



Dissonance: The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and its Classical Music Critic

Arts criticism had long occupied a special place in the universe of reporting. Critics—be it of architecture, music, theater, or other arts—were closer in their writing style to columnists than to news reporters. At the same time, unlike commentators, they were expected to keep their personal tastes (for example, a dislike for Impressionist art) out of their reviews and aim for an unbiased but educated appraisal of the work. For critics reviewing live performances of new material, the assignment was especially tricky. They were expected to address not only the quality of the work, but the quality of its performance. Thus, a drama critic would judge whether a playwright had succeeded *and* whether the actors did the script justice.

But for the most part, performance criticism was restricted to judging performers of an already familiar work. In music criticism, that presupposed that the critic was knowledgeable about the music canon. Experts differed on what constituted proper training for a music critic. Should the individual be an accomplished musician? Did s/he require an advanced degree in music history? In music theory? What kind of journalism training did a critic need, if any? There was no licensing program for critics. In practice, they emerged from a variety of backgrounds, gaining credibility with readers through an accumulated record of reviews in which their judgment, on balance, made sense to the audience.

The Cleveland *Plain Dealer's* music critic, Donald Rosenberg, had been at the paper since 1992 and, as of 2008, had critiqued music performances for over 30 years. So when *Plain Dealer* Editor Susan Goldberg received escalating complaints about his reviews of the Cleveland Orchestra, she was dismayed. Detractors—including the orchestra's management and patrons—charged that Rosenberg (who had written a history of the ensemble) was engaged in a personal vendetta against its music director, Franz Welser---Möst. They alleged that his reviews of Welser---Möst's performances were disproportionately, and unjustifiably, negative. She also heard that Rosenberg had been overly generous in covering Welser---Möst's predecessor, Christoph von Dohnányi.

Goldberg reviewed Rosenberg's articles but could reach no conclusion on her own about his objectivity. Had he gotten too close to his subject in Dohnányi's case, but not close enough in Welser---Möst's? What did it mean to be a responsible critic? Surely critics could write what they believed to be true. Perhaps Welser---Möst was not up to the standards

of previous Cleveland conductors. On February 4, 2008, Goldberg summoned her editorial leadership team to consider what, if anything, to do about Rosenberg and his coverage of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The Paper and the Orchestra

The *Plain Dealer* was an institution in Cleveland. So was the Cleveland Orchestra. The newspaper was founded in 1842, went out of business in 1865, and was resuscitated in 1877. Over the next century, it went through a series of owners until, in 1967, Advance Publications (part of the publishing empire of S. I. Newhouse) acquired it. The 21st-century woes of the newspaper industry hit the *Plain Dealer* hard with declining revenues and dwindling subscriptions. In 2006, it offered buyouts to one-fifth of the staff.

But it continued to serve the community as best it could. Over the years, the paper had won numerous regional and national awards, among them the 2005 Pulitzer Prize in Commentary and several awards from the American Association of Sunday and Feature Editors and the Associated Press. In 2003, the newspaper trade publication *Editor and Publisher* named Editor Douglas Clifton "Editor of the Year." In 2007, the paper had a total daily circulation of 334,195.

Clifton served as editor from 1999 to 2007. When he retired, the paper appointed Susan Goldberg, executive editor and vice president of the San Jose (CA) *Mercury News*, to replace him. Goldberg had previously worked in reporting or management positions at *USA Today*, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. She took over on May 29, 2007.

The orchestra was not as old as the newspaper—founded only in 1918. But it was just as important to the community. The orchestra lived in the famed art-deco (with heavy classical influence) Severance Hall, built especially for the ensemble in 1931. It rose in prominence to become one of the top orchestras in America, along with such institutions as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Symphony, and the Chicago Symphony.

Its best-known, and longest serving, conductor was George Szell (1946–1970). Under Szell, the orchestra undertook an ambitious touring and recording program which brought its music to dozens of cities and into millions of homes. Lorin Maazel spent 10 years at the helm (1972–1982), and was succeeded in 1984 by Dohnányi, who served 18 years until 2002, when Welser-Möst took over. Cleveland's music fans adored the orchestra, even seeking autographs after performances. In the summer, the orchestra moved operations to Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, and the Blossom Music Center.

Over the decades, the newspaper faithfully followed the Cleveland Orchestra with both news stories and music criticism. Cleveland *Plain Dealer* readers were fortunate that the paper invested in a music critic, a luxury not every newspaper could afford. But at the *Plain Dealer*, it was considered a worthy expense. Rosenberg was only the latest in a

long line of music critics who spent many hours at Severance Hall. But by 2007, some of his editors were starting to question whether Rosenberg should remain in that post.

A Beloved Beat

Rosenberg had covered the Cleveland Orchestra for most of his career. In 1977, he was recruited for his first newspaper job—music and dance critic for the Akron *Beacon Journal*. An accomplished French horn player and a graduate of Mannes College of Music, Rosenberg went on to earn masters of music and musical arts degrees from Yale. When *Beacon Journal* editors asked a Yale professor to recommend a music critic, he nominated Rosenberg. Because Rosenberg had no journalism experience, he wrote a few reviews on trial. He got the job.

