THE ART OF JUDGMENT
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Published in *Café Américain*, 8 May 2026: https://cafeamericainmag.com/the-art-of-judgment-pt-2/

Part Two: From Argument to Experience

The arguments developed in Part One - about the legitimacy of evaluative judgment, the distinction between solicited and unsolicited evaluation, and the pathology of the comprehensive audit - are not offered from a position of theoretical detachment.

I have spent over three decades as a concert pianist, having been regularly reviewed in the national and international press, and have written reviews of performers and composers myself. I have been peer reviewed and have acted as a peer reviewer in turn, sat on appointment panels, adjudicated composition and piano competitions, set and marked student work across music and sociology, examined doctoral theses, and served on many academic misconduct panels.

I have campaigned, researched and published on abuse in music education and on academic freedom. I have sustained a wide public presence through journalism, blogging, and social media. And I have lived through a large number of intimate relationships and close friendships of varying degrees of commitment, in which mutual evaluation of character, desire, and conduct is continuous, often unspoken, and rarely neutral.

These are not credentials offered as a guarantee of authority. They are the conditions under which the following case studies were formed. What Part One examined in the abstract, this part tests against the resistance of particular situations. The situations listed also create an obvious risk: that the author may appear to install himself as judge of all judges. That risk has to be admitted at the outset. What follows is not a claim to exemption from evaluation, but an attempt to think from within its practice.

My own judgments have certainly not been without flaws: there are composers whose work I once valued primarily on grounds of novelty, or their adherence to aspects of modernist aesthetics, but whose work I have since recognised exhibits less of the deeper quality that sustains lasting interest. The failure was over-reliance upon reified criteria: mistaking the general for the particular. More uncomfortably, I have written on composers I admired and continue to admire – Michael Finnissy, Pascal Dusapin, Helmut Lachenmann - in terms I would now recognise as over-defensive, at times approaching the hagiographic register this essay criticises elsewhere.

I have stayed too long in relationships which were obviously unworkable, either when over-flattered by the other person, or when the fear of an unknown future alone outweighed honest assessment of a known present. Recognising such failures in oneself is part of what can sharpen the critical eye one subsequently brings to others – and what makes one more alert to the evaluations being made of oneself in return.

Bad Reviews and the Development of Resilience

No-one likes receiving a bad review. Most of the reviews I have received have been as a pianist, in publications in various countries. The number of genuinely bad or hostile ones has been relatively few, certainly well-outweighed by highly positive assessments. But I won't deny that have a very negative review in a national newspaper is a highly unpleasant experience. A musician, unlike a scholar, has no right of reply, no opportunity to address the public audience to whom the review is directed. The asymmetry between reviewer and reviewed is structural rather than personal.

Furthermore the reviewer has no obligation to demonstrate work of their own in a comparable fashion to the artist, and few critics are practising performing artists. But that asymmetry is probably unavoidable, and perhaps preferable to the obvious conflicts of interest that would arise otherwise. But the reviewer should have earned their authority through a track record showing verdicts grounded in knowledge, attention and wide comparative experience rather than whim, fashion or personal investment. In this sense, a review also evaluates its author.

I would never wish to claim that those who have given me bad reviews have committed an invalid act. I might dispute the emphases, the selectivity, or aesthetic assumptions, but they had every right to publish their reviews. Public performance and publication solicit evaluation: they place work before others and invite response. Yet there is a growing presumption that a review is legitimate only if it is positive - that performing or publishing is courageous, and that courage deserves protection rather than scrutiny. That is not an ethical position but a sentimental one.

Nor could I honestly dismiss all negative criticism I have received. Sometimes I already knew, at some level, the weakness being named; sometimes because the way I imagine a performance to have come across is not the way others actually heard it. Harsh criticism can wound, and someone with too little inner ballast may indeed be badly shaken by it. I am not going to sentimentalise this. A life in public performance cannot be sustained on the expectation of protection from adverse judgment. But surviving such judgments requires more than resilience in the bland institutional sense of the term. In my case it has required a more refractory quality: belligerence, tempered - when I have been at my best - by the capacity for critical self-reflection.

