Problems Facing Music Criticism

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Recorded and transcribed by Laura Kuhn

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Laurie Spiegel
Joan La Barbara
Tom Johnson
Walter Zimmermann
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Guest Participant:

Alan Rich

1. Various Types of Music Criticism
2. Music Criticism in Europe
3. Objectivity and Influence
4. Capturing the Essence of Music in Words
5. The Power of a Critic
6. Critics and Cross Cultural Issues
7. Criticism and Publicity
8. Music Criticism, Politics and Marginalization
9. Uses of Music Criticism by the Music Industry
10. Polemical Wars and Camps Within Music Criticism
11. Composers as Music Critics
12. Avoiding Insularity

1. Various Types of Music Criticism

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: There are so many various types of music criticism that it's difficult to lump them together, just as it is difficult to lump all French composers together or many other categories that get lumped together— West Coast composers, and so forth. And especially now, because in each area of the world there are so many different tendencies operating simultaneously because of increased communication. But, in considering music criticism, it would be important to think, from the composer's point of view, of experiences you've had with criticism—have there been events that have been helpful to you, that have occurred through your reading of criticism? Has anything ever had an impact on your work? Is criticism useless to you as a method of feedback due to the quality of it? Or the quality of it in a particular location? What is the difference between daily, weekly, and quarterly criticism, and if we look at just daily criticism, which is the kind we mostly respond to because we're anxious to see what happened after our concert. We have to take into account that there are various types of daily criticism and various qualities of training of critics and there are reviews, previews, and "think pieces,"—which is a strange name that is bandied about in newspaper parlance because we would hope that all the pieces would be "think pieces." But these are overview statements about tendencies and we also have a situation, in this country, which is quite different from foreign countries, from other countries. I'm sure Tom Johnson will address that. There is also the issue of composers as critics vs. non-composers as critics. *The New York Times* refuses to hire composers as critics whereas *The Herald Tribune*, in its heyday, had only composers, or primarily composers, as critics. There is also the famous dictum of Virgil Thomson which is that criticism should first and foremost describe the performance so that somebody who wasn't there could understand basically what went on. Very often we have criticisms which are inadequate in that they don't describe in any detail a particular piece of music because of the lack of preparation of the reviewer or the lack of ability in the reviewer to comprehend what is going on. Or many other factors… Maybe the critic wasn't even in the hall. That has happened. So we need to think about many of these things and, particularly, about what use criticism is to us, what we think it should be. We have a couple of examples of writing from the '30s to the present which begin to stimulate discussion. John, would you like to start with some comments about your thoughts over the week on this subject?

JOHN CAGE: Well, the difficulty is that it's a large subject. One way that I, for myself, simplify it, is that criticism is not musical, it's literary. It's an act of writing rather than art, or making a piece of music. So, it seems to me that if one's interested in quality, which criticism seems to be—whether something is good or bad—that first of all it should be good writing. I find that I am unable to take criticism seriously that is not interesting to me as writing. Now what is interesting to me as writing is often something that I can't even understand. For instance the philosophy of Wittgenstein. I find it extremely beautiful, fascinating to read, but I don't understand it. The same takes place with the writing of Gertrude Stein. One's not involved with understanding but rather with the experience of reading. Now I think this is largely missing from what we call newspaper or media music criticism and I myself don't use it. I don't buy the newspaper, any more than I, pardon me Charles, listen to the radio.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: I've heard stories that you would run out to the corner stand and buy the newspapers.

JOHN CAGE: To get Virgil's. I used to go and buy the *New York Herald Tribune* not knowing what Virgil had written about just to see what he had to say because he was interesting to read. On another occasion, as far as the usefulness of criticism to me goes, I used it once in advertising a concert that I was giving of music for prepared piano. I put on one side of the announcement favorable criticisms and on another side unfavorable criticisms, so the person reading the announcement could see what situation he was in—namely a controversial one. As far as the attitudes toward music go, I think in terms of Marcel Duchamp's text "The Critical Act," which makes it clear that the work of art is not finished by the composer but is finished by the person who uses it. This is very much like the philosophy of Wittgenstein, that meaning doesn't exist apart from the actual use of whatever it is. So that if there are twelve people using or listening, say, to a piece of music, there will be twelve pieces of music at the end rather than the one which we think there is. This is why people can converse or can disagree. But there is not one attitude toward the piece in a realistic, Duchampian way. There are as many works of art as there are observers of the work. That makes a very complex situation in which I come back to the fact that I think the first duty of the critic would be to write something that we can read with pleasure or with the use of our faculties.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So the criticism becomes a work of art in itself.

JOHN CAGE: Yes. In my own case, I would not do it. I've grown disinterested in writing about things. I would rather write in such a way that the writing was a thing itself. This, of course, arouses indignation on the part of not only critics but many observers with regard to my work.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: There are a couple of points. One is that you talk about the use of music and the corollary is what is the use of criticism, what is it actually used for? By analogy of there being multiple perspectives on a piece of music, there are probably as many readers of a review as there, I mean, different ways of interpreting...

JOHN CAGE: And it gets more complicated.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: It's a branching set of perceptions so you end up with a couple generations' removed of people's hypotheses about what actually happened at the concert. The uses of a review are to find out about something you weren't at, or to get further ideas about something you did experience.

JOHN CAGE: That's implicit in what Charles quoted from Virgil.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: You also mentioned using them to publicize things, so they're useful to us composers as sort of descriptions that are, hopefully, less subjective of our own work. But, I don't know. I'm curious how many people here really feel that criticism in reviews has been generally useful to them.

JOAN LA BARBARA: I wanted to get to a different thing before we get to that. When you spoke about criticism being valid as almost a work of art, or valid in itself, I have difficulty with that because I know that when I was working as a stringer for the *L. A. Times*, [Martin]

Bernheimer made a big point about how you write your piece. You had to have a "hook" at the beginning, to "hook" the reader in, and it was more about writing an entertaining piece of verbiage than writing about the music itself. And, in fact, I had to argue with him for a long time before he would permit me to be hired by the paper because he felt that I had such a strong conflict of interest because I knew about music. He felt it would be better to have a person who was trained in English than a person who was trained in music. And I think that's a fundamental problem because many, many times we have critics writing about music who were trained in baseball or some other thing rather than trained in music.

JOHN CAGE: I didn't say what I said earlier to you that both your work in writing about music and Charles' work with the radio seems to me to be bringing about a bridge between the music or the composer and the listener, and I think you do that, in both cases, in a way that works, in a human way, so that the feelings are very good and you have said something about the work in such a way that it could be used in any way by any person who happens to read it. I don't think of that as criticism.

JOAN LA BARBARA: I never considered myself a critic.

JOHN CAGE: It's almost a kind of social act, characterized by love.

JOAN LA BARBARA: I always considered myself a kind of translator. In fact, when I started writing, I wrote for a paper called the *SoHo Weekly News*, which was given out on the doorsteps in the neighborhood for free. I did that because, one, the criticism was so bad, and, two, because my friends wrote such terrible program notes that were either incomplete or so difficult that they put the audience off and confused people. So I would interview the composers ahead of time and do preview articles to sort of introduce the audience to the area that they were going to be entering when they came into the concert space. But I never considered it criticism. And I think music critics do the same thing—they don't consider what I write or people who write the way I did as music criticism. They consider it something else.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Tom Johnson, you haven't said anything yet.

TOM JOHNSON: I'd like to put the emphasis a little differently than John has. I think I'm not really interested now in criticism as much as in musicology or even in music philosophy. I never thought very much about that in America because you never read very much of it in America, but in Europe I've come across that more often. And, in my case, several times in the last few years I've learned, really learned, something from critics. They have said something so perceptive about my music, about things I hadn't seen myself. And there're a couple of quotes... I even have one in my brochure now, because they explained my music better than I ever have.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: But it didn't alter the way you compose, it just reinforced the way you compose.

TOM JOHNSON: I think it gave me more conviction or understanding of what I was doing and then maybe more courage to go forward.

2. Music Criticism in Europe

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: How good is the best criticism in the European press?

