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THE HELFGOTT PHENOMENON: A STUDY IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The eccentric Australian pianist David Helfgott came to worldwide attention in 1996 with the release of the movie *Shine*, a “biopic” of his life. The subsequent resurrection of his musical career, including two world tours, created what has been dubbed the “Helfgott Phenomenon”, a multimedia event of mammoth proportions extending from the film into live concerts, recordings, books, and various other forms of popular media. This thesis steers a path through the intricacies of the “Helfgott Phenomenon”, treating it as illustrative of the increasing inter-connectedness of the various media and of the ever-increasing commodification of culture. Helfgott’s fame also created what was undoubtedly the largest controversy of the arts’ world in 1997. Derided by critics for his musical and behavioural failures, adored by many fans as he filled halls to capacity all around the world; claimed as a genius by some, slated by others as a fraud: it is often claimed that few artists have so markedly divided critical and public opinion. The focus of this thesis is a detailed investigation of the extreme variance in opinion towards Helfgott personified by the gap between critical and public reaction, concentrating in particular on the perspective of New Zealand music critics. Through the interviewing of five New Zealand critics (supplemented by additional material), I analyse the construction of artistic value. I argue that the negative critical reaction to Helfgott draws heavily upon the traditional aesthetic of musical value, and that such an approach is neither the only nor indeed the correct way to analyse Helfgott. I consider an alternative conception of artistic value, one grounded in the social contingencies of critical judgement, and argue that this conception more accurately accounts for the multiple dimensions of the Helfgott Phenomenon.

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Nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.

Bourdieu (1984: 18)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I am attending a concert by a soloist billed by a poster inside the hall as a 'virtuoso, exquisite, electric... an inspiration'. Is this the same man I have read of elsewhere as being responsible for 'a significant new step in the dumbing of America'? The hope is that this concert will offer me some answers to such an apparent contradiction.

To most outward signs, David Helfgott's recital in Auckland in early September 1998 appears to be the same as countless other concerts: the crowd milling around the foyer; sellers hawking a substantial, satin-smooth and beautifully produced programme for a cool \$12; recordings of the artist being offered for sale. However, in comparison to the other innumerable concerts I have attended, the audience of tonight's recital seems to contain many more younger people, often attired in a way that does not quite match the finery of a top-class "event".

At 7:57pm a warning is given to be seated: I make my way into the concert hall itself, taking my seat overlooking the stage that is bare except for a piano. There is a low yet expectant murmur emanating from the audience; I sit there with contradictory and confused thoughts racing through my brain: how will I react to seeing and hearing the very man who is the focus of my study? How will the strong beliefs that my classical music-dominated upbringing had instilled in me be resolved with the sociologically oriented thinking that my university education has provided?

I am not given much time to ponder these thoughts: mad applause breaks out as Helfgott half tiptoes, half runs on to the stage. He starts playing even before the applause has died away. Helfgott's appearance is certainly eccentric: a manic expression and a peripatetic demeanour coupled with a wild-looking white pirate-shirt reinforce the image of Helfgott that I have gained through the media: he looks like a maniacal version of the Karate Kid.

The audience appears to have a assortment of ways of responding to Helfgott. On the whole, they give the impression of being totally dedicated to both the performer and to the performance. However, while he is playing there is a certain level of noninvolvement from many in the audience: a number of muted conversations going on, reading of programmes, some restlessness. All this changes at the culmination of each work, even sometimes in

the middle of a piece when, between movements, a number of listeners applaud. At such times, many in the audience laugh at this breaking of traditional concert etiquette. In acknowledgement of this applause, Helfgott rises partly off his seat and then carries on with the work. With the conclusion of each piece, he bounds off his seat, peering myopically and blinking at a fast rate, gives a number of small bows to all quarters of the auditorium. The audience responds with sustained applause.

Helfgott truly delivers a performance in all meanings of the word, and as the evening goes by, appears to increase his "eccentric" behaviour. The most obvious quirk is a persistent and tuneless droning that does not necessarily have any direct connection with the notes or rhythm he is playing at the time! I found this extremely irritating as it broke my concentration on the music, yet for the people sitting beside me there was no such concern: 'he's enjoying himself' I overheard one say. Helfgott also proved to be a very physical player, not only bounding around the seat in a manner reminiscent of Keith Jarrett but also conducting with a spare hand, or clasping his hands together. These actions seem to increase the bond between Helfgott and his audience, turning it into a relationship between people, rather than just some sort of purely musical event. A call-and-response: the audience responds with moans of appreciation to Helfgott's actions; he, in turn responds by increasing his antics, standing and bowing while continuing to play. They appear to be egging each other on.

As Helfgott completes the last piece on the programme, a Beethoven sonata for piano and applause-between-movements, he jumps up frenetically from the stool and is presented with flowers. A few bows to the audience and he runs off the stage, on again, off again and then back on again, accompanied by substantial applause and wolf whistles. Even before the noise has time to die down, Helfgott is well into his first encore; following this we are treated to a repeat of curtain calls and two further encores. At each stage, the audience's response increases. Not only does the noise multiply, but also increasing numbers of people raise themselves to their feet: by the end of the third encore, virtually the whole crowd is standing in a salute to Helfgott. He laps it up, repeating his bowing antics to all parts of the auditorium. However, the audience knows the concert is over when the lights go up and Helfgott is no longer scurrying onto the stage, so they begin to take their leave.

I also make my way to the exit and take off to find something to eat and to mull over what I have just experienced. An intense feeling of not actually truly being part of the audience was an immediate response: perhaps this was because I was there as an "observer" rather as a full participant. I had the impression that the audience response was manufactured in some way, that it was artificially induced. A case in point was the clapping, stamping,

yelling, whistling and standing that increased in volume as the concert came to a close: it was as if this was expected of the audience. I had a similar problem with the antics of the performer. The moaning and groaning, the conducting; in general the extroverted behaviour did not sit well with the “rules” of concert etiquette that I had been brought to not only respect but to perceive as essential in a classical concert environment. Self-indulgent would be one term that springs to mind.

Then there was a deeper concern for me: the actual quality of performance. It was truly quite a shock to come to the conclusion that Helfgott was an extremely poor player. Quite aside from his antics, I have to agree with those who question his musicality when compared to other highly regarded musicians. Not only was there a high proportion of wrong notes, fluffed runs, and lack of coordination between his hands, but on a more general and serious note, I felt there was a lack of structure to his playing: he just didn't seem to understand the form of the music he was playing. From this perspective, I would agree with the label one commentator gave him: a 'gifted amateur'.

Somehow, all my “balanced reasoning” that I thought I could hold on to had gone out the window; I had reverted back to the aesthetic snob that my upbringing had helped produce. This personal story of my own encounter with Helfgott highlights the main aims of this thesis: the contrasting and conflicting responses to the man, his music, and the myriad of other issues surrounding him - the Helfgott Phenomenon. In many ways, my own response to Helfgott personifies the very debate at the centre of the thesis: a conflict between musical and sociological understanding. In musical terms, it appears to me that Helfgott was a failure, and yet as a social event the concert was clearly a success. How can we make sense of such a wide disparity in cultural evaluation?

Chapter two tells the story of David Helfgott, and offers an in-depth exploration of the Helfgott Phenomenon. Starting off as a child prodigy, Helfgott suffered from a psychological condition that saw him institutionalised for many years; in the 1980s Helfgott made a return to performing and so came to the attention of film maker, Scott Hicks. Released in 1996, his movie *Shine* told Helfgott's life story – a story of genius reborn - and was received with considerable public and critical acclaim. It did not take long, however, for claims to be made about inaccuracies in the film, notably in the portrayal of Helfgott's father. These claims did little to damage the resurrection of Helfgott's career – in 1997 he completed a substantial world tour that was a huge success in terms of filling houses. Most in the audience appeared to love him; critical reaction, however, was extremely derogatory. As Helfgott's fame grew, so did the various aspects of the Phenomenon: recordings, television appearances, numerous newspaper and magazine articles, books, and even the world

wide web all reflected the global interest in Helfgott, an interest that exemplified a truly multimedia event. The bubble was soon to burst, however, with waning attention showing that the Helfgott Phenomenon was an intense but short-term episode.

The methodology of the thesis is laid out in chapter three. This thesis concentrates on the Helfgott Phenomenon from the perspective of New Zealand music critics: in particular five relevant critics were interviewed face-to-face on Helfgott and the wider issues surrounding the phenomenon. The critics were chosen to provide a wide coverage of opinions; the transcriptions of these interviews provided the basis for the following two chapters, supplemented by secondary sources.

Chapter four is structured around the opinions of the five critics interviewed on David Helfgott. This chapter examines, from the critics' perspective, the wide disparity between critical dismissal of Helfgott and the public's adulation of the same man. It starts with an analysis of why the critics believed Helfgott failed as a professional concert pianist; it is claimed that Helfgott does not meet the requirements expected in the areas of technique, interpretation and behaviour. That the public continued to enjoy Helfgott despite the critical dismissal leads the critics to an examination of the audience itself. Perceived as new to classical music, the critics claim the audience is relatively dismissive of the critics' own musical criteria of value; rather, the audience were using a different set of values which I have titled social criteria. The critics acknowledge that it was on the basis of these that the public found Helfgott attractive: primarily, they emphasised the film *Shine* which, in its portrayal of genius, madness and a life restored through love, was perceived as being continued by the public performances. While the critics often agree over the reasons for Helfgott's success, their contrasting beliefs over the validity of such reasons highlights solid differences in their thought processes, notably over the construction of artistic value.

The following chapter picks up the contested issues of artistic value and the aesthetic, placing Helfgott in a wider context to trace out contrasts between the musical and social forms of value as outlined in chapter four. The theoretical underpinnings of the critics' judgements are examined in order to understand the basis for their opinions on Helfgott. A presentation of the conventional or traditional approach to the aesthetic that dominates academic and common understandings of artistic value is made; it is then critiqued and found to be, on a number of grounds, fundamentally flawed. The critical emphasis offered by many writers discussing the cultural field are used to examine the position of the arts in society, in particular the status of classical music. Based on the work of theorists such as Bourdieu, the historical and social nature of the traditional aesthetic approach is exposed; the suggestion is made that the notion of artistic value is a social construction, and one that

is highly contingent on a number of factors, notably the use of art in forming social distinction.

The traditional conception of a universal critical authority, then, is untenable. This seems to suggest that the critics' dismissal of Helfgott must be read as no more than one viewpoint among others. The premise that an artwork can be critically examined from more than one valid perspective is introduced; however, this 'multiple perspective' theory fails to adequately explain the audiences' response to Helfgott. To account for the audience response, a radical reconstruction of the aesthetic proposed by one of the critics is introduced. It is argued that Helfgott's appeal was constructed around a wider set of values that incorporates all aspects of the Helfgott Phenomenon into what is dubbed the 'massively extended aesthetic object'. The thesis is concluded on the point that the struggle between traditional and social construction conceptions of artistic value cannot easily be resolved and so is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER II

THE HELFGOTT PHENOMENON

*One is torn between absolute disgust at what one hears and feeling sorry for this man who can't know how bad he is (Stephen Pettitt, music critic for the *Financial Times*, in Bragg 1997).*

I don't know anything much about classical music but I'm enjoying what I'm hearing, and as far as I'm concerned, that's the main thing. (Member of audience at a Helfgott recital, in Bragg 1997).

Introduction

An introduction to the Helfgott Phenomenon will always be a fraught affair. The issue is complicated because, as this chapter will show, the Helfgott Phenomenon is a complex event – one that involves multiple cultural dimensions and media – and thus can be approached from a considerable number of angles. Hence the difficulty of knowing where to begin.

A logical start would be to focus on David Helfgott himself, the man at the very “core” of the Phenomenon, hence the need to begin with an examination of “the life” of Helfgott. Accordingly, it is with Helfgott’s biography that I begin, though it is not long before we discover the essential character of the Helfgott Phenomenon: Helfgott’s biography is not a singular and logical telling of one musician’s life story, but is a hotly contested, divided, multifaceted “event” of substantial proportions. Many competing versions of the man’s life exist and, while some appear to have more validity than others, sorting out fact from fiction is difficult. While most of those who know anything of David Helfgott would have undoubtedly sourced their information from that inspirational telling of his life, the film *Shine*, this account has been condemned by other sources, including members of Helfgott’s own family. Helfgott’s “official” biography, penned by his wife, offers another version of the story told in *Shine*; both these sources, moreover, are thrown into doubt by comments and writings from others in Helfgott’s family.

Thus, in providing an accurate coverage of the Helfgott Phenomenon one must emphasise both its contestations and its multimedia nature. Spilling out from the confines of the film, the Phenomenon is personified by its many facets, notably the resurrection of Helfgott’s

career as a professional pianist that brought public acclaim and critical dismissal. The substantial number of recordings of Helfgott's playing marked yet another format the Phenomenon took; other formats also came into play with the production of biographical works, sycophantic media reportage and academic retorts; even cyberspace could not escape the tentacles of the Phenomenon. In every form it took, the Phenomenon continued to attract both plaudits and criticism.

Helfgott's Life Story

David Helfgott was born in 1947 in Melbourne, his parents being Jewish emigrants from Poland. Peter, Helfgott's father, had led a colourful life before arriving in Australia: the son of a rabbi, expectations were that Peter would follow in the same vocation. However, differences with his family led him at the age of 14 to leave home, drifting around Eastern Europe, working with a circus and living in Israel. Employment with the merchant navy brought him to Australia in 1934: 10 years later Peter married Rachel Granek, the daughter of a business associate: the couple had five children, the second being David. Helfgott's early years are described as 'relatively happy and peaceful, even if not exactly luxurious' (Helfgott 1996: 46). Brought up in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood in Melbourne, Helfgott and his siblings were raised by Rachel while Peter worked in numerous jobs to provide the family's income. A falling-out with Rachel's family put an end to Peter's business relationship with her father, and failures in other business ventures led to financial difficulties for the Helfgott family. Relocating to Perth, Peter turned to the local Jewish community for assistance as the family was still experiencing financial problems: while help was forthcoming, according to Helfgott the relationship with the Jewish community was not helped by Peter's purchase of a piano.

Peter and Helfgott obviously shared a close relationship: 'being the eldest son in a Jewish household... (he was) Peter's absolute favourite. Peter called him "my little prince", lavished extra attention on him, spent every spare pound on David's needs, and generally invested as much of himself in his son's development as was humanly possible' (Helfgott 1996: 48). Helfgott was the only child in the family who regularly went to meetings of the Communist Party and the local synagogue with his father, even though Judaism seemed to play little role in the home. Music, on the other hand, was a central focus of the Helfgott household. Peter was a self-taught pianist and passed his knowledge onto the children: Helfgott began lessons at around age four. According to Helfgott, Peter was a harsh teacher:

Father was a very stern taskmaster and he expected a very high standard... Father taught me in a very brusque, in a very Russky, very Russky way. He'd put you on the piano and, if you don't play well, he'd shout and sternly throw you off the piano (in Helfgott 1996: 54).

Helfgott was soon playing for the neighbours, and at age nine made his first public performance in a competition. Soon after, Peter acknowledged that he did not have the skills to continue teaching his son. Helfgott took up lessons with a professional teacher who taught him and a sister for no charge. Over the next few years, Helfgott entered local and national competitions with some success. Writing in 1960, a reviewer at one such event claimed Helfgott had a 'rare and prodigious talent' (Helfgott 1996: 67). In other competitions, Helfgott represented Western Australia in the ABC Talent Quest and made it through to the finals. Soon after, he entered the ABC Concerto and Vocal Competition, but did not get placed; entering the same competition the next year, Helfgott made it through to the state finals. On one occasion, Helfgott was requested to perform for two American musicians, one of them being Isaac Stern, a famous and great violinist. Helfgott claims Stern's reaction was 'he could see some signs of genius and he said I deserve all the help I can get' (1996: 70). Stern suggested Helfgott shift to the US to continue studies there.

The local community, notably the Jewish community, made a considerable effort to raise the required funds as the Helfgott family were unable to afford the cost. Helfgott indicates that there was some feeling of distaste from the Jewish community towards Peter: the Jewish community was ostensibly horrified by comments in an article about the little prodigy that stated the family 'asked for help from no-one' (Helfgott 1996: 76). However, their apparent aim was to help the Helfgott children, and especially Helfgott, the child prodigy. According to Helfgott, when Peter became aware of the involvement of a particular man from the Jewish community, he decided to cancel the US trip. The reason he gave to the press was that Helfgott was too young to go overseas, a claim refuted indirectly in Helfgott's biography (Helfgott 1996). Initially, he seemed to have taken this change in plans fairly well: 'I just sort of accepted and it didn't seem to affect me badly'. However, it was 'the first in a series of increasing devastating "last straws" in which his father had 'stabbed me in the back and betrayed me' (1996: 86). It is postulated by Helfgott's biography (and thus implicated that such are the thoughts of Helfgott) that this 'last straw' was an important point in Helfgott's increasing mental instability.¹ While Helfgott had always been shy and introverted, there had also been signs of emotional and psychological problems, 'signs of slight nervousness' (1996: 48). By 1960 Helfgott admits his mental state was in decline: this year he describes as his last 'fog-free year' (1996: 65). 'Fog' is one term Helfgott has settled on to describe his mental state:

His mind swirled in a chaos of rambling thoughts and his soul was steeped in pain, external reality and everything and everyone in it were shrouded in a thick, cotton-wool fog... At the age of fourteen, the world as David knew it stopped making sense to him. Reality was so baffling it literally became unbearable. It was all just too much and that's when the world 'fogged up' (Helfgott 1996: 64,87)

As a result, Helfgott says he became increasingly withdrawn, anti-social and unpopular at school. His siblings, Helfgott claims, took this new persona as arrogance; he says this wasn't helped by the attention and money lavished on him at the expense of the others; for example, the purchase of new suits. Also emphasised in the biography was the souring of Helfgott's relationship with his father. This was the very man he blamed for the cancellation of his trip to the US, and thus the man he could blame for his unbalanced mental state. In 1962, a forceful exchange took place between the two in which Peter was allegedly verbally and physically violent: this proved to be another proverbial 'straw', with Helfgott ceasing talking to Peter 'apart from the most perfunctory of exchanges' (1996: 107-110). This exchange occurred on the night of that year's regional finals of the ABC Concerto Competition which Helfgott won but was not selected for the national finals, adding insult to injury according to his biography.

Helfgott's mental problems continued. He describes how his brain 'transferred all the anguish into a little point of pain in the corner of his eyelid'. This strategy for controlling his mental anguish, his biography claims, aimed at 'preventing him from any further emotional pain, and, consequently, any further emotional development' (Helfgott 1996: 112). This 'little point of pain' receded and returned over the next few years, but by the time Helfgott reached 18, he says it had lodged itself permanently in place. Helfgott nevertheless continued to play the piano, though it was noted that his playing 'dramatically decreased in quality': this is directly linked in the biography to the major argument Helfgott had with his father over the US trip. A move to a new teacher, a one-time pupil of Bartók's, led to Helfgott not performing in public or in competitions for over a year. Instead, it was a period concentrating on the repertoire required for Helfgott's attempt at his licentiate.² His return to the stage in June 1964 was a performance of the first movement of Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, in the regional finals of the Concerto Competition, a performance Helfgott described as 'a triumph' (1996: 114). This time, Helfgott made it through to the national finals only to be beaten into second place by half a point by Roger Woodward (who would go on to become one of Australia's more noted pianists).

Soon after the competition, Helfgott left school, ostensibly to enable him to concentrate on his music. However, the truth behind leaving was that Helfgott's mental state was far from stable. He later returned to school to complete his leaving certificate, and also made it

through again to the national finals of the Concerto Competition. The standard of his playing had raised considerable interest in certain musical circles, whose members encouraged Helfgott to apply for funding to continue studying overseas. Granted £500, a place was found for Helfgott at the Royal College of Music in London. As the scholarship he had been awarded would not cover all of Helfgott's costs, a fundraising concert was organised that raised another £400. Peter, Helfgott claims, opposed the idea of overseas study, though he did sign the parental permission slip that was required. According to Helfgott, this disagreement led to Peter throwing him out of their house. Staying with one of his benefactors, it supposedly became obvious that Helfgott lacked certain social graces: he could not even use a knife and fork correctly, and was thus given lessons in 'manners and etiquette' (1996: 133).

Taking up his position at the Royal College, Helfgott was placed under the tutelage of Cyril Smith, a one-time pupil of Rachmaninov. His life in London was described as hectic with piano lessons, composition classes and choir rehearsals, as well as making use of the freedom and new experiences that London offered (1996: 185,187). Smith was a strict teacher and made many changes to Helfgott's technique and habits. The comments on Helfgott's playing were mixed: while Smith stated 'he has had bursts of quite brilliant playing' and 'he has an extraordinary pianistic talent', he also felt Helfgott's 'work is ill-organised and spasmodic', and that 'more attention to basic rhythm problems' was required (quoted in Helfgott 1996: 189,196). Helfgott's personal wellbeing was also undergoing turmoil: while he was increasingly sociable and considered this time in London to be his 'vintage years', he was leading an 'increasingly chaotic lifestyle' and his 'mind (was) slowly spinning out of control' (1996: 195). Because of increasingly bizarre behaviour, Helfgott's place at the college was jeopardised which led to him seeking help from a psychiatrist for the first time.

Helfgott attributes the gradual but marked improvement in his playing at this time to the help given by the psychiatrist: in his third year Helfgott was awarded two medals, one for coming third in piano performance. The highlight of that year was his performance of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with the College's orchestra for which he received a standing ovation. A few days after the concert, Helfgott found out he had been granted another scholarship to enable him to stay on for a fourth year. This he did, but his mental state began to worsen; he turned to alcohol and valium to cope, but in the end Helfgott checked himself into a psychiatric hospital. After leaving a couple of months later, Helfgott's behaviour, both playing-wise and socially, continued to become increasingly erratic. A performance of the same Rachmaninov concerto in March 1970 was 'embarrassing' and 'histrionic', though Helfgott's playing of a Liszt concerto at the Royal Albert Hall fared

slightly better. His fourth-year report contained the following: 'His life has been so disordered and chaotic, that pianistic progress has been allowed a sporadic opportunity' (1996: 210). Increasingly unstable, Helfgott returned to Australia as soon as it could be arranged.

Helfgott at this time is described as 'incoherent, scatter-brained and unable to stand up straight without constant stumbling' (1996: 265). Within ten days of being home, Helfgott was admitted into a psychiatric hospital: Helfgott claims that Peter only visited him once while he was there. For the following three years, Helfgott was constantly in and out of institutions; during this time he saw little of his family. It was also during this time Helfgott was married to a woman named Clara: this relationship did not last long; Clara is depicted as a conniving troll out to extract from Helfgott whatever she could manage.³ In 1975 after another long stay in an institution, Helfgott returned home with his father's approval, though the rest of the family was opposed to this. Peter died at the end of that year, and in the following March Helfgott was readmitted to hospital. This peripatetic life continued for a number of years: in all, Helfgott spent over a decade in and out of institutions. Music continued to be an important part of his life throughout this turmoil: he would play the piano for up to 10 hours a day (Harris 1986: 3).

Helfgott's life did finally begin to improve: the start of this "redemption" came, says Helfgott, with his brother finding him a part-time job at a Perth wine bar playing the piano. His biography gives the following account of his first night on the job:

A nervous, chain-smoking apparition snuck his way through the bar-crowd to the piano and pulled out tattered and stained copies of Christmas carols and sing-along charts, and with his two index fingers prodded a few keys. But just as the crowd began to get out of control, and a mortified Chris was making his way towards the piano to rectify the situation, a technically perfect volley of notes resounded through the room, as David attacked the keyboard with *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*. The awe-struck crowd was hushed, and David has been a regular *Riccardo's* act ever since (Helfgott 1996: 6).

It was during his tenure at this bar in 1983 that Helfgott met Gillian, his future second wife; she was a divorced astrologer with adult children, and fifteen years older than Helfgott. He proposed to her the second time they met, and within two weeks they were living together. At the time Gillian met Helfgott, there were a number of visible signs of his psychiatric problems:

Each day he would make himself fifteen to twenty cups of coffee, with five sugars in each, spilling the coffee and sugar all over the floor. He

took innumerable showers, leaving up to ten wet towels lying around the house, smoked 125 cigarettes a day, was extremely untidy with his clothes, books and sheet music, and his constant talking made peace and quiet virtually unattainable... The combination of nicotine, caffeine and enormous amounts of sugar resulted in extreme hyperactivity and over-stimulation (1996: 16,29).

Life with Helfgott is depicted as an intense, full-time job: Gillian did make attempts to arrest the more extreme elements of Helfgott's personality. His drug intake was carefully controlled: on high doses Helfgott was 'calmer and more coherent' but his playing suffered (1996: 90). Though he had been performing at the bar and occasionally with an amateur orchestra, Helfgott began practising the piano in earnest as Gillian set about on the task of returning him to the stage as a professional concert pianist, a career that had eluded him. A manager was appointed, and 'right from the outset, Mike was determined to present David as a serious concert artist'. Gillian is adamant that Helfgott was never to be sold as an 'act'. They also avoided publicity, with a number of small concerts being held 'in secret', helping Helfgott build up an experience of performing.

His "come-back" concert in front of a full house was a 'triumph', even though some of the playing was, Gillian admits, 'uneven'. 'Most of the audience (were) in tears as they erupted into spontaneous applause, followed by a standing ovation and cheering' she reports (1996: 97). A few weeks following this concert, Helfgott recorded Rachmaninov's *First Piano Concerto* for the ABC⁴ and performed the same composer's *Second Piano Concerto* with another orchestra. Helfgott returned for guidance to his old teacher, Alice Carrard, as he would continue do over the following seven years. His concert schedule began to fill up with performances throughout Australia; the media's interest in him also began to grow with Helfgott appearing on a number of television programmes. In the first admission of a major disparity between critical and audience reaction, Gillian states that while the 'general public came in droves', 'the conservative factions of the music establishment... refused to recognize David as a serious professional': they were, claims Gillian, taking the position that David was nothing more than a 'performing freak in a side-show' (1996: 168,169).

