

A quantitative survey of music criticism in Australia's major newspapers

By Graham Strahle

Comparisons show that our major dailies vary widely in the amount and type of music reviews they carry, writes Graham Strahle.

Irrespective of what one may think of the quality of music reviewing in Australia's major press, its limitation is primarily the amount of column space allocated to it. Only a very small proportion of public musical performances ever get reviewed, which may lead many readers to view our newspapers with disdain as to their level of commitment to musical criticism. Yet one can easily forget that it is only by the good grace of newspaper editors that any musical criticism exists at all. Unlike news reporting, music reviewing has no born right to occupy the pages of a newspaper. It is a discretionary extra. But so too are all the lifestyle and entertainment pages that proliferate in our newspapers these days, so it does come back to the importance editors place on arts criticism.

How much music reviewing does take place in our major dailies? Last year at the Perth Assembly of the MCA, Dick Letts and I discussed how quantitatively comparing the amount of music criticism across all the capital city newspapers might make an interesting project – and I would like to thank him for sparking the idea for this research. While probably in many people's eyes the more pressing issue is the *quality* of music reviewing in Australian newspapers, this of course remains – like criticism itself – wholly a matter of subjective judgement. But at least a study that measures actual column space of reviewing might shed light on how seriously newspapers take music criticism. Certainly, the suggestion here is not that more music reviewing equates to better music criticism. However, it is quite reasonable to suppose that if one newspaper carries more reviews than another, that this indicates it takes a more serious commitment to criticism.

The challenge is trying to choose a long enough survey period to gather reliably indicative data. Newspapers carry varying amounts of arts reviews depending on what time of the year it is. Over the summer months the frequency of reviewing drops off, because this is generally a quieter period in the arts calendar. Conversely, the frequency rapidly picks up when a major arts festival is taking place; so one might expect large spikes in the amount of reviewing when a local paper is covering a festival in its city. Ideally then, the sample period would be 12 months, since the arts calendar works on an annual cycle (or two yearly cycle if one takes into account biennial festivals), but that would mean having to read an impractically large number of newspapers – over 4,000 if all of Australia's dozen major dailies were surveyed over that length of time. A sampling approach, taking spot measurements either randomly or at regular intervals, seemed a poorer alternative because this would have difficulty taking into account the distinctive, unique weekly reviewing patterns of each newspaper.

Anticipating what is hoped might become a more extended study, the three months of January to March of 2007 were surveyed. Being a quarter of the year, this period should at least enable some preliminary observations to be made. Admittedly, these months are when few subscription seasons have started, but since all the newspapers face this situation, it allows a fair comparison. Only live performance reviewing was considered, not CD reviewing. Column centimetres of reviews were measured, not number of words, as this is a widely used benchmark in print media analysis.

The League Table

In the three months of January to March, *The Sydney Morning Herald* comes out on top with a total of 15.3 meters of music reviews. Next, in order, come *The Age*, *The West Australian*, *The Australian*, *The Advertiser* and lastly *The Courier-Mail*. See Table 1. Except for the latter, these are impressively large figures: in the case of the *SMH* it equates to 17 centimetres of reviews per day over the 90-day period. Given that Sydney had its arts festival running during the survey period and Melbourne did not, the surprise is to find the *SMH* and *The Age* running up such similar figures. Of course, Perth had its arts festival underway too, and later in the survey period Adelaide had its Fringe and Womadelaide; yet *The Age* outdoes both these cities' newspapers in its amount of music reviewing.

A bigger surprise is to see *The Courier-Mail* measuring so poorly. In the three months surveyed, it published a mere two music reviews (both were classical concerts, reviewed by Martin Buzacott). Absent from the results are a number of other dailies – *The Mercury*, the *Northern Territory News*, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Herald-Sun* and *The Canberra Times* – but this is because their January editions were found to contain negligible numbers of concert reviews.

TABLE 1: Column meters of music reviews, January to March 2007

	Column meters
The Sydney Morning Herald	15.300
The Age	13.844
The West Australian	12.004
The Australian	9.982
The Advertiser	4.472
The Courier-Mail	0.606

One can then look at how these totals break down into the various musical styles or categories. We can see this in Table 2. The clear winner is classical music, here including opera and contemporary classical music (the latter could not be treated as a separate category because of the typically mixed nature of concert programs). It tops all the other musical categories in all six

newspapers – remarkably, it accounts for 41% of the total column meters measured. Rock and contemporary come in at second place, accounting for 21% of the total column meters. Jazz and world music are well back, recording only 9% and 4% of the total column meters respectively. At the bottom is country music, with less than 1%.

Why rock and contemporary fail to come out on top is interesting in view of the prime attention the print media gives to mainstream culture. Possibly, it is because the culture of criticism in classical music is more established, or that the major dailies feel they are unable to compete with the street press on this front. Nevertheless, the large number of rock and contemporary CD reviews routinely published would more than likely balance the ledger. Rock and contemporary of course also benefit from a very healthy continual stream of interview articles, previews and gig guides.

