Damn your taste. Let me sharpen your perception, and your taste will take care of itself.

—Graffito, Art Department, University of Calgary, 1973.

In the last issue, we printed an angry letter from a member of the group Tzimmes, whose recent CD had been reviewed by Judith Cohen in the previous issue. The Bulletin does not particularly pride itself on tough reviews or controversy (though I hope that we haven’t gotten so long in the tooth that we’re afraid of either), but from time to time one does lead to the other. Some months ago, I began some woolgathering on the role of reviews in this publication, following one artist’s unhappy letter. That got put aside under the pressure of other concerns, but it seems to me to be worthwhile reviving and completing it now.

I should preface all of this by saying that John Leeder is in charge of the review section of the Bulletin. I occasionally make suggestions and have comments about this section, but I do not set his policies. What follows, then, is my opinion only; it should not be assumed to represent John, much less the board or other members of the Society. (I have included, as well, some other thoughts on reviews in my consideration of Grit Laskin’s most recent CD. See the review section of this issue.)

Responding to Cohen’s review, Julian Siegel chose to be ironic. Pretending to thank her for the review (which was, as he noted, "extensive"), Siegel suggested that Tzimmes is a non-commercial group, whose "modest album sales" ought to exempt them from the "adamant scorn and mockery" which he seemed to accept as appropriate for "world-class ‘muzak’ giants such as Kenny G., Yanni and Liberace." (I’ve had to insert "seemed" into that sentence because irony is not always as easy to read as some of my undergraduate teachers suggested.) Presumably he did not appreciate the "scorn and mockery" applied to Tzimmes; he may not believe that we should scorn the others, either, though he seems willing to accept that this happens.

Cohen’s review ended with the expectation that the album would be "very successful"; Siegel claims that Tzimmes has "humble professional aspirations." I have never heard Tzimmes’s work, so I can’t comment on what their aspirations, esthetic or commercial, might be. Whatever is the case with this particular group, there is a wide range of degrees of success to which musicians might aspire, and there is no clear dividing line between the commercial and the sincere (and I’m not at all sure that the commercial cannot be sincere, though it often does not smell that way to me).

The matter becomes somewhat more complicated when you consider how frequently humble aspirations are claimed in our democratic societies. Even heavy metal groups like to see themselves as underdogs, and don’t forget that at one of the pinnacles of their earnings, the Rolling Stones put out an lp entitled It’s Only Rock ‘n’ Roll, as though they somehow represented a marginalized community. In fact, I’ve seen performers who weren’t going to make a dime off an event pander to audiences, so the evils we associate with commercialism may not have much to do with album sales.

In a letter not intended for publication, the earlier complainant I referred to raised a similar issue, namely that the recording which had been reviewed was characterized by its homemade nature (unlike his other work), precisely the sort of expression the Society and Bulletin exists to support. I essentially agreed with this proposition. Had I drawn that assignment, I myself might have reviewed this one more favorably than his more "professional" releases, though this might not have pleased him, either. (Consider the controversy between myself and Michael Pollock over the value of A Celebration of Heritage: Songs of Labrador in Bulletin 28.1, for a similar event.) Not everyone in the Society, of course, will understand our mandate in precisely the same fashion, nor is the function of reviews in this or any publication necessarily as clear as it may appear.

Years ago, I heard an entertainment writer for a Calgary daily claim that his job was to help readers to spend their entertainment dollars wisely. I disagreed with him then, and I still do. While I am hardly of the "it’s-all-a-matter-of-personal-taste-and-yours-is-as-good-as-mine" school of thought, neither do I simply accept the notion that there are absolute standards of quality which some people are better able to discern and apply. Sure, there are people whose backgrounds and taste overlap with mine sufficiently that I can ask them, "Do I want to see/hear/buy that?" and feel safe to apply their one-word response. But there have been hours of discussion to precede that word. Even so, it’s sometimes a mistake to follow their advice—or to follow my own, I suppose: my esthetic history is riddled with occasions when I’ve changed my mind.