For Rosenberg, the beat was a plum assignment in large part because it included the Cleveland Orchestra. Cleveland's was considered one of the best orchestras in America. "They may have very good ensembles in other cities, but not comparable to the Cleveland Orchestra," he says. "So it was thrilling not only to cover concerts, but to talk to great artists" such as Italian opera star Luciano Pavarotti and French composer---conductor (and former Cleveland Orchestra principal guest conductor and musical advisor) Pierre Boulez. "It was the thing I loved most."¹

Rosenberg had taken a music criticism course at Yale, but learned journalism on the job. "Editors certainly helped me, especially in the early years," he recalls. He learned to write commentaries, feature stories—the gamut. A personal highpoint came in 1982, when the *Beacon Journal* sent Rosenberg to Germany for a week to do interviews for a Sunday magazine profile of Dohnányi—just named the Cleveland Orchestra's music director---designate. Rosenberg won an award for the story from the Akron Press Club.

After 12 years with the *Beacon Journal*, Rosenberg in 1989 joined the *Pittsburgh Press* as music critic. But three years later, he returned to Ohio when the *Plain Dealer's* classical music critic position opened. Rosenberg would cover not only the Cleveland Orchestra, but opera, musical theater, and other live performances in the city, as well as review classical recordings.²

Rosenberg certainly knew what he was getting himself into. He had been a critic for nearly 15 years. It was a field with high standards.

¹ Author's interview with Donald Rosenberg in Cleveland, OH, on December 15, 2010. All further quotes from Rosenberg, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

² From December 2006, Rosenberg also wrote a wine column.

Role of a Music Critic

The man credited with setting the standard for “critical evaluation and journalistic thoroughness” of classical music criticism was Harold C. Schonberg, who worked at the *New York Times* from 1960–80 and before that at the *New York Herald-Tribune*.³ His 1971 Pulitzer Prize was the first awarded to a music critic. Schonberg was a classically trained musician. His expertise as a pianist and his knowledge of classical music provided him with the background to write intelligent, thorough reviews. Schonberg wrote not only reviews of classical concerts and recordings, but also columns that discussed a wide spectrum of classical music topics. Schonberg described his job in a 1967 interview:

I write for myself—not necessarily for readers, not for musicians. I’d be dead if I tried to please a particular audience. Criticism is only informed opinion. I write a piece that is personal reaction based, hopefully, on a lot of years of study, background, scholarship and whatever intuition I have. It’s not a critic’s job to be right or wrong; it’s his job to express an opinion in readable English.⁴

Schonberg disliked it when some music critic colleagues who were also composers courted conductors in an attempt to get their own compositions played. “I refuse to believe that if a critic is friendly with a musician, he can be impartial,” he said. “If word gets around you are a friend of a musician, your opinion becomes suspect.” Schonberg even created a code of conduct for music critics that proscribed friendships with composers or performers.

Schonberg also stood firm when performers were upset by unfavorable criticism. Defending his coverage, he pointed out that good criticism was backed by research, but also subjective—a combination of the critic’s “background, his taste and intuition, his ideals, his literary ability. If style is the man, so is criticism, and his criticism always ends up a reflection of what he is.”⁵

As the *Plain Dealer*’s music critic, Rosenberg says he adhered to this view. He notes, “The critic’s personality is going to come up naturally in the writing... It takes a lot of industry, and it takes a lot of courage because you’re putting yourself in front of the public and exposing what you believe.” A critic’s responsibility, he says, was to ensure that the reader absorbs “a real sense of what the art is like, what the artist is like, what the music is like, what the work is like... all the while knowing that most people who read reviews are not experts.”

³ Allan Kozinn, “Harold C. Schonberg, 87, Dies; Won Pulitzer Prize as Music Critic for The Times,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/nyregion/harold-c-schonberg-87-dies-won-pulitzerprize-as-music-critic-for-the-times.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Rosenberg at the *Plain Dealer*

Rosenberg's first 10 years at the paper were dominated by Dohnányi's tenure at the Cleveland Orchestra. Rosenberg had a close, personal relationship with Dohnányi dating back to the profile he had written for the Akron paper. The two men socialized together with their families. Rosenberg seemed to his editors, however, to cover the orchestra fairly and the friendship was never the subject of any performance review or evaluation of Rosenberg's work. In 2004, *Plain Dealer* Editor Clifton nominated Rosenberg for a Pulitzer for criticism.

In the spring of 2000, Rosenberg published a book, *The Cleveland Orchestra Story*. It was well received and benefited his reputation. *New Yorker* writer Alex Ross called the book "absorbing."⁶ The orchestra had given Rosenberg exclusive access to its archives to research the book, which took three years to write. Such favorable treatment from an organization he covered did raise some eyebrows in the newsroom, recalls Debbie Van Tassel, then---*Plain Dealer* business editor. "I do think that getting that kind of access put him under some kind of debt of obligation to the orchestra," she adds. But no editor said anything.