There were faults to his playing at this stage, Gillian admits. To remedy this, it was decided that Helfgott needed to 'polish up various aspects of his playing' outside the 'cliquey music community in Australia' (1996: 169). Thus in 1986 Helfgott was taken to study in London to receive lessons from Peter Feuchtwanger. From the very first lesson, Feuchtwanger had to take steps to minimise Helfgott's distinctive interpretations: 'that was interesting, David, but there was too much Helfgott in it. Now I would like you to play Chopin' he is recorded as saying (1996: 221). In all, the Helfgott's spent five months in Europe which resulted in 'contact with fine musicians, people assessing David with an unbiased view and an

expansion of his musical horizons' (1996: 239). Over the next few years, Helfgott performed both solo recitals and with small orchestras in Europe and Australia to mixed receptions. The droning and talking that accompanied his playing had reached extreme levels.⁵ This, his intense personality, and his need for physical contact with people were among the many peculiar habits noted by those he encountered. At one stage Helfgott had, without informing anyone else, decided he no longer required medication: this led to a number of difficulties as many of his more extreme habits returned. Once back on medication, Helfgott started regular sessions with a psychiatrist: during these sessions, Helfgott started to explore his past. It was in this therapy that his relationship with Peter became of central concern. Fortunately, the building of a new home, referred to him as both 'Heaven' and the 'Promised Land' 'began to manifest a miraculous healing power' claims Gillian (1996: 286).

Into the 1990s, Helfgott's schedule was increasingly full of concerts: performances in Japan, Russia, Scandinavia, Germany and Albania were given. Also, the idea to film the story of Helfgott's life, initially raised by film-maker Scott Hicks at a concert by Helfgott in 1986, finally came to fruition. Hicks and others had researched Helfgott's past, written a screenplay, and attempted to find financial backing for the film. However, the finances took some considerable time to sort out and it was not until March 1995 that shooting began. Helfgott was involved in recording the soundtrack for the film, and both Helfgott and Gillian reacted positively to the finished product: 'this is a wonderful movie' was Helfgott's response on seeing *Shine* for the first time (1996: 322).

The life story of David Helfgott was an obvious choice for filming: a tale of childhood precociousness brought down in its prime moving to the grown man restored to health by the love of a good woman is classic movie fare. Indeed, Helfgott's life was obviously one of inspiration and interest to many thousands around the world as shown by the development of what has been termed the 'Helfgott Phenomenon'. If the above gives the "story" of David Helfgott, below I aim to show how that story has manifested itself into what could be described as an industry of its own: the Helfgott Phenomenon. The Phenomenon that sprung up around this man came in the form of film, print, public performances, audio recordings, television appearances, and even cyberspace. The examination of this multifaceted multimedia extravaganza will begin with that which is most central to many people's understanding of Helfgott: *Shine*.

The Film: Shine

As stated above, the way in which a great majority of people have come to know of Helfgott, and thus the reason for his extreme popularity, is through the movie *Shine*. The film premiered in 1996 at the Sundance Film Festival at which there was considerable interest in bidding for distribution rights. It was an undoubted success, remarkable for a film that Scott Hicks could not raise finance for only a few years earlier so arduous (*USA Today* ⁶). *Shine* was a box-office sensation in many countries including Australia, Britain the US and New Zealand, where it was the highest grossing film for a number of weeks. *Shine* had cost US \$10 million film to make grossed over US\$ 30 million in the United States alone (Steinberg 1997). It also received a considerable number of awards including seven Oscar nominations (winning the category of 'Best Actor in a Leading Role') and nine awards at the Australian Film Institute's prize ceremony. ⁷ Such success in the Oscars was a virtual guarantee of future popularity for *Shine*.

The film's success is also partly due to the typically crude narrative ploys used in film making. Here, this takes the form of a romantically enticing story-line: a talented musician is ruined by his evil father, but through true love he is redeemed and can once again return to the stage where he rightfully belongs. This highly simplistic rendering of the truth should be of no surprise: such an affecting story of good overcoming evil, of true love, of the mad genius artist – 'the duality of madness and creativity' (Pruett 1996) – is classic film fodder. The backdrop of lush Romantic music adds to the image: one writer described it as 'not simply music. It is tissue... the score sustains us spiritually through an intensity that alternately soothes and scarifies' (Pruett 1996). Success aside, *Shine* raises other issues surrounding notions of authenticity and reality. Considerable criticism, notably from other members of Helfgott's family, has been levelled at the film for its inaccuracies. These revolve around both points of fact and of interpretation. The official stance of the film's makers is that :

Shine would be inspired by Helfgott's life, not a biographical reproduction of that life, nor any sort of documentary. "There is an emotional truth in the story -- and everything has its point of reference in David's experience," stresses Hicks, "but, if we were to try and make David's life, it would be a 20-hour mini-series of extraordinary experiences." Intent upon avoiding "docudrama," Hicks [the director] and Sardi [the screenwriter] wanted to make a film that had the feeling of a work of fiction (*Shine* homepage).

Hicks is unrepentant about the decision to fictionalise Helfgott's life. Indeed, he has stated that 'I believe that an audience wants to be taken on an emotional journey' - thus the flexible approach to the facts is supposedly justified in telling a good story (Fishkoff 1997).

Hicks also claims the audience should be aware *Shine* was not the true story as it contains a disclaimer stating that the film depicts characters and events that are fictional;⁸ however Les Helfgott, Helfgott's brother, claims this is reproduced in minuscule writing in the final credits. Few in a film's audience stay through the credits; this, combined with the difficulty in reading the disclaimer, does not make it particularly apparent that the story is fictional, claims Les Helfgott. Thus the audience is led to believe that *Shine* depicts the truth (*Los Angeles Times* 1996: 88). There is always a danger when attempting to put real people and real-life events on the screen that an audience will grant considerable authenticity to the story told.

Whatever the supposed intentions of the team that created *Shine*, one only has to examine the technique used in marketing the film to realise that the audience are likely to regard the film as fact. An examination of the media coverage given to Helfgott and *Shine* shows that many in the media simply recounted that which was depicted in the film, no matter that this differed considerably from other alternative accounts. Much of the advertising went one stage further and actively pushed the myth that the film was factual. One poster claimed *Shine* as 'the real life story of Australian genius pianist'; another asserted that the film 'tracks the life of [a] musical genius', that it is a 'biographical film' of 'well rounded realism' (RCA poster; *Shine* handout). The *New York Times* contained full page advertisements proclaiming '*Shine* is an utterly extraordinary true story' (Helfgott 1998: 4).

The person who has spent the most effort to bring to the public's attention the fictional elements of *Shine* has been Margaret Helfgott, Helfgott's sister. In an article entitled *Pain or Shine* in the *Jerusalem Post* (Fishkoff 1997)⁹, Margaret attempted to present what she saw as the facts; this was continued with the publication the following year of an extended examination (Helfgott 1998). She described *Shine* as a 'an unforgivable distortion of the truth' (1998: 2). Significant reinterpretations of the facts of Helfgott's life were made in the production – the screenwriter is down on record as saying 'when you're dealing with someone's life, you tread a fine line between events that are known to have happened and your own creative licence' (in Fishkoff 1997).¹⁰ What is undoubtedly the most controversial portrayal in *Shine* was that of Peter Helfgott, David's father. The relationship between father and son is one of the main themes of the film, and there is no doubt that the audience is to identify Peter as the protagonist and Helfgott as the victim. The relationship between the father's cruel abuse of the son and Helfgott's mental problems is fully explicit: Peter is portrayed as a 'self-serving, violent man, quelling young Helfgott's dreams with his harsh – and obviously wrong – dictum that he always knew best' (Wilmoth: 1996). Hicks had told Margaret that 'it is not my intention to be judgmental in the portrayal of Peter Helfgott' (in Helfgott 1998: 187). Yet the film's black-and-white portrayal of the relationship

is partly thrown into question by Gillian's book (Helfgott 1996) and is completely contradicted by Margaret Helfgott's version (Helfgott 1998).

Margaret claims that while her father could be stubborn and, at times, domineering, he was however a 'generous and decent man, who was both loving and much loved' (Helfgott 1998: 2,3). She claims as untrue the film's depiction of Peter's reasons for cancelling Helfgott's trip to the US, stating it was not simply paternal power in action: Margaret claims Helfgott was simply not capable of such independence that the trip would require (Helfgott, she says, could not tie his shoelaces or even boil a jug unaided at this time). Margaret goes on to say there was no 'dark and oppressive atmosphere in our house, there were no beatings in the family'; 'my father never once hit David or threatened to hit him', a claim she says is backed up by her mother and other siblings (1998: 4,88). The film's attempts to conflate Peter's treatment of his own children with his own family's background are also heavily drawn: 'the Holocaust metaphor is drawn with a heavy hand: barbed wire cuts across the father's face as he nails shut the family gate... reflected flames dance across his eyeglasses from the open stove where he burns his son's scrapbook' (Fishkoff 1997). Margaret claims the film also portrays Peter as a German-Jew with a heavy German accent (Helfgott 1998: 221). The result in the wider media was to pick up on these connotations, treat them as fact, and serve up depictions of Peter that included the claims he was 'only slightly less loveable than Himmler' and a 'hardline Stalinist'. For this is the same man that Helfgott stated in the obituary for his father 'If I have done any good at all I owe it to my father' (quoted in Bragg 1997).

Gillian rejects such allegations of an untrue portrayal of Peter: 'I don't think for one moment that Scott Hick's portrayed Peter as a monster. I had a far greater understanding of Peter after seeing the film... His father loved him very well but perhaps not wisely' (in Wilmoth 1996: 7). Two other Helfgott sisters are also on record as agreeing that *Shine* does indeed capture the complexity of their father, and that Margaret has a rosy-tinted perspective on the past (in Bragg 1997). However, other family friends have come to support Margaret's disagreements over Peter's portrayal: it is thus obvious that this debate about where the truth over Peter lies appears set to continue.

A large number of other flexings of the truth occur in *Shine*; indeed too many to recount here. Two examples will suffice: the first image of the film, and a most effective opening, has Helfgott running through teeming rain, banging on the door of a wine-bar until being let in, and then stunning the audience with his playing: the reality, as covered above, is a bit more prosaic in that the job was found for him by his brother. Another invention involves Helfgott's collapse on stage: 'playing the blisteringly difficult Rachmaninoff "Piano Concerto

No. 3" to an admiring college audience, David's performance is a triumph. But, when it is over, he collapses on stage, the victim of a complete breakdown' (*Shine* official synopsis). Again, the summary above shows this to be a case of combining various events and heavy over-dramatisation. Margaret says there was no such breakdown on stage; furthermore, Helfgott stayed in London for another year. After returning from London, Helfgott lived with Peter, and Peter spent the rest of his life looking after his son: the virtual divorce between the two depicted in *Shine* (and only slightly more mildly expressed in Helfgott 1996) was yet another use of artistic licence to stress the isolation and familial antagonism so emphasised in the film (Helfgott 1998: 5,114,155).

These points of difference between the fiction of *Shine* and the reality as portrayed by Margaret are substantial: they are not only points of interpretation but also of fact, and as such are of vital concern for us here. The logic of this case bare repeating: first, *Shine* contained many deviations from the truth; second, *Shine* was sold, and taken to be, a portrayal of the truth; third, the public's knowledge of Helfgott came nearly exclusively from *Shine* and the media's use of *Shine*-derived information. The acceptance of the film as reality has enormous consequences for the other areas of the Helfgott Phenomenon for it is *Shine* that has made David Helfgott the international celebrity he is today. It was also thanks to people's interest in Helfgott being sparked by the film that they were eager for further gratification through productions in other forms of media. It is to these we now turn.

Public Performances

Without a doubt, the greatest flow-on from the success (and the greatest controversy) of *Shine* has been the impact on David Helfgott's concert career. Above, it was shown that Helfgott was on the come-back trail from 1986 onwards, as Gillian and others slowly eased Helfgott back into public performances. However, these concerts were inevitably on a small scale and in no way could it be said that Helfgott had an international reputation; they were also insignificant in that they played no role in the eventual popularity that Helfgott was to reach. It was only through *Shine* that Helfgott received coverage that other artists can only dream of. The standard career path for musicians is a requirement to build up a reputation through excellence in performance; this, combined with various levels of marketing and hype, does often have result in a large public following. Helfgott was able to bypass these usual stages through a free 105 minute "advertorial".¹¹ Suddenly there were a huge number of people who knew the name of David Helfgott, who had supposedly experienced his life vicariously through the film, and now had a chance to follow this onto the next stage: seeing the pianist perform live.

David Helfgott and his entourage including Gillian set out on a 58 concert world tour entitled 'David Helfgott Live!'. Such a tour is big business: one estimate of the financial rewards of this tour placed earnings at between US \$1.6 and \$2 million (in Bargreen 1997a). The series began in Perth in August 1996; the tour proper began in New Zealand in February 1997, moving on to the US, Britain and Europe. The following year saw Helfgott performing in Hong Kong, Japan, Europe, Britain, North and South America, New Zealand, South Africa and Asia (Helfgott official website). The promoter claimed that 'this is probably the largest recital tour of its kind ever known' (Helfgott press release, 16/2/1997). In keeping with the Romantic theme that pervades *Shine* and, more generally, Helfgott's story, many of the concerts were given appropriate titles that included *Celebration of Life* and *The Miracle of Love*.

Helfgott's repertoire is fairly limited in that it draws from a particular period.¹² This is the era of Romantic music, which is a term used 'to designate the apparent domination of feeling over order... of instinct over reason, of imagination over form, of heart over head' (in Sadie 1980: vol. 14 141). More specifically the term is applied to a period of Western music, often referred to as the *Age of Romanticism*, that ran from approximately 1790 to 1910. Examining the description of Romanticism given above, the connection to Helfgott is obvious. Not only was Helfgott brought up on, and obviously had a great attachment to, the music of the Romantic period, but it also fits brilliantly the image that has been so successfully moulded around him: the madness, the passion, the romance. Helfgott's concerts were sold on these Romantic concepts: 'the triumph of the human spirit', of 'passion'; 'the world he inhabits is in total unison with Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin... playing their passionate works with ?' (Helfgott NZ tour advertising). An examination of the music Helfgott played on his second tour shows the total domination of the music of this period: the programme included works by Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Beethoven, Mussorgsky, Schubert and Ravel.

In terms of filling halls, these tours were extremely successful. A second concert in Auckland in 1997 was required to cope with demand; the concerts in New York and Los Angeles sold out in record time; \$75 US tickets for his concert in Philadelphia were being hawked for up to \$300 US (Helfgott press releases, 3/2/1997; 17/4/1997). He sold out two nights in Toronto (seating capacity: 2,700), two nights in Los Angeles (3,000) and three nights in London (2,500), as well as other well-attended performances. Management at Helfgott's New York venue were reported as saying 'I have been here for the last thirty-four years, and I've never seen anything like it' (Helfgott 1998: 248). In terms of response, the audiences were generally ecstatic; clapping, cheering and stamping in the honour of their hero, often granting Helfgott standing ovations.¹³ In the words of one review, the audience

behaved 'like members of a pop crowd' (quoted in Cumming 1997). Helfgott had all his (un)usual quirks – the talking cum mumbling cum singing, the running onto the stage, the conducting - all strange habits for a classical musician, but still the crowds responded enthusiastically.

The critics, on the other hand, were considerably more divided in their response, with a great many offering harsh criticism that was often at odds with the apparent impressions of many in the audience. Some, including the *Guardian's* critic, walked out before the concert was over (Bragg 1997).¹⁴ While Helfgott had been getting positive reviews into the 1980s - 'excellent', 'breathtaking' were adjectives used as late as 1987 (Helfgott 1998: 258) - those in the late 1990s were to be far less complimentary. This critical backlash had begun right from his first concerts in New Zealand, with the reviewer of the Christchurch concert stating 'to my mind there remains something deeply disturbing and not quite honest about what was going on.... I cannot bear to see such dishonesty go unchallenged' (Jones 1997). This was comparatively complimentary compared to the vitriol spat by critics in the US, Helfgott's next point of call. *The New York Times'* critic stated 'his sound is weak and thin. There is little definition in the playing, and no reliable pulse....he is not a finished pianist in any sense' (Tommasini 1997). In London, Geoffrey Norris commented that 'Beethoven's Appassionata Sonata is not so much fractured as crumbled into rubble... the form was shapeless, the definition clouded, the sense of direction wayward' (1997). Barry Millington writing for *The Times* admitted that 'clearly Helfgott is a pianist of considerable abilities'; however, 'the idiosyncrasies began to play havoc with musical sense.'

What Helfgott's playing lacks at the moment is discipline, shape, and structure... Helfgott's erratic lurching speaks eloquently for his condition, but tells us little about the music... His attempts to communicate result in a flow of consciousness the musical equivalent of the over-excited, barely intelligible mode of speech heard in the film (Millington 1997).

It was apparent from the reviews that many critics were slightly flummoxed by the appearance of Helfgott on the world concert stage. A great number of the reviews spent more time discussing Helfgott's behaviour than his actual playing: his chattering and groaning was apparently an affront to the sensibilities of the classical music critic. One reviewer claimed Helfgott's 'one claim to musical interest' was his mental handicap' (*Economist* 1997). The other obsession of the critics was over the actual phenomenon itself, an acknowledgement that his concerts were considerably different from the norm. In what is probably the most (in)famous review of a Helfgott recital, Stephen Wigler writing in the *Baltimore Sun* claimed the concert as 'a significant new step in... the dumbing down of America' (quoted in Dutton 1997b). A common catch-cry was that Helfgott's popularity came at the expense of many more capable players who simply did not have the draw-card

that Helfgott had in *Shine*: 'I have 100 pianists at Julliard and the Manhattan School of Music each better and each working for minimal wages with no possible guarantee of a concert anywhere', one piano teacher stated (in Steinberg 1997). Another prevalent claim was that Helfgott was being exploited, marketed as a performing freak.

It is however also important to stress that not all critics were as harsh as Wigler et al.; while very few were willing to acknowledge that Helfgott was a world-class pianist, some obviously did not find his success or his playing as repugnant. A few critics pointed out that people's attitudes towards Helfgott's playing had become too polarised. Typical of these remarks are comments by a critic writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: 'neither an epiphany nor a fiasco, Helfgott's recital... merely offered the spectacle of a pianist making his way with middling success' (Kosman: 1997). Some acknowledged the audiences' obvious enjoyment: 'He came, he played, he conquered', read the opening line of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* review (quoted in Helfgott media release 17/4/1997). 'I've never seen an audience so supportive, so keen to cherish the man on stage' stated Michael Church, the *Independent's* critic. Church was also one of the few critics who admitted to enjoying Helfgott: 'I'd much rather see a beautiful ruin than a brand-new castle. Who wants the invincibly accurate technical stuff which these critics seem to live by?' (in Bragg 1997). A common argument in favour of Helfgott was that the exposure of classical music to an audience new to it could only be positive:

Critics ought to be pleased... there is a real connection between getting people in the door with highly appealing classics and having them to stick around for more sophisticated fare. Developing taste has to start somewhere (McLennan 1997).

Others rejected the Wigler line of 'dumbing down'; Joshua Kosman objected to the pious and melodramatic nature of these arguments: Helfgott is 'an insignificant blip on the national radar', simply a fad of popular culture (1997c). On a different tack, Norman Lebrecht emphasises Helfgott as a positive development in a time where classical music is being pushed to the margins of culture:

He, alone of all living pianists, is selling out halls... it's a spiritual phenomenon. We're seeing someone put his ten fingers on the hidden spiritual side of music and touching people in that way, is a way that the professionals have forgotten how (in Bragg 1997).

While it was claimed that ticket sales were affected (*Dominion* 1997), the audiences kept on coming for all that 1997 tour. Comments elicited from members of Helfgott's audiences were mainly positive. Remarks from the crowd at Helfgott's London recitals included: 'the very character of the man shines through'; 'it's not just another concert pianist: it's a real

story'; 'I don't know anything much about classical music but I'm enjoying what I'm hearing, and as far as I'm concerned, that's the main thing' (in Bragg 1997). The public backlash against the critics was equally ferocious. In letters to newspapers and magazines, Helfgott's fans attacked the critics for elitism and snobbery. The Helfgott industry also swung in with similar comments: 'I think there are some critics who perhaps act as sort of self-appointed guardians of an elite culture', claimed Scott Hicks (in Helfgott 1998: 250). The critics defended themselves, the usual response being along the lines 'that their job is not to offer subjective judgements on personality or be swayed by an artist's popularity but to evaluate the worth of oeuvre put before the public' (*Times* 1997).

No matter the initial heat of controversy dividing critics and audience; the fiery public debate was not sustained as Helfgott's time in the limelight was apparently short-lived. Even by the time of his second visit to New Zealand in 1998, the indication was that Helfgott was no longer the draw-card he once was, with many seats in these concerts going unsold. Though his large-scale touring days may be over, Helfgott continues to live on, even if diminished, in other media. It is to these that I will now move on to discuss.

Recordings

Another way the Helfgott Phenomenon has expanded has been through recordings of Helfgott. At this stage, it appears that seven albums are available.¹⁵ First to be released was the soundtrack of *Shine*; this is a combination of the original film score, excerpts from the seminal Romantic works that make up Helfgott's standard repertoire, and other highlights from the film's musical backdrop, including the ethereal tones of Vivaldi. Some of the piano playing on this recording is by Helfgott himself. Sales were extremely high, especially for a classical album: in its first week of release in New Zealand, it made it to 30 in the pop charts, later making it into the top 20 and selling nearly 7,500 copies. In the UK it reached number four in the classical charts; in the US and Australia, number one. Sales in the US topped 500,000 units: in one day at the height of Helfgott fever, 22,000 copies were sold (sources: Helfgott 1998: 254; BMG press releases; Helfgott media releases 9/1/97, 3/2/1997, 7/3/1997). As a follow-up to this success, Philips also released a double album of the works used in the film, *Shine – the Complete Classics*.¹⁶

The other albums Helfgott has recorded are loosely based on his wider concert repertoire, thus nearly all are inevitably from the Romantic period. The first of his solo albums was entitled *Rachmaninov: The Last Great Romantic*, and included a live recording of the work that Helfgott had popularised with the general public, the *Third Piano Concerto*, plus a selection of solo works by the same composer.¹⁷ The sleeve notes of the CD contained the

typical claim of uniqueness: 'David Helfgott is an enigma, a mental unicorn, a freakish angel with antennae stretching far out into the universe... Helfgott's intellect operates on a completely separate wavelength which picks up cosmic noises and vibrations'.¹⁸

By March 1997, this CD had sold over 200,000 copies (NYT: 1997). Margaret Helfgott claims that the *Gramophone* magazine refused to review this recording as it was 'so appalling' (Helfgott 1998: 257); this is not actually accurate: in March 1997 a review appeared that stated:

A mixture of tact and compassion forbids me from detailed commentary on these recorded offerings, save that... the orchestra manfully follow their soloist as he skitters from one crisis to another. The fillers include equally sad performances... of the most numbing inadequacy (*Gramophone* 1997).¹⁹

Other critics were equally damning: 'a morass of rhythmic disconnection and miscommunication between pianist and orchestra' is how Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* described it (1997). 'Helfgott takes a mushy-handed approach at the keyboard, painfully fumbling his way through critical segments as he speeds up and slows down at inexplicable intervals' commented critic Ed Brown, reviewing the recording in *Fortune* (1997). The second of Helfgott's own albums was entitled *Brilliantissimo: David Helfgott Plays Romantic Encores* which had reached number one in the classical charts in Britain within a week of being released (Helfgott media release 14/5/1997). In 1998, a CD entitled *Brave New World* was released. Containing similar verbiage to the album above - a slightly incoherent rave about Helfgott - it is also notable for its complete lack of notes on the actual music: only composers, names of works and length are listed. There is, however, a charming portrait of Helfgott on the cover: on the back, his suit is credited to Giorgio Armani. It is apparent though that, as with Helfgott's live performances, interest in the recordings is waning: many stores now have Helfgott's albums at discount prices.

Texts

The written word has also not escaped the Helfgott story. First on the shelves was the *Book of David* by Beverley Eley, published in 1995. It was with the subsequent publication of Helfgott's biography in 1996 (the same year as the release of *Shine*), written by his wife Gillian, that the public had a chance to read an 'official' account of the star's life. Entitled *Love You to Bits and Pieces: Life with David Helfgott* (Helfgott 1996), the book does indeed purport to be the 'real story' by 'the person who knows him best'. Whilst it is undeniable that this book lies closer to the truth than does *Shine*, it is still a highly subjective and personal

account; Helfgott's perspective as mediated through Gillian. As with the film, positions are polarised: Peter is still portrayed as the cause of Helfgott's condition; Gillian is the proverbial knight(ess?) in shining armour, the woman who stood beside David. Margaret Helfgott is just as scathing of this book as she is of *Shine*, dubbing it 'Exploit You to Bits and Pieces' (1998: 255). She claims Gillian 'not only repeats many of the falsehoods told in *Shine*, but adds some new ones of her own' (1998: 98). An example of this includes Gillian's portrayal of Claire, Helfgott's first wife: she calls Claire 'the world's greatest bitch' and suggest her motives towards Helfgott were anything but honourable. Margaret contradicts this portrayal, claiming that Claire was the prime reason behind Helfgott's 'startlingly swift rehabilitation' (Helfgott 1998: 136,149).

Yet another perspective is given in *Out of Tune: David Helfgott and the Myth of Shine* (1998) by Margaret Helfgott. The book, as indicated above, is a refutation of much of *Shine* and Helfgott (1997). In *Out of Tune* she points out that mental illness is present within the family, thus offering a different version of the reasons for Helfgott's mental problems.²⁰ Peter's aunt in Poland and his sister in Australia (the only family member to survive the Holocaust) were both institutionalised (Helfgott 1998: 128). What is also of interest is the obvious level of tension between Margaret and Gillian. This was undoubtedly not helped by Margaret's campaign to redress the inaccuracies of *Shine*: at one stage she was told by Gillian that 'you're crapping over everything' (1998: 199). Gillian also had copyright of the correspondence between Peter and David granted to her and has threatened legal action when attempts have been made to publish them (Helfgott 1998: 100).

The Internet and Other Forms

Turning to the other media through which the Helfgott Phenomenon has been disseminated: the internet – the latest craze in information formats - has not escaped the Helfgott furore. Websites on Helfgott and *Shine* have been created: these include both amateur sites produced by dedicated fans (shrines, if you like) and official sites created to hook into other forms of publicity. The official site is typical in its use of hyperbole and reliance on the artistic genius theme:

David Helfgott is a unique Australian and a brilliant concert pianist with a fascinating life story as portrayed in the Oscar nominated & multi-award winning film *Shine*. David Helfgott, as a concert pianist, stands apart from all others in the world today. From a child prodigy, through years of hardship including a severe breakdown, David is back and larger than life. With his wife Gillian he is sharing his experiences with the whole world. He communicates, shares and expresses his joy of life through his

passionate playing on the piano. Each concert is an event not to be missed (*Shine* homepage).