I use the term belligerence deliberately. I have often said to others: 'Remember the critics don't know what they are talking about when they give you a *good* review'. If one believes a hostile critic ignorant, blinkered or malicious, consistency demands the same scepticism towards the gushing review by an uninformed enthusiast, or the glowing verdict of a partisan admirer. Flattering praise can be just as empty as wounding condemnation. The point is not to internalise criticism just as it comes, but to learn, through repeated exposure, how to distinguish what is exact and usable from what is merely noisy, self-important, fashionable, or vindictive.

That discrimination is learned only over time: from receiving enough judgments of different kinds to feel the difference between the review that lands because it has identified something real and the one whose impact results from the author carrying public authority. Belligerence can keep one upright when facing the second sort. It is

a defence against being too easily broken by verdicts that are shallow, arbitrary, or over-invested in themselves. In that limited sense, it is not a vice but a resource.

But the same belligerence that prevents collapse can also protect vanity, deflect correction, and harden into a refusal to learn. The capacity to pick oneself up after a bad review is not the same as the inability to recognise when the review was right. That distinction matters. The contemporary therapeutic tendency to treat negative evaluation as harm obscures one side of the problem; the cult of toughness obscures the other. One needs enough resistance not to be crushed by judgment, but enough honesty not to become impervious to it.

The Reflexive Dimension

Both grandiosity and self-flagellation are frequently rooted in the same evaluative damage: early evaluative environments in which the child's worth was made systematically conditional, or systematically denied. I come at this from direct experience. The neglect and abuse I received from family and at school left me, for a long time, with a badly miscalibrated internal evaluator: one that oscillated between defensive inflation of my own capacities and a readiness to accept hostile verdicts as though they were simply what I deserved. The child who is told persistently that they are not good enough, or that only their achievements count, is being trained not only in distorted reception of external evaluation but in distorted self-evaluation: a lasting difficulty in knowing whether one’s work is actually any good, independent of what others say about it.

It has taken me years to overcome this, and the overcoming never seems quite complete. Yet the same conditions that damaged the capacity for calm self-assessment also produced something genuinely useful: a belligerence more deeply rooted than ordinary professional confidence, because it was forged not in success but in refusal - refusal to accept that the verdict of those with power over me was final. That refusal was not always discriminating, but it kept me upright when more measured responses would not have done. That is the background against which the movement from solely receiving evaluation to also delivering it must be understood.

Friendship, Sociality, and the Evaluative Dimension of Personal Life

Part One touched on the evaluative dimension of personal intimate experience without narrating it further here. I want now to address a different but related register – friendship and sociality, which have their own evaluative structure. It is worth distinguishing between purely professional relations; professional relations that also become friendly and extend into other physical spaces; general friendship; intimate friendship, in which the most personal matters can be discussed with trust and candour; and romantic or sexual connections, which carry their own evaluative structure, addressed more directly in Part One. I have many close friends, including many women, in that intimate but non-romantic category, and those friendships are among the most valuable things in my life.

On the other hand, there have been colleagues whose conduct - substituting institutional authority for earned argument, claiming injury whenever subject to scrutiny, delivering confident verdicts on work barely engaged with, or adopting a markedly performative manner - make me unwilling to extend the relationship beyond what is strictly necessary professionally. These are not revelations of some truer self behind the social performance; Goffman's framework cautions against that reification. They are behavioural features, observable across multiple interactions, and I evaluate them as such. When such people, whether after malicious action on their part or simply when they demand a level of respect I cannot sustain - attempt a warmer register, I keep responses brief and non-committal. On one occasion at a study day, where every paper had been followed by a long monologue dressed as a question from one such figure - an academic whose strong aesthetic verdicts on music seemed based less on listening than on accompanying verbiage, with stentorian political verdicts attached - she approached me during a break with an apparently friendly overture. I returned the greeting but did not look up from my laptop. That was simultaneously an evaluative act and an assertion of a boundary: a judgment that this social move was inconsistent with the pattern I had observed, and that the honest response was to decline its terms without ambiguity. She was of course evaluating me in return; that mutuality is always present. But to meet a move one distrusts with simulated warmth would be evaluative cowardice in social form.