At the time, the *Plain Dealer* had no written ethics policy. Questionable behavior was judged on a case---by---case basis. Unrelated to Rosenberg's book, Editor Clifton in October 2000 decided to put in writing a policy that addressed at least journalistic conflict---of---interest, as well as right---of---reply. In October 2000, he sent out a memo to all newsroom staff:

It is not enough to simply have good intentions and honest motives. *Plain Dealer* staff members must avoid any conflict of interest or even the appearance of a conflict of interest or an abuse of the power of the press... *Plain Dealer* journalists will approach assignments with an open mind. Appropriate efforts should be made to understand all relevant points of view and to tell every story completely... Generally, we should publish responsible comments submitted by persons or organizations criticized in the *Plain Dealer*. Whenever possible, serious allegations should be described to the subject and we should let the subject respond in detail in advance of publication.⁷

Meanwhile, Rosenberg in 2001 was elected president of the Music Critics Association of North America (MCANA), an organization founded in 1956 to uphold the standards of professional music criticism. Its 105 members included music critics with the *Chicago Tribune*,

⁶ Alex Ross, "Maestro! Maestro! American orchestras scramble for conductors," *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2000.

⁷ Doug Clifton, memo to editorial staff, "Ethics Guidelines," October 12, 2000.

the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the *Wall Street Journal*. After serving a two---year term, Rosenberg in 2003 was re---elected for a second term. He also helped organize MCANA's annual conference, which included professional development seminars for music critics.

New conductor. Rosenberg, like many in Cleveland, was curious when the Cleveland Orchestra in 1997 announced that Dohnányi would retire in 2002: who would replace him? The answer was announced in 1999-----Franz Welser---Möst, then---music director of the Zurich Opera, would take over in 2002. Welser---Möst came with a reputation. After an impressive run as guest conductor to many of the world's major orchestras, the Austrian in 1990 was named principal conductor of the London Philharmonic. His tenure was controversial, and critics gave him the nickname "Frankly Worse than Most."

Welser---Möst had an unconventional personal life as well. In 1986, at age 26, he was adopted (although his own parents were alive) by Baron Andreas von Bennigsen of Liechtenstein. In 1992, he had a falling---out with Bennigsen, and in 1994 the conductor moved in with Bennigsen's young estranged wife, Angelika. The baron and his wife divorced and, in 1995, she and Welser---Möst married. This was the 42---year---old conductor who, in 2002, arrived in Cleveland ready to take over the leadership of the city's esteemed orchestra.

A New Season

The 2002–2003 season was not the first time Rosenberg had seen Welser---Möst conduct the Cleveland Orchestra. He had first seen him in Cleveland in the early 1990s. "Actually, I was very high on the first five seasons he came as guest conductor," says Rosenberg. "I felt that he had made a good connection with the orchestra, and I thought that his music making was intelligent and sensitive." But when Welser---Möst in fall 1998 tried out to replace Dohnányi, Rosenberg thought he seemed like a different conductor. "He was much less forceful and confident and interesting," Rosenberg says, adding that the other candidates didn't do particularly well either.

In a July 1999 profile he wrote after the orchestra announced that Welser---Möst would succeed Dohnányi, Rosenberg termed the conductor a "maverick maestro."⁸ Halfway through the 3,400---word article, Rosenberg briefly mentioned the Austrian's personal background. But he devoted most of the article to the conductor's professional history. When Welser---Möst officially arrived three years later, Rosenberg says he found his first season performances "colorless, lacking in energy and lacking in real vision of the music." Rosenberg's wrap---up of that season was mixed. He wrote:

[Welser---Möst] showed welcome daring in terms of programming, mixing cherished works with neglected fare and new pieces... His championing of recent and commissioned scores is a healthy sign

⁸ Donald Rosenberg, "Maverick Maestro for Cleveland: Continental views on orchestra's heir apparent," (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer*, July 25, 1999.

that the continuum of serious orchestral music won't be overlooked.⁹ But he also observed that too many of Welser---Möst's performances "didn't measure up." He noted that the conductor seemed most comfortable conducting choral music and collaborating with soloists and choruses. As the next few seasons unfolded, Rosenberg found consistent confirmation for the lackluster opinion he had formed during the conductor's 1998 tryout. He reviewed Welser---Möst weekly during the season, for several weeks in a row (Welser---Möst conducted about half the subscription concerts each year). The *Plain Dealer* reviews were mostly critical.

Readers complained about the unfavorable reviews in emails, letters, and voicemails. Rosenberg was not surprised. "It's the people who disagree that complain," he says, "and evidently, there were a lot of people who disagreed. I touched a nerve." At the same time, he suffered from his own disappointment and says he often came home from concerts depressed. The orchestra performed as well as ever, Rosenberg thought, but Welser---Möst's artistry was not up to the orchestra's standard.

Despite the tepid reviews, Welser---Möst remained accessible and agreed to interviews whenever Rosenberg contacted him. That ended in August 2004.

A Turning Point

That month, the orchestra was touring in Europe. Rosenberg, who had covered the orchestra's international tours for years, went along. In Switzerland, the public relations director of the Lucerne Festival gave Rosenberg a copy of a Swiss magazine that featured an interview with Welser---Möst. An orchestra member translated the interview for Rosenberg.