TOM JOHNSON: Well, I don't think that individually they're any smarter than we are. But there is a tendency for critics to be musicologists and for people with Ph. D's who've really thought about and specialized in new music and maybe written dissertations on Ligeti to be coming to your concerts. People who have had more time to think and often have more space to write. And often are better informed. A good anecdote is Phil Corner and I were in Berlin for D.A.A.D. at the same time and a musicologist from the Technische Universität came to do an interview with Philip about his music because she was writing a little article and she began the interview by apologizing that she only actually knew seven of his pieces. This really shocked him. He said, "There's not a critic in the whole United States that knows seven of my pieces and I just got to Berlin! I've been living all my life in the United States." So she was a person that does her research, that memorized all the *Source* magazines, and *Ear*, and everyplace you can find Philip Corner's music, and had done some special research, of course, before that too.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Is this typical? When you give a concert, do you have critics come to you beforehand for scores and conversation?

TOM JOHNSON: Well, no...

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Walter, do you?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: No... In Europe, the critics are used to keeping a distance and I think it's good for the composers, too—for them to keep their distance.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So you don't fraternize with the critics?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: I don't advise that. It can work. It can also work the opposite... You should stay away.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So whose writing are you interested in, in criticism, in Germany, for example?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Well, Reinhard Oehlschlagel is one real example of a full-hearted critic. He is very enthusiastic.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: We should say he's coming here, by the way.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Yes. He's one of the best-informed critics. He knows more than any others. He can also be difficult, become difficult, because he also has his limitations. He's not so open as one wishes him to be. Well, I can recall this event which happened with Scelsi. I don't know if you were informed about this. Scelsi died last year. And, as you know, he had someone to transcribe his music because he used to record his music on tape.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Playing the piano?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: No, a special instrument, I think, an electronic instrument which allowed him to play also quarter-tones. He had someone with the name of Tosatti, who was his assistant, you can say, like in the Renaissance. And he transcribed his music like you transcribe an improvisation into a score, with exact rhythmical and precise dynamic notation. And after his death, somehow the Italian press dug up this man and asked him, "Isn't it so that you were there...?" and they suggested to him questions which he answered with "Yes." And finally you found an article in Italian which says "Scelsi c'est moi." This was, of course, because there is a long history of Scelsi being opposed to the more academic Italian composers because they think someone who is not writing his music to the very end is not a composer, he is something else. Well, Oehlschlagel, in this case, used this just one statement and published it in his paper in German translation, without any comment. Because the Italian newspapers already were going around getting comments on that assertion [Tosatti's] from other composers. So he brought this isolated to... And I think this is a kind of... He is not objective in the matter. He consciously withholds information to point out something he probably thinks is right. Probably he thought that Scelsi anyway was an aristocrat. He was not from the Communist party, and all of this was, you know, going along with his thinking. In this case, he was not a journalist as I wish a journalist to be—that he supplies all the information.

3. Objectivity and Influence

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: I think this is the danger—that journalists are also opinion-makers. I wish that they were open and try to get the whole perspective of a situation, like a detective, who tries to find out the truth all the time.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Why shouldn't critics have areas of specialty and interest just like composers?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Of course it's impossible to be objective. I know that. But you can still try. If you consciously withhold things... He's very clever. He could have gotten these other messages if he wanted to. You find in this German critic the kind of opinion that you would expect from someone who writes with a special political stance. So from that side, he already sees the music under a certain light and he's not... Whereas in America, I think there's a closeness of... Sometimes, like Joan La Barbara, who herself is doing music, is more like a translator. So that's one of the differences.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Mort's been dying to say something, but Tom, if this is about Europe...

TOM JOHNSON: Yes, it's about Oehlschlagel. And we should also talk about Gisela Gronemeyer, too, I think, who writes just as well, and thinks just as well. They work together on *MusikTexte*. One thing I think that's important about them, and about a lot of other people, is that they're not just writers—and you usually think of a critic as a writer—but musicologists, somebody who's really thinking about music. Like they'd be involved in a lot of other things. One thing that they do a lot of is radio production work. Gisela did I think it was a 90-minute broadcast of my things on Frankfurt Radio where she'd selected ten or twelve excerpts of my pieces and she wrote about six or seven pages of text which later became an article in *MusikTexte*. But she really started as a radio producer, selecting these examples, how she was going to... So she was thinking of it from that standpoint. Then, of course, being an editor of a magazine is another way where you're selecting what to quote and what not to quote. But many people also teach or do other things, or write program notes. There are many ways that musicologists of contemporary music can make money in Europe, more than here, especially with the subsidized National Radio, where they can do commentaries and interviews and prepare programs.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Tom, you introduced me to Rene Farabé who is the producer for Radio France who does very in-depth interviews with a composer and then collages the interview, in translation if necessary, with pieces of music so that you don't hear continuous, whole pieces of music. Is that the same style?

TOM JOHNSON: No, Rene Farabé is more of an artist. He's making radio as an art object, I would say.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: But he does get into some of the deeper issues of why the composer does particular things.

TOM JOHNSON: But when I was talking about musicologists, I was really thinking more about French radio, the classical music program. For example, every morning from 9:00 AM until 12:00 noon, it has, you know, morning music. But there's usually a theme for the week. There was a wonderful week of Bernd Alois Zimmermann, for example. Often choosing a composer like that, who's important, but not terribly well known. Somebody works, you know, two months on doing all the research and putting together the best tapes of all the most important pieces, in the right sequence, and writing a very useful text to introduce all of this. So it's almost like a little course on Zimmermann you can have in the morning. That was one week I got hooked, because Zimmermann is a very important composer, I think, and somebody who we should know better. And if there's enough money in a situation like that, to pay somebody for a lot of work to prepare fifteen hours...

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Mort, you had something?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: It's very much related to what we've just been talking about and what John brought up at the very outset. I just wanted to point out, or to raise the issue, a couple of small issues. I don't have anything much to say about them, but just to raise them. One is that in addition to criticism being a literary form, as John pointed out in the beginning, it also exists in a series of media which are very different from music making. Music happens in a concert hall, where you might have in the biggest sense two or three thousand people at one time hearing that piece of music, or in the case of a recording where one person or two people at a time hear it. Whereas even the smallest magazine or quarterly will have a larger audience than any piece that was talked about at any given time. And then when you get into newspapers, you're talking in the millions, and magazines you're talking in millions, so that the impact of that media is, I wouldn't say greater, but quantitatively greater, and certainly different than music. So it's not just that it's a literary form but the whole way in which it interacts, as Walter was talking about, with people is greater. He called it an opinion-maker. In many cases, that's the function of it, to create opinion. Which is not the function of music. We're not trying to create opinions; we have an experience. So we have two very different forms there and it makes it very difficult for us to even know how to approach it. The second thing, related to that, is that in the United States, the opinion-making function of criticism has become so important because the marketplace has become so important. BAM and various places are all trying to make money and in the process of making money they're using the media in order to do it. So for many people—I don't even want to say critics, because it's not even critical anymore—it becomes a function of the marketplace. It's a whole other thing. We're facing that in this country more than Europe is facing it, but Europe, as it becomes... It's already happening in England now where the BBC is going to be challenged by commercial stations. This could happen anywhere where the marketplace becomes strong. I just wanted to add those issues to it.

JOHN CAGE: Have you finished?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: I've finished.

JOHN CAGE: I'd like to tell something that happened to me this last year. The ISCM president—I've forgotten his name, but he lives in Poland—had gotten me somehow to agree to

write about twenty different composers for whom the ISCM was making films. Originally they wanted each composer to have his own film and I think they made that material. But then they were told that it would be better for the music and better for the films and so forth if each film had two composers. Then I was still asked to write about each one of the twenty composers and to introduce their work to the public. Now what in heaven's name was I going to do? Because I didn't know the music of these twenty composers, and they failed to send me tapes of the music which I did not want to listen to. If I listen to all the tapes that are sent to me constantly I have no time to do anything else. Well... I didn't want to finish because of the pleasure your work gave me…

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: No, finish that sentence. That's good. Finish that sentence.