At the same site, all Helfgott's media releases are available to read. Also available off the web was *Shine: the Studyguide* (Lifetime Learning Systems 1996), containing a number of worksheets aimed at school children. Again, this relied on the themes and stereotypes as set out by the film: 'Shine is inspired by the life of David Helfgott, a pianist who retreated into his private world to find love and win back his career. This riveting film is about ambition, doubt, loss, love and simply "expressing the inexpressible."' (1996:2). It also worked from the presumption that the film depicted the truth, asking students to consider such questions as 'what happens to young people when their creative outlets are blocked?' and 'to what degree are we the product of our childhood?' (1996: 2). Margaret Helfgott, worried by the content of the study guide, especially its claims of *Shine's* truth, successfully fought to have it withdrawn from circulation (Helfgott 1998: 278).

This study guide exemplifies the use of the internet for the "celebration" of the Helfgott Phenomenon; however, there was also considerable negative coverage, notably in classical music-related newsgroups. Indeed, the role of the internet in the context of the Helfgott Phenomenon highlights the use of a new form in which both commercial interests can further "push" their products and the public can debate issues surrounding them.

There are even further ways in which the Helfgott Phenomenon has been encouraged or propagated. The methods employed have been the usual media outlets: TV, radio, and the print media. Interviews, reports and articles have appeared the world over as the media "milked" the sensation. Helfgott's appearance and performance at the 1996 Oscars ceremony, while partially there in support of *Shine*, was an obvious marketing and publicity ploy by the Helfgott machine motivated by the huge exposure he gained. Another appearance had Helfgott as the subject of a programme presented by Melvyn Bragg (Bragg 1997). Typical of such interviews, Bragg found it well nigh impossible to elicit anything of coherence or interest from Helfgott himself. He still managed to produce a programme that attempted to present all arguments of the Helfgott fracas, talking to critics both in favour and critical of Helfgott, audience members, the film's makers, and the Helfgotts themselves.

In New Zealand, journalists from the *Listener*, *60 Minutes*, *Holmes*, and *20/20* were amongst those who dedicated considerable coverage to Helfgott. Words such as 'genius' and 'pianistic colossus' were used, further encouraging the public's perception of Helfgott as a masterful pianist. The *Listener's* cover was blazoned with 'Fragile genius, David Helfgott, comes to NZ' (Helfgott 1997); Paul Holmes described him as a 'brilliant Australian pianist'; Dylan Tate of TV3 said 'I think the man is [a genius]... [It comes down] to the way

[his playing] affects me. He's a pianistic colossus. He plays music on an edge over quite an unspeakable drop' (in Bushnell 1997a). These articles and programmes in the mainstream media were inevitably sycophantic re-tellings of the re-birth of Helfgott, as was common throughout the world. There was, however, some coverage of the wider picture, most notably by public radio (Bushnell 1997a, 1997b). An article by Denis Dutton also sought to bring to the public's attention Margaret's version of events, published in various papers in slightly altered forms (Dutton 1998a, 1998b).

The most detailed examination of the Helfgott Phenomenon came with the release of the October 1997 issue of *Philosophy and Literature*, an academic periodical co-edited by Denis Dutton, that included a symposium entitled "'Please Shoot the Piano Player!' The David Helfgott Debate'. The symposium consisted of a number of articles from many different perspectives. Included were a defence from Helfgott's teacher (Feuchtwanger 1997); an examination of the psychological aspect of the Phenomenon (Lorraine: 1997), and the standard critical arguments (Silsbury 1997; Bazzana 1997). As it is an academic journal, direct exposure to the wider public of these articles was inevitably limited, though some mention of it was made in the media (e.g. Bargreen 1997b; Bushnell 1997b). An attempt to present these articles, plus others written since, to the public in a book entitled *The Helfgott Variations* was made but floundered over difficulties with the publishers.

Conclusion

The Helfgott Phenomenon is a complex and multifaceted event, centred around an individual pianist. The story of Helfgott's life – a tale of the demise and rise of a musical eccentric – came to prominence through the movie *Shine*, creating considerable interest in the man and leading to the resurrection of Helfgott's pianistic career. While critical and audience reaction to his performances were markedly different, this revival also marked the formation of what has been christened the 'Helfgott Phenomenon'. Interest in Helfgott was satiated through multiple outlets ranging through recordings, television appearances and books, as well as the concert career and film fame.

It is worth emphasising that, not surprisingly, all these many forms in which the Helfgott Phenomenon has been packaged— film, live and recorded performances, books et cetera – often come together. One form of the Phenomenon will be marketed together with another. For example, the official website has links to related sites including the official *Shine* page and instructions of where to purchase Helfgott's recordings. Audiences of *Shine* in Britain have been able to purchase copies of his CDs at the theatre (Clinch 1997), while readers of Helfgott's biography are similarly encouraged to purchase the recordings and see the

movie. This interconnectedness is typical of the modern method of marketing a “brand” such as the Helfgott Phenomenon.

Nearly all aspects of the Phenomenon caused considerable controversy, as did the interplay between them. Most marked was the distinct division between critical and public reaction to Helfgott’s concerts: many critics dismissed his playing for its inaccuracies, his idiosyncratic behaviour for its annoyance, and the whole Phenomenon as a sign of the demise of cultural standards. Audiences, on the other hand, appeared to have none of these concerns, apparently adoring the man and his manners. This polarity of attitudes to Helfgott will be the central focus of the remainder of this thesis.

Notes

- ¹ Gillian Helfgott describes this as ‘an incredible self-protection device manufactured by David’s exceptional brain’ (Helfgott 1996: 64).
- ² Helfgott went on to pass with ‘the highest score’ (Helfgott 1996: 118). It was also at this time, under Carrard, that Helfgott was introduced and learnt a number of his “signature pieces”: Beethoven’s *Waldstein* Sonata; Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*; and, most notably, Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No. 3
- ³ Among the misdemeanours listed are that she sold David’s piano; that she attempted to gain control of money raised on behalf of David; and that she had David checked in to a hospital when she was having an operation (after which he refused to return to her) (Helfgott 1996: 150-153).
- ⁴ The recording for the ABC was never aired - as to why this was, one can only surmise that it failed to reach the required standards of the corporation.
- ⁵ Fitzgerald describes Helfgott’s ‘own distinct warbling’ as having the ‘sound of a dull buzz saw!’ (1997: 76).
- ⁶ <http://www.usatoday.com/life/enter/movies/lef527.htm>
- ⁷ Amongst its many other successes, *Shine* was nominated for five Golden Globes, winning one of these; it was also nominated for nine Baftas, winning two (source: www.imdb.com).
- ⁸ The full wording of the disclaimer is as follows: ‘While the characters David and Gillian Helfgott are actual persons, this film also depicts characters and events which are fictional which do not and are not intended to refer to any real person or any actual event’ (quoted in Helfgott 1998: 196).
- ⁹ Note that this article was published at the same time as Helfgott’s world tour was just underway.
- ¹⁰ See Appendix I for the “official” synopsis of *Shine*, sourced from the film’s website.
- ¹¹ Though the selling of Helfgott followed the standard strategies of marketing and creating the image of the “star” around Helfgott: ‘their work must be packaged by dressing them up in *signs of artistry*... What are the signs of artistry?... these are individuals defined as possessors of extraordinary, expressive talents as human sources of significant creativity, their abilities evidenced by individual indicators which flow through their works and persona (Ryan 1991: 199,200). Hence the marketing emphasis placed on Helfgott’s idiosyncratic behaviour and a “milking” of the artistic genius/madness myth.
- ¹² In itself, this should not be of concern as it is common for musicians to concentrate on a certain style or period, for example baroque or classical music; here I am simply emphasising the strong ‘Romantic’ link.
- ¹³ For a more detailed account of the goings-on in a Helfgott concert, see the introduction.
- ¹⁴ Another audience member to leave early was Isaac Stern – the same man who had encouraged Helfgott to study in the US (Helfgott 1998). He was on record as saying ‘It was a terrific effort; he’s trying his very best’ (Steinberg 1997).
- ¹⁵ Two not discussed here in the main text appear to not be widely available: a CD of Mussorgsky, Beethoven and Chopin; and a CD of Liszt (source: www.cdnow.com)
- ¹⁶ This is a common commercial ploy to milk the popularity of an initial soundtrack: other recent examples are the second volumes of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Trainspotting* and *The Wedding Singer*.
- ¹⁷ The score for the Rachmaninov *Third Piano Concerto* was re-released with Helfgott’s cutesy title for the work - the ‘Rach 3’ - and sold 5000 copies in the UK in one month! (Helfgott 1998: 254). In a survey to find out listeners’ favourite works commissioned by the commercial classical station in Britain, Classic FM, the ‘Rach 3’ moved from no. 86 to no. 24 from 1986 to 1987 (Reynolds 1997).
- ¹⁸ See Appendix II for a full transcript.
- ¹⁹ This is another review that spent more effort in debating the overall phenomenon than the performance.
- ²⁰ David suffers from ‘a bio-chemical disorder... he was diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder, which can produce the symptoms of both schizophrenia and/or mood disorder’ (Helfgott 1998: 130).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The Helfgott Phenomenon was an enormous story in the arts' community in 1997, catching the attention of classical music critics and audiences all around the world. Helfgott's popular world tour of piano performances came hard on the heels of *Shine*, the film telling the story of his life. The film and tour were but two of the facets of what has been dubbed the Helfgott Phenomenon: as well as *Shine* and the concerts, Helfgott was propagated through recordings, books, television the print media and a variety of other cultural forms. It was, however, his concerts that caused the greatest interest, capturing both the imagination of the public and the ire of music critics throughout the world: the former apparently infatuated with the man; the latter ridiculing him for what they claimed was incompetent playing and unacceptable behaviour.

The Phenomenon presents, in one unified case, many issues pertaining to a sociological examination of contemporary culture. The multifaceted nature of the phenomenon exemplifies, for example, the interconnections between different forms of cultural product that is increasingly common in the "postmodern" world. The enormous marketing and popularity of a classical musician is also symptomatic of the music industries' escalating reliance on the "crossover" artist to increase sales. But in particular, it is the contrast between critical and public reaction over Helfgott's performances that raises one of the most fascinating, controversial and under-explored aspects of culture: the structuring of artistic value: how could there be such opposite opinions on Helfgott held by two groups attending the very same event? The aim of this thesis is to examine the gulf between the many thousands of members of the public who apparently so enjoyed Helfgott's concerts and the music critics, most of whom had, it is claimed, a highly negative reaction.

In examining this difference in opinion over Helfgott, the focus is on the *critical* reaction; the opinions and attitudes of the music critics to all aspects of the Helfgott Phenomenon. Why did Helfgott fail for the critics? Did he indeed fail for *all* critics? Why do the critics think he was so popular with many in his audiences? This thesis situates the answers to these questions in a wider social context: what is the role of criticism? What does the Helfgott case say about the state of classical music in the world today? The attention given within

academia to the enormous social and cultural change that has occurred throughout this century, with claims of increasing commodification, decreasing distance between 'high' and 'low' culture et cetera, raises important points when attempting this contextualisation of Helfgott and the critics. Through the writings and theorising of Bourdieu (primarily *Distinction* 1984) and others including Smith (1988) and Wolff (1993), I focus in particular on the construction of artistic value, uncovering underlying issues of power, ideology, status and differentiation. These writers suggest that traditional criticism, with its origins in the Kantian aesthetic, is heavily grounded in an assumption of its own "naturalness" and innateness, belying its realities as a social creation. I propose that there is more than one way to theorise artistic value and conclude by considering alternatives to the Kantian aesthetic, alternatives that more appropriately take account of the full range of social factors implicated in the Helfgott Phenomenon.

Interviewing the Critics

In structuring this thesis, the decision was made to focus primarily on the opinions of New Zealand critics. While it was always accepted that it would be vital to use the large quantities of reviews, commentaries and analyses produced by overseas critics in order to flesh out the full picture, it was equally obvious that a concentration on the views of critics from only this country was justifiable on a number of grounds. First, it limited the huge pool of data, making it manageable for a thesis-length document. It also enabled key figures within the critical community to be interviewed face-to-face, thus enabling the thesis to cover areas of specific relevance to the topic in sufficient depth. Finally, after some preliminary examination it was obvious that New Zealand could offer critics with strongly argued, potentially antithetical perspectives whose differences were worth exploring further.

The decision to base the thesis around material garnered from interviews came from a realisation that the material detailing the reaction of New Zealand critics to Helfgott was both sparse and too specific. While the articles in *Philosophy and Literature*, programmes on the radio and a number of reviews of Helfgott's 1997 recital tour were available, in order to fully investigate the topic it was apparent that direct contact with the main players was required. The emphasis of this thesis is on the *opinions* of the critics, and face-to-face interviews are undoubtedly an excellent source of these.

The selection of those to be interviewed was based, from the outset, on the critics sharing a common background in the general area of 'criticism' of the arts. As recommended by Tolich and Davidson, the selection of the interviewees did 'not stress representativeness', but rather was based 'upon essential and typical units' (1999: 34,35). I determined that

these 'units' must cover the various foci of arts criticism, namely criticism centred in the academic arena and criticism based in the media. In choosing five critics to be interviewed, a balance between these two areas was achieved, with two from academia and three from the media. In line with the focus on the New Zealand critical response to Helfgott, the fundamental principle of selection was the subjects' residence in this country. In a sense, the two subjects based in academia selected themselves: I first became aware of the importance of Dr. Stan Godlovitch and Dr. Denis Dutton with the broadcast on New Zealand's National Radio of an exchange between the two men on the Helfgott saga. This was followed up with the publication of the *Philosophy and Literature* issue mentioned earlier, including articles by both Dutton and Godlovitch that further elucidated their positions. Both the radio programme and these articles made it obvious that Dutton and Godlovitch held widely disparate views on Helfgott; the former holding a fairly traditional outlook, the latter suggesting a more radical perspective.

The backgrounds of Godlovitch and Dutton are similar in many ways: both are philosophers; hail from North America (Godlovitch, Canada; Dutton, USA); and currently hold posts in New Zealand universities. Stan Godlovitch is a senior lecturer in philosophy in the Social Science department of Lincoln University; his main academic background is in the philosophy of science, ethics and animal rights. He became interested in the area of aesthetics – the area of philosophy most pertinent to Helfgott – through his own musical background: Godlovitch plays and teaches the guitar and lute, but does no formal teaching in aesthetics. However, he has recently published a book entitled *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (1998) that examines the changing status of performance in the twentieth century through the influence of technology.

Denis Dutton is a senior lecturer in art theory, in the Fine Arts department of Canterbury University. He is undoubtedly the most publicly recognised philosopher in this country due to his involvement in the Sceptics' Society, a casual role as a raconteur on radio, and more recently a position on the board of Radio New Zealand. Dutton describes himself as an aesthete, dealing in the philosophy of art; he has a background in music as an amateur pianist and sometime music critic, with a particular interest in the classical piano tradition. Dutton's initial interest in Helfgott was brought on by a requirement for a stimulating topic to discuss on a radio programme. Generally speaking then, Godlovitch and Dutton fulfilled ideally the necessary qualities of academically-oriented critics as interviewees with their personal interest in music and academic engagement with aesthetics, combined with their already openly-argued positionings on Helfgott.

The choice of the three remaining interview subjects, all oriented within the media side of criticism, was also straightforward. My initial interest in David Helfgott as a potential thesis topic had been sparked by the broadcasting of a radio programme in which Paul Bushnell made a short but dense examination of the controversy that was, at that stage, at a peak (Bushnell 1997a). It was also Bushnell that organised the debate between Godlovitch and Dutton mentioned above (Bushnell 1997b). Bushnell does not perceive himself as a “critic” but as an journalist of the arts, thus I believed he was able to offer a distinctive and relevant perspective on the Helfgott debate in that he could provide an overview of all happenings. Bushnell’s job title is ‘Spoken Features Producer’ for Radio New Zealand, New Zealand’s publicly owned and subsidised radio network. He is the writer and presenter of ‘Art’s Week’, a weekly presentation covering issues in the arts’ world on National Radio.¹ His background is not in music: with an MA in English focusing on theatre, he has taught, written and acted in drama, functioned as a theatre and opera critic and as an occasional reviewer for the *Listener* and *Music New Zealand*.

Finally, it was apparent from the outset that a vital voice that must be heard was that of the newspaper music critic, for it was such critics that were rendered so obvious and visible by their often harsh reviews of Helfgott’s concerts. In a small society such as New Zealand, I was aware that the highly regarded professional critic was a rare breed, but in the selection of two for interviewing, this was a prerequisite. John Button is a Wellington-based writer, and was an obvious choice as, in his role as principal music critic with the *Dominion* newspaper, he had reviewed Helfgott’s 1997 Wellington Concert. Button has also worked for EMI in Australia, acted as an outside consultant for Phonogram, and owned and ran businesses importing and selling recordings. He has been a critic with the *Dominion* since 1983. With a B.Mus. from Victoria University and a background as a pianist, Button has also become involved in the recording industry, acting as producer and editor on a number of CDs including recordings by the pianist Michael Houston.

The other music critic, Ian Dando, had not attended any of Helfgott’s concerts in New Zealand. However, I did not consider that this devalued his opinions on Helfgott and the surrounding controversies; rather it potentially raised an equally pertinent question: why did he not attend? Dando is a music critic writing for *Music New Zealand* and *Canzona*, New Zealand’s two principal classical music periodicals; and is the South Island music critic for the *Listener*. Before its closure, he was music critic with the Christchurch’s *Star* newspaper. He has an B.Mus with honours and a LRSM in piano, and has been employed by the Canterbury College of Education, teaching guitar. Thus with Dando rounding off the list, the choice of these five interviewees succeeded in giving adequate representation to both academic- and media-oriented criticism.

Interview Methodology and Process

Organisation of the interviews, once the names of those I wished to talk to were established, was begun with letters sent out in November 1998 to each of the potential interviewees; these letters also functioned as a information sheet by giving a brief explanation of the thesis topic and why I wished to speak with them. Having gained agreement from all five, the interviews were scheduled for February 1999. Ian Dando was interviewed in Christchurch on the 16th; Stan Godlovitch and Denis Dutton were interviewed the following day in the same city. With a shift of location to Wellington for the final two, I interviewed Paul Bushnell on the 25th and John Button the next day. The length of interviews varied from one and a half hours to three hours, with the conversations being recorded on tape, supplemented by the taking of brief notes.²

The conversations were conducted in the format of 'in-depth, open-ended interviews', one of the three main techniques of qualitative data gathering (Patton 1990: 10). The power of using the in-depth, open-ended interview lies in its ability to address topics and areas not covered in existing writings: this was especially relevant for the gathering of opinions and information on contextual issues surrounding Helfgott. The interviews' structure was guided, as is typical of qualitative interviewing techniques, by a pre-scheduled interview sheet. Included as Appendix III is a copy of the general interview guide used.

Such interview guides, according to Tolich and Davidson, aim at 'tap(ping) into the informant's knowledge with good questions, themes, and prompts' (1999: 109). As stated by Tolich and Davidson, 'each... interview builds on previous... interviews to create a depth of insight into one or more aspects of social life' (1999: 108). Thus I was able to review and reformat the interview guide between each interview, tailoring it to the specific situation, and improving on areas not fully developed while removing topics that appeared irrelevant. In organising and conducting these interviews, I already had specific areas and topics that I wished to cover. While I was aware of the need for flexibility and granting much of the control to the interviewee, the role of interviewer as a "blank canvas" was irrelevant for this style of research. This was not an ethnography where 'the mundane, not the newsworthy, is where our interests lie' (Tolich and Davidson 1999: 108). Rather the aim was what Adams and Schvaneveldt call the 'focused interview'.

The interviewer comes to the situation with goals in mind, objectives to be attained, and the questions to be used in accomplishing these purposes. The researcher is informed and knowledgeable about the focus of the interview and this enables the interviewer to guide, direct, and interpret the process to achieve the express purpose of the focused interview, namely, to focus research attention on the background and

experience of the respondent as related to the purpose of the study (Adams and Schvaneveldt 1991: 214).

Turning to the actual structure of the interview guide (Appendix III): as is usual in such interviews, the first section was a short introduction to the research I was carrying out, and what I hoped we would examine in the interview. Following this the interview proper began with a number of basic questions about the actual interviewee; as the jobs and roles of the interviewees varied, specific questions were aimed at each group (i.e. philosophers, critics, and arts' journalist). Such questions not only gave an understanding of their backgrounds but also acted as 'introductory questions' which are seen as an ideal way of encouraging the subjects to talk about the topic under discussion (Tolich and Davidson 1999: 109).

The interview schedule then moved onto cover the three main themes that I had created: music criticism; aesthetics and taste; and Helfgott. The first of these, music criticism, was aimed at finding out the interviewees' opinions on criticism in the classical music world. The focus was on the purpose and role of criticism; it also covered more general points of what one looks for in a performance and the origins of standards. The second theme, aesthetics and taste, was to place music criticism in its wider context, and directed at discovering what the interviewees thought music criticism was based on. What is the aesthetic? What is taste? How do they interact? Finally, the third theme dealt specifically with the Helfgott Phenomenon, teasing out and elucidating their thoughts and views on Helfgott, his playing, and the reasons for his successes and failures.

The interview guide proved useful, indeed vital, in the actual conducting of the interviews. However, the operative word in this context is a 'guide': In the realities of the interview situation it is well nigh impossible to stick closely to a fixed schedule of questions and topics. All the interviewees were talkative and articulate, and the conversations ranged widely in an order often considerably different from that set out in the guide. This was not a large problem as the guide was thus able to function as a check list, with points being marked off as they were covered, thus enabling full coverage of the relevant topics.

Much is written about the influence the interviewer brings to the interview proceedings. Tolich and Davidson suggest that 'the researcher assumes a role in which he or she knows very little and is in the research setting to learn' (1999: 6). As suggested above, however, with the 'focused interview' such an approach is not particularly helpful. With the emphasis on reflexivity so common in modern research, it would be ridiculous to assume that I could enter the field as the proverbial *tabula rasa*. With an upbringing heavily steeped in classical music and with years at university studying sociology, my background obviously had a heavy bearing on the interviews. As Holstein and Gubrium suggest, 'background

knowledge in *any* research circumstance, involving *all types* of interviewers and respondents, provides direction and precedent' (1995: 46). The questions I asked, how I structured them, my interactions with the interviewees: all these are so influenced. Yes, I was partaking in these interviews to gain the opinions of the five critics, but to suggest that my own opinions and thoughts did not play a role in gaining these opinions would be dishonest. From the outset of all interviews, encouraging dialogue between interviewer and interviewee was the goal. I do not believe that such personal involvement reduces the value of the information gained; indeed, if anything, such exchanges can produce more interesting results, especially considering the focus was on gaining the critics' *opinions*.

Once all the interviews were complete, transcription was carried out. Full transcriptions of the whole interview were not made; rather, as suggested by Fetterman, an editing process took place in which extraneous material was not transcribed (in Tolich and Davidson 1999: 123). Also, my prime interest was in the substantive content of what was said by the subjects. Thus transcription did not follow the more precise guidelines that recommend noting pauses, 'ums' and 'ers' and relevant body language; rather, the transcriptions are a textual realisation of the subjects' verbal utterances as relevant for the thesis. There are, of course, exceptions to this; most notably the use of sarcasm which, if not noted, can easily reverse the apparent meaning. With the completed transcriptions, categories were established in which to sort the data, with much of it being discarded at this stage. These categories were continually refined and adapted, while at the same time I was settling on a the thesis' final form. During this time it became apparent that the interviews were unable to provide relevant commentary from *all* interviewees on *all* topics; here the value of the secondary sources was shown. These sources proved vital in "plugging the gaps" of the interview data. The use of interview material has been used mainly in direct quote form.³

Conclusion

The sociological investigation undertaken by this thesis focuses specifically on the substantial gap between critical and public reaction to David Helfgott's resurrected career as a professional pianist. This critic-audience distancing is scrutinised by examining the reaction of New Zealand music critics to the Phenomenon and surrounding issues: in achieving such a focus, it was decided that direct, face-to-face interviews were the most appropriate source of critical opinions. While coverage of the New Zealand critical response to the Phenomenon did exist, such texts were limited in scope: interviews, it was believed, offered an ideal strategy to elucidate on these writings, also enabling a concentration on the areas most pertinent to the thesis' focus.

The use of interviews raises concerns over subjectivity, representativeness and the value of qualitative data. While the decision to concentrate specifically on critics located in New Zealand can be attacked for limiting the focus and potentially not providing wide coverage, I am confident that the choice of interviewees successfully addressed the wide spectrum of opinion evoked by Helfgott. As has been noted above, the issue of interviewer bias is a concern commonly raised over qualitative data gathering techniques: in this thesis, this has been dealt with by reflexive admissions of my own positioning as both a musician and student of sociology. The very purpose of holding interviews was to gain opinions on specific areas of concern: it was my existing knowledge base that enabled the informed 'focused interview' format to function.

The substantial data gleaned from the five interviews proved invaluable in terms of shaping this thesis around the Helfgott Phenomenon, enabling a full examination of the critical response to Helfgott and the wider issues surrounding him, with a special emphasis on the construction of artistic value. As the following chapter argues, it is on this issue of artistic value that the division between critics and audience appears to be based.

Notes

¹ This is the programme on which both Helfgott programmes were aired. Bushnell describes 'the mission of *Art's Week*, the particular programme in to which most of my energy goes in to, is to reflect what's happening critically within the area of culture in New Zealand'.

² My thanks must be noted here to Massey University's Graduate Research Fund for providing financial help that enabled these interviews to be carried out.

³ Please note the specific format that the use of quotes take. Any quote taken from additional sources is given with its year; those listing only author are taken from the interview transcripts. Within quotes from the transcripts, the use of square brackets indicates both questions asked by myself and interpolations of missing text or small changes made to improve comprehension.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRITICS STRIKE BACK

Introduction

The rise (and eventual fall) of David Helfgott caused a major controversy in the arts' world as has been made explicit in chapter two; this chapter examines that controversy from a specifically New Zealand perspective. I am not suggesting that there is a totally distinctive or unique local outlook; indeed it has been suggested that the New Zealand reaction serves as a replica in miniature of the world-wide controversy.¹ New Zealand was the first port of call for Helfgott's 1997 World Tour: as in all other countries that Helfgott visited, the New Zealand media were quick to market his story. The real-life man made famous by the film *Shine* made his way into magazines, newspapers and put in an appearance with the Kiwi institution that is Paul Holmes. The public were just as fast to become attached to Helfgott – his 1997 concerts in this country were sell-outs – but it was also here that the first highly critical reviews of the tour were written, setting a pattern of what was to follow Helfgott throughout his tour.