Rosenberg was interested in some of the conductor's comments. Welser---Möst referred to Cleveland audiences at Friday matinee orchestra performances as "blue---haired ladies."¹⁰ He touched on fundraising strategies, as well as his appreciation for Cleveland's pastoral feel:

Asked what the ladies must donate to meet Welser---Möst personally, he answers: "For \$500, you don't get a handshake from the music director." And for \$5,000? "No, it has to be a little more than that. A few years ago, an enthusiastic middle---aged fan, in this case a man, moved a check across the table for \$10 million. With such a person, of course, you go to dinner."

⁹ Donald Rosenberg, "Welser-Möst ends season of few highs, more lows," *Plain Dealer*, June 12, 2003.

¹⁰ Donald Rosenberg, "German critic likes enhanced sound," *Plain Dealer*, August 25, 2004.

How do you like Cleveland? "Cleveland is an island. Here we have a world-class orchestra in what I call an inflated farmer's village. For me, who loves the country, it is wonderful to live there among the green. Recently in the street in front of my home, I found a huge turtle. It had not escaped from the zoo. It was just walking in the street."

During the tour, Rosenberg periodically wrote a round-up column of interesting news items too small to justify an article to themselves. He wanted to use quotes from the Swiss interview in his round-up, but checked first with Arts and Entertainment Editor Michael Norman about whether that would be appropriate. Norman was enthusiastic and urged Rosenberg to lead with them. Rosenberg opted instead to start the column with a positive review of the orchestra's most recent performance, in Frankfurt. "Then I put the Welser-Möst comments second, because I didn't want [them] to draw attention," he says.

Complaints. Nonetheless, they did. The orchestra and its administration were not pleased, and they made that known. When the orchestra returned to Severance Hall, Rosenberg found himself barred from using a small room where he usually wrote his reviews after performances. He also lost backstage access and was blocked from attending rehearsals. "They felt that I had betrayed the institution, which was not ever my intention," he says. At the same time, he was not a flack: "I don't work for the Musical Arts Association," the nonprofit organization that oversaw the orchestra.

The orchestra's administration also complained directly to the *Plain Dealer*. At the end of the 2004–2005 season, Musical Arts Association (MAA) Board President Richard Bogomolny wrote to Editor Clifton alleging that Rosenberg himself had become controversial. He said:

A legitimate goal of a great newspaper is to publish news with appropriate commentary. In the case of criticism, opinions can encourage discourse, even controversy. As a result of lack of credibility, Mr. Rosenberg has made himself the subject of... controversy. It has become all about Donald Rosenberg, not about the music where it legitimately belongs... Mr. Rosenberg's bias runs the risk of damaging the credibility of the *Plain Dealer*. I, for one, would not like to see that happen.¹¹

Clifton defended his critic. "My sense is that Don's criticism is based on an honest and strongly held belief that Franz is not up to the job," he responded. "In the end... we must tread lightly on the independence of our critic. To overrule him in the face of protest would make a mockery of the critical process." Still, there would be changes. Clifton informed the MAA that music and dance critic Wilma Salisbury henceforth would

¹¹ Michael Gill, "The Orchestra Pit: A fight between a critic and conductor drags two Cleveland icons through the mud," *Cleveland Scene*, May 5, 2010, <http://www.clevescene.com/cleveland/the-orchestrapit/Content?oid=1903352>.

review one Cleveland Orchestra concert per month. Second, Rosenberg's reviews of Thursday performances—opening night—would appear on Saturdays instead of Fridays. That would give the newspaper more time to edit his reviews prior to publication.

The *Plain Dealer's* ombudsman (known as reader representative), Ted Diadiun, also rose to Rosenberg's defense. In a column on June 26, 2005, he addressed complaints from readers. He remarked that while readers tolerated unfavorable movie and restaurant reviews, the orchestra "is as close to an untouchable civic treasure as we have... Woe unto the cad who dares cast anything less than an admiring eye toward the Cleveland Orchestra. We guard it, and its reputation, jealously."¹² Diadiun told readers to celebrate, not reject, Rosenberg's criticism of the orchestra under Welser---Möst. Readers should not expect Rosenberg to praise music when he found it lacking.

Nonetheless, the orchestra continued its campaign. In August 2005, MAA Executive Director Gary Hanson and President James Ireland III (who had replaced Bogomolny), asked to meet with Clifton. During the meeting, they showed Clifton a chart listing 150 sentences written by Rosenberg about Welser---Möst, beginning with Rosenberg's reviews of his performances as guest conductor. The sentences were rated "positive," "negative" or "mixed"; the "negatives" outweighed the other two categories. The MAA officials rested their case: Rosenberg was biased. It was clear they would be pleased if he were removed from the orchestra beat.

But again, Clifton stood firm: "We don't let news sources dictate who will cover them," he later said.¹³ Clifton also heard complaints from the *Plain Dealer's* publisher, Alex Machaskee, who was an MAA board member. But Machaskee never tried to tell Clifton what to do about it.

For a while, the matter died down, even when music and dance critic Salisbury retired in late 2006 and Rosenberg became once again the sole critic covering the orchestra (and took over the dance beat). His reporting provoked no special complaints for the first half of 2007. In May 2007, Editor Clifton retired. His successor was Susan Goldberg.