JOHN CAGE: What you've done with recorded sound is marvelous, whereas for me it doesn't have that life that it has for you because of your involvement with technology. Anyway, I then asked him to send me what these twenty different people had written, each one, about his own work. Anything that he had said. Then I used that as source material, so that I had twenty bodies of source material with which to write something. Then, of course, what I could write was a mesostic on the name of each composer. Or several. I forget how it happened. The result was that I was involved in writing twenty different kinds of poetry, which came from the twenty different sources. And it was interesting for me personally to do that, because I had never read such things before. And I made them work as something to read as much as I could and by that I mean I introduced into the writing aspects of music. That is to say… aspects of time, which writing is a part of, as music is. It goes, you know, from one moment in time to a later moment in time. These poems didn't make sense, but they made twenty different kinds of nonsense, and the different kinds of nonsense somehow explained or suggested twenty different attitudes toward living and working in the field of music. And the people, when they came to film my reading of them for the final film, were surprised that each one introduced the work of that person in a way that they thought would please each person, that the works, of course, were coming from that source, that the music came from.

4. Capturing the Essence of Music in Words

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Getting back to the subject of criticism, you're not suggesting that Alan Rich write mesostics in response to music?

JOHN CAGE: Well, I'm suggesting...

ALAN RICH: Not if I have to do seven a week!

JOHN CAGE: No, I'm suggesting not that the rest of the world engage in writing mesostics as I do but that they write in such a way that we can read it apart from... Let's see, what can I say? Read it in such a way that we are introduced to the ideas of what's being discussed. I think Walter came close to it. We want, when we read about something, to get a—how would you put it?—a full picture, in which the writer has not decided how we will feel but in which we can make up our own minds.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: The problem is that the critic has the feeling that if he reports like this that he would be in a way a servant of the composer. And, of course, he has his pride in his profession to also transmit a certain opinion.

JOHN CAGE: His own opinion.

JOAN LA BARBARA: You know, I think it's a matter of opinion vs. information and that the critic feels that if he or she is not giving an opinion he's not serving his function as a critic. Whereas I think perhaps composers who write about music are more interested in imparting information about the subject. Musicologists may have the same feeling.

JOHN CAGE: There's another thing in information and that's experience. That's what I'm trying to suggest with my suggesting that nonsense is not irrelevant.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: It's closer to the music.

JOHN CAGE: It's closer to the music and when the nonsense is closer to the music that's being introduced there may be some value to it, or some usefulness.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: You know, in this little discussion going on, between trying to introduce the music, or explain the music, or present in a literary way something about the music which is complete, maybe the one thing that is in common with all of this is that there ought to be... And my feeling is that the media itself is being used. It has a very high impact. It's a higher impact than the piece itself, at any given moment. That perhaps what we're talking about is the responsibility. In other words, if the critic felt the responsibility of trying to do this, they'd find their own way to do it, rather than to form public opinion. If the responsibility of the critic were to somehow serve not just the piece of music, but the art of music, and not to create particular opinions about music, it would fit into various things that we're talking about, whether it's historic, or whether it's an experience, or whether it's a description. But I think that where we're at is that the role of the critic is not really defined. I mean, each critic defines it for him or

herself, and each newspaper defines it for, as Joan was pointing out, the critics at that newspaper, rather than there being a more general idea about what the responsibility or role of criticism is in this medium.

5. The Power of a Critic

TOM JOHNSON: One opinion which I formed rather early in my career as a critic and which I've really never changed, I still believe, is that composers and performers always, without exception, overestimate the power of the critic.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Well, a simple example. A critic is in a small room with new music that has thirty people in it. He writes the next morning for 30,000 people. I mean, this is power.

JOAN LA BARBARA: Yes.

JOHN CAGE: But is it?

TOM JOHNSON: I never felt that.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: This is an incredible power one person has.

TOM JOHNSON: But when you see it from the other side you write an article and you think, "Ah! This might have some impact. This might make somebody think," and you see very little come back. I never had the feeling that my writing had very much impact.

JOHN CAGE: I don't agree about power either.

TOM JOHNSON: No.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: I don't think it has power with the thirty thousand or the thirty million people. I think where it has power is in the people who are the producers of new music, who will look at it, and they have the power because they can produce an opera. And so, in that sense, it is power.

TOM JOHNSON: Most producers that I know are very proud of the fact that their own opinions are better than the critics' opinion. In fact, the critics get off on having this inverse effect on them.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: I have a simple example, very short. The opera I did, *Static Drama*, which was actually a non-opera, was criticized by opera critics. They were completely confused and they banned this piece. Other opera houses read this critic, because they didn't go there, and they say, "No, we don't want this."

JOAN LA BARBARA: Yes.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: That's exactly what I'm talking about.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: It had the effect of turning the piece off...

JOHN CAGE: From it being used.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: We had a very similar experience when I did a piece with Lee Breuer, which was extremely well received by the audience and we had one performance and the reviews were, for the production, very bad. And we have not been able to reproduce it again because it's very expensive and there's nothing. It's just very scary for them to do something that expensive.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Would it have been better to have no criticism printed at all?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: It probably would have.

JOAN LA BARBARA: Yes.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: But I'm not suggesting that that's a good idea.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: In my case, it would have been better if the critics informed themselves about what were the real problems of this production. Not just going there, and seeing what's happening or not happening. That there were some problems with the production which did not necessarily belong to me as the composer. But the composer, of course, always gets it back.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: John, what do you say to that, in regards to power? If a production is stopped.

JOHN CAGE: I have a whole history of criticism of my work. If the criticism were true, the work wouldn't exist, and that's not true so I don't think it has power.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: But you never wanted to write operas until recently. We're talking about very large productions.

JOHN CAGE: I'm wondering, in response to what Walter is saying about power, whether you could bring about the performance of your work. Could you do that?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Well, now Stiebler did it, because he...

JOHN CAGE: That's what I mean about the absence of power.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: ...because he sensed the injustice which happened at this point. So that here was something wrong which did not have to do with me, so he tried to show that it was not the music.

TOM JOHNSON: But that's a case of criticism being a negative influence on the producer.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Yes, but it's a very bad case. I mean, there's lots of music which has disappeared because of bad criticism.

JOHN CAGE: Yes, I know.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: In America there is a whole history of unplayed scores.

ANTHONY DAVIS: Sometimes I think they use the press as an excuse. I don't think that necessarily producers are all that influenced by the press. They may use negative criticism as an excuse for not doing something. I used to find that to be more the case. That there are other factors that enter into it that are much more pertinent. I think there are quite different attitudes I think in how the press receives things vis-à-vis if you look at something in New York, for example, as opposed to other places around the country. I think that sometimes there's a sense of standing at the gates. You know, that the critic has this idea of functioning as the person who's guarding this gate. I don't know what the gate's supposed to be or what's supposed to be on the other side. But, you know, this sense of this Janus image. I think that's a problem and I think in a sense what it is is they have a weird idea about their function in history. Somehow I think they try to take on too much responsibility, more than what is possible.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: A short example. Last year there was in the Frankfurtfest a "Portrait of Stockhausen," for his sixtieth birthday. One of the critics from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*—a lady, who was very charming—got him to have a three-hour discussion on his work. She gave him the impression that she wanted to understand what he has to say.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: She was sympathetic.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Yes. But it was a trick, and the next morning there was a very bad, opinionated article of hers against his attitudes and about the kitsch in his work. Of course he was furious. And the next evening, he saw her again and he went to her and he said, "Get out!" He didn't want the concert to start before she left, so she had to leave. So the next morning, in the paper, you saw the real power of the journalist. This made the rounds in all the German newspapers, about the scandal that Stockhausen caused by asking this critic to leave the room. Stockhausen was the loser finally.

JOAN LA BARBARA: No. Stockhausen is a showman.

ALAN RICH: The critic couldn't buy that much publicity! How did Paul Hume become famous? By Harry Truman punching him in the jaw. These are the things we live for.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: John Simon in New York, too, I'm sure.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Tania, do you have any thoughts about all of this?

TANIA LEÓN: Oh, sure. Perhaps Ricardo could also say something about all this, and that means that traveling is something very impressive because you get to the different awareness of our society and where do they lean to and what is important to them and in reference to where we come from and what is expected from us in terms of sound and in terms of attitudes, and things like that.