The movement from professional acquaintance to friendship, and sometimes to intimate friendship, feels less like a concession than a consequence of evaluation, and is rarely unilateral. The deepest such relationships have grown because mutual assessment produced compatible verdicts: each finds in the other something consistently worth engaging with. Not all such assessments are reciprocated, and the mismatch is its own evaluative experience. The events of the Society for Music Analysis are among the highlights of my professional calendar - not only intellectually but personally - because the orientation of the people there is genuinely open: judgments emerge through detailed musical engagement rather than institutional reflex, or prior ideological or other allegiance. That intellectual openness can generate personal warmth, because someone who can genuinely embrace divergent phenomena - who has not foreclosed their responses in advance – is likely to be similarly open to different kinds of people and experience. Something similar applies to fellow campaigners on academic freedom, whose consistency between enacted and stated values is itself something to which to evaluate, and to sociologists whose work proceeds from curiosity about how societies function, rather than from a prosecutorial posture that knows its conclusions in advance. In all such cases, assessment of how someone thinks, listens, argues and responds provides a basis for deciding what kind of relationship one wants with them. This is not a contamination of professional judgment by personal feeling. It is what it looks like when evaluation and human connection are functioning as they should.

Harsh Reviews, the Killer Question, Peer Review

The same evaluative habits that shape one's social choices operate in more formally significant contexts. I have written numerous academic book reviews - a few very positive, a few very harsh, most somewhere in between. The harshest was a review-article in *Music & Letters* in 2015 of a monograph on the composer Brian

Ferneyhough, whose piano works I have played, recorded, and studied for decades. The book was, at the time, the largest English-language monograph on a composer whose work demands and rewards serious independent analysis. I was surprised that its many considerable problems had not been addressed during peer review, and worried about the consequences of its being allowed to stand unchallenged as the primary scholarly resource. Students and researchers would then be citing as established scholarly work what amounted to a compendium of the composer's own views, uncritically presented, with little if any aural engagement, methodological reflection or wider contextual knowledge. The damage to the scholarly understanding of Ferneyhough would have been greater and more lasting than the damage the review did to its author. A longer meta-critical article published six months later in *Search* examined the breadth of Ferneyhough scholarship - including other writings by the same author on the composer in which I identified similar problems - within a broader pattern of hagiographic scholarship in new music studies.

The review went through various drafts. Fellow academics suggested I remove passages where the frustration was audible, and the editor moderated some things further. But when anger is replaced with calm, evidenced, precisely targeted critique, the result is harder, not softer. Anger can be dismissed as subjective; methodical precision cannot.

The review was not *ad hominem*. It addressed the book in detail - its arguments, its methods, its sources, its relationship to the music it claimed to analyse - and not the person who wrote it. Nonetheless, I can understand the pain it must have caused. A comprehensively negative assessment of a first monograph in a leading journal strikes at the heart of professional identity. I would be lying if I said I did not realise the author would likely find it devastating - had I been in her position, knowing how it feels to receive harsh reviews, I would likely have resented me for writing it. But knowing that an honest evaluation will cause pain is not a sufficient reason not to publish it. If it were, no negative review of any scholarly work could ever be legitimate. The question is not whether it hurts but whether it is accurate and whether it needed saying. The review invited a detailed response - the journal would have published one - but no substantive engagement with its criticisms has been forthcoming. I do not regret publishing it, and I stand by it.

The pain that may follow from honest evaluation of work and the pain that is the purpose of the comprehensive audit are categorically different things. The one deploys the evaluative form to assess the work, not the person, and the damage, where it occurs, is a cost rather than the point. The other deploys it to damage the person.

