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## Book Review

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# The undead of music

by David Goldman

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### **Nothing But the Best: The Struggle for Perfection at the Juilliard School**

by Judith Kogan

Random House, New York, 1987

239 pages, clothbound, \$18.95.

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Amid the existential blur of this incoherent, blathering memoir of the Juilliard School, the reader obtains crucial evidence, showing why great music has ceased to exist. It is worse than if music had died; it is undead, imprisoned in the tortured minds and fingers of the youthful victims of the chief temple of the international music mafia. Nothing in Ms. Kogan's bathetic drivel justifies mention of the book itself in these pages, but its appearance refreshes our outrage at the destruction of our musical heritage.

First, the ultimate horror story: A composition teacher instructed a student to produce an orchestral work. The student "decided to sketch a huge phallus. He sketched it in soft but thick lead. It took up the whole page. . . . [He] filled in notes along the inside, all over the place . . . then he erased the phallus outline. Along the left margin, one per staff, he wrote the name of every instrument he could think of. . . ."

He then "brought the piece to his lesson and placed it on the piano ledge. . . . The teacher scanned it. 'This looks excellent,' he said. 'This is the first time you've brought me a really fine piece of music.' "

Problem was, the teacher kept pressing the student to finish the promising work; the student, of course, ignored the instruction. The "teacher eventually got angry . . . and went to the administration to try to get him thrown out of school."

Everyone acquainted with the horrors that pass for modern composition knows a similar anecdote; a much milder version of the same story, at a much less prestigious institution, persuaded this reviewer to run screaming out of composition studies. This one ranks as the worst in the repertoire, and it occurred at what passes for the world's top-ranked music school.

Author Judith Kogan intended this anecdote as a shocker. But the daily fare of Juilliard students, by Kogan's account, explains much more about the disaster that is contemporary music.

### **Brainwashing by gramophone**

Juilliard students are taught to produce note-perfect imitations of the recordings which the music mafia deems acceptable. Success revolves around performances of solo-instrument concertos with the Juilliard orchestra; soloists are chosen by competition, and winning competitions determines future career prospects. To win a competition, Kogan gossips along, a student first determines what available recording represents acceptable opinion on the subject, from the standpoint of the competition judges. The student, after debating the merits of various recordings in the Juilliard cafeteria, walks across the street to purchase said authoritative recording, and listens to it dozens of times.

Once he or she has been brainwashed sufficiently, the student enters a practice room for roughly six months, working eight hours a day or more, to produce a perfect imitation of the recording. Who does this best, wins, provided that he has the right political support from contending factions of faculty members among the judges.

A Juilliard survivor reports that one leading violin teacher would tell students who had learned a piece, "Now, Sugar, go to the library, and take out the Perlman recording, the Zuckerman recording, and the Stern recording, and measure their tempos. Then find your 'own' tempo somewhere in that range."

No wonder none of these tortured, undead souls can play music! The performer's job, as the great violinist Norbert Brainin emphasizes, consists of confronting the composer's own performance instructions, through the original text of his composition, and learning to translate the composer's indications into a poetic representation of his musical ideas. One of the most frequent complaints European musicians make against their American colleagues, is that they play either with metronomic dullness, or romantic bathos. The

True classical *rubato*, in which the beat shifts imperceptibly to accentuate the phrase, without undermining the underlying tempo, is almost unknown to American musicians; I cannot think of one who has mastered it.

Mere imitation of a recorded performance propitiates the arbitrary opinions of the powers who determine who shall have a career, and who not—in the case of the violinists, the “Kosher Nostra” over which Isaac Stern presides.

Much worse, however, is the mental damage suffered by musicians who learn from recordings. The great guitarist Andres Segovia told a newspaper interviewer not long before his recent death, of his contempt for the present generation of conductors: “Their academy has been the mirror and the gramophone,” Segovia sniffed. That is precisely how Kogan describes the preparation of Juilliard conductors: “Despite the long hours spent standing before the stereo conducting Herbert von Karajan and the Vienna Philharmonic, the conductor is largely helpless without an assembly of live bodies.” That is what produces such trolley-car conductors as James Levine (the Metropolitan Opera), Dennis Russell Davies (the Bonn Tonhalle), or Leonard Slatkin (the St. Louis Symphony).

True musical memory absorbs the underlying geometry of musical ideas, at least at some level of the musician’s consciousness. Phonographic memory merely fixes the surface events of a musical composition. Only a generation ago, a serious student would be expelled without recourse or remorse from any serious institution, were it proven he had listened to a recording of a work he was studying. Young musicians were isolated for summer work in establishments where means of electronic musical reproduction were prohibited, and for good reason: The damage done to a musician in the formative years, through dependence upon recording, is probably irreversible.