A Problem Brewing

Before Goldberg took over officially, the two held conversations about Rosenberg (among many other matters). Clifton told Goldberg he had considered reassigning Rosenberg to another beat, but had decided to leave the matter for his successor to resolve. Clifton listed

¹² Ted Diadiun, "Even the Cleveland Orchestra needs a strong critic," *Plain Dealer*, June 26, 2005.

¹³ Andy Netzel, "Critical Sinking," *Cleveland Magazine*, April 2009,

<http://www.clevelandmagazine.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?sid=E73ABD6180B44874871A91F6BA5C249C&nm=Arts+%26+Entertainment&type=Publishing&mod=Publications::Article&mid=1578600D80804596A222593669321019&tier=4&id=10C70AA481314E21AB8171EB81ACCB4B>.

a whole “raft of concerns” about Rosenberg, including worries that the critic was biased and endangering the credibility of the paper.¹⁴

Goldberg heard more when she took the reins fulltime. “One of the things that really caught my attention on coming to the *Plain Dealer* was just this flood of complaints that I got when I walked into the door about Don’s coverage, about how people felt it was biased, it was unfair, that it seemed nasty, kind of personally motivated in some cases,” she said.¹⁵ The new editor decided to get to know Rosenberg and talk to him.

On his beat. On Saturday, July 7, about five weeks after her arrival, Goldberg accompanied Rosenberg to a concert he was going to review. They drove to Blossom Music Center, the open---air venue for the Cleveland Orchestra’s summer series, for the concert and dinner. That night, the orchestra performed Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, led by Welser---Möst. “I really wanted to see Blossom, see the orchestra, listen to Don’s concerns, because he really felt like he needed to get all of his concerns off his chest,” Goldberg said. She let him do most of the talking.

Rosenberg opted to be candid with his new editor. He told her that orchestra supporters had started a campaign against him and that he believed Welser---Möst was second rate. Goldberg told Rosenberg that critics are hired for their opinions, a statement that he found encouraging. She also expressed surprise at the volume and kind of feedback she had received from readers about his reporting and reviews.

Rosenberg did mention Welser---Möst’s personal life, specifically that the conductor had married his stepmother. Goldberg was surprised. “I just thought it was this really odd thing for him to be talking about the man in a way that was supposed to indicate he was an odd guy, a weird guy, in the middle of a conversation that was really a professional conversation,” she said. She wondered whether this was one of the reasons Rosenberg found the conductor objectionable.

That night, Rosenberg wrote a positive review of the performance. On July 9, Rosenberg emailed Goldberg: “Susan, thanks for a wonderful evening Saturday. It was a real pleasure.”¹⁶ Rosenberg attached a column of his that her predecessor, Clifton, had killed and that he had mentioned to her the night they were at Blossom. “Let me know what you think,” he wrote.¹⁷ Goldberg read the column and replied that she would have changed some words. “[B]ut I don’t understand why the column was killed,” she wrote diplomatically. She did not want to rehash an old clash that predated her. Additionally, she didn’t

¹⁴ Goldberg in testimony from *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio. All further quotes from Goldberg, unless otherwise attributed are from this testimony, July 19, 20, 30, and August 2, 2010.

¹⁵ Goldberg testimony, Case no. 08-678705.

¹⁶ Email read as part of testimony during *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio, July 30, 2010.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

know Rosenberg well. “I was trying to manage the situation and move forward,” Goldberg said.

Features Overhaul

Meanwhile, Goldberg had plans for the paper that would affect all of the features staff. Among her intended modifications was the mix of news on Page One. Goldberg wanted the *Plain Dealer*, like other newspapers learning to survive in a post---Internet world, to focus on local affairs. “I think the front page really needs to reflect the reality of people’s lives, and people’s lives are not just about events to worry about—war, death, and tragedy,” Goldberg said.¹⁸ To this end, she wanted more culture and arts on the front page. Hard news would still take priority, but she expected the critics, including Rosenberg, to expand the breadth and depth of their coverage and write cultural news stories for the front page.

Goldberg’s plans dovetailed with the vision Debbie Van Tassel had set when she was named assistant managing editor (AME) for features the previous year, in October 2006. Van Tassel wanted more from her reporters. “We had a staff meeting where I referred to it as being on that gerbil wheel, where all you’re doing are previews and reviews,” recalls Van Tassel. “I wanted [stories] that would be informative, instructive.”¹⁹ She asked her staff of some 50 feature writers, including lifestyle, general assignment, food, and others: “Why not take a fresh approach to your beat?” She encouraged them all to do more entrepreneurial reporting.

Initially, not everyone was on board. While she found the pop culture critics accepting, Van Tassel recalls that some of the fine arts critics were skeptical. The debate was “pretty lively and heated,” she says. Van Tassel recognized that some of their resistance was simply to change itself. “I think in all my years in newspapers and working with other journalists, we tend to be a bit of a hidebound group,” she says.

Rosenberg was one of the holdouts. He felt that his work—reviews and previews—was already appropriate for the front page. Van Tassel wanted news *about* music, not just criticism of it. Van Tassel and Arts Editor Norman met with Rosenberg to brainstorm story ideas suitable for the front page. Rosenberg suggested a feature about distinctive orchestral recordings, and the editors immediately agreed. He produced it for the December 17, 2006, edition of the paper.²⁰ “It was an excellent package,” Van Tassel said. “We led our

¹⁸ Ted Diadiun, “Page One’s new look is an effort to reflect people’s lives,” *The Plain Dealer*, November 11, 2007.

