

EDITORIAL

Composer and musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky published a fascinating and delightful book entitled *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time* (Slonimsky 1965). The book is a collection of what Slonimsky called “biased, unfair, ill-tempered, and singularly unprophetic judgments” (p. 3) about famous composers and their works. We find, for example, the *Gazette Musicale de Paris* on August 1, 1847, saying of Verdi, “there has not yet been an Italian composer more incapable of producing what is commonly called a melody.” And this publication stuck to its guns. On May 22, 1853, it said of *Rigoletto* that it “lacks melody. This opera has hardly any chance to be kept in the repertoire.”

The May 1804 issue of *Zeitung für die Elegente Welt* proclaimed

Beethoven's Second Symphony is a crass monster, a hideously writhing wounded dragon, that refuses to expire, and though bleeding in the Finale, furiously beats about with its tail erect.

Amazingly, Beethoven appreciation still had a long way to go even more than a half century later. In 1857, thirty years after Beethoven's death, A. Oulibicheff said of Beethoven's style that it

is nothing less than a violation of fundamental laws and of the most elementary rules of harmony—wrong chords, and agglomerations of notes intolerable to anyone who is not completely deprived of the auditory sense.

J. F. Runciman, in *The Saturday Review*, London, November 8, 1897, wrote the following about his “especial aversion, Johannes Brahms”: “Brahms seems to appeal to those curious folks whose minds are made in bits carelessly joined or not joined at all.” Despite the *especial* place of Brahms in his affections, in fact Runciman had plenty of aversion to spread around. In *The Saturday Review* of December 12, 1896, he wrote

It is one's duty to hate with all possible fervor the empty and ugly in art; and I hate Saint-Saëns the composer with a hate that is perfect.

Moreover, like the *Gazette Musicale*, Runciman also stuck to his guns. In the February 19, 1898, issue of *The Saturday Review* we find him saying,

Saint-Saëns has, I suppose, written as much music as any composer ever did; he has certainly written more rubbish than any one I can think of. It is the worst, most rubbishy kind of rubbish.

Most of the invective collected by Slonimsky was penned by critics. But composers are also represented generously. For example, Louis Spohr said of Beethoven that he “was deficient in esthetic imagery and lacked the sense of beauty.” Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary on October 9, 1886, “I played over the music of that scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! It annoys me that this self-inflated mediocrity is hailed as a genius.”

I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to compare the intransigence, smugness, and lack of vision of these musical critics with the posturing of some who confidently criticize scientific innovation and exploration, or entire arenas of empirical investigation such as parapsychology and LENR (so-called “cold fusion”). Slonimsky himself saw the parallel, regarding it—not entirely correctly—as an illustration of non-acceptance of the unfamiliar. He may be right as far as the world of art is concerned. But I suspect that scientific shortsightedness, smug certitude, and easy recourse to cheap or dishonest dialectical tactics such as ad hominem arguments is a more complex matter. In any case, reading Slonimsky’s book again gave me an idea I’d like to propose to some *JSE* reader (presumably someone with lots of spare time).

I think it would be both entertaining and instructive to compile a scientific book along the lines of Slonimsky’s *Lexicon*. There are plenty of confident pronouncements by scientists and science writers illustrating clearly how humans are notoriously poor judges of the empirically possible. As Slonimsky noted, and as many readers of this *Journal* are all too aware, “The obscurantist opposition to progressive ideas in science is often made in the name of rational thinking and logic” (p. 29). Slonimsky also provided examples, many of which were new to me.

For instance, according Melanchton in his *Elements of Physics*,

The eyes are witness that the heavens revolve in the space of twenty-four hours. But certain men, either from the love of novelty, or to make a display of ingenuity, have concluded that the earth moves. It is a want of honesty and decency to assert such notions publicly, and the example is pernicious.

Similarly, Dr. Nicolas Joly of Toulouse ridiculed Pasteur, writing, “It is absurd to think that germs causing fermentation and putrefaction came from the air; the atmosphere would have to be as thick as pea soup for that.”