The undead of Juilliard do not fight through to the composer’s ideas, by means of the unretouched score. They kiss the foul end of what is politely known as “performance tradition.” Here is how Ms. Kogan reports the Juilliard Orchestra’s preparations to play the Strauss work, “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” under a famous guest conductor:

“In the cafeteria, the players debated the merits of the Ormandy-Philadelphia Orchestra and the von Karajan-Vienna Philharmonic recordings of Zarathustra, wagering guesses as to which would be closer to the Skrowaczewski interpretation. The concert master, with Zarathustra solos that soar up the fingerboard and above the orchestra, put his money on Ormandy-Philadelphia. He listened to the recording enough to learn the piece, but not so much that Ormandy’s ideas would harden in his mind. . . . The trumpeter had been practicing like a madman ever since he found out the part would be his. He bought the score to follow as he listened to his Solti-Chicago Symphony recording, to see how his part fit into the whole. . . . [At the first rehearsal] it was clear that the players had listened to recordings of the piece. Most of them had never played Zarathustra, but they knew of things,

## Books Received

**The Master Terrorist: The True Story of Abu-Nidal**, by Yossi Melman. New York: Avon Publishers, 1986. \$3.95 paperback, 277 pages.

**Sarum: The Novel of England**, by Edward Rutherford. New York: Crown Publishers, 1987. \$19.95 hardcover, 897 pages.

**War Games: The Secret World of Creators, Players and Policy Makers Rehearsing World War III Today**, by Thomas B. Allen. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. \$19.95 hardcover.

**Fearful Majesty: The Life and Reign of Ivan the Terrible**, by Benson Bobrick. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1987. \$22.95 hardcover, 398 pages.

**American Espionage and the Soviet Target**, by Jeffrey Richelson. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc. \$18.95 hardcover, 383 pages.

**Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion**, by Richard Ned Lebow. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987. \$24.95 hardcover, 226 pages.

**Containing the Soviet Union**, edited by Terry L. Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis. Washington, D.C. et al. Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, Inc. (a member of the Pergamon Group), 1987. 251 pages.

**Managing Nuclear Operations**, edited by Ashton B. Carter, John D. Steinbrunner, and Charles A. Zraket. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987. \$39.95 hardcover, \$18.95 paperback, 751 pages.

like changes of tempo, not marked in the music.”

Never mind that “Zarathustra” is one of the ugliest works of a Richard Strauss, whose music the great Wilhelm Furtwängler described as “Wagner puffed up with hot air,” or that von Karajan and Ormandy are the two postwar conductors best suited to conduct Sousa marches. The musicians prepared for the work by brainwashing themselves according to accepted “performance tradition,” making no effort to grasp the composer’s intent.

There is reason to suspect that the situation is even worse than Kogan presents it to be. She recounts, for example, one anecdote of an incompetent conductor forced off the podium by a rebellious student orchestra. The student protest, she claims, persuaded the college’s president to promise never to engage the conductor again. In fact, according to a leader of

the rebellion, the conductor returned repeatedly, despite his obvious incompetence.

### Can music be saved?

The myth about music schools is that they suffer from too intense competition. The best musicians deride this; Norbert Brainin told an interviewer last year that the biggest problem of present-day conservatories is that standards have fallen. We require a much bigger musical public, accustomed to demanding live music.

Czechoslovakia, with a population of 16 million, employs 24 professional symphony orchestras, 12 professional opera companies, and 30 standing chamber-music groups; by rough calculation, the average Czech attends a classical concert once every 10 days or so! That is the solution to the problem of narrowed career opportunities for musicians.


But more fundamentally, the task of music schools should be to teach music, not the slavish imitation of the music mafia's accepted recording stars. There is no better preparation for any field of endeavor, than to come to grips with the mind of a great composer. Without the required technique and musical attention span, that is next to impossible; high standards and "pressure" are indispensable to the training of competent musicians. Juilliard victims are denied this; they emerge from their torture, if successful, into membership in the undead of the recorded media, and if failed, haunted by

the electronic ghosts of their training.

Of course, some excellent musicians continue to work at Juilliard; an example is the new director of the school's accompaniment program, pianist Margo Garrett, whose own education took direction from the late Paul Ulanowsky, one of the finest accompanists of the war years and following. But such musicians survive there by accident, and despite the system.

A circumstance which gives the music mafia such control over young musicians' lives, is the absence of middle-level conservatories, especially in the United States. Apart from the stellar cluster, e.g., Juilliard, Curtis, Eastman, and Bloomington, the music student can only choose second-rate local institutions; indeed, failure to qualify for one of the top-ranked conservatories virtually blackballs a student from the music profession.

The Italian pianist Carlo Levi-Minzi has proposed a simple solution: Introduce the best training in instrumental technique at the elementary and secondary-school level. Musical technique is a science, Levi-Minzi insists, and virtually any student willing to put in a fraction of the time that most teenagers spend watching television, can master an instrument well enough to play the core classical repertoire. Create a nation seeded with such a quality of musical amateurs, he argues, and they will demand not merely external polish, but real thinking, from the professionals on the concert stage.



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