¹⁹ Author’s interview with Debbie Van Tassel in Cleveland, OH, on December 15, 2010. All further quotes from Van Tassel, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²⁰ Donald Rosenberg, “Music that soars to the heavens: Beloved staples form the foundation of classical sound,” *Plain Dealer*, December 17, 2006, p. J1.

Sunday section with it, and we had audio clips linking out of each of the CDs that was referenced. It was really well done.” Van Tassel wished Rosenberg would do more stories like that.

In early September 2007, Goldberg called Van Tassel and Debra Adams Simmons, the newspaper’s managing editor, into her office. Goldberg wanted to know whether they thought Rosenberg could do feature stories that were broadly reported and well sourced. She also asked them whether he seemed to have a bias against Welser----Möst.

Van Tassel was confident he could do fine feature work. Not only had he produced the recent piece on orchestral recordings, but they had been together at the Akron paper, where she remembered a “wonderful big feature about the restoration of the grand piano” at an Akron performing arts center. She observed that the *Plain Dealer* had allowed Rosenberg wide latitude for a long time, so he might experience the new demands as excessive. She told Goldberg that she and John Kappes, who had replaced Michael Norman as arts and entertainment editor in January 2007, were working with Rosenberg as well as the other critics on the features staff to expand their scope.

As for reader complaints about his orchestra coverage, Van Tassel said she was concerned, but wasn’t sure what to think. She believed that Rosenberg was being sincere when he told her that he attended concerts with an open mind. The meeting ended with Van Tassel offering to pay closer attention to his reviews and reader concerns, while Kappes would continue to give Rosenberg’s stories a particularly careful edit.

Goldberg didn’t pursue the issue with Rosenberg further. As the new editor, she had plenty on her plate. But well into the orchestra’s 2007–2008 season, her attention turned to him anew.

Walking a Fine Line

Upon Rosenberg’s return from a European tour with the orchestra, he wrote a column for the November 11, 2007, Sunday arts section called “Measuring the orchestra’s performance abroad, at home.” Rosenberg contrasted the reaction of critics writing for the foreign press with that of US critics. European reviewers, he observed, were largely positive about Welser----Möst and the audience reception enthusiastic, while notable American critics still had reservations. He cited in particular *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini, who wrote after a Cleveland Orchestra appearance in October at Carnegie Hall: “After his appointment [to Cleveland], audiences were encouraged to wait and see. The wait goes on.”²¹ Rosenberg ended his column: “[T]o experience the orchestra at its best these days, listeners need to hear a concert at Severance or Blossom led by guest

²¹ Rosenberg, “Measuring orchestra’s performance abroad, at home,” *The Plain Dealer*, November 11, 2007.

conductors who convey something specific and distinctive to the musicians and loyal audiences alike.”²²

Rosenberg sent the column to AME Van Tassel because Arts Editor Kappes was on vacation. Van Tassel opened the file and read it. She thought the walkaway line was “damning.” “It’s one thing to say that [a concert] wasn’t as good as it could have been, but to predict that it won’t be that good” in the future was going too far, she felt.²³ Yet she also did not want to over---influence a critic’s opinions: “It’s a very delicate line to walk. I don’t know that anyone has a blueprint for it.”

Van Tassel asked Rosenberg to reconsider. She worded her request such that she wasn’t telling Rosenberg what he should say. “There’s a language that we use. It’s code,” she says. “You just say, ‘Are you sure this is what you want to say?’ And I think every critic or every opinion writer knows when they hear that, they ought to step back and reconsider very, very carefully.”

Rosenberg stood by what he’d written. “It was an observation based on hearing this conductor dozens and dozens and dozens of times, and concerts by other conductors dozens and dozens of times,” Rosenberg says. “It was not an arbitrary evaluation.” Van Tassel asked him again, “Are you sure?” Rosenberg was steadfast and calm about the column and the last sentence.

Van Tassel told the music critic that she would seek Goldberg’s input because she was uncomfortable with the final line. The two editors had a brief email exchange on the matter. Goldberg thought the sentence was harsh, but she too believed in giving critics and columnists leeway. Goldberg advised Van Tassel to let the column stand.

Bad Reception

When the story appeared in the Sunday arts section, the negative response was immediate. Not only the administration, but several members of the orchestra were outraged. On November 22, the newspaper published a letter to the editor from a violist that contradicted Rosenberg’s assessment of Welser---Möst.

The public at large had plenty to say as well—both supporting and attacking Rosenberg’s position. One reader wrote to Goldberg inveighing against what he considered the critic’s inappropriate and biased reviews: “What is striking about Mr. Rosenberg’s

²² Ibid.

²³ Van Tassel testimony during Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al., Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio, July 30, 2010.

reviews is their complete lack of objectivity and fairness.”²⁴ The reader acknowledged that he, too, disagreed with some of Welser---Möst’s interpretations and found that at times the orchestra did not appear well rehearsed. But Rosenberg’s reviews, he charged, were “mean---spirited, personal attacks.” Goldberg showed the letters to Van Tassel, who shared them with Rosenberg.