The sheer volume and venom of the dialogue between all those who considered that they had a stake in the controversy was quite remarkable, especially when one considers that it had been sparked off by a classical musician. Letters to the editor, syndicated articles, television and radio debates and even the "academisation" of the Helfgott affair with the publishing of a symposium in the journal *Philosophy and Literature* were all products of this debate. This chapter focuses on the critical response to the Helfgott Phenomenon: the attitude of critics towards the man, his playing and his popularity will be covered, as will the critics' attitude towards each other. This is not to suggest that the "regular" consumers of Helfgott – the audience of his concerts, the purchasers of his recordings – are irrelevant. However, in keeping with my focus on the critical perspective, the "fans" will be examined through the eyes of the critics. It must be emphasised that it is the thoughts, comments and ideas expressed by the five critics interviewed for this thesis, all living and working in New Zealand, that structure this chapter.² It will become apparent throughout this chapter that while points of similarity amongst these critics do exist, the differences between them are just as obvious and marked. That the critics' viewpoints on Helfgott are sometimes contradictory, sometimes convergent. This chapter endeavours to tease out these points of concurrence and variance.

The starting point when examining David Helfgott, many critics would claim, must be an examination of Helfgott's *musical* value. There is considerable agreement amongst the critics as to Helfgott's musical abilities (or lack thereof). The critics concur that Helfgott fails as a professional concert pianist on musical grounds. This pronouncement of failure is categorised under three areas: technique, faithfulness and behaviour, and in all three Helfgott is perceived as lacking. While there is agreement over Helfgott's musical (dis)ability, all critics accept that there were many in the audience who gained considerable enjoyment from the very same recitals they so damned. That audience and critic could have such disparate judgements on the same man raises in the eyes of the critics a perceived distance between themselves and the audience. This chapter moves on to analyse the five critics' analysis of the critic–audience distancing. It is proposed that the very points of reference and comparison that are so important to the critics in forming a judgement of Helfgott (in essence that he is a “poor” player) may not be features that are important for his fans. The critics agree that to analyse the audiences' apparent infatuation with Helfgott, and to understand their pleasure in his playing, a vastly different set of criteria are required.

These criteria I have titled “social value”. As was the case with musical value, once again, the critics come to considerable agreement over the specific qualities that brought hordes of adoring fans flocking to Helfgott's recitals. Primarily they agreed that the film *Shine* was the principal lure, with its attractive themes, including those of redemption, genius and madness. Heavy marketing also played a vital role in forming Helfgott's success. While there is an acceptance amongst the critics that these non-musical or social values were vital elements in the audiences' understanding and appreciation of Helfgott, there remains considerable differences in analysing the specifics and correctness of these values. The audiences are analysed both as ghoulish freak-watchers and celebrators of the human spirit; as unrefined souls and expressive individuals. Such variance in analyses point towards fundamental differences in the critics' attitudes towards these two forms of value – musical and social – and the interaction between them. It is this tension between musical and social value, that so infuses and even personifies the Helfgott saga, that will be taken up and explored in chapter five.

The Critical Conception of Musical Value

While Helfgott was receiving full halls and popular plaudits, critical reaction was far from positive or complimentary. Indeed, reviews in newspapers and magazines were nearly all critical of Helfgott. Significant were those in the US and UK, in which critics were occupied

in “trashing” Helfgott and his playing in often extremely harsh and vitriolic reviews (as covered in chapter two). His three concerts of the 1997 New Zealand tour were all reviewed in the local newspapers: as a point of comparison these reviews were relatively complimentary and mild compared to those published overseas. In New Zealand, of the two music critic/reviewers I interviewed, it was only Button that attended and reviewed the 1997 Helfgott recital; Dando avoided attending as he ‘thought it might be a dud one, so I slid out of [it]’. Interestingly not one review of Helfgott’s second trip to NZ the following year was published in the major dailies – the possible reasons why this may have occurred are discussed below.

In critiquing Helfgott, ‘the pertinent questions are, How good a pianist is David Helfgott? Where does he stand in relation to the tradition of pianists...?’ (Dutton 1999: 5,6). For the critics it is on these issues that Helfgott must, as with all other classical musicians, be judged. Such questions immediately raise others that also require answers, including: who determines who is a good player? On what criteria? While these may appear difficult issues to resolve, they are the very tasks that critics have set themselves to fulfil. The answer to the first of these questions is that there is apparently general agreement from New Zealand critics that Helfgott’s playing fails to meet the widely accepted criteria expected from a professional classical performer. That is not to say that critics have avoided compliments altogether: Button accepted Helfgott was capable of producing ‘poetic moments’ (Button 1997).³ Even Dutton, speaking of the 1998 concert, admitted that ‘there was this one thing he played, well it was alright, not great but quite adequate’.

However, such compliments are insignificant in comparison to the considerable space that was spent by critics covering and justifying the claim of Helfgott’s musical incompetence.⁴ Even Godlovitch, a staunch defender of Helfgott, opens his contribution to *Philosophy and Literature* with the acceptance that Helfgott is a ‘sloppy piano player’ (1997: 368) and ‘I’m not denying for the least that standards are important’ (in Bushnell 1997b). Button suggests we should expect Helfgott’s incompetence: ‘Helfgott isn’t a very good pianist, I mean how could he be? It’s unreasonable for anyone to go along and expect him to be reasonable. We’re talking about a person who isn’t capable of the sorts of disciplines required’. Button, in his review of the 1997 Wellington concert, suggested the recital offered ‘an interesting, yet hazardous, musical journey’; that ‘throughout the whole programme one was aware of... a trained pianist through a distorting lens’. Dutton, attending the 1997 concert, was ‘very disturbed by what I saw, and thought the piano playing was extremely poor’.

Overall, the critics’ verdict was virtually unanimous: David Helfgott was (and remains) a bad player. The negative response of the critics detailing Helfgott’s musical failures can be

separated under three main categories: taken in turn these musical deficiencies revolve around aspects of technique, faithfulness and behaviour. It is apparent that these three categories all relate directly to a specific group or participant in the music world, namely, and in turn, the composer; the performer; and the audience.⁵ While Helfgott's failures within these categories are treated separately here for the sake of clarity, it remains in some way an artificial separation as the critics agree that the three are interwoven (though there is no such unanimous agreement over the degree of this inter-relatedness, as will become apparent at a later stage).

To take the first of these categories: technique. The term as used here refers to the technical aspects of the "art" of piano playing; perhaps this could be described as the possessing of the specific 'skills' required for fulfilling the requirements of the work. The importance of technique is stressed by Dando: 'I assume technique is OK – if it's not it doesn't matter how intelligent an interpreter they are, you're down the drain. If you haven't got the technique, you haven't got a vehicle to put your interpretation through'. Helfgott is without doubt, in the eye of the critics, a failure in this regard. It has been stated in chapter two that Helfgott had the potential to succeed as a concert pianist when a young student: that he has regressed from this at a technical level is universally acknowledged. Says Button: 'His fingers still do 70% of what they did for him as a student: he hasn't progressed from there in any intellectual sense. He's relying on the synapses in the brain that taught him at that time. His playing is pretty sloppy'.

While admission is made that Helfgott has periods of technical brilliance when performing, nevertheless a number of technical failures are listed by the critics. Button claims that 'technically difficult moments usually meant a slowing down and an increase in emphasis' (Button 1997). It is sometimes apparent that the music is technically beyond Helfgott – quite simply, there are occasionally too many notes for Helfgott to fit in at the "correct" speed. The result can be either, as mentioned by Button, a change of tempo in order to accommodate all the notes, or sometimes even missing out notes altogether. Dynamics – the appropriate application of loud and soft playing to a passage – are another area in which Helfgott's technical skills are questioned.⁶ Button states that 'the dynamic structure of the playing was completely individual' (Button 1997). More effort has been spent by overseas writers and critics in detailing Helfgott's technical lapses, with many suggesting Helfgott's technique is unacceptably poor, some comparing his technique to that of an amateur. Dutton, critiquing Helfgott's recording of a Chopin *Etude*, claims there is 'a sense that it falls apart, that it's incoherent, that there's a sense that he's starting and stopping' (in Bushnell 1997b).

Overall then it is apparent that, technique-wise, Helfgott is seen by the majority of critics as a musical failure. Their logic for such a judgement inevitably rests on Helfgott's ability in comparison to other professional concert pianists. Godlovitch puts the comparator thus: a 'pantheon of great players', a 'canon' of highly esteemed musicians. Dutton argues a comparison in these terms: 'It seems to me that the critics have every right to evaluate his performance against the standards that are set by Ashkenazy, Michelangeli, Hoffmann, Rubenstein and Horowitz'. Even Godlovitch accepts 'that against that particular tradition he may not stack up particularly well'⁷ (both in Bushnell 1997b).

Undoubtedly most New Zealand critics would agree with the belief that Helfgott does *not* have the technical abilities required of a professional concert pianist. Not only does he fail technically, they would argue, but also at an interpretative level. Interpretation must be one of the most contentious constituents of music: while technical mastery is usually presumed at the professional level, interpretative issues are forever being debated and discussed. Interpretation involves those elements brought to the performance by the performer themselves.⁸ In the case of Helfgott, much of the analysis of his playing has involved a critique of its interpretative aspects. Generally, such a critique is based around the general notion of Helfgott's playing being "unfaithful". Unfaithful to what? For most if not all critics, the composer holds pride of place in the hierarchy of a performance, thus when Helfgott is seen as ignoring the wishes of the composer, fundamental rules of performance have been breached.⁹

For considerable numbers of musicians and critics, performance is (or more accurately should be) based around the concept of reflecting 'composers' intentions'. This notion states that the performance should reflect as closely as possible the directions and instructions laid down by the composer, both in terms of specific issues such as dynamics and tempi, and more general stylistic concerns such as getting the "feel" of the piece.¹⁰ Such a view is held by Dando: 'David Helfgott is merely the middleman between the composer and me. If he's a very faithful middleman, alright, I'd probably be moved by it. If he's not, I'm not interested'. It must be noted that not all critics place such emphasis on the composer's intentions as the prime criteria for judgement. Button accepts this is one approach (and one of which he approves) but emphasises that 'the key word in a performer doing something is that they *think* this is what the composer intended'. Dutton apparently goes further in his rejection of the dominance of the composers' wishes: 'It's a highly authoritarian thing. They somehow think the composer has authority, and they think their favourite pianist has authority. But that kind of authoritarianism drives me crazy in music: I'm against that'. So where does that leave Helfgott?

No matter what the disagreements between these critics in terms of the foundational basis for their criticism, all agree on the point that Helfgott fails from the interpretative angle. Dutton, instead of looking towards composer's intentions, turns to something wider: 'the authority I have is everything I know about music'. It is on this knowledge base, built up through experience, that Dutton can judge Helfgott's interpretative skills as poor, 'and on the authority of that, I can say that's a shitty performance of the *Waldstein*'. If Helfgott's performance of the *Waldstein* or any other work can be labelled interpretatively unacceptable, what then are the boundaries that surround this? All critics are quick to make the point that there is not one single correct way to perform a piece: 'you can't be too dogmatic: you can say this is one of many different interpretations', as Dando says. Godlovitch agrees that there is such a range, but 'presumably in the Helfgott case they're saying "well, there's this range of possible ways of playing this; Helfgott falls outside it, doesn't even come close"'.

While Helfgott's failures, in the eyes of the critics, are mostly of a directly musical nature, deeply integrated within many critics' discourse is a concern over Helfgott's behaviour; a concern that his behaviour is anti-musical in that it draws attention away from the music. Such is obvious by an examination of the many reviews of his concerts, both in New Zealand and overseas. The critical contents of a standard review concentrate on the musical elements of a concert, the very issues covered above (namely commentary on technical and interpretative issues). And while reviews of Helfgott's recitals do mention this, an uncommon amount of space is taken up by extra-musical concerns. Most disquieting to the critics is undoubtedly Helfgott's 'atonal vocal obbligato' (Button 1997).¹¹

While the standard expectations of the classical music environment is silence from both audience and performer, this is occasionally breached by the performer. Most famously, the eccentric Canadian pianist Glen Gould was well known for his vocal additions.¹² Dutton's response is quick and to the point: such comparisons 'are merely offensive' as Gould's 'technical and artistic accomplishments are beyond serious question' (Dutton 1997b: 340).¹³ Whether or not one accepts this argument (does this assume that 'ability' excuses erratic and idiosyncratic behaviour?), there is certainly agreement from most critics as to the invasion that Helfgott's noises make into the appreciation of the music itself. One's focus is drawn away from the object under question (namely the musical work) by Helfgott's noisy additions. Not only that, but the very point that they are atonal (in that his noises are not associated musically to the work) is seen as an interference to the actual musical structure of the work being performed. Thus it is apparent that Helfgott's behaviour would completely destroy the situation sought by Dando: the transparency of the music, the invisibility of the performer. Dando is apparently arguing for a decreasing emphasis on the actual artist:

What I want is a communication by that intermediary who is so true that I forget there's an intermediary there. I'm in direct contact with whoever the composer is, because he's got such an insight into him he seems to disappear, and there's the music.

What Helfgott offers must be seen as the antithesis of Dando's requirements, namely the primacy and foregrounding of the performer. Continually "in-your-face", there is apparently no possible way that "Helfgott" the performer can be ignored. That is undoubtedly the biggest concern for these critics – too much Helfgott, not enough music.

Does such an analysis hold true for the audiences' attitude as well? Such a claim would undoubtedly be speculation, but it is certainly intimated by the critics that the audiences' experience and understanding of Helfgott is far removed from that of theirs. For the critics reach general agreement that, according to the conventional criteria of musical judgement, Helfgott is a failure as a professional pianist. A failure on technical, interpretative and behavioural grounds. Yet it was apparent to all that such a judgement was not reached by many in the audience of Helfgott's concerts; that audience members seemed to enjoy his performances *despite* Helfgott's flouting of those criteria of judgement. Such a situation appears to the critics to position the audience as a group that does not accept these criteria as appropriate. This acknowledged breakdown in the acceptance of these musical criteria as universals raises other issues in the minds of the critics. In an attempt to understand these issues, the critics shift to an analysis of the audience. It is this examination of the audience from the critics' perspective that we now consider.

The Critical Conception of the Audience

While the critics all share some belief in the propriety of judging Helfgott musically, and finding that he falls short of the requirements expected of the professional musician, they are also aware that those in the audience were not necessarily interested in or accepting of those critical judgements. That for Helfgott's fans, claim the critics, such standards of performance were apparently not relevant. Such an acknowledged disregard for the widely held and accepted "rules" of judgement lead the critics to analyse this situation more closely. Specifically, they turn to an examination of the audience. What sort of person, if one could generalise, appreciated Helfgott? What was their response to Helfgott's playing at a musical level? This section offers the critics' answers to these questions.

As critical reviews of Helfgott's concerts began to appear, audiences in New Zealand still turned out in substantial numbers for his 1997 recitals: Button reported that 'the hall was

packed as I have never seen it' for the Wellington concert (Button 1997). The response of the audiences towards Helfgott was generally favourable – indeed many were apparently in raptures.¹⁴ In order to understand both this enormous popularity and the ecstatic response of many in the audience, the critics must first decide who exactly these fans were. Most commonly claimed is that the background of Helfgott's audiences was not typical for a classical recital: the audience for any artist is rarely homogenous, and in the case of Helfgott backgrounds appeared to vary widely. 'The big thing about the concert was that your normal concert-goer wasn't there', states Button.

It would be a generalisation to claim that all of the audience came from a similar background, particularly in New Zealand where the negative reviews had not had a chance to damage Helfgott's reputation (being located at the beginning of the first tour). In this country a number of experienced classical buffs apparently attended: some claim such people were encouraged by the positive and exaggerated terms used by the promoters.¹⁵ The reaction of this group of "experts" has been reported in vastly different ways: Dando claims 'they were bitterly disillusioned, they were angry'; while for Godlovitch 'there were a lot of people who are musically refined' who appreciated Helfgott. However, such people, it is accepted, were a small minority: most of the critics accept that many, if not a majority, of the audience were relatively inexperienced in classical music.¹⁶

By suggesting this general inexperience in classical music it is potentially too easy, according to some of the critics, to downplay the role that the music played for the audience. Godlovitch, in particular, claims that many in the audiences had an intensely emotional response to the concerts: 'This is a case where people were really moved to their marrow by a musical performance. A lot of people said they'd never had such a musical experience, and these can be very magical occasions when you go to a concert or play like that; you remember it for the rest of your life'. Button proposes that most in the audience of the concert that he attended were happy with what they had received from the recital: 'most people thought they'd got what they had come for'. Godlovitch agrees: 'The audiences are indeed getting their money's worth, in fact far more so than they might otherwise be getting judging from the favourable responses that they've given to Helfgott' (in Bushnell 1997b). Dutton disagrees, strongly arguing that:

I don't think that people were moved by Helfgott... that's not evidence that they were moved. That's evidence that they might have thought they were moved and might have wanted to defend him against critics and write letters to the editor in the press saying that awful Dutton, and that awful critic of your paper saying these nasty things about this guy... [rather] they were ignorant and to some extent deluded. Deluded because they were mistaking hearing great music with hearing a great

performance of great music. They weren't hearing a great performance; they were hearing great music. And that's a confusion that is very easy for people to make. In this case, great music was not completely destroyed by a third-rate performer.

Thus Dutton argues it was more the sheer greatness of the music that caused the emotional response in Helfgott's audiences than Helfgott's musical contribution. Button rejects this analysis, and suggests that the reasons that many in the audience attended a Helfgott recital were purely performer-oriented. In response to Dutton, he says 'I'd like to think that was true... [however] most audiences go for the performer and nothing's changed.... No-one went to that concert because they wanted to hear the *Waldstein*, not a single, solitary person'. Thus according to Button, the place of Helfgott as the prime motivation for the audiences' attendance is little different from the reasons for attending a concert by a typical classical performer.¹⁷

Even though there is debate over the reasons for attendance, one area in which the critics are united is over a willingness to accept that Helfgott may have had a positive result through introducing a number of people to classical music.

It seems to me that one of the most important things about Helfgott is that in the Christchurch Town Hall there were some number of people, I'm sure it was more than one and less than 3000, who were having their minds opened to great music for the first time. Went out and bought his CD, but then liked it so much they bought another CD of another pianist and one of Beethoven symphonies. To me, that's the most important contribution he'll make (Dutton).

There is no hard proof that Helfgott's popularity (or indeed that of any other classical musician) has had such a result, but Button offers circumstantial evidence to support it. Speaking of the Rachmaninov *Third Piano Concerto*, he suggests Helfgott's recording is the best selling version, and 'I guess in a way, it's popularised it for a lot of people'. After reviewing a reissue of another recording of the same work, 'the record company has had an unprecedented run on it. It may have been in people's minds because of the publicity from Helfgott'. This role of Helfgott as an opening into the world of classical music often has elements of condescension, of educating the illiterate "peasants" into the ways of true culture.

While the reasons behind the audiences' attendance will be forever debated, there is general agreement amongst the critics that the musically-oriented standards being applied by the audience were considerably different (some would claim less severe) than those used by music critics. Such an audience's lack of interest in and knowledge of classical

music, its values and standards, it is agreed, will often mean that they will find performances of a lower standard more acceptable than the critic. That they will be less concerned over issues of either technique or interpretation. Godlovitch admits this: 'I guess that critics tend to be somewhat more demanding in their expectations than the general members of audiences'. Button feels this was the case with Helfgott's audience: 'the important thing about that concert was that there was very little critical judgement of his playing'. The critics' reaction to this lack of 'critical judgement' by the audience varies widely. Is it acceptable for an audience to enjoy a performer such as Helfgott, a performer that has been demolished so severely by the critics? Button replies in the affirmative:

I don't have all [that] much of a problem with it to be perfectly frank. I suppose if you apply very high-minded standards, you can say it's reprehensible, but that's up to the public to judge. If the people who went to the concert enjoyed it, and they appeared to, then I don't really have a problem. If they're not musically sophisticated, well so bloody what?

Indeed, on the surface there was a unanimous insistence from all those interviewed that Helfgott's audiences have the right to form their own opinion, showing agreement with the classic maxim: *De gustibus non est disputandum* (concerning taste there is no disputing).¹⁸ Dando states: 'what right have I got to put the damper on something which [they] paid good money to attend? What right have I got to ruin [their] enjoyment?'. Dutton, in a somewhat sarcastic tone, acknowledged that 'if they say "even if he's not a very good pianist I'm still inspired by it" I don't think anyone can have an argument with that... one of the great things about democracy is that pig-ignorance is allowed'. However, as Dutton's remarks suggest and other critics have claimed, behind this democratic façade of music criticism lies a considerably more belligerent attitude towards Helfgott's fans. While talking of this openness of value, some critics continue to dismiss the audiences for their approval of such a substandard pianist. This high-handed attitude is reflected in comments by Dutton (e.g. that Helfgott's fans were 'deluded') and Dando (e.g. the 'audience is not a true modicum of what happens'). Why is there such an apparent discrepancy and even contradiction embedded within the comments made by the critics? One could possibly suggest that this pretence at all-inclusiveness is an attempt by these critics to avoid appearing too authoritarian and elitist.

One critic suggests that this view of "critic as despot" has already been voiced by the audiences. Godlovitch claims that the audiences 'are quite happy to say "not only are you [the critics] wrong, but you've insulted what we've considered to be a marvellous performance, the most moving musical experience we've had, and further more you've had the audacity to label all of us as peasants because we can't see what you see"'. Dando, from the position of a music critic, states 'that's when people get annoyed. They felt it was

good, and they felt they were ripped off and they blame the critic and think “we can’t be wrong: we all clapped it, therefore the critic must be out of step with all of us”. Such an assertion brings to the attention of the critics issues surrounding their role and power. Of considerable significance here are questions including: who is the critic writing for? Are they representing the average classical concert-goer, or the audience of a specific concert?

Dando, ever the defender of the critic, accepts (and even expects) this gulf between the audience and critic. He places critics as superior judges:

The public can be taken up by peripheral things, but then you’re looking beyond that, so you’ve got to shut yourself off from audience reaction as a critic, because the audience can deceive you... You’ve got to write well above the level of audience perception, I mean that’s what’s expected of a critic, so you bring your audience up to a higher standard of what they should expect. By the time you are there, you are a bit further up.

With Helfgott, Godlovitch believes it was exactly this arrogant attitude that caused the insuring debate.¹⁹ Critics started realising they weren’t representing [the audience] and then started putting themselves forward in their own self-defence as determinants and I don’t think this went off very well... and audiences in this instance are not all that smitten with the notion of [the critic as] arbiter’. That the audience turned on the critics for their “high-handed” attitude once again emphasises, in the minds of the critics, the distance between themselves and the audience. Godlovitch believes Helfgott was a classic case when this gap became an issue: ‘generally speaking, I suppose criticism survives as a respectable practice because, in large measure, there tends to be a pretty close coincidence between what the critics like and what the audiences like’. His point being that such a ‘close coincidence’ did not occur over Helfgott. In the attempt by the critics to analyse and make sense of this distance between audience and critic, I suggest that a new set of criteria are introduced by the critics; that an accurate comprehension of the audiences’ infatuation with Helfgott can never be accurately answered by appealing solely to musical criteria. Rather, to understand the audience, the critics must turn to extra-musical or social facets of value. It is to the issues of social value that revolve around Helfgott that will be discussed next.

The Critical Conception of Social Value

It is widely accepted by the critics that while Helfgott fails for them as a pianist, audiences apparently cherished him. The critics also acknowledge that many in the audiences have little time or appreciation for the “rules” of judgement as used by the critics. It is in order to

understand these two points that the critics find it necessary to introduce into the equation other criteria for judgement, criteria far removed from those of musical value. Such criteria I have grouped under the title “social value”: various elements that the critics’ acknowledge played a vital role in the audiences’ infatuation with Helfgott. At this stage of the thesis I wish to situate “musical value” (which was discussed in the first section of this chapter) and “social value” as two different systems of evaluation. While the following chapter will put forward the argument that such a clean distinction is difficult, if not impossible to support, the introduction of “social value” in this chapter allows for the presentation of the critics’ reasoning for Helfgott’s success.

By the term “social value”, I am referring to all those elements that lie outside the world of music in some pure sense. Below, it will be shown that the critics agree that these elements – including the behaviour of Helfgott, films, and the public relations industry – played a vital role in producing Helfgott’s success, and were just as relevant in his eventual demise. While it is accepted by the critics that an appeal to social values is required in analysing the audience, there is considerable disagreement over the perceived “rightness” of such an understanding of Helfgott specifically, and classical music concerts generally. That social values may (and often do) take precedence over musical values is a highly contentious claim.

As stated in the first section of this chapter, some of the critics voiced concern over the behaviour of Helfgott on the concert platform. His vocal obligato and other idiosyncratic mannerisms, they claimed, were an unwelcome invasion that interrupted the flow and structure of the music, destroying their concentration and appreciation. That many in the audience were not so concerned over this matter is accepted by all the critics; indeed, it is claimed by all the critics that Helfgott’s behaviour was actually an *attractive* feature to a large number. Here they point to the obviously close relationship between Helfgott and his patrons, an emphasis on the interaction between producer and consumer. This was most notable in Helfgott’s undoubted “playing to the gallery”. The audiences’ participation in a typical recital would involve applause as the artist comes onto the stage, and again at the completion of each work. Helfgott’s audiences often took an alternative approach: ‘they applauded between movements... as cheers and clapping began, Helfgott would spring to his feet and bow... [then] shot back to the piano to play the last bars’ is how Dutton described his own experience of the phenomenon (1997b: 341). Such comments show Dutton’s obvious irritation with Helfgott’s willingness to break other conventions of the classical concert;²⁰ Dando concurs.

Not only was Helfgott's own behaviour questionable from Dutton's and Dando's position, but also the behaviour of the audience. It was through the interaction between audience and performer that something even more extreme was achieved. For Dutton, this closeness is a problem as it takes the form of a mutual admiration society that has little or no respect for the music. Helfgott's willingness to bow when applause breaks out in the middle of a work and other such behaviour is perceived as an unforgivable rupture in the workings of a classical concert.²¹ Godlovitch argues this:

One of the things [the critics are] annoyed and distracted about is what they took to be his unmannerly mannerisms: players are not supposed to somehow to develop some personal interaction with their audiences. This is thought somehow to be a distraction from the business at hand, which is the playing, the sound. I thought they thought him as some kind of buffoon violating all the cannons of etiquette and good taste that are supposed to accompany a very dignified and formal occasion such as a recital, and recitals are like affairs of state: very, very strict rules of conduct and behaviour, very strong partition between listener and player.