6. Critics and Cross Cultural Issues

TANIA LEÓN: In my own perception of the critiques that have been done to my sounds, I compare the critiques that have been done in different countries and it has to do with experiences of those critics in terms of where this composer is coming from, and how they perceive that composer. Perhaps, for example, my sounds might be analyzed in the countries that have to do with my place of origin in a very different way than they are critiqued or analyzed, per se, in the United States. Things that may be generalized as dance rhythms or Latin American rhythms or whatever are not such in those countries where they will go into tremendous in-depth talking about the units, about the cells, about the correspondences, and about where this is coming from. And it has to do with the amount of information that they have about that particular origin of music and rhythms and different associations that might not be the same experience of the critics in another region of the world.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: This is like the Eskimo having many words for snow.

TANIA LEÓN: Exactly. So, you might have the very same piece critiqued by three different societies and they are completely, diametrically opposed to each other. That has been an experience that has led me to believe that, in a way, music is a social function and it is going to be actually described or received according to the awareness of those people that are actually critiquing. But that doesn't suffice or that doesn't actually give power to anybody to permeate the validity of the work, how valuable this work is.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So one has to take into consideration these cross-cultural identities.

TANIA LEÓN: Definitely.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Julio? Anything about that?

JULIO ESTRADA: Yes, I have something to say about music criticism and power. Mexico had some elections recently and we had a parallel development in music criticism as we had in journalism regarding politics. You know we have the Aztec Soviets in Mexico, and they always win, the PRI. Also they lose, and they try to legitimize the supposed President by means of the newspapers, the press, and the TV.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So they just take the elections.

JULIO ESTRADA: Yes. But now, there was more of a scandal. It was shown to all the country that they had lost. So, one thing could happen is that suddenly, after certain actions of the President, several individuals of the extreme center wrote in a newspaper a letter saying, "You are wonderful, Mr. President. We give our support." And then from there it came a very strange situation from one of the musicians who wrote that particular letter that he became suddenly also a very important composer. And by the press, by the music criticism, was also legitimized. So the composer gave a concert and the audience was against the music, saying this was a very

boring thing. All of the audience, saying this, and this, and this. But in the press it was a fantastic work, "Oh, the audience were stupid people! Nobody understood the sense of that work, which was sublime, etc., etc., etc." And then what we get is the same as in politics in music. But you must know that in Mexico a music critic, if the national orchestra travels, they bring the critic with them in the plane. You can hear from the critic the cynical attitude, "Yes, I sublease myself." But we are furious as a society. We are really furious about all this. But what can you do as a society, as a musical society, against that? If you write in the newspaper and you are critical against that particular music, that particularly composer, or that particular situation, you become someone who is in trouble. You are doing a political action.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: It's interesting that this situation is exactly parallel to the composer whose work is misunderstood by the audience and by critics for years and years and years and who gets terrible reviews, and in fact it's important work.

JOHN CAGE: This is another experience that brings about our belief in anarchy.

JULIO ESTRADA: There's no anarchy in a country which has no newspapers, where the only newspaper which exists is a paper from the government, when you want to print something you need to eliminate certain names. So you can be an anarchist in the shower. That's what we do.

JOHN CAGE: When you have a dualistic situation of the strong and the weak, and the right and the wrong, and so forth, then you have a situation which is not good.

JULIO ESTRADA: Sure, it's not good.

7. Criticism and Publicity

MORTON SUBOTNICK: After all this I withdraw my statement about power, because what we're really talking about is short-term power and long-term power. In the short-term, all of us are deeply affected by someone saying bad about us to a million people, but in the long-term it really doesn't matter. So I think the power is very short-lived. There is a power, no question about it, but it's much shorter lived than the power of the music itself, which is going to outlast, you know. People will gradually, well, you get these terrible reviews, and gradually people will remember less and less of what was in the review and gradually remember, "Gee, that person had all those reviews." It almost turns opposite over a long period of time.

JOHN CAGE: This is why Gertrude Stein said it doesn't matter what they say, it matters how much they say.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: This brings up the question of how they select which things to write about. How do you get to be one of the ones that are written about, because there are all these conflicts? I think every paper and every person writing must have different criteria for selecting who to write about. Coming from New York, where there are millions of things going on any given night, there are only six things possible to cover.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: There are two examples here—John, who has had probably more bad things said about him than any human being, over and over again, and Nancarrow, who went years without anyone hearing anything about him. And then it reached the point, not through the press and not through all those things, where people searched him out to see what he was doing. So in the long run, I don't think it matters that much. That's why I withdraw what I said earlier.

TOM JOHNSON: Just to raise another issue about who becomes a critic and who doesn't. Does anybody know what's happened to John Vinton?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: Who?

TOM JOHNSON: John Vinton. He worked with Eric Salzman on *The Dictionary of Contemporary Music* which is that 1,000-page black book that we probably all use, a very fine piece of research, I think. Salzman left and he finished it all by himself. I met him twice, once with Frederic Rzewski and another time with another person. I was very impressed with this man. He knew everything about everybody's music and he had really interesting things, he had philosophical/aesthetic backgrounds in the other arts, and so forth. After he finished the *Dictionary*, he was unemployed. He couldn't find anything in the university. He wasn't really the teacher type, I think. There were no other reference books to edit. There were no jobs in publishing. He was not the type of critic who could write things in a daily paper on short notice because he tended to think longer and write more. And the last I knew of him he was running a machine in a photocopy shop because he couldn't do anything else. If he'd been in Europe, I think, there would have been any number of jobs he could have found in editing, or working with subsidized arts journals. The radios would have been happy to hire him to put together programs and stuff. But we don't have places for people like this, and it's a shame, because these are the people who could tell us about the music.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Jin-Hi, you're writing criticism now for Korean press on the new music scene here.

JIN HI KIM: I'm not writing criticism.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What do you write?

JIN HI KIM: I'm a case like Joan La Barbara.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Feature articles?

JIN HI KIM: Yes. It doesn't make any sense to the Korean audience to get criticism because they don't know what's happening. So I'm reporting what's happening. I just interview the composers and kind of, well, transport information. That's the case.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What about criticism in Korea for contemporary music? Is there a lot of performances and writing about it?

JIN HI KIM: I don't know much about the criticism because whenever I have a chance to go to Korea and I read the newspaper there is not much criticism at all. But I know one thing, that they focus on the really famous composers. There's a kind of dangerous situation, if somebody is famous, because everything is focused on him, and then absolutely nobody else gets a chance to get a review or anything like that. That's the case.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Who is the composer in this case?

JIN HI KIM: In Seoul? Well, there are maybe only two people—Byong Dong Paik and Suk Hi Kang. You probably know him because he works in America too. And then we have a third which you might know about, Isang Yun. He was neglected for a long time, for thirty years or so.

ALAN RICH: Is he being played in Korea now?

JIN HI KIM: I was in Korea this year, in February. For the first time his music was supposed to be performed, for the orchestra and some chamber music.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: For the first time?

JIN HI KIM: For the first time in Korea. I mean, he did an orchestra piece before but there was a lot of bad reaction. People demonstrated against his music.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: They demonstrated in the streets or what?

JIN HI KIM: Yes, because he was involved in critical actions. But anyway, he still has this handicap. But, this time, for the first time, he was invited to Korea by the musicians, and also

somebody invited him, one of the major newspapers, and when I got there there was one beautiful concert of his music. And the newspapers talked about him—who he was and his music and the performance and all that. And then there was a problem. He asked the Korean press and the public to give a public apology, for what happened before, and, of course, the government didn't want to do that.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: They wouldn't apologize?

JIN HI KIM: Of course. And they made a big issue that now he's not a composer anymore, he's a politician in Korea. And then after that they cancelled the concerts and they published an article which was not just criticism about his music but about the kind of political view that he's not a composer, he's a bad composer. It's a very sensitive issue, not very logical, not very rational at all.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: As a progressive individual, then, he has to suffer this indignity because of his politics.

JIN HI KIM: That is true.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So the press is like the Mexican press in a way.

JIN HI KIM: They don't have their own goal. They just depend too much on what's the political situation. Critics don't have their own trust. It can't be just this anger or that anger. I couldn't believe it.

8. Music Criticism, Politics and Marginalization

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Was there a parallel situation in the U.S. in the late '30s with Blitzstein and other composers writing music that was politically oriented? Did the press attack that in the U.S.?

