic accessibility of their music, both from the standpoint of listening and from the standpoint of the ability of amateurs to produce it. It is as though their claims to artistic virtue over the commodified world of serious music must also carry a claim, in an egalitarian society, to democratic virtue and the participation of the common man, and it is from this that the (misplaced) desire to claim the mantle of amateur arises. Their work is not,

by and large accessible, neither for listening to by amateurs nor performance; it never will, and need not, be.

For these aesthetically undemocratic artists have a claim to something, quite evidently, beyond their frustration with the world of mainstream serious music, although it is not something that I think many of them would acknowledge. It is not their unwillingness to make themselves commercially accessible; it is, rather, that their artistic integrity (I intend this unironically, in an entirely unfashionable sense) gives them the possibility of using music to approach the sublime. Ever since the age of the Romantics, it has been a condition of romanticism that it cannot admit of itself - and that is the romantic conundrum of the avant-gardists of "Bloody Amateurs"; their project is to allow themselves to glimpse the sublime, even if their aesthetics (or politics) would not allow it to be put that way. Their position, like Ives's, is not very different from that of Cyrano de Bergerac refusing to alter "one comma" to suit Cardinal Riche-lieu, because, although the Cardinal pays well, he pays "not so well as I".

This seems to me a fair - and fairly admiring - description of many of the essayists writing in "Bloody Amateurs" and the musicians on its CD. They lay claim to the title of amateur, apparently on the basis of doing it "for the love of it", as something almost to be thrown in the face of those at the centre of serious, mainstream, commercial music. But really they are so very much professionals. They are so much more professional than their commercially successful counterparts, that the sine qua non of their professionalism -getting paid for one's work - comes to be seen as a matter of reward beyond even money and commercial success.

The amateur and the professional beyond merely commodified professionalism, are two very different-sounding things. Indubitably, however, they are both Romantics.