Godlovitch puts forward that such perceived breaches of etiquette may say more about the exclusivity of classical music than unacceptable behaviour by Helfgott and fans. 'I think they've basically sanitised themselves out of business. I think people actually have to suppress their feelings when they go to concerts. Maybe in this respect because of that the Helfgott thing is a kind of embarrassment because presumably people let it all hang out, as he did. Kind of gave leave that that was OK'.

There's only a sense in which you have this guy Helfgott breaking the rules, unless the rules have a kind of authority and finality of chess. I find the kind of people who are trying to sustain what they take to be their favoured standards of correctness as exclusive, I just don't see any warrant for this. I can see a historical explanation, I can see a sociological account in terms of the preservation of certain divisions in terms of class structure, but underneath that I don't see anything. So at that point, I guess, Helfgott's working, and working obviously very successfully... It's all the more sad that people are resenting this as a violation of something that's sacred. It's like pissing in the church.

Button is also willing to accept that Helfgott's individualism and rapport with the audience is a major part of his attraction, partially as such interaction is extremely uncommon in the contemporary classical world. He suggests that 'there isn't any question that uniformity in performance and a certain blandness of performance is inevitable... what they turnout is chromium-plated kids who are clones of one-another... The musical scene isn't as replete as it used to be with real personality. Whatever else you could say about Helfgott, he is a

personality'. Godlovitch's suggestion, and one that Button echoes, is that it is *precisely* Helfgott's differences and distinctions as a performer that makes him attractive to his audience. This is especially pertinent if one takes into consideration the widely accepted point that classical music concerts no longer enjoy the same support they once did.²² The reasons why this may be are forever being debated, but it is put forward by Godlovitch that the classical music industry has had to adapt to cope with this reduction in support, partially relying on an appeal to a wider audience through various forms of popularisation. David Helfgott is an example of such a process.²³

Classical music for an audience that is, it is claimed, relatively new to this genre, is a complex event according to Bushnell, complicated by 'the codes and the social codes which surrounds it, and all the aura of specialness which surrounds going to a concert'. The highly formalised behaviour patterns of the classical concert are alien to such an audience; instead of following these patterns, Helfgott and his fans decide to ignore them.²⁴ While this can be dismissed by Dutton et al. as further proof of both the audiences' ignorance and Helfgott's arrogance, it can also be argued, as it is by Godlovitch, that it is this very release from such expected behaviour that appeals to many of his fans. 'I think it's the fact that [the live classical concert is] attracting fewer and fewer people begins to suggest that it's not satisfying whatever purpose it did, [as opposed to] the rock concert, where people can go into a frenzy when they like it' says Godlovitch.

For a usual performer to do something special to an audience, particularly a classical live performer, is harder now than it was before. That can be used in arguing what is so much the more remarkable about Helfgott, because he turned people on to music in the way that most people just can't. You'll go and applaud, and you know because it's expected; you go through the social ritual of the performance, and Helfgott seems to have broken through that, which is unusual. [A positive thing?] I would have thought so. What's possibly wrong with it?

That many in the audiences found Helfgott's behaviour appealing, as has been outlined above, does not however answer *why* it was specifically Helfgott that was attractive, nor *why* they turned up to see him in such large numbers. It is to answer these questions that critics seek out the one social aspect to which Helfgott owes his initial fame: the film *Shine*.

There is universal acceptance amongst the critics that the prime reason for the audiences' attendance at Helfgott's recitals was the association of Helfgott to *Shine*: 'they were people who had seen the movie and heard about him coming to town' (Dutton). As Godlovitch says 'the film came out before [Helfgott's popularity] and the film was enormously successful and particularly successful in Australasia...The people had a reason, having gone to the film, to

go and see and hear and watch the man in concert'. But why the need to see him? Various interpretations have been offered as to why Helfgott so appealed to an that they were encouraged to attend an event that they would usually have little interest in. Typically it is suggested that the concert experience was 'for a lot of the audiences, continuous with the film' (Godlovitch).²⁵ An extension to the film, a chance to further acquaint themselves with the Helfgott that they had discovered through the film; a warm, cute and child-like eccentric. To take part in a classic tale of 'early success, family tension, mental disintegration and eventual redemption through the love of a good woman' (Bushnell 1997b). Dutton suggests that 'by the time they were on their feet applauding, they had personally invested themselves in the concert hall extension of the *Shine* screenplay and had become a part of Helfgott's life story' (Dutton 1999c). Godlovitch concurs: the 'audience in this particular case actually gets to be part of the movie' (in Bushnell 1997b). Button tells of two women sitting next to him during Helfgott's Wellington concert:

Their whole reaction to Helfgott was entirely bound up with the film itself. They didn't have the faintest idea of whether he was a good pianist: to them he sounded marvellous... They loved it. Because he is like a little kid, that's the way the audience treated him like. They were willing him to succeed with anything he did.

Button suggests this reaction was typical for many in the audience: it was this image of *Shine's* Helfgott that the audience saw being replicated on the concert stage. As Bushnell puts it, the audience was looking at Helfgott 'through the lens of the film experience'.

For Dando, this connection and interrelation to the film simply gets in the way, destroying the actual purpose of the concert:

I've got to be moved through the music he plays, rather than be moved by the presence of a man and then harking back to the film and thinking "oh, poor chap". Confusing the circumstances of his life with what he is there to do, and that is to perform music.

However, under the surface of this attraction with the man of the film lies, the critics claim, even more than just an attraction to Helfgott. The power of the film lay in its heavy usage of, and reliance on, what was termed in chapter two the "genius" myth. This "romanticisation" of the man and music was integral to *Shine's*, and Helfgott's, success assert the critics. While the "genius" myth was primarily emphasised in *Shine*, it found continual (and successful) use in all other elements of the Helfgott Phenomeon, incorporated into marketing and publicity strategies, the biographies, et cetera. The genius myth is used in the music both associated with the film and Helfgott – that Helfgott's repertoire is dominated by works from the Romantic period, a period associated with feeling

and emotion, has a certain obvious logic. Dutton states that the emphasis placed on Rachmaninov's *Third Piano Concerto* in *Shine* is a further example of the genius myth in use. In the film it is made out that it is the most difficult of all piano pieces to perform; however Dutton states that 'the demonisation of the Rachmaninov *Third Piano Concerto* is, to any trained musician, an absurdity. None of the versions of the Rach 3 are impossible to play for anybody: there are much harder concertos for the piano'. It is suggested by the critics that many in the film's audience found attractive the obvious linkages between the real Helfgott, the Helfgott of the film, the music, and the concept of genius. Certainly, the critics argue, the film's success in portraying Helfgott as an appealing character – eccentric, even mad, a genius redeemed - produced an image that undoubtedly helped create the frenzy of purchasing tickets to his concerts.

Whether this image of Helfgott as mad genius is accurate is another issue, and an issue that many critics emphasise. As covered in chapter two, there is considerable debate over the accuracy of *Shine* as a true portrayal of Helfgott's life. These allegations only surfaced (to any large extent) after Helfgott was well into his world tour, and received scant media attention in this country.²⁶ The relevance of this controversy has much to do with the audience as it is bound up with the belief that *Shine* was indeed a true film (in essence, that the film was a "biopic"). When I asked Dutton how integral was a belief in *Shine* as a true story to the success of Helfgott's musical career he replied: 'I think it's absolutely fundamental. I think people believing the movie was a true story was crucial to their reaction'. Bushnell also believed that 'there's also the feeling that the film was true; I mean, I came out thinking "god, that father is an absolute bastard"'. Thus, they claim, film-goers believed that the man of the concert stage was the very same one depicted on the film: 'The difference is that [they] thought [they were] seeing [a] dramatization..., it wasn't just fiction' (Dutton 1999: 3).

Bushnell and Dutton do however differ in their belief that a knowledge of the 'very strongly competing versions of the same story' (as Bushnell puts it) would alter the audiences' attitude towards Helfgott. 'I do not know a person who believed in the Helfgott story who wasn't effected seriously by encountering the Margaret Helfgott opposing story... You cannot take that movie seriously and that piano playing seriously, and read the Margaret Helfgott book and say "I don't care, it's just a story"' says Dutton. Bushnell disagrees: 'the power of film as a medium to actually affect how people actually feel about things is incredibly strong; I don't think [knowledge of the other versions] would have shaken the belief of the average punter'. That there is even this debate over whether or not audiences' attitudes were altered by knowledge of the various "versions" of Helfgott's "story" highlights some fundamental issues of "truth"; of myth versus reality. Dutton's argument relies on a

knowledge (and acceptance) that the film is a heavily stylised version of the truth – Dutton goes even further in claiming the film omitted or falsified crucial facts. From this basis, he argues, audiences were duped into believing the “David Helfgott” seated on the piano stool in their hall was the very same “David Helfgott” seen in *Shine*.²⁷ Dutton is also concerned that the film’s portrayal of mental illness was unfaithful, that Geoffrey Rush’s portrayal of Helfgott in *Shine* offered a sanitised version (a ‘pleasantly engaging... presentation’) of the ‘far less charming’ realities of ‘borderline schizophrenia with manic episodes’. This sanitation of reality resulted in, says Dutton, many audience members being taken aback by the idiosyncratic and dominating behaviour of the “real” Helfgott, with his ‘uncontained chattering, groans and low snores’. This was shown in part, he claims, by the large numbers of people leaving at half time (1999: 2,3).

The people at his concerts put off by the realities of Helfgott’s behaviour were, however, still in a minority say the critics; according to their observations, large numbers of the audiences continued to be entranced by the man, his music and his story. Those who held onto their positive experience of the Helfgott concert receive a rather frosty response from two of the critics interviewed. Both Dutton’s and Dando’s perception is that such fans were those who continued to be “deluded” by the myth of *Shine*, “deluded” into thinking Helfgott was a good player.²⁸ These critics question the basis of the interest shown in Helfgott: Dando labels Helfgott’s fans as ‘sentimental sympathisers who regarded him in the same light as a chimpanzee’s tea party’ in that it ‘he’s doing it, and doing well [for his ability]’.²⁹ Dutton is even harsher in his deconstruction of audience intentions: as he reports, ‘there were repeated references to circus and freak shows’ by ‘New Zealand critics and seasoned listeners’ (1997b: 340). Dutton himself compares Helfgott to “Blind Tom”, a ‘mentally retarded’ ex-slave pianist whose talent was over-hyped (“the greatest musical prodigy since Mozart”) and was hugely popular with audiences in nineteenth century United States (1997b: 345). Dutton’s claim is that rather than finding Helfgott appealing for reasons of humanity – as is commonly suggested – audiences were drawn to him because of his freakish behaviour.³⁰ These comparisons suggest something fundamental about Dutton’s attitude of (and towards) the audience in that attendance at a Helfgott concert is for (at least, in part) voyeuristic reasons.

Dutton not only questions the audiences’ interest in Helfgott, but also the hype over Helfgott’s ability. Dutton and other critics are concerned that Helfgott is, in part, a charlatan, a fraud. This argument states that Helfgott was oversold as a masterful pianist and that the audience were duped into believing this. Dutton’s biggest concern certainly appears to be that the audience was deluded into believing that Helfgott was the pianistic genius claimed by his promoters, that his popularity was partially a creation of a concerted effort by

Helfgott's promoters. 'He had the biggest musical publicity machine in recent years, at least in classical music', says Dutton. For Dutton and Dando, Helfgott was marketed as a world-class pianist, thus he must be compared to other leading pianists. 'If he's advertising himself as a concert pianist, and he is playing a repertoire of music, then I expect the same standards I expect from any professional concert pianist to whom I pay an admission fee of \$50', says Dando. Dutton is especially concerned over the claims of the promoters: 'it seems to me that there's a truth-claim being made in saying the playing was wonderful, and the truth-claim is that he really is compared to other pianists. And I think that's a confusion. And I'll argue with that one'. Dutton points to the use of selective quotes that 'stressed his early potential, and tried to depict it as now blossoming' (1999: 6). Helfgott's record company made similar comments: 'He also appears on the RCA Red Seal label and that's sort of featured some of the great pianists in the past such as Horowitz and Rubenstein, and we're sort of saying he's the '90s version of these guys' they stated (in Bushnell 1997a). This, for Dutton, is a big concern: these claims of genius that are (according to him) patently false and misleading, fooled a largely ignorant audience into championing an incompetent.

That Dutton is correct in the extravagant claims made by Helfgott's promoters is accepted by all critics. However, the damaging results of such claims is rejected on two fronts by other critics. Button questions, in the first place, whether the audience were fooled into thinking (or even caring about) that Helfgott was the maestro portrayed: 'I saw no evidence that the audiences really believed that he was a great pianist, although I think they thought he was better than he actually was. I don't think that the audience I saw cared particularly'. Godlovitch also responds to Dutton's claim, stating that such exaggerated claims are typical in the marketing of all "products":

If Denis is upset about that then he really should be upset about every sort of remark that is made about the latest film that has come out, or all the garbage that is said about professional philosophers in the reviews of their books in professional journals. There's a lot of hype and hyperbole.³¹

This hyperbole was most obvious in comments by a woman from Helfgott's record label: the underlying commercial imperatives of the recording industry were laid bare in her blatant admission: that 'the bottom line is he's selling so that's all that matters' (in Bushnell 1997a). Bushnell 'sort of whooped internally when she said it because it was such a clear crystallisation of that attitude', an attitude that was also, he claims, practised by the wider media.

The media is incredible, especially mainstream media – the example I pick on as a kind of shorthand for that is the *Holmes* programme,

because of the way it tends to cover arts stuff, usually if its got some sort of freakish element attached to it: if someone's incredibly young... In the case of Helfgott, it's the whole way that *Holmes* picks up victims, finds an individual story, something with heroism, tears, somebody who dies, close-up on the tears, and milks that for all its worth.

Bushnell feels that while the media's interest in Helfgott was not solely driven by 'venal, commercial reasons', the media is nevertheless restricted by its 'role of delivering an audience to the advertisers'. The angling of the Helfgott story he found 'fundamentally dishonest'. Whether or not one found Helfgott's publicity machine as offensive varied, though all of the critics interviewed accepted that the promoters were vital for Helfgott's success. Button claims the promoters were purely commercially driven: 'the publicity machine simply wants to make money by filling halls for Helfgott on world-wide tours. You could only do that once, so they make elaborate claims'. Godlovitch feels this is typical of the contemporary environment: 'I don't think one has any special reason to take seriously these kinds of things simply because we're living in an environment of hype... none of this stuff really means very much' (in Bushnell 1997b).

Indeed, a number of the critics suggest that the tale of Helfgott shares many features of a popular culture icon; that Helfgott has potentially more in common with *The Rolling Stones* than with Vladimir Ashkenazy. Such a claim rests on a number of foundations, partially on the marketing hype as outlined above. Classical music has increasingly turned to such hype as it fights for its survival. I suggested to Dutton that the promotions used to sell Helfgott were indeed nothing unusual in classical music nowadays; he responded: 'they try to [use such tactics as] topless violinists on the CD case, but does it work?... You can put all the attractive casings you want to... but in the end it will be the [musical ability] that makes people come out and buy it'. Godlovitch's reply is to suggest that the marketing of Helfgott differs little to the marketing of any other product, including classical musicians.

It's *all* fiction. Look at how they built up the careers of musical artists. Look at the photographs that are taken of them: they make them all look glamorous, they keep the same photographs for thirty years... To build a musical career you have to have an aura, and this is created by promotion and the tittle-tattle of the musical community. The Helfgott case, in that respect, is just a extremely sophisticated way of doing it.

Not only is Helfgott marketed using elements typical within popular culture, but it is also put forward by some critics that the very elements that apparently attracted Helfgott's fans – these elements of "social value" – are characteristic of popular culture. Such features that are considered to be simply "noise" by music critics – Helfgott's chattering and behaviour, for example – may indeed be essential elements of the Helfgott Phenomenon.

Comparisons to illustrate this point abound; one suggested by Dutton is that of Liberace, the flamboyant pianist cum entertainer.³² Accused of being more about style than substance, about being more a spectacular event than about music, accused of having a retinue of overly devoted fans, Liberace does indeed function as an appropriate comparison. Another I would suggest is the Spice Girls, the all-girl English pop group. Points of similarity include: questioned talent, panned by the critics, a huge support base of fans and audience, multimedia³³, commercially hyped and potentially short term.

One important aspect that the critics link to Helfgott's popular roots is the longevity of Helfgott's career – as Button puts it: 'he's a oncer – he hasn't developed a following'. Chapter two stated that Helfgott's second tour in 1998 drew houses far from overflowing. Dutton, speaking of the Christchurch recital, estimated that the venue was only one third full. The critics tend to all agree why Helfgott's support fell: it was most likely inevitable that Helfgott would fade due to the ephemeral nature of his popularity. If one accepts that Helfgott functions as a popular event, it came as no surprise to the critics that his moment of glory was short. Button feels that the dying interest in the film, the prime reason for Helfgott's fame, played a major role: 'the further you get away from the movie, the less the Helfgott Phenomenon is going to work'. Bushnell, speaking more generally, stated 'I'd put down the waning interest just [to] the fact that we're talking about popular culture. Popular culture depends on novelty, things coming through, the hot thing of the month, [or] the year, and then waning interest'.

For Dutton, the failure of Helfgott to develop a long-term career was similarly to be expected. 'They actually didn't bother to buy tickets the second time which shows a pretty shallow reaction, doesn't it?', he says about the audiences' response. For Dutton, Helfgott's initial support was flimsy and came about for inconsequential reasons, with 'people buying because they think it's important'. When this superficial interest had been satiated, Helfgott's support base was no more. He goes on to take a pejorative stance over the ephemerality of Helfgott specifically, and popular culture generally. Helfgott's demise is further proof of the longevity (and hence superiority) of the "true" classical tradition. I suggested the singer Lou Reed as an appropriate comparison to Helfgott: Reed is often accused of being musically incompetent; he is also celebrated and valued for his looks, persona and behaviour. To this comparison, Dutton replied:

I quite agree, it's a good analogy, however I will point out that the Lou Reed phenomenon shows how shallow the popular tradition is. Because it won't last. Because once the knowledge of that tradition, the interest in that cultural surrounding is gone, Lou Reed's voice won't carry it

anymore. I will be very surprised if people will be listening to Lou Reed in 50 years time.

Thus Helfgott, whose support was also shallow, must expect the same death sentence. The deciding factor for Dutton is that if Helfgott had had something more than frivolous appeal, namely an ability in the areas needed as a professional classical pianist (undoubtedly technical and interpretative prowess) he would have continued to fill halls.

In other words, all the hype in the world didn't save Helfgott because he wasn't a good pianist'. [Is that why he failed?] Yes. Simply that. If he was even a good grade-b pianist people could have said, 'well, he's overrated', but he'd still have a career. But he wasn't even a grade-b pianist, he wasn't grade-c. He was a disaster. And that's why he failed... it's partly due to the fact that people were so underwhelmed by his performance that they didn't come back. If people had been overwhelmed by that performance he would have sold out the second time regardless of what I or anyone else had said.

There is no doubt that Dando would agree with the sentiments expressed above by Dutton. Non-musical elements are shown to be irrelevant in providing a long-term musical career for Helfgott (and all others). Musical standards have once again proven themselves in sorting out the sheep from the goats: Helfgott failed simply 'because he wasn't a good pianist'. Godlovitch's position is fundamentally different from such an analysis. He and Button both argue that such an approach is flawed as it starts from the wrong basis: an assumption that the judgement of Helfgott *can and must be made on purely musical grounds*.

They sort of missed the point. There are two ways you can look at it. You can look at the Helfgott concert in absolute isolation from all the other things, and if you try and treat Helfgott as a person fit to stand beside the concert pianists who went to your town before, you're in trouble. So most of the American critics have treated Helfgott with some degree of ridicule. The phenomenon of Helfgott is slightly different from that: before you look at Helfgott, you've got to look at who goes to him... It wasn't really a concert in the strict sense of the word. It was a sociological event (Button).

This coming from a music critic? Godlovitch states similar sentiments: 'they were firing past one another because what it was [was] that one group was launching attacks upon was not the same object the other group was lavishing praise upon'. What is apparent from the exchanges above is that fundamental differences between the critics are becoming obvious: that even while agreement is reached over the reasons for Helfgott's fame, fortune and flop, the answer to the question 'is this a good thing?' is much more contentious. Such

divergence opens the Helfgott case to wider issues that will be discussed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

David Helfgott, it has been regularly claimed, managed to divide the arts' world like no other artist has in recent times. Patrons were busy purchasing tickets to the very same concerts (and apparently enjoying them) that were to invariably receive harsh comments from music critics in the next day's review. For the five New Zealand critics interviewed for this thesis, this apparent anomaly required further examination. They themselves had come to some consensus over Helfgott in finding that he was, and remains, a poor player. Helfgott is perceived as failing on three grounds of musical value. First, he was not faithful as a musician: technique-wise, he simply failed to match up against others within the tradition of great concert pianists. Second, his faithfulness to the composer is questioned when the critics find that at the level of interpretation he is lacking. Finally, his idiosyncratic behaviour on the stage is perceived as breaking many of the "rules" of the classical music recital, resulting in, some say, a sully of the purity of the music.

Helfgott simply does not stand up to scrutiny as a professional pianist, the critics agree. However, all claim that the audiences' response appeared to indicate a different view: that despite the flouting of the critics' criteria, the audiences apparently enjoyed the concert. To understand this disparity between critical and public reaction, the critics turn to examine the audience itself. They come to general agreement that the audiences were considerably different from those of the typical classical recital, with many new to classical music and without deep knowledge of the "rules". It is accepted that the audience had an important connection to the actual music and Helfgott, but the nature of this connection is debated. While Godlovitch argues that the audiences' response was intensely emotional, Dutton suggests that rather it was simply the greatness of the music being performed. That the audiences' response was different is, at one level, accepted, with all critics claiming an audience has the right to gain enjoyment from a performer that most see as questionable at best. However, it appears that these statements from some of the critics contradict their own openly antagonistic attitude towards the audience. Indeed, it is suggested by Godlovitch that many in the audience are aware of such an attitude and turned on the critics for their elitism.

Such a claim once again emphasises for the critics this perceived distance between themselves and the audience. In order to understand the audiences' attraction to Helfgott, they accept that the musical value criteria were of little importance; instead, they turn to

what I have termed criteria of social value. Here, it is unanimously accepted that Helfgott's behaviour was far from the "turn-off" it was to many of the critics, shown by the audiences' complicity and open interaction with the performer. While Dando and others find this interaction destroyed the focus on the music, Godlovitch argued that it was more about a release from the tight controls on behaviour within classical music. There was something even more fundamental, the critics agreed, in an understanding of Helfgott's popularity. The film *Shine*, they say, was the one reason behind the resurrection of Helfgott's career. A story of redemption, love, madness and genius, the film enticed the audience into forming a relationship with Helfgott that could be taken one stage further by seeing the man live in concert. Yet, it is accepted by the critics, there are major differences between the real Helfgott and the man portrayed in the film.

That the film has been questioned for its accuracy is well documented: for Dutton and others, this is tantamount to fooling the audience. They have been duped as to what the truth of Helfgott really is. Dutton and Dando go on to suggest that the audiences' attraction to Helfgott is a morbid one, based more on voyeuristic rather than humanistic interest. Dutton also claims the audience, through clever marketing and claims in the film, believed Helfgott to be a truly great pianist. While all acknowledge the extreme hype in selling Helfgott, Godlovitch's response is that such is to be expected in the current climate. Indeed, Helfgott has much in common with popular culture. All critics agree with this popular comparison: where they do diverge is over whether such criteria for forming judgements are acceptable. Superficial and shallow say some; others argue for its complexity. All do nevertheless end up in agreement that Helfgott's demise was not a surprise. As a man with popular (and populist) appeal, ephemerality was to be expected. Dutton and Dando further justify this by returning to Helfgott's failure in terms of musical value: simply that he did not have the ability required to sustain a concert career. Dando and Godlovitch respond that to judge Helfgott on purely musical grounds misses the mark – that due to the importance of social values, Helfgott was not a typical pianist, and certainly did not present typical concerts. Dutton and Godlovitch claim that the critics' criteria may not be the appropriate tools to use in this case.

While all critics, to a great extent, agree with this pigeon-holing of Helfgott with popular events, this does not lead to all having the same attitude to the value of popular culture itself. Does one accept, or even celebrate, such features of popular culture? Is it acceptable for an artist working in a classical form to take on the trappings of the popular? The answers to such questions as these highlight the massive theme of cultural division – high versus low – that is to be explored in the following chapter. Thus this chapter concludes with an indication of fundamental divisions occurring amongst the critics. While there are

many points of agreement between them, the fundamental differences must also be emphasised. It is these disagreements that are picked up on in the following chapter that examines the Helfgott Phenomenon in the wider context of aesthetic value. It should be apparent from this chapter that the differences amongst critics come down to the very definition of artistic and aesthetic value: the aesthetic is a fraught topic, as will be shown by the following chapter in which the relationship between musical and social value is examined further.

Notes

¹ Paul Bushnell, one of those interviewed, said: 'the point that I'd make too was that in terms of the international launch, New Zealand was the beginning, and I found it very interesting after this great wash of controversy here, backwards and forwards, exactly the same arguments, for and against, were reprised all around the world. We got wire stuff from Reuters, and I would find the same arguments occurred in the States and later on in London'.

² As introduced in chapter three: these are Denis Dutton and Stan Godlovitch, both lecturers in philosophy; John Button and Ian Dando, music critics; and Paul Bushnell, arts journalist and commentator.

³ Other NZ critics made similar comments: 'fine pianist with an excellent technique.... A beautifully judged interpretation' (Werner in Auckland's New Zealand Herald); 'moments of undoubted technical and poetic brilliance' (Jones in Christchurch's Press).

⁴ Though such criticism is nearly always accompanied by a critique of non-musical features including Helfgott's behavioural tics – see below for further elucidation of this point.

⁵ This can also be analysed in terms of relating to the production, transmission, and consumption of music; this tripartite division is commonly employed in analysing music, for example Godlovitch (1998).

⁶ Dynamics are defined by *Groves* as 'that aspect of musical expression which results from variations in the volume of the sound' (Sadie 1980: Vol. 5, 795).

⁷ But goes on: '[but] it doesn't seem to bother me... because I don't really think that's germane to the particular issue at hand' (in Bushnell). The reasons for Godlovitch's lack of 'bother' in covered the final section of this chapter.

⁸ A formal definition: *Groves* describes interpretation as: 'that element in music made necessary by the difference between notation... and performance' (Sadie 1980: vol. 9 276).

⁹ For example Jones comments that Helfgott 'communicated precisely nothing about Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Liszt or Chopin' (Jones: 1997),

¹⁰ This raises the point of how technical and interpretative issues differ from each other; an example would be dynamics: the ability to wield and control dynamic contrast would be a technical concern; the actual application in an appropriate style would be an issue of interpretation.