MAA reaction. The orchestra administration also weighed in. Nikki Scandalios, public relations director for the MAA, contacted Arts Editor Kappes. After previous tours, Scandalios pointed out, the newspaper had published a roundup of overseas reviews. Why did it not this time? Kappes explained that he had been on vacation and that publishing a roundup now would be too late. Besides, he added, Rosenberg had written positive reviews of most of this tour.

When he got off the phone with Scandalios, Kappes went to Van Tassel. The column bothered Kappes, who felt it echoed the one Editor Clifton had killed a few years before. Kappes reminded Van Tassel that, before leaving for vacation, he had briefed her on the plan: Rosenberg would, as usual, compile tour reviews for the November 11 edition. The column that appeared was not the one they had agreed upon. “Well, I guess I forgot what the plan was while you were on vacation,” Van Tassel said. “I was slammed. I was doing your work as well as mine.”²⁵

Later, Van Tassel summarized the discussion for Goldberg, who agreed that too much time had elapsed since the European tour for the newspaper to do a roundup column. Moreover, as an editor and journalist, Goldberg believed that a newspaper should not be beholden to the institutions that it covered. If an organization or a reader had a complaint about coverage, she would hear them out. But she would never let the paper become a mouthpiece. “Our job is not to cover institutions from their perspective,” she said. “Our job is to cover institutions on behalf of the readers.”

Rosenberg defense. On December 4, Goldberg received an email from Rosenberg with the subject heading: “Talk?” He wrote, “I’m sorry if my passionate devotion to the subject is causing you angst.”²⁶ In his email, he included another email from Richard Solis, a French horn player with the orchestra, which backed Rosenberg. “If you ever find your job in jeopardy as a result of the FWM [Franz Welser---Möst] crap, please, if I can be of any help, let me know,” Solis wrote. He added that he did not “want to see the orchestra go downhill with musical ignoramuses chasing the almighty dollar.”

²⁴ Reader’s letter read as part of testimony during *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio, July 30, 2010.

²⁵ Van Tassel testimony during *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio, July 30, 2010.

²⁶ Rosenberg email exchange with Goldberg read as part of testimony during *Rosenberg v. Musical Arts Association, et al.*, Case no. 08-678705, filed in the Court of Common Pleas, Civil Division, County of Cuyahoga, State of Ohio.

Goldberg agreed to meet Rosenberg on a Tuesday in mid-December to discuss the outcry, but a schedule conflict obliged her to cancel. The next time they saw each other was at a *Plain Dealer* holiday party at her house. The matter was not mentioned.

The MAA was also trying to get her ear. At another holiday event, she mingled with prominent members of the Cleveland community, including MAA administrators. "I was trying to meet people at this party, and [MAA President] Jamie Ireland is yapping in my ear about unfair coverage [by] Don Rosenberg," said Goldberg. "I kind of thought, I didn't want to hear it right then. It was not a long conversation."

But in January 2008, she brought up the subject herself. The occasion was a dinner at her house, on the first weekend of the new year, for four former journalism colleagues she had known for more than 20 years. All were nationally known journalists "who in their own careers have tackled every kind of ethical issue, journalistic issue, personal issue, dealing with the community kind of issue," said Goldberg. They were Clark Hoyt, public editor for the *New York Times*, his wife, Linda Cohen, features editor with *USA Today*, Tom McNamara, a top editor for the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, and Marcia Bullard, CEO and publisher of *USA Weekend*.

Goldberg asked for their counsel. "I had this strong sense that our credibility in the community was being undermined," Goldberg said. She felt Rosenberg's reviews had become predictable and, after the November 11 column, she thought he might in fact be incurably biased against Welser-Möst. At the same time, Goldberg didn't want to be seen to submit to community pressure. She was considering her options. Should she reassign Rosenberg to another beat? What kind of message would that send to other critics on her staff? The group discussed the situation into the late hours of the night. Goldberg returned to work after the weekend still unsure of what action to take.

Bias or expert judgment?

In late January, MAA Executive Director Hanson contacted Goldberg, and she went to his office at Severance Hall. They did not know each other well, and the meeting was framed as a get-acquainted session and opportunity for frank discussion of several issues. The complaints Hanson voiced about the newspaper's coverage of the Cleveland Orchestra were hardly new. But Hanson had more to say.

In 1998, he told her, Rosenberg was with the Cleveland Orchestra in China. Then-Music Director Dohnányi had had a major argument with Hanson's predecessor. People had stormed out of the room. In Hanson's estimation, the episode was newsworthy and

yet—he charged—Rosenberg never wrote about it.²⁷ The reason, he alleged, was Rosenberg and Dohnányi’s close personal relationship. Hanson admitted that he, too, had once been friends with Rosenberg.

This was news to Goldberg, who had not known of these friendships. “It concerns me as an editor if one of our reporters has become really good friends with someone they cover,” said Goldberg. When she returned to the office, she described the meeting to Van Tassel. After discussion, Goldberg suggested another meeting with MAA representatives.