At the time of writing the author was Head of Programmes at a conservatoire while I was a junior lecturer (today I am a full professor, and she is Deputy Principal of a conservatoire). Almost a decade later, it was reported to me that the fact that a male critic wrote the review was made an issue in an EDI event, and the author herself, in a candidacy statement for a leading professional association, referred to 'damaging experiences at the hands of longer-established figures' and committed to ensuring 'safe environments to share work'. I did not think about the author's gender when writing the review, and have reviewed multiple male authors with comparable severity. To have softened on grounds of gender would have been to deny the author full membership of the scholarly community. The call for safety here can become a

call for insulation from the kind of rigorous critical scrutiny that scholarship exists to provide.

A different form of evaluative intervention is the 'killer question' at a presentation. I have cited elsewhere Kathleen Stock's observation that the decline of combative questioning in philosophy has simply redirected aggression into more hidden and less accountable channels. The question which may expose a major faultline in an argument, or that the speaker's own evidence makes unavoidable, is a more transparent option.

In one instance, an ethnomusicologist gave a paper on a composer that I found fawning and unexamined – uncritical celebration dressed in the language of ethnographic analysis (a wider phenomenon I explored in detail in my article 'When Ethnography Becomes Hagiography'). The claims were exalted: an unsubstantiated assertion that the composer's work challenged capitalism and colonialism, and that they were an individual standing outside of institutional power - a narrative undermined by the presentation's own evidence of prestigious commissions. I bit my tongue on this.

But I could not do so when the speaker went on to praise the composer for having received an award from the Ernst von Siemens Musikstiftung. I had myself undertaken archival research on the Siemens Corporation, I therefore asked how this acceptance of this award was reconcilable with the progressive framing, given that Siemens had profited enormously from exploitation of slave labour at Auschwitz and had fought compensation claims for decades, as documented in Benjamin Ferencz's *Less Than Slaves*. The response was that I was seeing the matter through a political and historical lens, but that there were other equally valid lenses - a remarkable answer from someone whose paper had repeatedly deployed a political lens in the service of celebration.

In 2012 the leftist composer Mathias Spahlinger had publicly refused a commission honorarium funded by the Siemens Stiftung, citing this very history. Yet there was disquiet from colleagues from my asking such a question, as there had been about the review of the Ferneyhough book, on grounds of 'collegiality'. In certain scholarly cultures the killer question is understood not as a legitimate evaluative act but as a breach of an unspoken contract of managed affirmation. I would say the breach lay between the analytical claims and the standards brought to bear on them.

I encountered the same dynamic when I intervened in debates on the ethnomusicology of Western classical music (the application of ethnographic techniques—sometimes almost exclusively—to the study of this field)—having read the full range of texts in detail, drawing on wider debates in ethnographic methodology, strictly limiting my critique to the tradition I know best. I put forward my findings in a public debate on the subject (see here for wider links relating to this event), arguing against the territorialism of this field, the reductiveness of how its protagonists conceived the relationship between culture and society, the limits of 'oral tradition' and what is discernible through ethnographic techniques alone and , the tendency to over-estimate quite elementary findings already discovered by other scholars, and the problems of eschewing aesthetic judgment. The response, particularly on social media, was overwhelmingly *ad hominem* (attacking me for writing as an outsider, for being

someone whose first degree was in mathematics, and many crude personal insults) rather than offering substantive engagement with the arguments I had made. This is the managed-affirmation contract in action: the critical intervention is experienced not as a contribution to scholarly debate but as an act of aggression, and the response it generates is correspondingly aimed at the person rather than the work.

Peer reviewing, which I have done frequently, causes a structural tension between accountability on one hand and anonymity on the other. A signed book review is accountable, and can provoke retaliation. Anonymous peer review carries few social consequences, but this can be abused – for this reason, as I have become a senior academic I have usually waived my anonymity. If I can say something about someone's work, I should be able to put my name to it.