ANTHONY DAVIS: It happens now. I don't think there's any question about it. I think that what happens is not so overt. I think the idea is that they deal with political issues and then they try to say that's all the work is about. I think that happened with *X* at some points, with some of the criticism. I'd say particularly in New York, not in other places. But the idea that because of the political situation that's happening in America now, in which there's great antipathy between Blacks and Jews in New York, and *X*, doing a piece about Malcolm X, seemed to bring out those old fears and those old feelings. So I think what happens is that a lot of the press really dealt with that, with more about what are, I think, their problems with Malcolm X rather than dealing with a piece of art or a work of art, what it's about. A lot of it was trying to say, "This was polemic," or "This was propaganda," or something, because they couldn't relate, they couldn't really make a distinction between content and form. I think that exists, that still happens. I think what happens is, and the danger, I think, that we see in America now, is a real sense of censorship that's about to take place, and that's been taking place.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What forms is that taking?

ANTHONY DAVIS: Well, I think when you look at issues of funding, for example. I think that works which are political, which are likely to excite or alienate supposedly, are less likely to get funded now.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Can you give an example?

ANTHONY DAVIS: That's been happening. With the recent Helms stuff, that's really dangerous, but I know with my experience with *X* that there were foundations who even though they normally were interested in funding works of art and operas, etc., could not, because of the political nature of *X* and what Malcolm X was about, could not deal with that.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So private donors withdrew and other sources had to be found?

ANTHONY DAVIS: A lot of pressure was put on New York City Opera.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What sources were found to support the opera?

ANTHONY DAVIS: Well, we went into the Black community for it. But I think it was very interesting because it became a whole political thing. I remember a lot of donors, for example, who normally gave money to New York City Opera, withdrew their money. People refused to give money to the opera because they were producing this work.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What's the relation to criticism in all this?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: Can I ask a question just before this?

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Sure, go ahead.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: Do you feel that the money will be there, in the future, if you were not doing a political work? I mean, do you feel that the money was withdrawn from you or the subject? There's a slight distinction here. In the case of the Korean composer, the person is boycotted. The person himself can't do anything anymore. I don't know if that's the case.

ANTHONY DAVIS: No, I think what happens is that there's a sense of eliminating the possibility. I think what we're going to see is art that's not threatening, and there's a lot of pressure to produce what I call safe art.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: But the mechanism is different.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: What's the difference if he can't be himself?

MORTON SUBOTNICK: The mechanism is different.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: But he can't be Anthony Davis. He has to do something that...

MORTON SUBOTNICK: The result may be the same, but the mechanism is different.

ANTHONY DAVIS: But there's pressure for that. And I think that's been going on for some time and there is a sense of those kinds of pressures. I think producers feel it, the funding pressures. Now it seems, through the National Endowment, I mean you can see much more of that. I think it's a real present danger.

TOM JOHNSON: Well, this reaction doesn't seem to have hurt *Under the Double Moon*, has it? That was well supported...

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: There's some misunderstanding about what occurred. Private donors to the New York City Opera withdrew their normal donations because of this particular subject. As I understand it, Black labor unions in Harlem and many other people in the Black community came forward, made donations, and actually bought tickets for that evening. I mean, I was there. The audience was over 50 per cent Blacks.

ANTHONY DAVIS: No. What I think is funny is that initially it looked as if it was going to be impossible to produce this work again. The work was sold out every performance at the New York City Opera. There were lines around the house. But the reason is because, as we know about opera, ticket sales don't pay for opera. So what happens is basically the difference in the private support, the sources of private support. And when the subject matter or whatever of the work offends those who give private support, then you find that there's less support for the work.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: But what happened really was not less support but just diversification of the sources of support.

ANTHONY DAVIS: But it didn't really compensate for that. So, for example, when we go back... We would normally say, "Okay, why don't we do it again?" Now they are going to do it again, but because of the new regime. But it was really difficult.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: Was the press involved? Was it at any point reported that people were withdrawing support for the production? Did the press actually participate?

ANTHONY DAVIS: No, no, no. They did not report that. They wouldn't report that. In fact, we sent press releases out about these issues. No, I don't think was ever really reported. In fact, it was usually reported how abundantly we were funded. It was very funny, a very funny phenomenon. I would look at the paper and someone would say, "Well, they've had this and this, and they were so abundantly funded," and then realize that I just had to raise $20,000 to pay my bills for this thing.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Ricardo, you've not only been active in Buenos Aires but you travel quite a bit. What is your perspective on all of this business of music criticism?

RICARDO DAL FARRA: Well, first I would like to say something about what we were saying before about information and opinion and what is happening in Argentina and probably in many other places. Normally in Argentina, you don't have critics of contemporary music. You have critics to write about all kinds of performances, normally on traditional music, classical music. From time to time you can find critics of contemporary music, but they have opinions but no information. Then, what we were talking about before, about critics being opinion-makers, probably the critics in contemporary music, or, in my case, in electro-acoustic music... I never had a critique of a performance because they don't want to go because they don't understand anything at all of what is happening. The effort is too big to get some information to understand what is happening when you are going to a performance and then to give an opinion. I think that normally you find some critics with some opinions of what they are hearing in ten minutes about the work of probably one year or many years. And the person making the critiques doesn't know anything about what he is talking about.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Was there any difference in the period of the military dictatorship to the present period in music criticism or was it simply just business as usual?

RICARDO DAL FARRA: I think it's more or less the same. Probably now it's different because the last government was very open to cultural activities. But, anyway, you can hear many times comments that, for example, electronic music or something like that, is terrorism. Some kind of suppression. It's not all the people. I mean, there is a big audience in Argentina for concerts of electro-acoustic music. We have in Buenos Aires one concert each week of electro-acoustic and computer music. This probably doesn't happen in any other city of the world, one concert each week. But you can never find a critique about what is happening at those concerts.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: I recently talked with Astor Piazzolla when he was in California, and he always says the same thing, that his music was regarded as some sort of social criticism and therefore dangerous.

RICARDO DAL FARRA: But that is different. Because here, Astor Piazzolla is an avant-garde musician, a contemporary composer. Not in Argentina. In Argentina he is a tango composer. Ten years ago he was not a tango composer because his tangos were not traditional tangos. For many years he was not a tango composer. Now he is a tango composer. But he is not the same here. I was at the last New Music America Festival and there were several pieces of Astor Piazzolla. For me it was very surprising to find his pieces played in this Festival because living in Argentina, Astor Piazzolla's music, for me—and I like his music very much—is not typical contemporary music. It's an extension of tango music.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Annea, you haven't had a chance to say anything yet. Any thoughts on all this?

ANNEA LOCKWOOD: It doesn't really feel like a burning issue to me, unless I receive a really bad criticism, a criticism that really misunderstands what I'm doing, of course. Then it becomes very personal. I just had a few, rather unsophisticated thoughts. It's not something I think about. The issues that Anthony raised, about the marginalization of the arts and so on, seem to me much more vital, more interesting.

9. Uses of Music Criticism by the Music Industry

ANNEA LOCKWOOD: My experience suggests to me that pre-performance articles appearing in publications, from a producer's point of view, are clearly a lot more important than criticisms which appear after a performance. Of course, the time factor is inverted as it were. And I also have the sense, when I send off a bunch of criticisms to somebody interested in presenting me, that the existence of the criticisms, irrespective of the content, is what is of interest to the producer. Just that there are criticisms of my work is much more important than the actual content of the criticisms, so that the criticisms could be terribly abstract, almost graphic, as long as there's a headline and a dateline and a critic's name at the end. And I wonder if we're overlooking the extent to which newspaper readers are often thoroughly informed people. I think we're overlooking the extent to which a reader recognizes fully that a criticism is a personal opinion, takes the criticism as a personal opinion, which tends to diminish its political power. Maybe I'm dead wrong about that, but just from casual conversations, and not so casual conversations, with people who are not professional musicians but who hear a lot of music, it is very clear to me that they will read and interpret the various New York critics very much as personal opinion and select which one they're interested to read on that basis and really don't seem to interpret criticism as a cultural comment, you know, as a sort of community cultural comment.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: You get to know the critic.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Alan Rich is dying to say something.