¹¹ Tara Werner, reviewing Helfgott's 1997 Auckland concert, found this a 'disconcerting habit [that] almost threatened to derail [the work]... quite annoying, almost overwhelming the music... undermined by his constant humming' (1997).

¹² Outside classical music such behaviour is more accepted: those with similar reputations in the jazz world include the pianists Oscar Peterson and Keith Jarrett. In popular music, such behaviour is more the rule rather than the exception. This point will be further covered later in this chapter.

¹³ Gould's 'earliest years as a pianist got a lot of flak from critics because he chose non-traditional ways to perform, because he played things on the piano when it was becoming fashionable to play them on the harpsichord. People were mad to get to his concerts, year in, year out because he spoke to people, and people got something out of it' Dutton continues.

¹⁴ Jones, commenting on the Christchurch concert, wrote that 'the audience was ecstatic with what it heard, leaping regularly to its feet, applauding wildly. Everyone seemed to have a jolly good time' (Press 1997).

¹⁵ Button questions this; he 'can't believe that a musically knowledgeable audience would go to Helfgott except to see him make a fool of himself', considering that they would have had prior knowledge of the earlier and negative reaction he had received from critics.

¹⁶ Godlovitch suggests a similarity in audience structure to one that would be likely to attend an 'event' such as Handel's *Messiah*; Bushnell offers a slightly different take: 'I didn't find anyone of the people I interviewed who came along without having actually been, anyone who wouldn't normally go to a classical music concert who hadn't been persuaded to go by someone who normally does go to a classical music concert. There would have been 20 or so I suppose who would have been in that situation [that I interviewed]'. It must be noted these views do not refute the general point accepted by all critics: that most in the audiences were not regular attendees at classical concerts, particularly solo piano recitals.

¹⁷ To support his claim of the primacy of the artist over that of works in the minds of most in an audience, Dutton gives the example of the great period of the US orchestra – the 1920s and 1930s, the era of Toscanini and Stokowski. The labels of recordings from these times are structured in a particular order: the conductor, the orchestra, followed then the works.

¹⁸ I read to the critics the comment of W.H. Auden on the function of the literary critic, suggesting its relevance to music criticism: 'the one thing I most emphatically do not ask of a critic is that he tell me what I ought to approve or condemn... let him not dare to lay down the law to me. The responsibility for what I choose to read is mine, and nobody on else on earth can do it for me' (quoted in Thomson 1987: 18). All agreed with this statement.

¹⁹ Though it is important to emphasise that not all critics have this attitude: Dutton in particular takes an openly agnostic stance. As such he starts from a basis that 'I was interested in the attitudes of the people who were at the concert: that seemed to me to be as important as my own view, really'.

²⁰ A personal anecdote as to such breakdowns in expected behaviour: at a concert I attended given by a Czech quartet, an event of pseudo-"Garfinkel-esque" proportions occurred. After a particularly sublime second movement of a Mozart quartet a man began to clap, also emitting an anguished 'Oh, when may we applaud, when may we applaud?!'. Glances were exchanged between the musicians, plus a few nervous titters from the audience; the response from both indicated not only was this unusual behaviour but also totally unacceptable.

²¹ One can gain a sense of Dutton's outrage in his contribution to the *Philosophy and Literature* on p. 341, not so much in the content but certainly in its tone, e.g. the audience 'were abetted by Helfgott himself' as if it were a criminal act.

²² This topic has been increasingly studied and commented on by people from all persuasions: one such text is Lebrecht's *Who Killed Classical Music?* (1996). When, however, I put this question (why is classical music suffering a demise?) to Dutton he denied it, pointing towards the increasing popularity of opera.

²³ Though Godlovitch states that 'my point is that this kind of popularisation wasn't invented by David Helfgott: there's been lots of it. In fact many symphony orchestras... depend desperately on that just to raise capital: they couldn't survive unless they did that'.

²⁴ Godlovitch: 'What I don't know is why they don't see [these expectations of behaviour] as now what appears to be a highly outmoded, over-formalised sort of experience which audiences largely full of middle-class people are very unaccustomed to'.

²⁵ As one academic put it, the concert 'was part of a wonderful and deeply moving story of music and the human spirit. The story was brilliantly portrayed in a film which most of the audience had seen, but the story was also true, and now the audience were part of it' (quoted in Dutton 1997b: 341).

²⁶ Especially if one compares it to the hyped articles based on the film and press releases. The major exception is Dutton's syndicated article detailing Margaret Helfgott's version (Dutton 1998a; 1999b).

²⁷ As Dutton claims, the only strategy that could have been employed by the film makers to increase the film's level of "authenticity" would have been to have Helfgott act out his own life (1999: 3).

²⁸ In a similar vogue, Jones writing in the *Press* makes the statement 'I cannot bear to let such dishonesty go unchallenged': such dishonesty appears to refer to Helfgott's willingness to ignore the critics' opinions by carrying on to perform to an audience unaware of his incompetence (Jones 1997).

²⁹ Note the use of very similar analogies; most commonly quoted is the parable of Dr. Johnson's dog that could walk on its hind legs – "it is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" (quoted in Dutton 1997b 340)

³⁰ I suggested to Bushnell the New Zealand composer Gareth Farr as a comparison to Helfgott: he replied that a composer he spoke to commented that 'the Gareth Farr situation was not a very good one for New Zealand composers because you have to be a freak basically to get that kind of publicity'. Bushnell, himself stated 'of course, with Helfgott – freak, performer – you can kind of see the parallels, except in the sense that the interest with Gareth is not dying away. [People like him because he is so different from the standard classical composer?] That's it. It's that thing of the insider versus the outsider: he's using the language, the experience, and seems to belong to the world of the outsider, the person who's not part of the cognoscenti, and that's immensely appealing'.

³¹ Godlovitch goes on to say: 'Denis of all the people in the world should be fully aware of this. Denis makes full use of exactly these types of techniques to promote what he's interested in. I was once complimenting him on how successful he was and then he said "well, you know where I was born". I said "no"; he said "Hollywood". Then he said "there's a lesson in that". Knowing Denis, he's obviously taking this very hard line in some measure because it's a way of getting camera time. You can quote me'.

³² The similarities are, to my mind, uncanny. As reported by one writer: 'Liberace was a pianist. But oddly enough, he's remembered for his showmanship and for his lifestyle, not for his skill at the keyboard. It didn't seem to matter what or how Liberace was playing, only that he took stage, and that he took it well'. For more on Liberace and a response from Godlovitch, see Appendix IV.

³³ By 'multimedia' I mean that their popularity, as with Helfgott, was gained through many outlets: recordings, live performances, film, books, heavy marketing, et cetera.

CHAPTER V

ARTISTIC VALUE

That tradition is not something that is just a cultural construction, such that we could have a different culture and our all of our musical values would be different... It's vastly more complicated than that. We're now talking about music, we're not talking about sociology or social construction (Denis Dutton).

So to the extent that people want to pretend in some regard that music constitutes its own autonomous domain unaffected by the strife and squabbles of the material world, I think they're deluding themselves... Music is a social phenomenon for God's sake (Stan Godlovitch).

Introduction

The huge variance in the critical analysis of the Helfgott Phenomenon brings to the fore issues surrounding the value of art. In the previous chapter it was proposed that many fans were drawn to Helfgott by features that lay outside conventional musical value – such features were grouped under the title social value. That the critics had obviously divided opinions over the relative merits of these two forms of value makes further analysis of the aesthetic vital: how can it be argued that the criteria of musical value, as personified by Dutton's and Dando's approach should predominate? Equally, is it acceptable or desirable to use social value as a criteria for passing judgement? Answering these questions requires an examination of the role of critics in today's society.

The music critic is a relatively new breed: criticism as practised today dates from the eighteenth century (Godlovitch 1997: 375). Many (e.g. Schick 1996, Godlovitch) make a distinction between two "communities" of critics: those more academically and analytically inclined, usually working within universities et cetera,¹ and those whose role is, according to Godlovitch, to 'speak for the quality and merits of performing artists for contemporary audiences'. In terms of this thesis it is apparent that such a division is blurred, for commentary from both of these communities has been essential to understand the Helfgott Phenomenon; this is shown by the mixed backgrounds of the five interviewees.

As such blurring of distinctions suggests, the status of music criticism is often problematic. 'Music criticism has never had a single, generally accepted role. No two critics agree in their concept of criticism', claims Schick (1996: 11). Indeed, the ineffable qualities of its subject matter make it a complex task to pin down exactly how criticism works:

Music is probably the most difficult of the arts to criticize, owing to certain innate characteristics that complicate the task at the outset. It is art expressed in terms of time and sound... The music critic cannot communicate with his readers through notes and staves; he must use words. He is translating – and translating in the dark, for there can be no dictionary to help him... The critic has never been supported by a thoroughly worked-out musical aesthetic... There remains a chasm between the aestheticians on the one hand and the practical critics on the other, a chasm that can be bridged only by hard thought (Dean 1980: 44-45).

Criticism consumed by the public is usually disseminated through widely available media formats: mainly newspapers, magazines and radio; more rarely television. The opinions and analyses of these music critics are usually specific in their focus, primarily covering reports of live music concerts and recitals, but also producing reviews and commentary on recordings. Their writings are usually read by a select audience: those who have either attended the concert under review or, more generally, those interested in the event. The contents of such reviews typically contain straight factual information, for example the performer, the works performed and the venue; it is however the actual critique of the performance – namely what did the reviewer think of the performer? – that is of more interest for this thesis. According to Walker, 'the practice of criticism boils down to one thing: making value judgements. The theory of criticism, therefore, boils down to one thing also: explaining them' (Walker 1966: xi). It is apparent that critics assume a prior knowledge and understanding of the criteria employed in making such value judgements. As Rockwell suggests, critics are writing for readers with the same sensibilities and tastes as their own (in Schick 1996: 24), thus the theoretical base which underpins that judgements are rarely discussed or analysed.²

An examination of the backgrounds of critics makes interesting reading: it is widely accepted that no formal training is required. Some even suggest that anyone can be a critic through simply declaring oneself to be so – 'much art criticism is a self-proclamatory enterprise', states Godlovitch (1997: 371).

A lot of critics simply trumpet their own way into saying "well, I am a critic therefore I have refinement". You don't earn the right to be a critic by demonstrating independently your refinement; quite the contrary – it's the

role as critic that identifies you as one. It's like any other authority position (Godlovitch).

Thus, without the necessity for training and any solid guidelines or expectations, the quality of criticism can be extremely variable.³ It is, however, considered vital that the critic have a high level of musical experience. Typically the critic would have been trained in music to a fairly high level, but would not necessarily be a practising musician. According to Dutton, 'I think what you'd hope for in a music critic is wide experience and perceptive experience'. Godlovitch agrees these are the expectations most have:

I would suppose among other things critics would appeal to the range and breadth of their actual exposure and experience of music, so they would use the typical argument of from experience, saying "I've heard more of this stuff so I know more about it and I can make more fine-grained discriminations"; again the same argument is used by the wine-taster – "it's not just that I have a good tongue, I've swigged a lot of brew".

The necessity for critics and criticism is a topic that is not commonly raised. In answering this, Dutton feels 'people enjoy hearing another articulate, perceptive, not necessarily learned, but sophisticated reaction against which to measure their own reaction...the critic can make references and can make the thing more interesting and deeper after the fact by setting it in a larger context, or making contextual connection which not every reader can make'; Godlovitch mainly agrees with this.⁴ Some claim this role to be vital: 'the critic performs an indispensable function in our aesthetic lives. He is the seer and guide... The critic directs perception to the value of new and unfamiliar art and thereby encourages its acceptance' (Stolnitz in Smith 1966: 365). Thus far the critic has been portrayed as a guide only; such a role is not immediately one of a controversial nature. However, it is generally acknowledged that critics have some influence over their audience, though such influence is usually thought of as being of a long-term rather than immediate nature.⁵

The issue of influence is made even more pertinent when claims of critics' superior judging abilities are raised; this position was most obviously portrayed by Dando in the previous chapter. Keller follows this line: 'By society as a whole, the critic is highly esteemed because, once again, it is his job, his *raison d'être*, to know better' (1987: 30). Dutton claims that the level of power and influence that critics have is not terribly great: 'the power of critics is vastly overrated. When people don't like [what critics write] it's "oh, they're so powerful". Good musicians overcome bad critics all the time'. Dando contradicts this: 'the critic's status is frighteningly high. It worries me, it concerns me because people regard them as a sort of god after a while and that's the last thing I want to be'. Aschenbrenner suggests that 'most people are willing to yield to the judgment on those vast reaches of the

musical realm they cannot or cannot as yet share in to the experts' (1981: 110). Bushnell feels that many people's opinions are formed by listening to others, particularly critics:

Because given that music... is so much a social experience, and the thing is "what did you think?" afterwards is the immediate question that people ask, that I think people don't necessarily know what they think, and until they begin to suss out what other people think... [critics] can be a very powerful influence on whether we think something is good or bad.

Bushnell also feels audiences of classical music, which is by its very nature a complex artform, are more reliant on critics than are audiences of popular forms like film or popular music: 'they have the confidence that they are not an outsider: anyone can have access, everyone knows about film, it's part of most people's lives and so on. You have a greater confidence in your own opinions'. Button also acknowledges that often readers will rely on critics in forming their own opinions:

They assume the critic knows more than they do, if they've got doubts... I was told by one woman that she liked a concert until she read my review, and then she didn't like it after that. She couldn't like something that she'd been told wasn't actually very good.

For all the influence that music criticism may or may not have, it is widely acknowledged that it remains, in the end, subjective: 'The music critic does not tell some absolute truth about it... Usually the overall interpretation is an evaluation that is both personal and set in to a larger context', states Dutton; 'There is no true or false in criticism – one would be foolish to suppose there were', echoes Godlovitch. In a conference on music criticism held in 1979, 'the consensus was that few critics now believed their judgments present objective and universal truths', states Schick (1996: 60). Yet, despite this admission of the subjective nature of criticism, it is still vital to make attempts at discovering what lies at the heart of critical judgements:

Critics, it is true, rarely state explicitly their general assumptions about art and are often unconscious of them. Nevertheless, as necessary to criticism, these assumptions can be found in their writings, and the philosopher can often learn much from detecting and formulating them (Gotshalk in Smith 1966, 357).

Many of these assumptions have been uncovered in the previous chapter – some look to composers' intentions; others to an enigmatic 'tradition'. These claims attempt to ground their subjectivity in an objective basis. This search for objectivity is shown in Bushnell's comparison: 'in theatre history, there's a good parallel [in that] the director of a production was someone who, in the terrible phrase, allows the work to speak for itself; you're there as

the hand-maiden of the creation, of the delivery, of the birth of this thing, which you have played no role in creating. I think that's just a bit too limited'. Godlovitch also questions this attempt:

The book that I just published is in large measure a rejection of this very sort of view, based on the fact that a musical work for me anyway is pretty much something waiting in the wings to be given life, and that the life that it's given is the life that it's given by the player.... So from that point of view, this god-like view that there are these figures scowling from the heavens like Beethoven – “you do it this way” – I think is a load of garbage. And the critics certainly have no more clue in some sort of revealed way as to what the intentions are than anyone else does.⁶

The remainder of this chapter presents two widely disparate approaches to situating Helfgott specifically, and music and the arts more generally, in the context of aesthetic value. These arguments are shaped in turn by the perspectives of Dutton and Godlovitch, with their views drawing in a wide range of other theorists. The first, as presented by Dutton, offers a typical (and conservative) aesthetic outlook, with its origins in the work of philosophers such as Hume and Kant. Godlovitch, on the other hand, puts forward a strongly contrasting argument, suggesting there is a need for a radical reshaping of the typical aesthetic terrain. Both men argue that their own views offer an accurate and just portrayal of Helfgott contextualised, but as has already been noted they have strongly different opinions on Helfgott and his value, aesthetic or otherwise.

Traditional Aesthetics – The Position

The conventional arguments espoused by Dutton derive from what could be broadly titled “traditional” aesthetics. Labelled by some, for example Smith (1988), as the dominant force in aesthetics, this “school” is heavily influenced by early writers in the field, most notably Hume and Kant. Dutton’s and many other critics’ concentration on the areas of value, tradition, the canon and longevity show a considerable debt to this aesthetic approach; in order to both understand and critique this position, it is necessary to make a brief examination of these two “classical” authors.

Two texts originating from the 18th century remain among the most influential writings on the topic of aesthetics: David Hume’s essay *On the Standard of Taste* (1757) and Emmanuel Kant’s *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, one of two sections of his ‘Critique of Judgement’ (1790). The importance of these two texts, the latter to the extent that it is undoubtedly the “bible” of aesthetics, is underlined by other writers’ debt to Hume and Kant.

According to Gardner (1995: 586), these works did not so much solve all problems regarding aesthetic judgement, but rather established a 'framework outlining its basic features'. But what did they mean by this term 'aesthetic judgement'? A 'judgement such as that a sunset, or a vase of flowers, or painting is beautiful... In an aesthetic judgement the object is said to be, simply by its virtue of its appearance, an intrinsically rewarding object of attention' (Gardner 1995: 587).

There are clear linkages between Hume, Kant following on from him, and ultimately Dutton. First, the aesthetic judgement is a judgement of taste, a personally felt response to the object under examination; thus the judgement is not based on fixed rules.⁷ Hume and Kant both claim that aesthetic judgements are not objective; that such judgements are subjective 'in the sense that beauty is not a feature belonging to reality independent of human feeling or sentiment' (Cooper 1997: 77). Such critics aim to reconcile the subjectivity of personal taste with the belief that there are true and false aesthetic judgements – as Hume so strongly puts it: 'among a thousand different opinions which different men may entertain of the same subject, there is one, and but one, that is just and true: and the only difficulty is to fix and ascertain it' (1997: 80).

Though both Hume and Kant arrive at "the just and true", the path leading there varies. Hume's premise, as can be deduced from the title of his article, 'hopes to show that criticism is a factually based, rational, social activity, capable of being integrated into the rest of intelligible human discourse' (Jones 1993: 267). Hume claims 'it is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision afforded confirming one sentiment, and condemning another' (1997: 79). Some statements of taste are correct, others incorrect. As for Kant, Hume's emphasis is on the actual application of the observer's attention to the aesthetic object. Hume thus spends much of the work detailing conditions for the reaching of a "correct" judgement. The observer must actively attend to the object under examination, and the conditions for the proper examination must be:

a perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object; if any of these circumstances be wanting, our experiment will be fallacious, and we shall be unable to judge of the catholic and universal beauty....But to enable a critic the more fully to execute this undertaking, he must preserve his mind free from all *prejudice*, and allow nothing to enter into his consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination (1997: 82,86).

If one does not respond properly to the work, Hume lists three possible causes: a lack of delicacy, of good sense, or the effect of suffering from prejudice. He also presents the state

of the ideal critic – one that fulfils those criteria laid down above: though such ‘men of delicate taste be rare, they are easily to be distinguished in society by the soundness of their understanding, and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind’ (1997: 89).

A difficulty that Hume faces concerns the reasons why the views of the ideal critic are to be accepted, especially in the many cases where there are competing and contradictory judgements from other critics. His answer is that ‘in the absence of established models and general principles, *time* and the facts will ultimately vindicate any critical judgement’ (Jones 1993: 271). It is through longevity, through the passage of time, that the value of works of art is proven: ‘a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with’ (Hume 1997: 82). As Dutton puts it, Hume’s ‘view of art is that great art passes the test of time, it actually lasts, it has a staying power’. Dutton also agrees that longevity offers a proof of quality, both in terms of performers (the great tradition of pianists) and works (the canon of truly great compositions). I asked him ‘what is longevity anyway?’; his reply was ‘longevity is where it is at. [Does that show superiority?] Yes. The ability to withstand the tests of time’.⁸ From this position, Dutton rejects strongly the idea that social forces have a major role in the creation of artistic value:

If you’re talking about the long-term staying power of either a piece of music or a pianist, you’re talking about something that is musical and not social or culturally constructed... [Do you believe that the “great” music will always in the end be acknowledged?] I don’t think that’s a belief in the sense that it’s just a hypothesis. The history of music shows that that is the case.

[Would you argue that talent will always win out?] I think so. Over a long enough haul. [So those that are the most successful are the best in terms of ability?] Yes. I think that the test of time sorts out composers, and enough familiarity and enough time sorts out who the very fine pianists are... That tradition is not something that is just a cultural construction, such that we could have a different culture and our all of our musical values would be different... It’s vastly more complicated than that. We’re now talking about music, we’re not talking about sociology or social construction.

The other eighteenth century philosopher who remains a major influence on the modern-day study of aesthetics, and on the arguments of Dutton, is Kant. The *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* was mainly concerned with the appreciation of natural phenomena, though some space is dedicated to the appreciation of human-created art. As Smith says, ‘Kant’s objective is considerably more circumspect than Hume’s, for he offers not to justify the

claim to objective validity of certain judgements of taste but only to enquire into the conditions of the possibility of the rightfulness of such a claim' (1988: 65). Schaper puts it thus:

He does speak of correct and erroneous judgements of taste. This, however, must not be construed as his subscribing to standards or rules of taste. He has something different in mind, namely that a judgement to be one of taste at all must satisfy certain conditions. Accordingly, a judgement of taste is called "correct" not when it conforms to rules of validity, but when it meets the conditions for being a taste judgement (1983: 54).

The complexity of Kant's text makes it difficult to summarise in a short passage, and much of it is of limited relevance for this thesis. For Kant, an aesthetic judgement is one of deciding whether or not and to what extent something is beautiful; taste for Kant is 'the ability to respond with immediate pleasure and unclouded vision to beauty in nature and art' (Schaper 1992: 372). Kant makes the point that aesthetic judgement differs from deciding whether or not something is merely 'agreeable' or 'good': 'The *agreeable* is what GRATIFIES a man; the *beautiful* is what simply PLEASES him; the *good* is what is ESTEEMED.... Both the Agreeable and the Good involve a reference to the faculty of desire... On the other hand the judgement of taste is simply *contemplative*' (Kant 1997: 101,102).

This notion of contemplation is tied up with that of 'disinterestedness', the most relevant section of Kant's writings for this thesis. Kant strives to solve the 'normative problem of aesthetic judgement' by offering this theory of a contemplation 'purified' of any reference to desire. This is an attempt to remove from the equation any individual attributes that may influence the judging: 'Kant argues that this "universal" standpoint can be achieved through freeing our awareness of the object from desire and practical concern – what he calls "disinterestedness" – and from our conceptual understanding of it' (Gardner 1995: 594). Only when this is achieved does a judgement have universal validity; the 'pure judgement of taste'. This applies only to judgements of the beautiful: for judgements of the "agreeable",⁹ Kant agrees with the line 'every one has his own taste'. However, 'the beauty stands on quite a different footing. It would, on the contrary, be ridiculous if anyone who plumed himself on his taste were to think of justifying himself by saying: This object... is beautiful *for me*' (Kant 1997: 104). Indeed:

The result is that the judgement of taste, with its attendant consciousness of detachment from all interest, must involve a claim to validity for all men, and must do so apart from universality attached to

Objects, i.e. there must be coupled with it a claim to subjective universality (1997: 103).

Kant's aesthetic theory rests on his wider theory of cognition, in particular on the claim that 'the organising principles of the mind are fixed and given' (Anderson quoted in Martin 1995: 28). Beneath all the subjective and individual features of people lies the same cognitive apparatus. 'Hence it is only under the presupposition that there is a common sense ... it is only under this presupposition, I say, that the judgement of taste can be laid down... Cognitions and judgements must... admit of universal communicability' (Kant quoted in Smith 1988: 70).

Dutton, in debt to Kant, suggests that the aesthetic judgement of music is indeed based 'at the deepest level on... the hard-wiring of the human mind':

There's one other step here too: that tradition is based on human psychology, based on the hard-wired, musical capabilities of the human mind. Ultimately, that is not just a social construction. Pieces of music, for example Indian, Chinese, Western music, they become exciting through becoming faster and faster... In other words, that tradition is based on what we are as human beings. We are people who have a certain nature: there's something about that nature and how we're constructed, there's something about all that apparatus – which is very complex – which Beethoven understood so extremely well and Yul Brunner didn't.

The world-wide interest in Beethoven is caused by the intrinsic qualities of people [from] vastly different cultures and vastly different historical times listening to that stuff and finding it interesting. That's an objective fact about people's likes for music. Of course, you can always say that in the end it's my subjective reaction, but that subjective reaction is based on my reactions as a human being which is an excuse for criticism.

Thus Dutton emphasises the universal qualities, working from Kant and Hume to support the superiority of certain music, the superiority of certain musicians, and to emphasise that quality is proven over time. Where does this leave David Helfgott? As shown in the previous chapter, Helfgott has been "proven" to have little respect for the canon of music, and has been "proven" to deserve only the lowest position in the hierarchy of concert pianists. And, through the aesthetic theories of Kant and Hume, these judgements have, for Dutton, full and proper validity. Aesthetically, Helfgott is a failure. Such is the conclusion reached by many approaching music and the arts from the tenets of traditional aesthetics. This is an approach that 'has been continuously perpetuated, appropriated, and recreated for at least the past two hundred years and continues to dominate disciplinary aesthetics

and critical theory' (Smith 1988: 72). We still commonly have arguments put forward such as:

I believe that masterpieces unfold according to timeless, creative principles, that they would not be masterpieces unless they did... [These] are the immutable laws to which all genius gives unconscious utterance... Music is autonomous; it develops according to its own laws... [Music] neither requires an "explanation". It is a purely musical truth which can be comprehended on a purely musical level (Walker 1966, xi,4,5)

While an extreme position, the logic behind this claim is undeniably still dominant in the field of classical music. However, there has been an ever-increasing analysis of and attack on its foundations from many quarters, especially in the second half of this century. The remainder of this chapter charts this re-evaluation of traditional aesthetic judgements, focusing on the views of Godlovitch, supported by the writings of Bourdieu (1984), Smith (1988) and Shusterman (1992). To begin with, I examine specific critiques of the traditional aesthetic approach outlined above.

Traditional Aesthetics – The Critique

Traditional aesthetics continue to dominate aesthetic thought today. There is, however, increasing emphasis on a more socially-focused approach: Hume and Kant, as two of the founders of traditional aesthetics, have both received critical reappraisals from many angles. It is some of these texts that form the theoretical background for the remainder of this chapter. Notably, these include Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), which by its very subtitle – *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* – is obviously a retort to Kant's (and others) focus on the "pure gaze",¹⁰ and Smith's *Contingencies of Value* (1988).