But in all types of reviewing, the situation is hardest when one knows the author – and in small sub-disciplines it is often not difficult to identify an anonymized author. The pull toward softening operates through subtle recalibration: a criticism hedged with an unnecessary qualifier, a structural problem described in the terms of a suggestion rather than named as a flaw. What feels like tact here is a corruption of the evaluative function. The softening does not merely moderate the manner of the verdict; it distorts the substance. The hardest discipline in peer review is not severity - severity is easy - but the refusal to let personal regard for the author dilute an honest assessment of the work.

The Comprehensive Audit and the Cruel Teacher

I have seen, both as a pupil and a student, and later when administering performance tuition at university level, those teachers who view their positions as primarily vehicles for self-aggrandisement - who seek to dismantle a student's individuality and remake them in their own image. This often begins with acts of ritual humiliation - destructive comments about a student's playing in general, character, or prospects, sometimes delivered in front of peers, in ways which can be fatal for the student's confidence - given spurious legitimation by the claim that one needs to become 'tough' to survive the profession. I wrote about this at length in my 2015 safeguarding article for *Music Teacher* magazine, drawing on cases I had encountered through years of campaigning on abuse in music education. The pattern is consistent: evaluative authority hollowed out and replaced with a mechanism for damage.

Harsh criticism is sometimes necessary. A teacher who avoids telling a student that their technique is inadequate or their preparation insufficient is not being kind but negligent. But the purpose of such criticism is either to help the student understand what steps forward they need to take, or to tell them honestly and sympathetically when they are likely to face an impasse if they continue on their present path. Good feedback is focused on particular performances or pieces of work, specific in identifying what needs to change, and directed toward improvement. There is a world of difference between telling a student generalities like 'You have no technique' or 'You are profoundly unmusical' and telling them 'You really do need to do considerable work in order to improve', followed by specific suggestions. The first formulation targets the person, the second the work and the path forward. And it requires humility from the teacher: they are there to help the student, not the reverse.

The teacher who deliberately humiliates is doing something categorically different. The verdict may be identical in content, but the purpose has shifted from assessment to assault. The student's inadequacy is not being identified so that it can be addressed; it is being paraded. The claim that this builds resilience is false. The child or young person who grows up under systematic critical assault - from a teacher or a parent - does not emerge more resilient but more vigilant, more defended, and less capable of trusting evaluations that are genuinely meant to help. The damage is not only to confidence but to the evaluative faculty itself, to the ability to distinguish between criticism that is trying to reach you and criticism that is trying to break you, because for so long enough they have appeared the same.

Such cruel teaching is one especially clear instance of what Part One called the comprehensive audit. In both the pedagogical and intimate cases, the same feature recurs: parasitism on honest evaluation's moral authority. The cruel teacher, like the controlling partner, retains the form of genuine assessment while perverting its purpose. What matters, then, is not the difference between harsh and gentle evaluation, but the difference between evaluation directed at work, argument, or performance, and evaluation directed at the person as such. The latter is legitimate only where character is genuinely the relevant object – and in the pedagogical and intimate contexts under discussion, it almost never is.

Competitions, Marking and the Honest Subjectivity

When judging competitions, sitting on job appointment panels, marking student work, or examining doctoral theses, I frequently recall when I was the one judged rather than the judge. In all such activities there can be a moment of feeling one is 'playing God': delivering a verdict on which real consequences depend, and that cannot be fully justified algorithmically. But as my own piano teacher once said, one can try to play God as one thinks God should be played. One cannot know how a musician who played less well on the day would have performed under different conditions, or whether the candidate who came second might, before another panel or with another programme, have come first (even if a real God would!). At the top of a strong competition the margin between candidates is sometimes within the range of legitimate disagreement between well-qualified judges, and those moments where someone you found invigorating left a co-judge cold, or the reverse, are a salutary reminder of this.