February meeting. Goldberg invited MAA Executive Director Hanson and Board President Ireland to meet with her, AME Van Tassel, Arts Editor Kappes, and Managing Editor Simmons on February 4, 2008. Goldberg wanted the other editors to hear Hanson’s concerns. The two MAA representatives believed that Rosenberg held a personal grudge against Welser---Möst and that his reviews favored guest conductors. Listening to them talk, Goldberg thought, “Here we go again.”

My sense was that this was the same stuff I had been hearing from the moment I got to the paper, and even before I got to the paper.

Van Tassel went *into* the meeting confident that while Rosenberg had made some mistakes along the way, basically “he’s a good guy and he has a lot of integrity.” Earlier missteps had not been corrected at the time, and now the situation had escalated. She had taken the complaints—many from hardcore orchestra patrons with ties to the board—with a grain of salt. Like any other critic, Rosenberg had his fans and his detractors. But listening to the MAA visitors, Van Tassel began to ask herself whether his detractors might have a point about his remarks seeming personal. “They seemed to be *ad hominem* critiques of the concerts rather than about the program or the music,” she says.

After Hanson and Ireland left, Goldberg asked her colleagues Van Tassel, Kappes, and Simmons for their thoughts about the meeting and suggestions for next steps. Firing Rosenberg was not an option they considered; the union would contest it, and the editors had no desire to force him off the paper. The group came up with a couple of ideas. One possibility was to move another reporter, Zachary Lewis, to features. The *Plain Dealer* had just hired the 30---year---old Lewis a few months earlier to cover health and business. But he had interned at the paper years earlier, in summer 1999, and Rosenberg had been his mentor. The two had worked well together back then. Lewis in the intervening years had been a freelance arts journalist covering music, dance, theater, and art for several publications, including *Time Out Chicago*, *Dance Magazine*, and the *Plain Dealer* itself. Perhaps Rosenberg

²⁷ Rosenberg did in fact write three times in 1998 about the rift between Maestro Dohnányi and the orchestra. He did not report on the angry episode itself. See the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*: “Dohnányi angry over unfinished ‘Ring Cycle’” (June 7); “Dohnányi, trustees confer on tense relations” (September 13); and “Dohnányi, trustees find positive course at meeting” (June 20).

would welcome Lewis as a music features writer, or occasional music critic. His first assignment could be an updated Welser---Möst profile.

The editors agreed to let Rosenberg know that they had met with the MAA executives and what they had discussed. A few days later, Goldberg invited Rosenberg to join the same small group. She put the difficulty to him straight. "We [have] had a problem for years," she told him. "We [have] finally got to where we need to address this problem. What are we going to do about this?" His orchestra reviews, she declared, were eroding the newspaper's credibility in the community. Rosenberg disagreed. "I have strong views about Welser---Möst, and I don't see how that compromises the newspaper," he says.

Was the problem that I had a strong view of the musical director?
That was the problem. That was what they perceived to be the problem.
Rather than trying to understand that, hey, maybe Welser---Möst is a
problem, they made me the problem.

Goldberg considered the options. Personally, she leaned toward bringing in Lewis. The editors could point out to Rosenberg that, since Salisbury's retirement, he had been writing about dance as well as music. Lewis could provide relief for Rosenberg's double workload. But what should Lewis be asked to do? Straight features? Or could he take over music reviews? If so, all of them? Goldberg could assign Lewis to review the Cleveland Orchestra fulltime—which would remove Rosenberg from contact with the ensemble. Or she could assign Lewis to review the orchestra only when Welser---Möst conducted. Finally, she could simply appoint Lewis the paper's music critic and let Rosenberg do dance and other arts—in effect, take him off the music beat.

Whatever the choice, Rosenberg, she anticipated, would be angry. She also worried about the paper's reputation nationwide among newspaper editors, as well as music and arts critics. As former president of the Music Critics Association, Rosenberg had close ties to the arts criticism community. Had Rosenberg simply exercised his right as a critic to tell readers what he believed? Or had he stepped over an invisible line into *ad hominem* attacks on an otherwise accomplished musician? Would it be fair for the *Plain Dealer* to redefine his job? This was not familiar territory for a newsroom executive, and Goldberg struggled to reach an impartial judgment.

APPENDIX 1

For a selection of reviews by Donald Rosenberg, please visit the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* website at: <http://www.cleveland.com/plaindealer/>.

You can search the archives here: <http://nl.newsbank.com/sites/cpdb/>

Some examples of Rosenberg's reviews during the period described in the case are:

- "Maverick maestro for Cleveland; Continental views of an orchestra's heir apparent," July 25, 1999, p. 11
- "A 'joy' to experience in the great outdoors," July 10, 2007, p. E3. This is the review he wrote after he visited Blossom with Goldberg.
- "Visiting Vienna, a music lover's paradise," Dec. 23, 2007, p. K1 (Rosenberg was there with the orchestra tour.)
- "Orchestra's own Hoebig soars in Dvorak performance," May 10, 2008, p. E4.
- "'Rusalka' shines with super cast, energized orchestra," June 7, 2008, p. E5.
- "Starting the season with a blast at Blossom," July 8, 2008, p. E6