

ALEX ROSS ON MUSIC

Alex Ross. *Listen To This*. New York: FS&G, 2010.

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Alex Ross's second book, *Listen To This*, consists of a series of what appear to be *New Yorker* profiles. He has been music critic for that journal since 1996. Before that, he was music critic for *The New York Times* for four years, contributing to other journals, as well. In so far as he was born in 1968, Mr. Ross has been a music critic since he was 24 years old, a babe, as it were. George Bernard Shaw, the preeminent critic of classical music in English, was 20 years of age when he wrote his first music pieces for *The Hornet* in London, resuming again at 27, after a seven year hiatus devoted to "literary exercise," along with the study of "harmony, counterpoint and temperament." Shaw would write about music for the next three-quarters of a century, his last piece entitled "Music Today," a series of answers for a questionnaire from *The Stage*, in which he addressed the *situation* of music at that time—radio, government patronage to the art, the quality of contemporary instrumentalists and music criticism—in hopeful terms.

I mention Shaw because he is the standard to which all writers about classical music in English must, inevitably, be compared, and because Alex Ross mentions him but once in this engaging series of essays revolving around Ross' own notions of "Music Today"; today being, for the most part, the music performed and recorded in America in the 21st century.

Ross begins the preface to his book with this statement: "Writing about music is not especially difficult." Oh, yes it is, and if you want your heart to sink pick up any anthology of music criticism; say, for example, *The Attentive Listener: Three Centuries of Music Criticism*, edited by Harry Haskell. Why this is the case is a complex matter, but it is and hath ever been thus. Shaw, as W.H. Auden reminds us, in the event we needed reminding, "was probably the greatest music critic who ever lived." Why this is the case involves another complex discussion. What makes a "great, or good music critic, according to Shaw? "He must have a cultivated taste for music; he must be a skilled writer; and he must be a practiced critic. Any of these three may be found without the others; but the complete combination is indispensable to good work." ("How To Become A Musical Critic") He prefaces these traits with the "general qualification" that the prospective music critic have "good sense and a knowledge of the world," which, I would think, pertains for all criticism in the arts, and which, in fact, is alarmingly

rare.

Alex Ross is all these things and a very fine music writer. Mind, I don't say "music critic" but that is not really what he does, at least in the traditional sense. His predecessor at *The New Yorker*, Andrew Porter, wrote a weekly music column for many years, and more fits the bill of "music critic," attending mostly to individual performances and the *occasions* of music. Porter was writing when musical literacy and concert attendance was more commonplace among the middle and upper-middle classes, or at least those of the middle classes reading music columns in *The New Yorker*. Mr. Ross focuses more on the *situation* of music and music listening, as he should. With the culture, not least the music culture, going through enormous changes at an ever accelerating rate, the *situation* of music listening is the only real subject, the subject that makes conventional musical criticism, of the sort one finds reasonably well done in *The New York Times* or *The Financial Times* and that sort of market, seem a bit rarified these days, as would not have been the case 25 years ago.

Nor does Alex Ross confine himself to "classical" music. A classical music "nerd" growing up, he relatively late in his listening life came to "popular music," punk, rock, and the rest. He writes with enthusiasm about Radiohead and Bjork, and follows Bob Dylan performing around the country. Nor is he New York- or London-centric; quite the contrary. These essays have him all over the place: Iceland, China, Alaska, L.A., Bilbao. Someone like George Bernard Shaw spent almost his entire music listening existence within a couple of square miles.

Ross' virtues are the ones set out by Shaw, along with a broad sympathy for different kinds of music, a capacity for psychological insight and a good, reporter's nose for what's going on around him, at given time, or given place, also thoroughness. He is not of Shaw's stature as a music writer, no one is, and, on second thought, it's probably an unfair comparison to make. Shaw was an immeasurably larger writer. It is as if Ford Maddox Ford, because of a boyhood fascination with the subject, wrote a visual arts column for a broadsheet over the course of many years. But I don't know of a single contemporary whose music writings are as engaging and readable as Ross', both these *New Yorker* writings, as well as his excellent history of 20th century music, *The Rest Is Noise*. His shortcomings, such as they are, might be said to be the shortcomings of the magazine he writes for. The principal goal of *The New Yorker* is selling advertising revenue, as was the case with the newspapers for which Shaw wrote. The final authority the magazine answers to is Sam Newhouse, Jr., who runs Conde Nast. The cachet of *The New Yorker* has always been rooted in an American middle-class notion of

sophistication, and this has been the case since Harold Ross ran the show. What passes for sophistication in 2011 is something quite different than was the case 80 years ago. Still, the idea is to make the magazine's average reader feel like he's brushing up against culture and coming away with a bit of it, like sparkle on the lapel of his coat. Withal, Ross', and much of the other *New Yorker* arts writing, tells people more or less what they want to hear or are capable of digesting. What it surely does not want to do is to make anyone feel too terribly uncomfortable or be made to feel ignorant. It's the sort of commentary that doesn't really make demands on a reader that can't be successfully dealt with in the context of a doctor's waiting room. Ross tends to be overly kind (especially to Bob Dylan), too temperate and safe in his observations throughout, and his sentiments run a bit towards the cozy-feeling end of things. There is little in the collection that surprises or that might elicit objection, much less outrage, in the form of "hey, wait just one minute there, boyo!"

This is not meant in a mean-spirited manner. To write as well as Alex Ross under these strictures (which strictures are the sort of silken fetters most any arts writer would pay the moon to be bound up in) is a large achievement. The initial and title essay of the collection, "Listen To This," is a very contemporary mediation on the sociology and culture of music listening: intelligent, serious, far-ranging. Any serious student of music or informed listener should read it twice, which won't be a trial; it's very well written. The entire collection is. The most appealing piece, whether you're in a doctor's office or strapped to a sawhorse in the glare of a Texas July midday afternoon, is Ross' piece on the conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen: "The Anti-Maestro." It's not literature. It's a fairly standard *New Yorker* profile in most regards, but both the subject and the writer of the profile are a step up from "standard," quite a step up.