ALAN RICH: I just wish that were true. My experience is that it isn't. That, unfortunately, when we talk about the power of the critic, I think partly we're talking about the way the critic is used by the performance industry, by the music-producing industry and by the production industry. I think we are ascribed an amount of power that we neither seek nor deserve because we are quoted on three sheets in front of Carnegie Hall, we are quoted on record jackets, we are used as the weapon to substitute for the producer of music attending concerts himself and making his own decisions. And I think that this has led to a total misunderstanding of the critics' power. It galls me to go to concerts, both in New York and Los Angeles where I work, and hear how many times the opinion of the critic is parroted by people in conversation during intermission. We critics, talking in general, have actually created a jargon when we're talking about music, that I think is most unfortunate. We have created a way of thinking about a piece of music that is full of that kind of critic-ese or musical jargon that blinds one to what the musical experience could often be about. There are a lot of things that I want to say, but I'm here as a guest and I don't feel it's my place to make long speeches. But music critics are a different kind of breed from drama critics, or theater critics, or movie critics, or food critics, or any other kind, simply because most of what we deal with, a great deal of what we deal with, is a repertory that has been sealed in amber for anywhere up to two or three hundred years. We get to the point where the whole idea of performance becomes a much more important aspect of music criticism than the work itself. And, unfortunately, this can spill over to the way a critic approaches a contemporary piece. My own impression is that there are maybe half a dozen critics across the country who are working regularly, who know how to approach and deal with it, and translate—that very important word that John used—the experience of a piece of music and how it works. There used to be seven of

us until Tom Johnson left. Now there are only six. For the rest, we face a situation that Joan was talking about where the critic on the largest paper let's say in my vicinity looks upon music criticism as the writing of a kind of entertainment. It means that he, having been brought up as an opera singer and a performance-oriented person, has never yet learned about the importance of writing about contemporary music *qua* music. And I think that situation exists itself in most cities across the country. I wish I could say that there were a number of music critics working on newspapers and magazines across the country that people can trust for their opinions. I just don't think it's the case. I think we are being used as a substitute for the music industry having opinions of its own. I think that the function of a music critic as creating a feeling of curiosity, both within and outside the musical community. The best thing I can hope to do, and I include myself in the number of those people sympathetic to new music, is to write in an engaging enough way to create a kind of curiosity, to get people to say, "Hey, there's something going on out there that interests this guy who writes rather well for the *Los Angeles Herald* and maybe I should check it out for myself." I wish there were more people doing that.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: We haven't mentioned any of the criticisms in the packet I gave out, but I'd like to read one passage from Virgil Thomson just as an example of a criticism that is not technical or analytical but gives a sort of broad, general understanding of a particular aspect of vocal music and opera and see what your response is to it. This was written in the May/June 1939 issue of *Modern Music*, and it is in the context of a general report called "More and More From Paris":

> "All musicians know the subtlety of the interplay that takes place between a good recital-singer and his accompanist, between a true song-line and its instrumental clothing. The two are not one, but they have one subject which they treat with all the mutual understanding, all the intimacy of a true married pair. The lied is the most sensitive kind of music in the world and very nearly the most personal. It is very difficult to put on a stage. Sauguet's achievement (the thing that has shocked so many of his critics) is that he has got it on to the stage. His lied-technic is at its best, of course, in the solo numbers and the love conversations. It got in his way frightfully in the larger scenes. He finally scrapped it altogether for the final church-scene and broadened the whole effect considerably by the systematic use of choral interjections and the employment of a sustained and independent orchestral accompaniment that represents the scene itself rather than what some character on the stage is feeling about something. In consequence, what the characters do feel, and express vocally, becomes very clear indeed and quite moving, thrown into relief as it is against a background of contrasting music."

What about this passage? This is not a technical-analytic passage. It doesn't go into detail to defend his assertions. What is good and bad about the passage?

ALAN RICH: What is good about it is that it implies a way of listening to music that can be extended to listening to all music. I think that's one of the things that occurred to me.

TOM JOHNSON: It's a good description of the style.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Of the style of Sauguet?

TOM JOHNSON: Yes. I have a good feeling about what the opera must have been like. To what we were talking before, about the importance of information, I always used to say, when I was doing criticism, that I should do first description, second interpretation, and only third evaluation. I didn't always achieve that. Sometimes evaluations got up front. But in principle...

JOHN CAGE: Would you repeat that?

TOM JOHNSON: Description, and then interpretation, and then evaluation.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I thought there was a lot of insight. That interested me. I thought it had some insight. I mean, I always expect that. That was interesting to me. It spoke to larger problems. I think a lot of stuff that was interesting speaks to larger problems, problems that actually, as a composer, Thomson was dealing with. So that makes it more interesting to me because it's speaking to the issues of the music.

JOHN CAGE: I would like to say I'm glad that Tom Johnson was writing, whether it was about my work or about someone else's work. I found his writing interesting.

ANNEA LOCKWOOD: And thoughtful.

JOHN CAGE: I'd like to ask him whether not doing it, whether you miss something of yourself or whether you feel better not doing it.

TOM JOHNSON: I think I feel better not doing it, partly because of conflicts of interest which arose which were difficult. When I was only a composer that was simpler. But I think the main thing was that I had the feeling in the last two or three years that I was writing that I wasn't writing as well. Sometimes I had to write about the same people a third, fourth, and fifth time and started finding myself finding it difficult to come up with a new idea and looking back and seeing that the article I'd written two years earlier was really already better than anything I could come up with new. It seemed time to make a change.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Also that you felt used for record covers.

TOM JOHNSON: No, that didn't really bother me because I really firmly believed and still believe that the power of the critic is universally overestimated by composers and interpreters.

10. Polemical Wars and Camps Within Music Criticism

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: But I think what was very important with you in New York, as I knew it at that time, when I was there, there was Uptown and Downtown aesthetics, and you were a representative for the Village, which was the more experimental and I would say avant-garde aesthetic, and since you left there's no one to replace you.

TOM JOHNSON: Well, I wasn't the only one that left. A lot of composers left too. I wanted to say one thing to something. Alan was talking about jargon. He said that he thought that inventing jargon was not too useful but I think sometimes this is very useful. I often think about how in art criticism there's such a healthy dialogue it seems to me between the artists and the critics. Some critic comes up with a term like post-minimalism or post-modern and everybody has to try to figure out, "What does post-modern mean?" and the artists start thinking, "Well, let's see. Am I post-modern or not?" It makes a dialogue. I think it really is a useful exchange. Or what's the difference between repetitive music and minimalism and other terms that are sort of vaguely related but they're really different? When critics start to label things or come up with a new label...

ANTHONY DAVIS: "Fit to be demolished."

TOM JOHNSON: It would be nice to have a more useful dialogue back and forth as I see in art criticism.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I think it's really a problem, that when I first came to New York, this whole Uptown/Downtown dialogue was going on. And I was always impressed with the fact that Blacks didn't exist in either. So, to me, it was like a dialogue of mutual exclusivity. I had a very violent reaction to it because it seemed to be talking very little about what was going on.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: But you were covered quite extensively in jazz criticism, and you belonged to that category and not the other, so it's not as if...

TOM JOHNSON: There were three camps of criticisms: the uptown critic, the downtown critic, and the jazz critic.

ANTHONY DAVIS: To me it was all pretty misrepresentative. I felt that a lot of those distinctions, and I think still, when I read Peter Garland's article, a lot of those distinctions blur. I mean, I think a lot of that schism isn't too real to me.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: It's not too real altogether.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I think there are a lot of other ways in which we divide ourselves and I think they're ultimately very damaging. So, I found what emerged was a certain kind of dogma that, as a composer, I found repugnant—both the Downtown dogma and the Uptown dogma. So, what I dislike about a lot of critics, in New York particularly, is that they're more sociologists than critics. They're really looking at it from the idea of a social phenomenon and an analysis of a group of people rather than looking at it as the emergence of an idea or art as a form. That

really upsets me.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: The question, though, that Tania brought up, "Is a critic insensitive to a particular social group?" Is that relevant? There are aspects of sociology, I suppose, that are important. You wouldn't want somebody not to know the background from which you begin to emerge as a composer.

ANTHONY DAVIS: No, but I think that what they do is enslave you to it. I mean, that's what it is.