There’s no shortage of similar examples. For example, Wilbur Wright commented,

I confess that in 1901 I said to my brother Orville that man would not fly for fifty years. Two years later we ourselves made flights. This demonstration of my impotence as a prophet gave me such a shock that ever since I have distrusted myself and avoided all predictions.

Nevertheless (and despite their success), in 1908 Orville said, “No flying machine will ever fly from New York to Paris.”¹ Similarly, Lord Kelvin notoriously proclaimed in 1895, “Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible.” That same year, Thomas Edison seemed to agree:

It is apparent to me that the possibilities of the aeroplane, which two or three years ago were thought to hold the solution to the [flying machine] problem, have been exhausted, and that we must turn elsewhere.

Lord Kelvin’s confidence, in fact, like that of J. F. Runciman, extended more broadly. In 1897 he asserted, “Radio has no future.” Earlier, in 1883, he was confident that “X-rays will prove to be a hoax.” And speaking to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1890, he said, “There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now; all that remains is more and more precise measurement.”

It’s easy to continue. Apparently, Bill Gates once predicted, “We will never make a 32-bit operating system.” In 1899, Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office, said, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.”

You get the idea. My proposal (and hope) is that someone will do for scientific prediction and related fallible scientific judgments what Slonimsky did for music criticism. It would be good to have an organized collection on hand for those (probably inevitable) times when our capacity for self-criticism and humility seems to flag. In fact, I propose that this volume adopt one of Slonimsky’s more clever innovations. In addition to a useful index of names and titles, Slonimsky’s *Lexicon* includes what he called an “Invecticon, an Index of Vituperative, Pejorative, and Deprecatory Words and Phrases.” So for example, we find such entries as these:

AGONY

Liszt, 112, 118
Scriabin, 172
Strauss, 185
Varèse, 213
Wagner, 247

COMMUNIST TRAVELING SALESMAN

Milhaud, 126

DEMENTED EUNUCH

Wagner, 239

HATEFUL FUNGI

Liszt, 111

OVERWHELMINGLY VULGAR

Ravel, 138

PUTREFACTIVE COUNTERPOINT

Bruckner, 80²

ZOO (feeding-time at)

Schoenberg, 156
Varèse, 214

ZOO (sleeping inhabitants of)

Webern, 250

So perhaps a *Lexicon of Scientific Invective* would include Dr. Walter Gross's 1940 statement,

The so-called theories of Einstein are merely the ravings of a mind polluted with liberal, democratic nonsense which is utterly unacceptable to German men of science.

And perhaps that judgment would link to Invecticon entries under "ravings of a polluted mind" and "liberal democratic nonsense." Similarly, perhaps the term "absurd" will link to the following pronouncements (among others):

The abolishment of pain in surgery is a chimera. It is absurd to go on seeking it . . . knife and pain are two words in surgery that must forever be associated in the consciousness of the patient. —Dr. Alfred Velpeau, French surgeon, 1839

What can be more palpably absurd than the prospect held out of locomotives traveling twice as fast as stagecoaches? —*The Quarterly Review*, March, 1825

Lee DeForest has said in many newspapers and over his signature that it would be possible to transmit the human voice across the Atlantic before many years. Based on these absurd and deliberately misleading statements, the misguided public . . . has been persuaded to purchase stock in his company . . . —a U.S. District Attorney, prosecuting American inventor Lee DeForest for selling stock fraudulently through the mail for his Radio Telephone Company in 1913

The idea that cavalry will be replaced by these iron coaches is absurd. It is little short of treasonous. —Comment of Aide-de-Camp to Field Marshal Haig, at a tank demonstration in 1916

So, I hope that some enterprising (and probably otherwise idle) *JSE* reader will seize the opportunity to plug this hole in the literature of science. Initially, I was tempted to predict that it would be a big financial success, but now I'm not so sure . . .

Notes

¹ My thanks to Dick Shoup for this example.

² Actually, I agree with this one.

STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

Reference

Slonimsky, N. (1965). *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time*. University of Washington Press. [first published in 1953]