Smith approaches the aesthetic writings of both Hume and Kant by placing them under the same heading of 'axiologic logic'. She defines axiology as 'the justification of the claim of certain norms, standards and judgements to objective validity', and states that such logic, as it is based on the 'demonstration of the noncontingency of the contingent', must fail (1988: 54). Axiologic argument 'always either dissolves into infinite regresses, or is supported in circular or bootstrap fashion by unacknowledged self-privileging a priori norms' (1988: 64). Hume's article on aesthetics is summarily pulled apart by Smith on a number of grounds. Her first point is that nowhere does Hume actually justify his claim that it is 'natural' to seek a standard of taste (though such a claim, as Smith says, is impossible to justify). Smith also has concerns with Hume's claim that taste can be ranked – some

taste is acceptable, other taste is not; some art works are acknowledged as inherently superior to others. A similar problem is apparent with Hume's notion of the true judge. A common criticism, as raised by Gardner (1995) for example, is how to establish the grounds of authority of the critic. 'What sense is there then in my regarding his pronouncements as having a stronger claim to correctness than my own?' (1995: 594). Cooper questions Hume's claim that the critic can validly speak for all times and places:

The notion of the "true judge", arguably, is plausible only where one is considering aesthetic judgements *within* a cultural tradition and *over* a limited genre of artworks. It is one thing to look for "true judges" of the respective merits of Ogilby and Milton; another to look for ones to arbitrate between Beethoven and the Beatles, let alone between Beethoven and raga composers (1997: 77).

Smith finishes her critique of Hume by stating that his writings contain a considerably large number of qualifications, considering that he purports to present a strong argument for the rightness of critical judgements. She accepts that these qualifications are often acknowledged by others, but are misread as Hume recognising critical subjectivity rather than:

That when the qualifications and specifications are put in place, the universals are no longer universals, the unconditional foundations are no longer unconditional, and whatever standards are built upon them lose the force of *absolutes*. Hume's claim is that there is empirical, factual evidence for a natural norm of taste. When restated with the conceded qualifications, however, the foundation of that norm... becomes a limp truism, *some objects tend to please or displease some people under some conditions* (Smith 1998: 63).

Thus Hume, Smith claims, leaves us with little more than the obvious; he just took quite some time and effort to say it! His attempts to rationally justify standards of taste get us nowhere. Smith's critique of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* picks up on different details that further question the logic of axiology, in particular its notions of purity and disinterestedness.

According to Smith, Kant's claim that aesthetic judgements are subjective is not actually supported by his own theory. In stating that a pure judgement ultimately rests on the cognitive apparatus universal to all humans, Kant has essentially turned such judgements into an objective claim. Furthermore, the appropriate judgement 'can be met only when the judgment of beauty has been truly elicited by a pure reflection on the pure sensation of the pure operation of the mental faculties responding to pure form' (1988: 68). Smith suggests that Kant does not feel that such a state would be difficult to achieve. She argues, however,

that this state of purity does not 'appear possible at all'; rather 'no matter how "simple" the "stimulus" or "pure" the "form," the human creature always experiences (sensation) through her total sensory/perceptual/cognitive system and in relation to *memory*, *context*, and *meaning*' (1988: 68,69). Kant's state of refined purity is not achievable; through the "refining" process required to achieve contemplation, 'the exceptions exhaust the possibilities and the residue is nothing at all' (1988: 69). Finally Smith turns to the issue of the existence of a universal cognitive apparatus that is so essential to Kant's arguments. That all humans share 'at the deepest level... the hard-wiring of the human mind', as Dutton puts it, is not a universally accepted notion, with no firm evidence to support it.¹¹ And if such a claim was wrong, suggests Smith:

If everyone's cognitive faculties did not operate in the same way, then the objectivity of knowledge itself would not be possible, and everyone knows that knowledge is objective... except, as everyone knows, skeptics. So, there must be a universal knowing-machine, because otherwise skepticism would be right and the entire argument of the "Analytic"... would be wrong.... The claims of judgments of taste to universal validity... it appears [are] ultimately ungroundable. (1988: 70,71)

Smith presents a strong argument against the traditional approach to the aesthetic: the 'axiologic logic' of Kant and Hume is shown to be illogical, contradictory and inherently flawed. In showing this, Smith has provided an ideal basis for the remainder of this chapter in which goes on to further question the supremacy of traditional aesthetics and criticism.

The Social Positioning of Aesthetics

The axiologic logic of such authors as Kant and Hume has been prevalent within many academic communities including philosophy, art history and musicology for over two centuries, and continues to dominate aesthetics even today.¹² Smith's case against neo-Kantian aesthetics is part of the critique of this dominant orthodoxy. This section considers other critiques that have played a role in highlighting the restrictions and limitations of axiologic logic, critiques that have enormous impact on the whole construction of artistic value in our society.

While neo-Kantian aesthetics continues to influence many within academia and the wider world, there have been challenges to this approach's blinkered cultural analysis. These challenges have occurred particularly in the late twentieth century with the rise of disciplines and schools of thought founded in a context of increasing critical and "sociological" understanding, for example post-structuralism, critical theory and cultural

studies. Postmodernism, a popular theorisation of contemporary society, also questions the dominance of the traditional aesthetic approach, with Featherstone, for example, suggesting that social changes have brought about 'the aestheticization of everyday life' (1991).¹³

The impact of these new approaches on many other fields has been enormous: art history and art criticism, to give two examples, have become increasingly self-aware of contextual issues surrounding their subject matter.¹⁴ Also worthy of note are developments in the study of popular culture, including popular music. Writings in this field are often based on the claim that: 'culture making is a social process... it is therefore inherently political, it is centrally involved in the distribution and possible redistribution of various forms of social power' (Fiske 1989b: 1). Some, for example Fiske, such as in his widely known analysis of the singer Madonna, have possibly gone too far in taking an all too uncritical, even celebratory, approach to popular culture (1989a, 1989b).¹⁵ Others have taken a more discriminating and rational perspective; in the field of popular music the work of Frith stands out, notably his recent book examining the value of popular music (1996).¹⁶

While these fields have undergone some form of reform or revolution, the same cannot be said of classical music; here, the neo-Kantian, traditional aesthetic continues to dominate, underpinning the workings of most critics.¹⁷ The concepts of longevity, canonisation and tradition have a stranglehold in the western world on most approaches to classical music; even other forms of analysis of music continue the myth of its ethereal, supra-human status:

The tendency to deal with music by means of acoustics, mathematics, or mechanistic models preserves its mystery (accessible only to a trained priesthood), lends it higher prestige in a culture that values quantifiable knowledge over mere expression, and conceals the ideological basis of its conventions and repertoires. This tendency permits music to claim to be the result not of human endeavor but of rules existing independent of humankind (McClary 1985: 150).

Both the academic study and everyday observation of classical music and the arts more generally have involved an obsession with categorisation and hierarchy. Ranking, dividing and generally classifying cultural items and behaviour – most obvious in the "high/low" culture split – are typical of the western world's approach to culture. Baudrillard argues that the most substantial metanarratives are those that underpin Westerners' concepts of culture: the canons composed of the "best" the world has produced in literature, classical music and the museum (in Laermans 1992: 255). Indeed, the "superiority" of elitist culture has usually been taken for granted; even within academia the response to popular culture

has often been derogatory. Such negative reactions have come from unlikely bedfellows, from both left and right; for example Leavis and Adorno (1990). The accuracy of many of these elitist approaches is questioned by Vulliamy:

The starting-point of the critics of popular culture is that such products are made solely for commercial reasons and consequently they must be standardised in the interests of mass production. This mode of production results in a "separation of the manufacturers of culture from the consumers" and the consumers then become no more than passive objects who are unscrupulously manipulated by the producers of mass culture (1970: 180).¹⁸

Music and its wider culture are, by definition, social and thus intimately influenced by their socio-historical context. Indeed, a common starting point taken by those critiquing the traditional aesthetic is to show its development as strongly historically contingent. The very construction of aesthetics as we know of it today originated only in the eighteenth century, particularly through the works of German philosophers and writers such as Kant, Schiller and Baumgarten: indeed it was Baumgarten that first coined the term 'aesthetics' in 1735. It was this period that constituted aesthetics 'as a distinct discipline, focused solely on art, its objects and their appreciation', and in turn this development depended on the move within western society to see art as an autonomous field (Wolff 1993: 13). The increasing move to place and analyse art within its socio-historical context has challenged the separationist tendencies and ahistorical concerns of traditional aesthetics. Wolff sums up this challenge:

The social history of the arts has some serious consequences for the philosophy of art. By relativising their apparently supra-historical status, it puts into question those very works of art which aesthetics generally takes as its unproblematic subject-matter. The social history of art shows, first, that it is accidental that certain types of artefact are constituted as "art"... Secondly, it forces us to question distinctions traditionally made between art and non-art... for it is clear that there is nothing in the nature of the work or of the activity which distinguishes it from other work and activities (1993: 14).¹⁹

The domination of conservative and traditional aesthetics, both at a level of academic and common understanding, has instilled a notion of the arts as a separate entity, somehow existing in the ether far removed from the mundanity and practicalities of the "real" world. That the arts and culture are a *social creation* of human societies tends to get lost in the depiction of art as supra-human; however, the concrete origins of art cannot be escaped. Let us not forget the social, economic and political imperatives of art production. Godlovitch highlights these imperatives:

Certain kinds of music took the forms they did because they were called for by the people who paid for them, for god's sake. The fact is that Bach wrote one cantata a week for n weeks because that was his job at the church that he was in, and if he didn't do it, he would have been fired. Bach also knew the service was so long, he knew he had these singers and those players so he couldn't write big parts.

Claims about the universal, trans-cultural nature of the arts are sociologically untenable. For example, the claim that music is a "universal language" is flawed as 'the appreciation of all musical styles is learned, and nobody is born with an innate comprehension of a style' (Schick 1996: 86). Furthermore, anthropology and ethnomusicology have shown that even what is perceived as "music" or "art" is culturally variable and culturally specific.²⁰

As the sociological approach continues to relentlessly knock away at foundations of the traditional aesthetic paradigm, those who continue to work within the latter's boundaries remain defensive. Zolberg argues that while critics, aestheticians and 'connoisseurs' do not have a problem with the sociological analysis of the consumer²¹, they 'oppose those who try and "explain" artistic creators as if they were ordinary social phenomena. Their resistance makes it clear that what they defend has the force of an ideology' (1990: 128).²² This debate over the influence of the social upon the aesthetic has enormous implications for the construction of artistic value; this we will come to in the final section of this chapter, where Godlovitch's own non-axiological theory is considered.

First, however, the sociological approach to culture and the aesthetic requires further examination, for this approach is powerful in gaining an increased depth of understanding of artistic value. I make no excuses for the emphasis (and, some may claim, bias) within this thesis on the so-called "socialising" of the aesthetic: this thesis is written in the discipline of sociology and, as such, this emphasis should come as no surprise. Indeed, it is surely the job of sociology and other related disciplines to reveal what lies behind the too-often unquestioned cultural distinctions that so dominate people's understanding of culture, art and value. Bourdieu certainly thinks so.

Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984 [1979]) is undoubtedly one of the most important texts in the examination of taste in the twentieth century. Generally speaking, Bourdieu's aim in *Distinction* was to examine 'the relationships between the universe of economic and social conditions and the universe of lifestyles' (1984: xi). Through complex analyses of surveys carried out in 1960s France, Bourdieu shows a strong correlation between cultural practices, education and social origins (1984: 13). *Distinction* argues that tastes, commonly regarded as nothing more substantial than personal preferences, function as forms of power. Bourdieu emphasises the role of taste as:

One of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production.... Here the sociologist finds himself in the area *par excellence* of the denial of the social (1984: 11,12).²³

For Holt, *Distinction's* key contribution revolves around this: 'it effectively isolates tastes and explains [their] unique contribution to social reproduction' (1997: 98).²⁴ Bourdieu labels his strategy an attempt at 'barbarous reintegration' (1984: 6), of reintegrating Culture into culture, of Taste into taste.²⁵ Thus Bourdieu brings out into the open what he sees as the strong relationships between class, power and taste, relations that are not widely acknowledged by society. It is with this classical "unmasking" strategy that the power of *Distinction* lies:

Simply put, Bourdieu's approach is a device that has the potential for revealing a great deal of what may lie beneath the surface of social behaviour. It does demand that the researcher ask questions and peel away layers of appearances that, Bourdieu is convinced, disguise an underlying reality (Zolberg 1986: 515).

Indeed, as Fowler suggests, most of Bourdieu's work can be seen as an extension of the main objectives of Marx into the cultural arena: 'throughout all his cultural works, Bourdieu aims to unveil the mystification caused by ideological distortion' (1997: 43).

The influence of Bourdieu on the social sciences (notably sociology and anthropology) is substantial, and has grown enormously over the past twenty or so years; Shusterman labels him 'France's leading living social theorist' (1999: 1). This growth in prestige worldwide is shown by the veritable publishing industry that has sprung up around Bourdieu: not only is he a prolific author in his own right, but the importance of his work combined with the classic French density of his writings has led to the release of many texts ranging from "Bourdieu for Dummies"-styled books to substantive critical readers.²⁶ Bourdieu has not simply been sycophantically received by a dotting public. The generalisability of Bourdieu's work to cultural-historical situations outside France is often debated,²⁷ as are criticisms that his social theory fails to account for change.²⁸ Bourdieu's attitude towards the popular aesthetic also comes under considerable reproach,²⁹ and, accusations of aesthetic reductionism are often raised.³⁰ That many of these criticisms have a degree of validity is accepted; however, the use of Bourdieu in this thesis is focused around the specific concepts and general understanding he brings to artistic and aesthetic value.

The general themes and concepts of *Distinction* (1984) have their genesis in the earlier writings of Bourdieu, most notably *Photography* (1990); *Love of Art* (1991); and

Reproduction (1977).³¹ The first two of these texts were examinations of art forms that, 'being cheap or cost-free in economic terms, are in theory, equally open to all groups and classes' (Jenkins 1992: 131). However, Bourdieu showed that such equality of access was not reflected in their use: rather use was an expression of differentiation and intimately linked to class (Robbins 1991: 119). Bourdieu went on to associate such differentiation with the dominating traditional aesthetic. In *The Love of Art* (1991), Bourdieu launched a direct attack on this Kantian 'notion of pure or innate cultural taste' (Jenkins 1992: 137). He

argues against the view that the capacity to appreciate great art is a 'gift' – an "eye" comparable to the "ear" for music – in favour of the view that this capacity can be acquired through education, in such a way that the acquired seems to be 'natural' (Robbins 1991: 120).

The same struggle against axiologic aesthetics became a cornerstone of *Distinction*: it is the very idea of taste being both a 'cultivated' and 'innate' disposition (1984: 99) that Bourdieu wants to question as wrong, and to pose instead as a social construction. The ability to appreciate art is a socially learnt process, taught through social institutions. The forming of aesthetic judgements of taste, Bourdieu argues, is governed by one's habitus. The term habitus describes the 'social practices and frameworks of evaluation [that] are transmitted from one generation to the next through socialization processes' (Swartz 1997: 27). These processes include the family and the education system, and help instil within the individual attitudes and opinions, including those of artistic value, that appear natural and proper.

One's habitus is, however, 'acquired in a class-specific way' (Codd 1990: 142). For Bourdieu, society is divided into three main classes: dominant, middle, and dominated. Each class has its own distinctive habitus, and its own distinct set of tastes.³² The dominated class, he claims, has the 'taste of necessity', a practically oriented aesthetic aimed at functionality (1984: 177). The middle class identifies itself in relation to the dominant class; it is forever paying homage to the tastes and behaviour of the class above. Bourdieu claims that the dominant class has a 'freedom from necessity'; being economically secure, members of the dominant class do not have the same worries over those day-to-day concerns that rule the lives of the dominated. The tastes of the dominant and dominated classes are crudely structured around binary opposites, the former based on the Kantian concept of taste; the latter, an inversion of this (1984: 41).³³

As is common to all such theorisations, struggle between and within classes is an essential component of Bourdieu's work. For him, however, class struggle is perceived not simply in economic terms; economic capital is but one form which individuals and groups use to manoeuvre themselves within the class structure. Here Bourdieu introduces the concept of

'cultural capital': ³⁴ 'the status derived from education and modes of consumption' (1988: 47). Putting cultural capital in context, Berger describes it as at distinguishing between 'the power exercised by money [economic capital] and the power exercised by resources inherited or acquired chiefly from family and educational systems' (1986: 1446). He goes on to define cultural capital as:

All the inherited and acquired skills and facilities that function as assets (and liabilities) in the cultural performance of everyday life and that, like economic capital, their possessors may deploy in markets - displaying, flaunting, investing, trading, threatening, or otherwise using them to maintain or enhance a position in the order of class domination (1986: 1446).

Individuals hold various amounts of each form of capital, and one form can be converted into the other by being used as "tokens". For example, the education system is commonly used to improve one's quantity and quality of cultural capital. ³⁵ In order to understand the difference between lifestyles, Bourdieu projects these as determined by the quantity of cultural and economic capital. ³⁶ The three major classes are differentiated by their total *volume* of capital; distinctions within classes (class fractions) are determined by the *composition* of their capital, i.e. the ratio between economic capital and cultural capital (1984: 114).

The enormity of the role of cultural capital is brought home by Bourdieu's concept of "distinction". Distinction can be generalised as the forming of differentiation between groups; Codd defines it as a 'form of cultural capital, transmitted mainly through the family and education system' (1990: 142). For Bourdieu,

The very title *Distinction* serves as a reminder that what is commonly called distinction, that is, a certain quality of bearing and manners, most often considered innate..., is nothing other than *difference*, a gap, a distinctive feature, in short, a relational property existing only in and through its relation with other properties. The main idea [of distinction] is that to exist within a social space, to occupy a point or to be an individual within a social space, is to differ, to be different (Bourdieu 1998: 6,9).

It is through the judicious deployment of one's cultural capital that distinction is formed, maintained and fought. Taste, expressed through cultural capital, becomes a battle-ground to define identity and position in the class structure. Groups attempt to improve their accumulation of cultural capital by excluding other groups: reconversion of capital is part of the struggle of each group attempting to 'maintain or change its position in the social structure' (Bourdieu 1984: 157). However, in order to be able to function as a form of

distinction, forms of cultural capital (specifically 'non-economic tokens') have to be assigned a weighting as they have no intrinsic value of their own (Robbins 1991: 119). This weighting is determined by society and is often determined by a narrow group within society.

For Bourdieu, the arts, and in particular music, have a strong tendency to be used as forms of cultural capital: as he states in an oft-quoted passage, 'nothing more clearly affirms one's "class", nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music' (1984: 18). Indeed, taste in art operates as an exclusionary resource: 'the work of art is the objectification of a relationship of distinction' (1984: 227). Competency in art appreciation is a classic form of cultural capital: the meaning of art is socially constructed and a work of art 'only exists as such for a person who has the means to appropriate it, or in other words, to "decipher it"' (DiMaggio in Bourdieu 1991: 149).

The relevance of these arguments for classical music is enormous: for Bourdieu, 'there is no activity more classifying, more distinctive, that is, more closely linked to social class and educational capital than concert-going or the playing of a "noble" instrument' (1993: 104). Classical music *is* a complex art form that is perceived as requiring an extensive knowledge base for one to gain an understanding and appreciation of its intricacies. Indeed, Bourdieu states that the level of competence in a field required for its appropriation determines the level of symbolic profit; it is classical music's complexity that plays a major role in its status as a high cultural marker (1984: 229).³⁷ Bourdieu identifies the Kantian aesthetic, with its focus on disinterestedness, on the pure gaze, as a product of the dominant class. The Kantian aesthetic aims at forming distinction, maintaining an hegemonic control over the way art is produced and consumed.

Bourdieu claims that it is intellectuals, the dominated fraction of the dominant class (with relatively high levels of cultural capital compared to economic capital) who play the most important role in determining artistic and aesthetic value; members of this fraction are 'the whole corporation of critics [who are] mandated by the group to produce legitimate classifications and the discourse necessarily accompanying any artistic enjoyment worthy of the name' (1984: 28). Critics are, however, usually 'preaching to the converted' for they are already 'structurally attuned' to their audiences' view of 'the social world, their tastes, and their whole habitus' (1984: 240). Art is thus never innocent; used as a form cultural capital, art becomes a token in the battle for distinction that occurs between and within classes. The dominance of the Kantian aesthetic is tacitly accepted by all classes as legitimate. The possession of the right artistic knowledge is perceived as a sign of distinction; the reverse also holds true. For example, a lack of knowledge of classical music

'can only create in the untrained... a sense of inadequacy, a feeling that though he may enjoy the music he cannot claim really to understand it' (Cook 1992: 1).

For Bourdieu, 'aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent' (1984: 56). Often when such intolerance occurs, it can be seen partially as a response to attempts by lower classes or class fractions to adopt and adapt the assets of those directly above them in the hierarchy to gain an equal placing on the class ladder (1984: 161). This is most evident when legitimate culture suffers the 'sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated' (1984: 57):

When faced with legitimate works of art, people apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos... the result is a systematic "reduction" of the things of art to the things of life... which is pure barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic (1984: 44).

This strategy of reintegration of contrary tastes produces a strong reaction from the dominant class; such 'barbarism' affronts their Kantian and pure conception of the aesthetic. 'Pure taste', states Bourdieu, 'is based on the disgust that is often called "viscera" (it makes one sick or makes one vomit)' (1984: 486).³⁸

The obvious effrontery of challenges to legitimate culture lies behind the outrage expressed against cultural "bastards" such as Helfgott; his lack of respect of the cultural elite's behavioural and musical expectations made this inevitable. However, the by-now obvious interconnections between the traditional aesthetic and power succeed in further revealing the cultural contingency of the former. I now move on to a discussion on this fight for distinction over art in one of its most notable forms: the concept of "high" and "low" cultures.

The High/Low Distinction and the Re-invention of Classical Music

As many contemporary theorists argue, distinctions between "high" and "low" culture are a social creation.³⁹ While disagreements exist about the deeper social origins, such a starting point is clearly at loggerheads with the traditional view of aesthetics and elitist culture. The classic portrayal of this "split" has the immutable, superior product battling against the commodified trash of popular culture. High culture is portrayed as rarefied, elite, intellectual, of substance and permanence; low culture as common, commercial, "dumbed down" and disposable. While the high/low split is not a recent development, the enormous cultural changes of the twentieth century have led to an increasing number of writers extolling its accuracy; often this is in the form of reactionary rants. Such writers include

Bloom (1987), Washburn and Thornton (1996), and Scruton (1998): the final of these rejects 'common culture' as 'without judgement', as a culture of 'near total inarticulateness' (1998: 90,131).⁴⁰ Rather than take on this ahistorical and non-socially aware extremism, the attempt here is to work through the origins, implications and reasons for the common belief in such a split. As Martin says:

the sociologist may not start with the opposed concepts of, for example, "serious" and "light" music...: rather, the *concepts* themselves are the topic for investigation, as is the use to which they are put. Whose interests are served by the institutionalisation of such a distinction? How did it come about? Is it being challenged, and to what effect? (1995: 22).

Authors including Weber (1975) and Levine (1988), in historical studies of nineteenth-century Europe and America respectively, convincingly demonstrate the social forces at work in creating the high/low cultural split. Levine describes how in nineteenth-century America Shakespeare was regarded as popular entertainment, and that it was common for popular songs to be inserted into traditional operas (1988:13,90).⁴¹ As argued by Fraser (1981), the rapid rise in living standards caused by the industrial revolution brought about the development of a substantial middle class in the mid-nineteenth century. Due to higher discretionary income and increased leisure time, the role of the arts within society also went through considerable changes. It was in this period that the modern concept of the classical concert was invented:

There came a giddy social atmosphere among the middle class and aristocracy, eager trips to concert halls, ravenous consumption of sheet music and periodicals, passionate support of performers and musical styles, and a shrewd use of all this toward self-advancement (Weber 1975: 3).⁴²

The result was an increased distance between classical concerts attended by the middle and upper classes, and events of a more popular persuasion which became identified with the lower classes. Such distinction was also occurring amongst those attending the same events: Weber covers the development in the 1930s of separate concert seating with a range of prices. This practice, nearly universal a decade later, 'afforded people a strong sense of distinction' (1975: 25). There was a general move to higher prices that, not surprisingly, restricted entry, helping produce a more "exclusive" audience. Expectations of behaviour also changed markedly at concerts: Levine recounts tales of concert-goers in the US being lectured as to the correct way to behave. In 1892 an Edward Baxter Perry told an audience that they had 'no right' to sit through a concert 'stolid and indifferent': attention 'is a rigid rule of the concert-room', and silence 'is to music what light is to painting', he stated (in Levine 1988: 190).⁴³ Intermissions were added, lights were dimmed; some locations

even banned the wearing of large hats in theatres (Levine 1988: 190,191)! Most notable, however, was the tacit banning of most expressions of enjoyment (or otherwise) by the audience:

Nothing seemed to have troubled the new arbiters of culture more than the nineteenth century practice of spontaneous expressions of pleasure and disapproval in the form of cheers, yells, gesticulations, hisses, boos, stamping of feet, whistling, crying for encores and applause. By the middle of the twentieth century polite applause and occasional well-placed "bravos" were all that remained of this panoply of reactions, and there were some who seriously proposed abolishing even this small remnant (Levine 1988: 192).⁴⁴

Much has been written on the distinctions created within the classical music world; accusations of elitism and snobbery are commonly stated, many of which have obvious claims to accuracy. Classical music was (and continues to be) sold on its perceived superior quality and tradition, partly in an attempt to differentiate itself from the ephemerality and superficiality of popular music. Levine makes clear that:

The taste that now prevailed was that of one segment of the social and economic spectrum which convinced itself and the nation at large that its way of... appreciating music... was the only legitimate one; that *this* was the way... Beethoven [was] meant to be experienced and in fact had been experienced always by those of culture and discernment (1990: 231).