TANIA LEÓN: I'd like to elaborate a little bit on that because yesterday Tom and I were having a conversation dealing specifically with these issues and by dealing with colleagues that come from different walks of life. I could actually mention that people that are living under these categories are the ones that tend to speak very eloquently about all of the things that they are going through. The categorization, labelization, and all of these things, and the aspects of expectation… And the different communities of composers that feel they have been neglected because of the categorization or the labels they are under and despite of our talking about Uptown, Downtown, Midtown, whatever town you're talking about, the point is that there are some people who are completely out of town, even when they are in town.

TOM JOHNSON: That's good! The "out of town critic" can write about the "out of town music," and form a new school!

TANIA LEÓN: Exactly. You know, what I was saying is the fact that by dealing with many, many living composers, you will be surprised to know how many people feel that they are actually neglected of participating because of situation. There are societies being formed to address those composers. There are all kinds of situations going on, specifically in our metropolis of New York where we live. People that happen to be associated with these situations are the ones that know what's going on. These people are not participating, and I don't know why.

TOM JOHNSON: That's why we need critics to continually be remaking new categories.

TANIA LEÓN: Exactly.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: Either that or continually get new critics.

TOM JOHNSON: That's good too.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: I think categories, no matter how many you make, tend to limit. If you compare the category technique to the Virgil Thomson technique, which is trying to get you to a way to listen to a piece of music rather than a way to define where that piece of music exists, then I think you've got a very big difference there. What we need are more people trying to help us listen to different kinds of music rather than saying it fits into this category or that category.

TOM JOHNSON: It's hard to say anything without making categories. You just make a

distinction between the category technique and the Virgil Thomson technique, for example, thus forming two categories. Very interesting classification.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: No, no, no. See, you're making categories out of it. I'm just making a distinction between two things rather than trying to make large classes of things out of one thing.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I want to get back to what Anthony said. Anthony just said something very important, and it was an interesting choice of words, it was "enslaved by," being cast in a certain way. On the other hand, you're writing in a medium which is going to be judged by European, classically-trained music critics, and so we need then to define by what standards your music should be judged. And same for you, Tania. When you write a concerto for piano and orchestra, do you really expect that the critics that are largely writing about European classical music and writing about the American Composers Orchestra are going to be prepared for what you're doing? Or do you expect to be judged by a different standard? What are the standards by which you want to be judged?

TANIA LEÓN: Well, I have to get back to the question of Astor Piazzolla, because there was no differentiation between my thinking about Astor as somebody I admire for what he is doing and what Ricardo just mentioned. For me, Astor is an extension of tango form, you know, tango vocabulary in tone and rhythms and so forth, and yet some of the people in the country are actually mentioning him as an avant-garde in the contemporary scene, coming from Argentina. It's the same thing. The most that we know about Latin American composers is that we keep talking about Villa-Lobos, or we talk about Chavez a little bit, or Sylvestre Revueltas. But actually we don't know anymore about who is existing or who is extending, or who is actually producing any kind of sound that might have to do with their schooling and their region and their preferences. So, therefore, I open myself to any kind of comments because I actually work within the parameters of knowing that the person that is criticizing me might not be knowledgeable about the region where I'm coming from.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Isn't it true, though, that right now what is different about contemporary music is the hybridization that's going on? The fact that world music and popular music and folk music and jazz have had an impact on the European tradition and that it's no longer a pure form.

ANTHONY DAVIS: Well, that's true since 1900.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Sure.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I mean, there's nothing new with that.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: So what you're saying is that the critics haven't kept up with this trend.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I think we still deal with this whole high art/pop art schism, which I think is stupid.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Well, how do you respond when you see Charles Wuorinen quoted in *The New York Times* as saying that we have no standards in music and people who can't really compose properly are getting all the grants?

ANTHONY DAVIS: He must not be getting any grants.

ALAN RICH: He's pulled down a few.

ANTHONY DAVIS: I don't know. This is a person who wanted to abolish the NEA because of corruption. No, I don't take him seriously. Not at all.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Many people do.

TOM JOHNSON: Oh, no. Really?

ALAN RICH: Besides Charles himself?

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Two minutes and we'll wrap this up.

JOHN CAGE: How can you wrap it up? Charles has wrapping paper.

JULIO ESTRADA: A quick point about the opening of the spectrum of music, about ethnic music, classical music, etc. Let me tell you something, shortly, of my experience about Indian American music. I was listening to many records of Indian American music and I never understood.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: You never what?

JULIO ESTRADA: I never understood the music. I never knew which were the boundaries, what they wanted when they aspirate the rhythm, when they change the rhythm, what does it mean? Well, from several points of view, we ask as individuals, as critics, as historians, or professors. When listening to a certain music, you need an historical point of view because you will miss the whole point. You also need a musicological point of view, because you need to understand the structure. What happens finally is that we are always alone. We are anarchists, no? But we need to have that extremely independent, individual, isolated experience of perceiving what we are listening to. Maybe, for me, the explanation for critics, is, well, I would prefer they don't exist, but I think many of the critics have shown how much they have been involved in the experience of perceiving certain music and transmitting that particular experience to show that's one of the ways to listen to music. In some way, when you have a student and he comes to be taught, you can be a very bad musical critic. You can say, "Well, you're composing in a very nice kinetic style, and you can now go into Stockhausen's style and all this." Or you can be a more open-minded musical critic and professor and say, "What are you listening to? How much are you listening? How far are you listening?"

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: To other people's music, or in your mind?

JULIO ESTRADA: Yes. In the other's mind. Everything happens in your mind. Coming back to John Cage's commentary about these things, when we listen to music, is that enough to listen to music? Or do we need to organize what we have listened to into a sort of comprehensible language? Say, what I was perceiving was this aspect, or this other one, or this other one. Do we perceive a language? Not poetry. I don't like poetry from critics. I prefer poetry by itself. But when we listen to certain kinds of music, I think that many people need to have it explained, rationally, to use some rationality to explain what happens in this sensorial, perceptive, aural feeling. So, I think that once the critics give us an historical reference, and a musical reference, and a very individual, personal experience of the music, I think they can help. We don't really need the critics, if we are able to get information, to understand what the musical structure is, so that is musical education. And how much can we be lost while listening to music?

11. Composers as Music Critics

JULIO ESTRADA: I think to listen to music is really to be composing. It is to be absolutely lost in his world. And these things should be this way. That is why a lot of times we can thank the critics, and other times we cannot thank them at all.

JOHN CAGE: But I think that the introduction of the critical step can also be a lost step.

JULIO ESTRADA: Sure.

ANTHONY DAVIS: Do you think it's a problem of not enough composers writing about their own music? I mean, like Schumann and stuff like that. In a way, I think that part of the gap is the fact that we have more responsibility ourselves.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: I look back at the issues of *Modern Music* and I wish we had something like that. When I read *Ear* magazine, for example, for which many composers write, I feel that it's more of a vanity press.

JOHN CAGE: Yes, it's changed greatly.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: It's not an honest response to music and performance. It's more feature articles, really.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: It might be that we, and Annea sort of raised this issue, may not believe there's anyone else out there who cares, because Virgil Thomson's article assumes that someone really cares about a performance when they go to it. He's giving them a very deep insight into how to listen. *Ear* magazine is a good example of the fact that we're only writing to each other and really there's no one out there. There may be some people out there. There has to be.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: I think, though, that in *Modern Music* the composers were writing to each other. They were composers largely writing the articles and, I believe, composers largely reading them.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: I don't know, because there were groups of people in places like Los Angeles... Los Angeles was about the crassest city in the world at this point but it had Thomas Mann and all these people. They weren't just composers. They were interested in various things. And Virgil Thomson was across the board—he wasn't just writing to composers. I think there was, and I still think there is. I think that maybe we've lost sight of who they are at this point.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: That's why I found this gathering so interesting, because, in a way, without an audience around, when you listen to somebody else's music and we're just composers together, the kind of response you get is more valuable because it is, in a situation like this, more intensely directed than it can be in a performance situation. For me, one of the very great values of this kind of gathering is a kind of honesty which is, well, different.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: I think to save the critic a little bit, I think what he can do in the best case is create a forum, like what existed at *Ear* magazine when it was still good, or when Tom was in New York. I mean, this is very important. Avant-garde music is such a vital niche in what's going on, it needs a forum. And if this forum is lost, I tend to think that people are also lost.