I don’t think that the Bulletin is necessarily seeking reviewers who can give you an authoritative verdict on the items in question, but, rather, those who will have something interesting to say about them. I would never agree to our instituting a rating system, à la American Bandstand or Downbeat. This is not to say that our reviews should have no role in how you decide to spend your money; but I’d rather you take time to read and think about what our reviewers are saying, not count stars and whip out your checkbook.

Our reviewers have wildly different attitudes and backgrounds; this is why we occasionally print two different reviews of any item (even when the two reviews agree on the relative worth of the disc or book). We hope that most of them will continue to write reviews for us for a long enough period that readers will come to know them, to be able to interact with them.

Our reviewers also have rather different degrees of experience with writing. In fact, reviewing can be a way for aspiring writers to get practice and a few publications. Some reviewers are writing for the first or second time when you read them here. This may or may not mean that their reviews are unsophisticated. If an experienced musician takes up the pen for the first time, her writing may be that of a beginner, but her insider's
having made this clear, attempted to have her say in an enter-
her comments were opinions and which were meant as fact, and,
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I want to make clear that I don't think of myself as being "in
I think I can throw a few more whitefish into the chowder. (But
ated that process, so he deserves our thanks.

Nevertheless, it doesn't hurt us from time to time to take a good
hard look at what we're doing, and Julian seems to have precip-
tration, have generated a lot of column inches in response! I

Two short sentences, presumably written in haste and frus-
tion, have generated a lot of column inches in response! I
wonder if Julian Siegel wishes he could have them back....
Nevertheless, it doesn't hurt us from time to time to take a good
hard look at what we're doing, and Julian seems to have precip-
itated that process, so he deserves our thanks.

George has said many things with which I agree, and I don't
think I can add to his eloquence on those issues. Nevertheless,
I think I can throw a few more whitefish into the chowder. (But
I want to make clear that I don't think of myself as being "in
charge of" the reviews section, except possibly by default: I pick
up the mail, so I have first look at the review copies, and I used
to be called "reviews editor" years ago, and I'm in touch with
people who have agreed to write reviews—not enough, though—
and I have space in my basement, and nobody else has offered
to look after it, and I haven't brought myself to refuse, so it
seems to fall to me. I haven't yet gotten drunk with the glory of
it all, though....)

First, to the review itself. As I said at more length in a private
letter to Julian, I didn't detect "abundant scorn and mock-
ery" in the review (except possibly in the use of the word "mu-
zk;,
 a third-party quote which, I suppose, the author adopts by
implication, or at least doesn't dispute). I thought Judith Cohen
had opinions, and expressed them, and made it clear which of
her comments were opinions and which were meant as fact, and,
having made this clear, attempted to have her say in an entertain-
ing way. I think this is perfectly acceptable, in fact expected,

behaviour for a reviewer. I didn't think Judith's negative com-
ments were overly cutting or out of line. And, seeing as she's an
authority in the field, I doubt if many of her facts will be dis-
puted very strenuously. My personal opinion is that Mr. Siegel's
response was overly thin-skinned.

There are publications out there which do not carry reviews at all, or include only factual descriptions, often contributed by
the artist him/herself—a mini-press release. There are other pub-
clications which tell their reviewers, in effect, "If you can't say
something nice, don't say anything." This is a perfectly reason-
able policy for an organization whose mandate, in part, is to
advance the careers or avocations of its members—SOCAN and
CANSCAIP come to mind, and their magazines don't carry re-
views, just short descriptions.

CSTM is in a more anomalous position. Some of our mem-
ers are professional musicians, but the Bulletin's major man-
date isn't to advance their careers. (It's nice if we can, though,
and sometimes I think we do.) Our first mandate is to serve as
a newsletter for CSTM; our second is to provide interesting
reading for CSTM members in our area of interest. This may
from time to time involve someone turning a critical eye on an
artistic product created by someone in the field, and that some-
one may or may not happen to be a CSTM member (which, by
the way, wasn't the case in this instance, although one member of
Tzimmes has joined since then).

Some people may believe that the genre is so fragile that any
negative criticism will harm it. However, I certainly don't think

ceptations may have different tastes, but the sharpening will allow
them to articulate their differences, and, if nothing else, they'll
have a classier argument.

