

Reviews

Thomas Donahue

A Style and Usage Guide to Writing about Music
Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2010, 103 pp.
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Arthur Koestler, who collected strange coincidences, might have enjoyed this one. On the very afternoon that Thomas Donahue's sober, unassertive, disciplined book arrived in the letterbox, the mail also brought a Pennsylvania-based magazine, ostensibly musical, afflicted with unrelenting flossiness. Not only were this magazine's staffers ignorant of super-pianist Earl Wild—whom they repeatedly misidentified as 'Wilde'—but they printed (in an interview with, improbably, Pierre Boulez) a reference to 'Holliger', when the context indicated that Boulez must have spoken of Honegger.

This is the price that authors like Donahue must pay, because the very folk most urgently requiring musicological table-manners will never act on this requirement. San Francisco critic Stephanie von Buchau—too soon deceased—once deprecated editorial blockheads who, unaware that the composer of *Appalachian Spring* had no 'e' in his family name, rewrote her copy so that the relevant name read 'Copeland'. Nor can we neglect the prestigious Manhattan-based arts periodical whose resident music columnist, in January 2010, ardently proclaimed that Josquin Desprez bore the surname 'Desprez'. (Well within living memory, a first-year music undergraduate comparably clueless would have been expelled.)

Such melancholy observations completed, it should be emphasized that *A Style and Usage Guide to Writing about Music* will help anyone needing to discuss musical matters in English. The fact that Donahue writes mainly of North American stylistic criteria—he lives in New York State—need deter no one outside the United States from reading him with profit, once requisite adjustments for sea-changes (single versus double quotation marks, etc.) have been made. He deals less with local idiosyncrasies than with eternal principles of clarity, consistency and elegance. Moreover, he does so in 103 pages. This is a softcover that, by its inviting and handsome format, almost screams for inclusion in a student's backpack.

A tenacious, insulting myth holds that organ buffs care exclusively for organ music. Donahue disproves this fiction in each paragraph. His previous books include studies of Canadian organ-builder Gerhard Brunzema and American organist-harpsichordist-composer Anthony Newman, the latter a pupil of Nadia Boulanger and Alfred Cortot.¹ Nevertheless he does seem something of a Renaissance Man in musicological terms, and if he dislikes any musical period, no hint of this dislike is manifest here.

From the very start he tackles controversial issues, particularly ones related to spelling and current usage. Mendelssohn or Mendelssohn-Bartholdy? Amy Beach or Mrs. H.H.A. Beach? (Even in this seemingly dry area of debate, Donahue has valuable revelations.

1 Thomas Donahue, *Gerhard Brunzema. His Work and His Influence* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1998); and Thomas Donahue (ed.), *Anthony Newman: Music, Energy, Spirit, Healing* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2000).

You could win a trivia contest by announcing, for example, that Charles Ives's colleague and advocate Wallingford Riegger employed the improbable pseudonym Gerald Wilfring Gore.) The author stresses the requirement for correct diacriticals if one's prose is not to resemble the photocopied handout at a provincial music club's amateur hour. *Deo volente*, no reader of Donahue will ever again be tempted to perpetrate such full-frontal orthographic nudity as 'Saint-Saens', 'Bartok', or (this one particularly abounds in dilettante-land) 'Faure'. Inconveniences engendered by the English language's singular possessive (Donahue plumps for 'Sibelius's', but also 'Françaix's'), and its plural possessive (he jibs at speaking of 'the Strausses' waltzes': better to write 'waltzes by the Strauss family'), are methodically dealt with.

That awkward problem of when and how to italicize titles is analyzed as skillfully as it is possible to imagine. Donahue advises: 'If a generic term is incorporated in such a way as to form a unique title, it is italicized. However individually numbered works of a uniquely titled set are not unique and would be in roman type'. Thus, he reconciles two apparently self-contradictory usages: Bach's *French Suites* versus Bach's 'French Suite no. 2'. He even gets around the problem caused by *three* levels of titling, as with one celebrated Couperin harpsichord miniature, for which he recommends the description "Les barricades mystérieuses" from *Ordre no. 6*, from the second book of *Pièces de clavecin*. So no italics for the miniature itself, but inevitable italics from the miniature's ultimate source. And no upper-case 'c' at the beginning of *clavecin*: standard French titling avoids that.

Regarding standard cataloguing procedure with particular composers' output, Donahue delivers the goods here also. Judging by the 'Desprez' example above, plenty of alleged music-lovers must never have discerned that a 'K' preceding a Domenico Scarlatti composition means 'Kirkpatrick', not 'Köchel' (although the increasing deployment of 'KK' for Scarlatti pieces should be commended). Let these novices read the present volume and wonder no more. It is surprising, however, that so thorough an exegete as Donahue leaves his citations of 'BuxWV' and 'HWV' unclarified by any reference to Buxtehude and Handel, although we do get an account of 'Hoboken' in connection with Haydn.

The chapter called 'Notes and Pitches' is more self-explanatory, and perhaps of slightly less immediate use, since such indications as c^2 (an octave above middle C) appear more common Stateside than elsewhere. Equating lower-case letters with minor keys—so that 'c' automatically denotes C minor, as opposed to 'C' for the tonic major—is another North Americanism less often found east of Maine; twenty years ago it was rare even in the States. With the chapter 'Letters and Numbers', non-American readers will be on surer ground, once they recall that North Americans talk of 'measure' whereas others say 'bar' (and frequently use 'bar' to mean 'bar-line'). Elaborate coverage is supplied of the special difficulties pertaining to hyphens, whether between words or in ordinary computer-generated text. 'One should not rely exclusively on the hyphenation option of a word processor', Donahue justly writes; alas, even when an author can observe this wisdom, journalistic backroom personnel frequently cannot.

As befits someone of Donahue's intellectual breadth, he expects that his audience will, if not be conversant with principal European languages, at least have vaguely comprehended that foreign music terminology means more than just *adagio* and *allegro*. To the present reviewer's surprise, an error obtrudes in this connection. *Tannhäuser* (p. 71) becomes the presumably unpronounceable *Tannhaüser*. Previously Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses* has somehow (p. 16) been turned into *Symphonic Metamorphosis*. Otherwise, in a production that must have compelled nearly insuperable proof-reading exertions, all seems fine. And Donahue not only has discography formatting covered, but offers tips about

proper citations to CD booklet notes. He appears to have thought of, in a word, everything. *A Style and Usage Guide to Writing about Music* belongs on the same shelf as the *Chicago Manual of Style*, with which it shares a penchant for radiating a curiously hypnotic authority.

Author Biography

Robert J. Stove, born in Sydney in 1961 but now living in Melbourne, is an organist and writer about music. A biography by him, *César Franck: His Life and Times*, is scheduled for publication by Scarecrow Press (Maryland, November 2011). His articles on music have appeared in *Modern Age*, *The University Bookman*, *The New Criterion*, *Organ Australia* and, most recently, in the *Musical Times*. From 2005 to 2009 he was organist at St. Aloysius's Catholic Church in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield.

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