JOAN LA BARBARA: *MusikTexte*.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Like *MusikTexte* is a forum, like *Ear* magazine used to be a forum. This is important. If it's not Downtown, whatever. You name it. But it needs a certain place or a certain environment to give the people strength to go on with what they do.

12. Avoiding Insularity

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Now many of us do not belong to the group that subscribes to the journal *Perspectives of New Music*, but for those who do, what is the function of that magazine, which has very analytical articles, often very mathematical, about pieces of music?

TOM JOHNSON: It's still like that?

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: No. It's half and half. Does that meet the requirements you have? Your own needs, like *MusikTexte*?

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: I think, in the case of the early articles of '39, it must have been clear. The critics were necessary because nobody knew about these composers and they had to meld them, to hold them together somehow. It was such an urge to have someone speaking for them.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Is that true John? Is that what the function was of that magazine, or did people read it seriously for other reasons?

JOHN CAGE: What Walter says about *Ear* magazine, and what we all have experienced as it's gotten larger, is that it's gotten less useful. This has happened also with our places for performing music in New York. The Kitchen, which used to be lively, no longer is. One almost looks at New York now, if he wants to hear interesting music, he has to go to someplace that he doesn't yet know about.

JOAN LA BARBARA: Very true.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Anthony?

ANTHONY DAVIS: But that's inevitable. I don't think that's sad. To me, institutions wear out. The idea of critics changing is not sad either. I think there's some kind of cycle involved in that. The Kitchen's an interesting case because I think at some point when some people were affected it was because The Kitchen was becoming broader in its interests, which I think was a necessity.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: It was becoming more cross-cultural, less wide.

ANTHONY DAVIS: Yes, and I think that was very important. I think there's a lot of resentment in the Downtown community because they actually wanted to maintain it as this little niche for a very small group of musicians.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: Well, when it first started, I was in two of the first four concerts at The Kitchen, way back when it first started, in '70 I guess it was. The original idea was a place where composers could play works for each other which were perhaps unfinished or very experimental for dialogue and interchange... Public presentation of the music was one of the purposes, but the communication amongst composers was really a primary one. And then it really completely changed to the point where the public presentation was the thing and everything had to be very

finished and very completed to go on. It got to be very competitive to get things into it so they were very selective and then a lot of politics began creeping in, so really it's a cycle of becoming established. But one of the things that's been very important in the last couple of years in New York, I think, is what's happened with the radio and the fact that the concert media are just less important. I mean, the amount of new music programming, both in the established halls, but particularly on the radio, has just gone up tremendously, so that the primary media of new musical experience is really moving out of the concert halls and it's partly because we're becoming a more global society. We've got a swarm of student stations, plus the usual listener-sponsored ones, and a couple of classical ones.

JOHN CAGE: But it's clear from these meetings that we've had, that one of the urgent facts in new musical experience is space. It's been mentioned over and over again and this is not available to us through the radio.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: I'm not sure what you mean by space. But we do get, as a surrogate for the critic, we get the announcer making little announcements which are like pithy attempted descriptions that are coupled with music, which I think is important. Whereas reading the critic is desynchronized with hearing the music—it's either before or after—the radio stuff puts the commentary right with the music. I'm sorry to digress about your question of space.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Do you mean space in the sense that the composer is given air time to do anything he pleases for a particular length of time? That kind of space?

JOHN CAGE: No, no. The experience of hearing sound.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Music in space.

JOHN CAGE: Working with space as one of the parameters of musical experience, which so many of you do.

JULIO ESTRADA: Many, many resources of the radio can allow you to do different kinds of experiences of space. I did a concert in Mexico in which the performance was discreet and we were listening to another performance on the radio simultaneously. You do a lot of work with the radio so that you can get together several stations and you are dealing with people's space and different times.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: That's quite rare, though.

JULIO ESTRADA: Yes, but you can have it.

JOHN CAGE: No, but then the experience finally over radio comes from a box and that's what we want to become free of. We want to get into that space. And that has to be done in a live situation.

TOM JOHNSON: Well, that depends on the composer. Obviously, for you, the live situation is better, but for Charles, I think, radio is better.

JOHN CAGE: The result, for me, for my life experience, is that I leave the windows open, when the weather permits, and I hear the sounds of Sixth Avenue, and this is my music.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Joan, where do you live?

JOAN LA BARBARA: I live a lot of places. I was thinking of several things in a way as a kind of summary and also an introduction to maybe the next set of discussions. I think education is an extremely important thing. We are beginning to lose music education in the public schools so that education, in a way, comes from the radio, comes from print media, comes from other sources. And we're becoming a culture that does not know about classical works one to another because there are so few sources for this kind of information. Which leads me to the next topic, which is economics and the absolute control that economics has over what we are experiencing and what we are not experiencing. And then that brings me to politics, and how much control politics have over what we are experiencing and what we are not experiencing. And something that Anthony was bringing up is a major question, that of funding. If we lose our public funding, which is supposedly color-blind and other kinds of blind, if we become a culture that is funded by patrons, then we become music that is dictated by those people who happen to have money and who have a particular choice as far as what we're going to hear. So, I'd like to address those things.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: Is it very difficult to restructure, for example, the radio system?

JOAN LA BARBARA: Yes.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN: It seems to me simple. Like in Germany, everyone in Germany who has a radio in his home pays ten marks a month. From this money, we get our commission.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: That's anti-American! We all think that's the way it should be, but...

ALAN RICH: Unfortunately, the radio system is being restructured and it's being restructured in the wrong direction from what Walter is talking about. WNYC in New York, which used to broadcast across the board Tim Page presenting contemporary music, with a tremendous amount of imagination and knowledge, now puts Tim on once a week. The rest of what I hear on WNYC, because our NPR station in Los Angeles carries it, is a lot of new age jargoneering—"From the Hearts of Outer Space."

LAURIE SPIEGEL: It's become formalized. Some of the college stations, though, are very lively. But then students are always...

ALAN RICH: Are these critics? Are these knowledgeable people or are they hobbyists?

LAURIE SPIEGEL: Maybe not always, but they do bring information.

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: You're talking about John Schaefer?

LAURIE SPIEGEL: The problem with funding... Essentially you've got two kinds of radio, you've got the commercial stuff where it's blatantly commercial, and then you've got these listener-supported stations, that are done by contribution, where, again, to some degree, it's a little bit of a commercial. I mean, if Mobil Oil is sponsoring this one hour of air time, you have to be careful... There's a lot of pleasing people.

MORTON SUBOTNICK: Public radio has the worst tyranny, in a way, because it's not Mobil they're worried about, it's how many people are listening. And you get over and over and over again, you get five people who write letters and they say, "We've got to take this off the air immediately!" And they do.

ALAN RICH: Our public radio station in Los Angeles, KUSC, is becoming more and more like the commercial radio station every day. They just started putting in what they call "light pop," whatever that is. And our commercial good music station in L.A. is converting to rock in the middle of September, which is going to effect WNCN's thinking about good music in New York.

LAURIE SPIEGEL: We've got a very great paradox in the American system, because as a Democratic, capitalist economy, there is a tendency for that which is pleasing to the largest number of people, which is like the lowest common denominator, to gain the greatest support. At the same time, we're a society that wants to emphasize variety, multiplicity, and pluralism, which, of course, means the things that have the least support because they have the fewest people into them. It's a real paradox which is very problematic.

ALAN RICH: And it's complicated by the fact that these minority tastes control spots on the radio which are very commercially tempting to change to rock. How many people try to buy out KPFA every month?

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Buy out? By pressuring us to change programs?

ALAN RICH: Yes. How many offers do you get every month?

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN: Well, you left out one part of the equation. You have public radio stations, which is a term that was coined in 1970 after National Public Radio came into existence, and you have commercial stations, which came in the '20s, and you have the community stations, like the Pacifica stations, which respond less to pressure of that sort but have some considerations. But the point is, as composers living in this country, as Ellen Buckwalder pointed out yesterday on KOTO, the radio stations here, there are three kinds of support—there's private, corporate, and government. So, the equation is that we're, in America, in the United States, shifting between these three to get our acts together, as it were, whereas in Germany and in Argentina, and other places, the considerations are quite different. Maybe we can save that for the next discussion and take a break right now. Thank you all for your participation in the panel on criticism. Good work!

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