I have discovered that I am less interested in reviews than
I used to be. I may be very interested in how particular listeners
hear particular performances, but increasingly, I even find
buyer's guides to household equipment of limited value. Not of
no value: I would hardly buy a car or vcr or whatever without
consulting one or more consumer publications. But the patriar-
chial mentality that hopes for a truth to be dispensed by a doctor,
consumers' organization, or critic seems less and less useful to
me. Sometimes I go to the doctor and say, "This hurts," and
sometimes she says, "Do this," and sometimes she's right. But
sometimes she's just guessing at what's wrong, and—I'll level
with you—sometimes I am, too.

All of this is "just my opinion," as they say, and I'm sure
that it is not that of all of our reviewers. I suppose that I myself,
from time to time, ride a pretty high horse. But that suits my
vision of this publication quite well: I hope that we can provide
a forum for many different voices and points of view, especially
those that are not widely heard from elsewhere. I'm sure that
there are points of view I'd refuse to assist, but I don't think
we've encountered them yet. The Bulletin ought to be a melee
of ideas and styles that complement, support, and sometimes
trouble each other. [GWL]
this is the case with folk music in Canada today, if in fact it ever was. I'm sure it's not the case with Tzimmes as a group (although I sent their CD off without listening to it myself, so, like George, I have no basis for agreeing or disagreeing with what Judith says about it).

It is possible to write an interesting and informative review of something which the writer doesn't like much, either because he/she doesn't have a taste for the overall concept (but I hasten to add that we try to send review copies to people who we expect will like them) or because he/she doesn't think the artists executed well within that concept. No doubt you'll be able to read several of that sort in this very issue—successfully done, too. Writers often say, usually meant as an apology, "This review likely says more about the writer than the thing being reviewed." In my opinion, no apology is needed, and I usually use the editorial prerogative to excise those kinds of statements. I feel a review should be personalized—it should show the writer's human face rather than a mask of some godlike impersonal arbiter. As I said above, a writer's personal opinions should be readily identifiable as such—and I think, for the most part, that our writers do that, and their reviews are more interesting for it.

At the risk of belabouring the obvious: any musician who plays in front of an audience—even one listener in a living room—makes him/herself subject to the criticism process. And a larger audience expands that process; a recording expands it even more. Part of the process involves the inevitability that some of the listeners will not be 100 per cent positive about what they hear. A tiny percentage of those listeners will be reviewers who put their thoughts on paper and disseminate them to a readership (thus becoming subject themselves to the critical process from their readers), and it's highly possible that some of those thoughts will be less than adulatory. A musician who doesn't accept that he/she is part of the compact between performer and audience has an unrealistic understanding of the role. But then, a person who had those kinds of expectations likely wouldn't have gotten past the living room phase in the first place.

If it were up to me, all books, recordings and videos with a significant Canadian traditional music content or connection would be reviewed in our pages—some performances as well. Obviously, shortage of space, time, writers and energy make this impossible—sometimes it's rather a scattergun effect as to what gets reviewed and what doesn't, and what gets said about the things that end up being included. However, we try to provide a broad spectrum of coverage of the field, by a broad spectrum of writers of varying styles, points of view and approaches, and hope in the end that all of our readers will find, not oracles, Consumer Reports or great literature, but simply worthwhile assessments expressed in an interesting way. [JL]

ERRATA:

I commented in the last issue that Real Blues isn't to be found in the Calgary newsstands. Since then, I have noticed it in several [GWL]

Paddy Tuttty advises that her website was printed incorrectly last issue [page 28]; the correct version—


And here is old Jacques, the blind habitant,  
Who can sing you the whole of Le Juif Errant,

And play on his fiddle such tunes so gay,  
As Le vent frivolant, and J'ai tant dansé.

And now all the Seigneurie forms in a line,  
Then the Grande Promenadé with an air so fine,  

One can hardly believe it is "homespun grey"  
And "bottes sauvages" who are leading the way.

And next they engage in a merry round dance,  
Imported, of course, direct from France,  

Which must surely gladden our gay little Rose,  
In her dark-blue skirt nad her scarlet hose.

Mrs. J.F.W. Harrison ("Seranus"—1859-1935), from "Rose Latulippe"