TABLE 2: Quantity of criticism across musical genres (as percentages)

	The Sydney Morning Herald	The Age	The West Australian	The Australian	The Advertiser	The Courier-Mail
Classical inc opera	36	48	33	52	30	100
Rock/contemporary	20	31	20	16	6	0
Jazz	12	5	17	1	7	0
Folk	7	3	1	0	3	0
Popular	7	2	3	4	19	0
World music	6	1	2	7	4	0
Musicals	6	3	12	0	17	0
Cabaret	3	1	2	0	10	0
Music theatre	0	0	0	9	0	0
Country	0	0	0	3	1	0
Other	3	6	10	8	3	0

Table 2 shows that *The Australian* is particularly heavily geared towards classical music. Jazz, folk, musicals and cabaret generally do better in the other papers. The two Fairfax titles have a wide spread and exhibit a greater consistency than the Murdoch titles. Of the three Murdoch tabloids surveyed, *The West Australian* shows a significant proportion of reviewing going to rock and contemporary, jazz and musicals, while in *The Advertiser*, popular music, musicals and cabaret are well represented. *The Courier-Mail* is obviously the most disappointing paper because it carried such little music reviewing of any kind during the 90 days. This is the major concern emerging from the study.

What to make of it

It has to be said first that most arts writing in newspapers is taken up by journalism, that is, stories and articles about the arts – not reviewing. Further space in the arts and entertainment pages goes to previews, ‘buzz’ columns and what’s on lists. These are especially prevalent in the tabloid papers and in the ever-burgeoning lifestyle and leisure liftouts. One small redeeming fact is that while articles on the arts are occasionally syndicated from overseas publications, almost no music reviewing is: with very rare exceptions, it is entirely Australian in origin and content.

If we move onto the subject of *quality* in newspaper criticism today, this of course is considerably more difficult to assess. Here one can necessarily only make observations and opinions. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that the quality of reviewing depends significantly on which part of the newspaper it appears in. If reviews are located nearer the front part of the book, as is the case in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, they usually have higher word counts and tend to be more intellectually rigorous and serious in content. If they are located toward the back or incorporated into lifestyle liftouts, they tend to be lighter in tone and geared more towards entertainment interest.

While it was earlier noted that *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* are similar in their critical coverage of music, these Fairfax siblings are quite different in where they position their reviews. In *The Age*, music reviews float around between different parts of the paper: in the summer period they are located in the ‘Summerage’ liftout, and then toward the end of January they relocate to the main pages. This subtly changes the focus and character of the reviewing. In this respect, *The Age* lacks the stability and constancy of music reviewing in the *SMH*. *The Age* is confusing too because it has another ‘A2’ liftout with a section entitled ‘The critics’; although this has substantially long articles on the arts, it contains no actual music criticism. *The Sunday Age* has another ‘Preview’ liftout which occasionally has reviews. So music criticism has a somewhat jumbled presence and inconsistent look compared with the *SMH*.

Journalism and criticism are two distinctly separate disciplines of writing. Essentially the difference is that while the former seeks to remove the opinion of the writer, the latter, by its very nature, entirely bases itself on subjective opinion. Problems arise when this distinction becomes blurred, as when journalists who might lack training or expertise in the arts dabble in arts criticism. When this happens it typically manifests itself in ‘story-like’ writing in which a narrative is constructed from newsy-type content, anecdote and colour. More concerning is when preview pieces are written up as quasi-reviews and the writer

conveys an impression of having attended the actual performance. An example of this was in *The Daily Telegraph* of 27 January, 2007, and it deserves to be quoted in full:

Reviews with Kathy McCabe

Holly Throsby

Brass Monkey, 115a Cronulla St, Cronulla; today and tomorrow, 8pm, \$17, 9544 3844

This is a dream gig for lovers of roots-based singer-songwriters, with the brilliant Dan Kelly joining Sydney artist Throsby on her latest tour. With her quiet delivery, Throsby creates the kind of intimacy that makes hearing her vulnerable narratives about love won and lost feel like sonic voyeurism, particularly with the songs on her second album *Under The Town*. "I want the band to play louder on this tour; they play much louder when I've seen them with other people," she says, laughing. "But having said that, I do think it's good to be forced into levels of feeling uncomfortable."
(*'www.weekend'* liftout, p 10)

Here the writing becomes lost between preview and genuine review – the reader is left to guess which it really is. More than likely the thumbnail description of how the artist performs is based on her latest CD, or previous concerts, rather than the writer having heard the live performance in question. Yet she has done a nice job of interviewing the artist firsthand, it would appear, which is something of a bonus for a 100-word piece. The point is that if criticism is given a compromised voice it might as well not exist at all. So one area in which the print media could easily improve standards is to make it clear when a piece of writing that purports to be a review is indeed a bona fide review. Unless the date of the performance is stated, for example, it may not be possible for the reader to tell this with any certainty. Another problem is when bylines are not added. This thankfully appears not to be the case in our mainstream press, but it is elsewhere. Devoted to Australian country music, *Country Update* is a magazine with a lengthy review section of around 10 pages per each edition, in which 20-25 CDs are reviewed, including some DVDs. But none of its reviews are given bylines; consequently, the reader is left in the dark as to whose opinions are being expressed.

Column inches (sorry, centimetres) are precious things. The problem is not that music reviewing receives too little space in Australia's major newspapers – from the data obtained they do quite well in the amount of music reviewing they carry – but rather that if editors suddenly decide to curtail it, as appears to have been the case in *The Courier-Mail*, it can easily lose its foothold and risk disappearing altogether. Then one of the pillars of our musical culture surely falls.

Graham Strahle is a freelance writer who writes music reviews for *The Australian* and *The Adelaide Review*. He is the MCA's representative for music criticism and journalism.