Marking student work presents the same problem in slower motion. One must attach a number to something that resists quantification – especially creative work - while being institutionally accountable for that number. The temptation, often encouraged by institutions, is to retreat into a matrix of metrics that give the appearance of objectivity while draining the assessment of genuine evaluative content. This can be worse, not better. Yet a purely algorithmic verdict on a musical performance or a piece of scholarly argument would not be a purer version of evaluation, but a limited and inferior thing: precisely the displacement of *phronesis* by *techne* that the opening of this essay argued against. Such a method struggles to respond to work that is genuinely distinctive and recalibrates established parameters. The current drive toward ever more explicit criteria also has an unintended consequence: it makes

assessment easier to simulate and outsource, including to artificial intelligence, precisely because the institution has already pretended that judgment can be converted into procedure.

It would be equally rash to conclude that because evaluation has a subjective dimension it is merely subjective - arbitrary, unreliable, no better than anyone else's guess. Part One developed the argument for the partial objectivity through Hume's ideal critic, Kant's claim to universal assent, and the empirical evidence for cross-observer convergence. The experienced examiner who has heard hundreds of performances at a given level, or read hundreds of essays, is not simply expressing a preference. They draw on a reservoir of comparative knowledge, developed through sustained practice and disciplined attention, that gives their verdict genuine intersubjective weight.

What institutional evaluation demands, like teaching, is humility - not the false humility of disclaiming one's judgment, nor the performative modesty that functions as a form of evaluative cowardice, but an honest recognition of the activity's nature. One stands behind the verdict because someone must, and because the alternatives - no verdict, or a verdict produced by algorithm - would be worse. But one stands behind it knowing that it is partial, that another equally qualified judge might have decided differently, and that the authority to evaluate carries with it the obligation to examine the conditions under which one exercises that authority.

Towards an Ethics and Aesthetics of Evaluation

This essay has argued through both principle and experience. What results is not a theory—still less a set of rules, which would contradict the essay's own argument about the irreducibility of judgment to procedure—but a series of ethical and aesthetic commitments, tested in the cases examined above.

The ethical commitments can now be stated more plainly. Evaluation should be directed at work, argument, or performance rather than at the person as such, except where character is genuinely the relevant object - and the cases in which it genuinely is are far fewer than evaluators persuade themselves. Frankness should leave the evaluated person with accurate knowledge on which they can act, whereas the comprehensive audit colonises self-understanding and installs the evaluator as permanent arbiter of worth. Those who hold positions of institutional power bear a greater responsibility for manner, but this must never license dishonesty about substance. The experience of being found wanting is not a denial of dignity; evaluative rank and personhood are not the same thing, and conflating them is a characteristic error of therapeutic misapplication. Unsolicited improvement programmes in intimate contexts - the conditional clause linked to affection, the moving target, the permanent project of remaking another person - are a form of controlling behaviour regardless of whether individual observations within them happen to be accurate. And the disingenuous sugar-coating of verdicts - the institutional language of 'areas for development' that conceals genuine failure behind optimistic euphemism - is not kindness but evaluative cowardice.

On the aesthetic side, the commitments are harder to formulate but no less real. The best evaluation is itself a creative act: it perceives, articulates, and makes visible something that existed but had not been clearly named. This requires cultivated perceptual capacity of the kind Hume and Gadamer described - developed through practice, comparative experience, and disciplined attention, not simply bestowed by credential. It requires acceptance of one's own partiality without retreating into false modesty: the evaluator who hedges every verdict with disclaimers has not achieved humility but abandoned the function. At its best, evaluation is a form of respect - perhaps the deepest form available in intellectual and intimate life – because it takes the work, the person, or the relationship seriously enough to see it clearly rather than managing one's response to it, and because to be seen clearly in return – by someone whose judgment one has reason to respect – is among the rarer and more sustaining experiences available in a life well-lived.

The comprehensive audit and the fawning hagiography are mirror failures. The one deploys the evaluative form to destroy; the other abandons it to flatter. Between them lies the territory this essay has tried to map: more demanding than either, because it requires both the courage to deliver unwelcome verdicts and the honesty to examine the motives from which they are delivered. Evaluation, in that sense, is not a position but a practice - never perfected, only tested, and tested not in the abstract but in the resistance of particular cases.