

Reviewing tapes and CDs Meeting the “radio standard”

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Classical New Jersey Society Journal
September 9, 2004; Volume 4, Number 24

The Classical New Jersey Society has tried to give reviewing coverage to concerts which are interesting, which show a degree of growth or new direction for a group or person, and which do or could have an impact on the state’s musical life. Sometimes it is difficult to find reviewers to cover all events adequately. Since none of the writers are paid, we can only accept their simple yes or no when we ask them if they can cover a particular concert. As a result, there are times when there are not enough writers to go around, and a concert we really want to review is trumped, as it were, by a concert with even more elements we find compelling.

One recent example will suffice to give you the idea. The premiere of a significant work by a New Jersey composer will trump everything else, so the premieres of the six works by well-respected composers from this state (including Pulitzer prize-winner George Walker) by the various ensembles of the New Jersey Youth Orchestra organization was a shoo-in for being reviewed. Yet at the same time the **Schola Cantorum on Hudson** paired some of the medieval *Carmina Burana* songs with Carl Orff’s famous secular cantata in its version for two pianos and percussion, a major step for the small-but-excellent choral group in Jersey City. There had to be a choice between them, and it went without saying to live coverage of the six living NJ composers. Even the disappointed Schola conductor Deborah Simpkin King understood. But we requested a recording of the Schola’s concert. There was no promise to review it, but we certainly wanted to keep before us the attainments of this fine urban organization which is the closest geographically to Manhattan of any musical group in the state.

We have always welcomed tapes, CDs, and recently DVDs of performances. Some we have chosen to review and some not.

I feel that now is the time to have a word about this process. First of all, there is inevitably one important element missing from a recorded performance: the live ambience. No matter if the audience is apparent in a recording, the listener is still listening in a vacuum, probably alone at home or in the Society office. One cannot be swept up in a performance to the same degree as if one were there in person, perhaps not at all. Even with a video component there is a separation or – with a telephoto lens – an unreal intimacy which does not happen to an audience member.

Above all, the ear and mind are far less forgiving. Perhaps it is the fore-knowledge that a recording is a repeatable record of the event which immediately puts up the critical feelers in a home listener. A question we would be unlikely to ask at a concert we attend – and perhaps *should* ask – is “Would I like this to be a permanent representation of this work to the world beyond this audience?” That’s a tough question. Most performers would want the opportunity to make “patches” in re-recording sessions after the concert, or to have recordings made during rehearsals as the source for edits which will take out any musical blips which occur in performance. It is worth noting that at least one group makes a practice of not making recordings because, as I’ve been told,

they don't want anything but the live experience to be transmitted to the audience. And it is the group most likely to produce performances which will hold up under cold scrutiny: Mostly Music with Ani Kavafian, Carter Brey, and friends of their world-class ilk. To be sure, there would be major legal issues around making live recordings of these folks, but there is another issue: in recording for posterity, as it were, the temptation is to play it safe at the cost of taking chances. There are some who contend that the sameness of orchestras around the world in our times is due to record companies wanting another version of what has already sold, nothing distinctive need apply. Whether for mundane legal practicality, fear of having to be artistically "safe," or their stated idealism, the Mostly Music artists may have it right.

Yet many fine groups *do* record their concerts, and we keep an archive of New Jersey performers and music by New Jersey composers in the Society offices. These are available to anyone who would like to hear them in our office.

Sometimes concert recordings are sent to us in the hope that we will review a concert on that basis. Most of the time we decide not to. A good hard listen by the eager performers after some distance of time will, we think, show them that too many of their faults become more evident in the harsh, unforgiving setting of a recording. It has not been unusual to hear a CD sent by a well-respected group, and in the isolation of the office immediately hear every fault as if the speakers were a sonic x-ray device. Yet when surrounded by the spirit of a supportive audience a reviewer understandably tends to first find the positives unless the negatives are overwhelming.

This negative way of listening to a recording is why "highlights" demo CDs from various groups create suspicion. Instead of hearing them as fully representative, the listener tends instead to wonder why the rest of the piece wasn't presented. "They're showcasing this section because they can't really cut it in the rest of the piece," is how those demos come across. Our experience shows that a complete work is more compelling proof of excellence than dipping into bits and pieces of the repertoire unless the bit presented is clearly the most difficult portion.

CDs or DVDs of New Jersey composers and artists intended for sale through a commercial label or by the performers themselves are a different matter. Those we happily received and will review on their own terms. They, too, are kept in our archive. In all cases – private archival performances or those meant for public distribution – **the standard is simple: which represent the most polished performances, the ones which I would have no qualms about playing** when once a month I co-host John Hammel's Saturday morning radio show on WNTI-FM, which, being webcast as it is at www.wnti.org, can be heard anywhere in the world?

We have recently received several performance CDs and DVDs. Only one meets that standard: the Schola Cantorum on Hudson's *Carmina Burana* concert. We shall, however, lay ourselves wide open to a lot of phone time by saying that we'll chat with anyone about the recording they send us as long as they are willing to understand that the reason we are not reviewing it is because we are actually being supportive of their efforts, which do not yet meet what we think of as the "radio standard."

We intend to serve the classical music community of New Jersey. Sometimes that service takes the form of public silence and private conversation.