In a harshly worded but commonly put assertion, James states that 'what we call classical music has become an elite and self-serving institution, overwhelmingly dedicated to the curatorial function of preserving the musical traditions of the past' (1993: 232). These self-styled 'curators' of the 'past', however, are simply deluding themselves, unaware or unbelieving of the evidence that shows the "classical tradition" is both socially based and a relatively recent development. This is a consummate example of what has been entitled the 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).⁴⁵

Classical music has throughout history only appealed to a small percentage of the population; partly due to this low level of appeal, classical music is rarely economically viable, and has historically tended to rely heavily on state support. However, it has had to turn increasingly to the private sector for survival: the state of symphony orchestras throughout the world points to an environment where 'sponsorship is no longer abundant, recording contracts are hard to come by, and [government] funding is squeezed' (Tait 1994: 40). Under such constraints, orchestras, particularly in the US, have been forced to amalgamate or disband; New Zealand's own orchestras' difficulties testify to this world-wide

trend (see *Economist* 1987; Scott 1996). With the rise of popular music this century, classical music has undoubtedly seen further decline in support. Today classical music accounts for only four to eight percent of the total recordings sold: in post world-war two Britain the comparable figure was 18% (Cussic 1996: 121).⁴⁶

Classical music's lack of large-scale support leaves it in a catch twenty-two situation: to maintain its distinction and elite nature, its audience must remain narrow and small; to be financially viable, it must look to increasing its support base. As Bourdieu puts it, holders of legitimate culture become:

divided between their interests in cultural proselytism, that is winning a market by widening their audience which inclines them to favour popularisation, and concern for cultural distinction, the only objective basis for their rarity (1984: 229).

The result is an uneasy and always fraught alliance between the two extremes. The classical recording industry has apparently had few qualms about "growing" its audience; note the enormous increase in popularity of 'crossover' albums such as those of the *Three Tenors*, whose first album sold over 10 million copies (Symes 1997: 85).⁴⁷ Economic imperatives have also forced musical ensembles to take a similar route, for example orchestras presenting (often free) concerts in public spaces to massive audiences, commonly performing classical adaptations of popular works. These reworkings of classical music, claims Symes, 'eroded the distinction between the absoluteness of art and the ephemerality of entertainment', and thus have brought about an inevitable backlash against the so-called 'dumbing down' of high culture (1997: 85).

This backlash highlights the often determined concern of classical music consumers to maintain distinction. The relevance of such concern is exposed when examining the economic backgrounds of these consumers. Commonly held assumptions state that classical music fans are predominantly from the middle and upper classes of society; there are a considerable numbers of studies that support these claims. A survey of attendees at orchestral concerts in the US showed an average income of US\$80,000, with 90% having a university education (Triplett 1994). Figures for album sales in the UK in 1993 show a strong correlation between sales of classical music and class backgrounds (Longhurst 1995).⁴⁸ The reasons behind this are, of course, complex: Dutton suggests there is a direct correlation between 'the higher the class you come from, the more access you'll have to education'; the assumption being classical music appreciation is directly linked to education, a point that Bourdieu would certainly agree with.

Nowhere is distinction more obvious than within the typical classical concert. Levine (1988) has shown the continual development of expectations of behaviour throughout the twentieth century: the end result has been a highly formalised environment. Clothing of performers is usually limited to black and white attire (most often tails for men). While no such uniformity exists for the audience, the concert is an "event" of a very specific type and thus the audience are expected to follow certain conventions. These include the ritualistic applause for the leader, soloist and conductor; and clapping only at the end of pieces. These conventions, claims Small, 'serve to depersonalize the performers and to emphasize the universality and timelessness of the proceedings'. Indeed the symphony concert, Small goes on to claim, is 'an important ritual of the power-holding class in our society' (1987: 7,11).⁴⁹ The result of creating this distinction in the concert hall, it is argued by some, is an environment unattractive to many.

What I don't know is why [the critics] don't see it is as now what appears to be a highly outmoded, over-formalised sort of experience which audiences largely full of middle-class people are very unaccustomed to... [We are] asked to behave the way we normally never behave, a completely artificial environment. (Godlovitch).

The fact [is] that the response of classical music audiences is pretty much channelled within certain perimeters – no booing. Tradition is certainly part of the experience: why else do the men get dressed up in nineteenth-century clothes? It's ridiculous, if you think about it logically (Bushnell).

Presenting a similar case, Tait suggests that 'audiences... want to hear [music] in less formal circumstances. They can't be bothered with knowing when and where not to cough' (1994: 40). The contrast with the less-stultified ambience of the more popular event is substantial. Godlovitch counterposes the classical concert with the 'gathering of musicians in an agricultural village in the seventeenth century for a dance: players would come together, and people would be drinking and hopping around, some would be listening, some would ignore the music, but it would be part of the general ambience'. Godlovitch suggests that even within the aristocracy such formality as portrayed above was, at the most, rare.

The musical event wasn't one of these magical things where people had to sit: this seems to me to be very much a product of the 19th century where the whole notion of the artist as somehow the voice of god became much more prominent. Music became cultish, and we're still living through it... The classical tradition has kind of ossified, it's fossilised music. Critics again act sometimes as the keepers of the

cemetery. It's a community that identifies itself by a kind of conservatism that they've created as a form a identification.

Classical music, as has been shown above, has been re-invented in modern times as a conservative and supposedly unchanging art form: at the same time, wider society has continued to change; indeed societal transformations have been substantial. This raises the concern that classical music has possibly lost its relevance for many in society. In turn, this leads to the role of the critic in determining value for the wider society being hotly debated. Is the critic simply a representative of the average consumer? Or is he or she something beyond that?

Music critics *are* usually regarded highly within their cultural community and their influence can be massive. Even when acting as a "guide", critics are directing their audience to perceive the work from their position, thus undermining alternative and possibly valid interpretations.⁵⁰ The influence of the critic extends beyond playing a role in determining which specific performances or performers the public should attend; it includes helping determine the value of most cultural products. This powerful role is what is often titled "gate-keeping".

Criticism thus guards the door to all available high-art spaces, sets the terms for entry, scouts the fringe spaces for new talent, and tirelessly readjusts current criteria to emergent art modes. Criticism is the mediating veil in all art-world transactions... Criticism can decide which of many possible meanings a work will have and can suppress others, affecting how past works are seen and experienced in the present (Duncan 1993: 174).

While Shuker suggests that the term has been 'critiqued for being too mechanistic' and that it oversimplifies issues (1998: 142), nevertheless the concept of gatekeepers provides an excellent analogy if the term is used to stress the critic's role as an active mediator between the art object and its consumption by the public.⁵¹ Further, it is the often unrecognised nature of the critics' role and power, as argued by Bourdieu, that makes the gatekeeping concept so important. As Novitz suggests, part of the gatekeeper's power comes from the very informality (or the lack of recognition) of formal rules: in such guise, 'the authority of the "gatekeeper" can take many subtle and uncodified forms' (1992: 227).

The conception of the critic as gatekeeper must be linked back to a substantial argument of this chapter: that a great proportion of classical music criticism bases itself on traditional aesthetics. However, the revealing of the traditional aesthetics as axiological, ahistorical and class-specific must also immediately raise concerns over traditional critical authority. Godlovitch is extremely sceptical of granting such an authority to critics:

Let's face it, we're talking about a group of people who are accepting on authority a certain set of claims, somehow putting these forward as if they were facts about the physical universe, as sure as the number of planets in the solar system. This strikes me as investing a great deal more authority and finality in the deliverances of a critical community than it deserves. There's nothing outside, there's no sky-hook that you can say that establishes the legitimacy of any one of these [standards of judgement].

If somebody says "these are the high canons of high art and these are the criteria that must prevail", you say "give me a break": this is an interest group with certain kinds of standards which may have its own history... One has to say, "well from what standpoint are they actually speaking to us?", and it turns out that this consists of their obvious insistence that what they go and hear has to match up against a certain canon that they are themselves establishing as setting the standard, as sacrosanct... To vest it with any degree of exclusivity? Sorry. This isn't physics: it's just criticism.⁵²

As Gracyk argues a justification of one judgement as superior to another must be accompanied by evidence of the 'comparative superiority of one tradition over another' (1990: 127). This is the role that critics set themselves to accomplish; however, in an environment in which scepticism over critical authority is increasingly common, how can this proof of superiority of certain judgements be achieved? With considerable difficulty, states Godlovitch. Indeed, according to Godlovitch, cultural events such as the Helfgott Phenomenon require a radically new perspective of artistic value: it is to this we now turn.

Artistic Value: A New Perspective

According to Godlovitch, critics too often attempt to speak for all, setting standards and expectations for others based on *their* own values. How can it be established that these standards should be widely accepted as valid and universal? How can they be rendered as anything more than simply the views of one sector of the community with their own particular outlook? They cannot, says Godlovitch. The raising of critical judgements to the status of universals is a falsehood. Godlovitch (1997) shows how attempts to legitimise criticism, often through grounding it in a scientific basis, are fundamentally flawed. Revealing his background in the philosophy of science, he spends much of this article outlining the distinctions between criticism and science.⁵³ Godlovitch claims that critics hold a belief in the rightness of their judgements being proven through convergence of thought: that general consensus amongst critics gives such judgements a certain validity.

'Consensus among critics may be read (especially by the critics themselves) as justifying belief in the external "reality" of the ideals of artistic practice which must be met by certain artistic products' (1997: 372). Such an argument is certainly accepted within science,⁵⁴ which always has 'encounters with nature' as a final constraint; the field of art criticism, however, has no such constraint as its judgements are purely self-referential:

*All the critic can do is gesture approvingly and comparatively at some other artwork which putatively embodies the idea, and hope that his colleagues gesture thus as well. But this would be like saying that one theory was a good one just because another theory had been so judged. Not only is that not nearly enough to authorize approval in general; it is pretty much beside the point unless one can somehow break out of the circle of comparison and consensus. Critics can't do this because art just doesn't converge on anything (Godlovitch 1997: 372).*⁵⁵

Hence critical authority is somewhat diminished, if not totally stripped away: the critic as the Emperor removed of his clothes. The critics may still believe they are fully attired; many within their community may agree. However, for those who accept the demise of ultimate critical authority, the critics and audience are simply deluding themselves in their belief. Criticism is suddenly a contentious and highly subjective arena. Godlovitch's question is thus: if the traditional conception of critical authority is not tenable, how can we explain the huge disparity between critical and public reaction to Helfgott? How can we explain why audiences so adored and critics so despised the very same man?

To answer these questions, one must return to a discussion of the traditional gaze that enabled contemporary critics to dismiss Helfgott. The argument in brief: Helfgott is a classical pianist and, as such, is to be judged on purely musical criteria, for it is only those criteria that are relevant in judging a pianist. While most critics would agree that there are ultimately correct and incorrect ways of performing a work, there is not simply *one* correct interpretation. Rather, there are limits placed on how far one can deviate from such expectations. Working from this basis, says Godlovitch, 'presumably in the Helfgott case they're saying "well, there's this range of possible ways of saying this; Helfgott falls outside it, doesn't even come close."' However, working from Godlovitch's understanding that traditional critical authority is ultimately an untenable concept, it cannot be argued that the 'range of possible ways' that Helfgott 'fell outside' should be accepted unquestioningly as *the* standard. Indeed, in the absence of universal critical authority it is fallacious to suggest that all audience members at Helfgott's recital must be bound by the critics' own categories of judgement.

Having freed Helfgott's audiences from the shackles of traditional critical judgement, we must turn to an examination of their (mostly) positive reaction to Helfgott. One approach that possibly accounts for the audiences' reaction is to take up the widely agreed point made above: that there is never one single correct interpretation. This is a point that Levinson, a well-known aesthetician, makes:

Performances of music are *legitimately* evaluated from a *number of different perspectives*, and thus, as a result, there is little use for a notion of a good performance *simpliciter* of a given piece of music... a performance that is just fair from one point of view might be quite good from another, or *vice versa* (1987: 75).

Levinson goes on to link these different points of view with his claim that there are various kinds of listeners who may be looking for different things within the same performance (1987: 77). Judging a performance is thus heavily contingent on a number of factors:

While I think the practiced and informed listener's vantage point is a central one, and that the *primary* evaluation of performances is arguably with references to that, it is hardly the *only* position of importance in the musical context.... The question, "Is performance P of work W a good one, and if so, how good" can generally receive no *single* answer, but only a *series* of answers, for specifications of the question to various musically legitimated individuals, positions, contexts and purposes (1987: 86-88).

Hence we can position Helfgott's audiences as a specific listening public. As suggested in the previous chapter, many of those attending Helfgott's concerts were new to classical music. Contrasting the audiences' 'vantage point' with that of the 'practiced and informed listener's vantage point', it is easy enough to understand the former's reaction to Helfgott as completely valid.⁵⁶ The audience enjoyed Helfgott; while their expectations may have been "lower" than those of the music critic, with no ultimate critical authority, the validity of the audiences' reaction must be accepted as a given. This analysis, however, is questionable on a number of grounds. First, it suggests an extreme relativism which, as Schick states, 'grants each opinion the same worth as the next' (1996: 92). Second, it assumes either that the categories of judgement used by the music critics were also used by the audience (albeit using a "lower" standard), or that a judgement requires no categorised basis (again, a relativist position). Third, it presumes that the object being critiqued was the same for both audience and critic, and that object was David Helfgott.

It is Godlovitch's critique of this final claim – that both critic and audience were examining the same object – that leads to his proposal for a major reconstruction of the critical gaze.

For Godlovitch argues that with the critics' and audiences' reaction to Helfgott, 'what it was that one group was launching attacks upon was not the same object the other group was lavishing praise upon'. The object of artistic value has changed radically he claims and, as such, the metaphorical gaze of traditional criticism has been left behind:

The drawback for conventional criticism is this: it is stuck at a previous stage, locked into a notion of performance fashioned and dominated by the expectations generated exclusively by occasions of live and recorded sound. Within that context, hard limitations apply to what counts as the focal aesthetic object and, in association, the fitting aesthetic experience (Godlovitch 1997: 374).

Godlovitch argues that technology has had an enormous impact upon the appreciation of classical music within the concert environment: the development of recordings – from the gramophone through to the compact disc – has given 'us this engineered piece of sound, which is often much more perfect than anything that goes on on-stage', and it is this sound 'that somehow begins to predominate':⁵⁷

One standing assumption has been that the artistry in the performance is exhausted by the immediate performance context, that the only artistically interesting objects emerge in an auditor's immediate perception in the appropriate institutional context of display... This frustrates any impulse to value features outside the frame (1998: 139).

The traditional aesthetic concentrates solely on the music itself – the other elements of a live performance are now incidental to the music and are thus irrelevant, if not irritating, in forming a critical aesthetic judgement. As Godlovitch puts it, 'all [critics] do is essentially listen to a sound sequence. My guess is that a critic doesn't actually reckon there is anything to be gained by being in the concert hall as long as they have access to that sound'.⁵⁸ Classical music criticism now exclusively concentrates on the aural component of a concert. Drawing together this aural exclusivity with the social distinction of traditional aesthetics, it can be seen that the socio-historical processes of classical music have resulted in a continual narrowing of the aesthetic object. The contraction of artistic criteria has invalidated most ways to appreciate the aesthetic, and at the same time has privileged a specific and exclusive viewpoint. Finally, in dressing this up as inherently natural, it is unsurprising that Helfgott is categorically labelled incompetent by most critics. However, this judgement has been shown to be based on ahistorical and axiological reasoning. Furthermore, Godlovitch states, *the critics were judging the wrong aesthetic object*.

It was widely accepted that extra-musical elements were an important attraction for many of Helfgott's adoring fans. However, Godlovitch goes considerably past this, arguing that

'for certain consistently enraptured witnesses, "Helfgott" names neither person, persona, nor performer, but a complex of events, images, interviews, impressions, *to the totality of which aesthetic attention has been fixed* (1997: 368, emphasis added). It is not solely the music, nor totally his behaviour, nor any other of the elements of the Helfgott Phenomenon that so attracts many of Helfgott's fans, but all of these in their *entirety*, in their very connections. When music critics attempt to judge Helfgott in comparison with the oeuvre of professional concert pianists, they are simply missing the mark: Helfgott the performer is just one part of "Helfgott" the Phenomenon. An event such as the "Helfgott Phenomenon" marks a major shift away from the traditional aesthetic object and its narrowed focus; indeed, it suggests a radical widening of the aesthetic focus. This Godlovitch has entitled the 'massively extended aesthetic object':⁵⁹ Here,

performance spills out over the confines of sculpted sound and encompasses the totality of opportunity offered by taking as one aesthetic unit a number of varied elements drawn from film, from sound recordings, from live display, and also – let us never forget – from the meta-aesthetic shadows following these displays in the form of promotion, advertising, television and radio interviews, and other thematically related phenomena. A new type of audience experiences a live performance or a recording or a film as each constituting a fragment of a very much larger whole, the totality which constitutes the source of aesthetic enjoyment (1997: 373-374).⁶⁰

The MEAO is an amalgamation, if you will, of those supposedly competing and often contradictory forms of artistic value: an amalgam of musical and social criteria. When a critic at an Australian recital of Helfgott's derided the audience for behaving 'like members of a pop crowd' (in Cumming 1997), she was actually closer to Godlovitch's understanding of the event than I am sure she would have wished. The comparisons with a pop concert meet with his approval, for in such an environment all aspects of the performance are essential to the overall experience – the music, clothing, behaviour, image... the list goes on.

It's like being a fashion designer and going to a pop concert and saying "look, unless the dress code is just right, the whole thing falls". You say, "well, don't be a jerk"; it's all part of the whole thing, and the way they spike their hair or break their guitars or dress the way they dress is seamlessly interwoven as part of the event, and what you're trying to do artificially is to identify one and say "on this, everything lives or dies".

While audiences can find considerable pleasure in this MEAO, the traditional critic is left bewildered with nowhere to go; they are 'left behind by unwitting, unfettered, fellow nonpractitioners' (1997: 374). The critics fail, says Godlovitch, to understand the enormity

of the MEAO as a totally new way of constituting aesthetic value; 'the musical work and its rendition become mere aspects of the totality' (1998: 374): under these new conditions, 'one might well say, if you're prepared to admit that this is a different kind of event in that this thing works as it does because of the very complex melding... you presumably say to the critic, "well, you're just out of your depth here. You're not qualified to judge this kind of event"'.⁶¹ Indeed, Godlovitch suggests that it is the critics – *not* the audience – who are likely to suffer 'an unintelligible deprivation' as they fail to understand or appreciate the MEAO (1998: 142).

The role of the conventional music critic in the judgement of Helfgott has thus been invalidated. This is yet another symptom of criticism's historical backwardness; the Helfgott Phenomenon, on the other hand, 'is symptomatic of a forward shift of the primary aesthetic object' (Godlovitch 1997: 372). The MEAO, as personified by the Helfgott Phenomenon, with the integral nature of its multiple aspects, its immediacy, expressiveness and high level of personal involvement, may become increasingly common in the future, states Godlovitch.⁶² Whatever its prospective chances of survival, there is no doubt that the concept of a massively extended aesthetic object offers a fascinating reconceptualisation of the notion of artistic value, and thus has something vital to say about the role of culture in society today.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a contextualisation of the Helfgott Phenomenon in its wider societal setting. Examining what lies behind the strongly contrasting reactions of critics and audiences, this chapter has focused on the problems of aesthetic judgement and the object of artistic value. Traditional aesthetics has been rightly criticised for presenting a pseudo-objective stance that privileges a disinterested perception of artwork, focusing on the concepts of tradition and longevity. This stance continues to dominate the contemporary approach to artistic value, and as such typifies Dutton's negative reaction to Helfgott.

The traditional understanding of artistic value contains crucial flaws in its internal logic and fails to properly take into account historical developments. The esteemed position of the high arts in modern society is often predicated on the notion of traditional aesthetics' inherent superiority. However, through the work of Bourdieu and other socially-informed texts, the traditional aesthetic is revealed as a social creation of the modern times; art is portrayed as a form of (cultural) capital that plays a vital role in maintaining distinction between classes. Further, the search for distinction since the late nineteenth century is shown to be behind the segregation of culture into "high" and "low" forms.

The exposure of the recent and social origins of the aesthetic provides damning evidence against the validity of conventional music criticism. Critics are shown to have no ultimate grounds on which to rest their judgements, and the dominance of musical value in aesthetic judgements is revealed as arbitrary and socially motivated. Traditional critics' dismissal of Helfgott thus has no universal validity; they equally cannot account for the audiences' apparent positive reaction, for as Godlovitch argues these critics were examining the wrong aesthetic object. Both social *and* musical values were vital elements for the audience in forming their aesthetic response. This widening of the conception of aesthetic value, dubbed the 'massively extended aesthetic object', acknowledges that the attention of the audience is given to all facets of the Helfgott Phenomenon, taken as an integral whole. In such a situation, conventional critics are left with their old-fashioned conception of artistic value.

Notes

¹ The 'function of such a critic is... to speak to large-scale, evaluative issues in the history of an art form' (Godlovitch). Schick also suggests that the difference between the reviewer and the 'true critic' (i.e. the academic) is that the former is more likely to deal with music of the present; the latter with music of the past (1996: 57,58).

² Such a claim is undoubtedly more accurate for the media-oriented critic; the interviews I carried out with media critics showed an apparent reluctance to discuss the basis of criticism.

³ Many question the standards of music criticism in New Zealand: 'I don't know of any critic in New Zealand who is held in high regard', says Dutton. Both Dando and Button expressed similar worries, as does Thomson: 'A disturbing feature of music criticism in New Zealand over the past few decades however has been its inconsistency, lack of a true critical point of view, and often pre-emptory and ill-tempered brushing aside of notable artists and composers' (1987: 16).

⁴ The critic has 'a very valuable role, and educational role:... Isenberg's point, very simply put, was that the function and value of the critic was to draw your attention to something you might have otherwise missed, which would, in that sense, add to or enhance your aesthetic appreciation of the object under review' (Godlovitch).

⁵ This is speaking specifically of music critics – due to the nature of most performances being only held once, the post-event review is unlikely to have much immediate impact. However, *cumulatively*, reviews do build up to help form a reputation, either good, bad or indifferent, and thus have an impact. 'Audiences all judge the *direct* influence of criticism upon attendance to be *very* small, indeed all but negligible. Reputation of the performer, word of mouth and even advertising far outdistance the critical reviews as reasons for attendance. However, the indirect influence of musical criticism, at least over the long run, seems to be very substantial' (Schick 1996, 33). Other art forms – e.g. drama, art exhibits, opera – are influenced by critical reaction within a more immediate timeframe as their runs are usually of long enough duration. Shrum offers a qualitative study examining the influence of reviews. His finds 'show that positive reviews are associated with greater audience participation [in]... highbrow performance' (1991: 347).

⁶ The book referred to is *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (Godlovitch: 1998).

⁷ That said, this does not rule out, as will be seen below, references to 'general propositions' or 'lawlike generalizations' in justifying aesthetic judgements – both Kant and Hume end up with such claims (Gardner 1995: 588).

⁸ Another philosopher that subscribes to the longevity/quality correlation is Scruton: 'The successful work of art presents exemplary content in exemplary form... hence it is always there, never surpassed or replaced, always to be revisited. Inevitably, therefore, a high culture involves a repertoire, as accumulation of works of art and exemplary utterances' (1998: 39).

⁹ Kant's example of such a judgement of the agreeable is: 'one man likes the sound of wind instruments, another prefers that of string instruments'.

¹⁰ The use of the word "gaze" may require further explanation in order to distinguish it from the more common usage of the same term in the sense of the "male gaze" (for example, Mulvey 1989). The Bourdieuan use of the "gaze" refers to the Kantian disinterested contemplation of an artwork (1984: 3). As such, it is not limited to the visual but covers all senses, including aural.

¹¹ Smith's criticisms of these qualifications include her claims that 'the universality of the appeal of certain authors is not quite universal; the underlying shared psychophysiological structure of all human beings is usually defective' (Smith 1988: 63).

¹² A classic example of this is Goldman (1995), in which the aesthetic value of an object is judged on the 'deepness' of the aesthetic experience; the result is an intellectualising of pleasure, situating aesthetic value as a cognitive experience (re: Kant) and, by inference, claiming art that is not 'great' as little more than personal gratification.

¹³ Indeed, at the centre of postmodern world is, according to Jameson, 'a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life... can be said to have become cultural' (in Hall 1992: 232). Fowler for one, however, claims postmodernism exaggerates cultural shifts; notably, she states 'it fails to grasp the continued stratification of cultural consumption, in which the dominated class lack access to high culture' (1997: 74).

¹⁴ Bushnell, speaking of this, stated: 'In the late 1970s and early 1980s [with] a new art history... there [was] an explosion: different art histories, all those social things, all that contextual stuff is all happening.' A classic example of such a text is *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Duncan 1993).

¹⁵ Fiske's main focus is on the 'creative' and even 'subversive' ways consumers twist popular culture from its original status as a capitalist product. See Frith for more on the claim of a lack of a critical edge in cultural studies (1996: 14).

¹⁶ Frith's 1996 text is, to my mind, a considerable advancement on his earlier examination of the popular aesthetic (Frith 1987). Generally speaking, this sociological/critical approach to popular music has enjoyed considerable growth this decade; other texts include Negus (1996) and Shepherd and Wicke (1997).

¹⁷ As to why classical music remains mainly impervious to the sociological approach, Bushnell suggests that: 'most of the stuff written about is the music of dead people, so there isn't the same preponderance. Probably two thirds of the criticism that appears in the media about the visual arts is about contemporary art'.

¹⁸ Adorno stated that: 'in popular music... every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine' (1990: 303). Such music was about standardisation, relaxation, inattention (1990: 311): hence the view that 'popular liberation is best served by a critique of popular culture, and by an aesthetic that resolutely opposes the aesthetic preferences of the masses' (Bauch 1990: 65). Though Adorno's work on music continues to play a vital role in the task of seeking musical understanding, it has nevertheless received considerable criticism, notably for its cultural ethnocentrism e.g. Witkin 1998: 191; see also Martin 1995: 95 and Bauch 1990.

¹⁹ While Wolff does argue that 'the sociology of art and the social history of art convincingly show the historical, ideological and contingent nature of a good deal of "aesthetics" and of many, if not all, "aesthetic judgements", she does go on to say that 'the sociology of art has in some ways exceeded its own brief, in so far as it fails to account for the "aesthetic". Indeed, the central theme of this book is the irreducibility of "aesthetic value" to social, political or ideological co-ordinates' (1993: 11). This point will be picked up on in the thesis conclusion. Edwards claims that most 'socially informed' writing on music is produced by non-musicians and suggests that this increases the distance between social and traditional accounts of the aesthetic (1991: 693).

²⁰ Martin gives the example of the diatonic scale, the basis for western music, which is perceived as the 'natural basis for musical organisation', when it is actually culturally specific (1995: 7).

²¹ Zolberg quotes Bourdieu on why this may be: the public are seen 'as minor actors, merely economically motivated and, therefore, spiritually inferior to creative artists, who are taken to be imbued with the sacred flame' (1990: 127).

²² Wolf on the same point: 'the defenders of traditional values, in the face of their construction of a PC threat to abolish the study of Western culture... have paid a good deal of attention to the defence of Great Art and the canons of literature, art and music which are assumed to be at risk... And yet this is also the evidence that, however much things have changed in a decade, fundamentally they remain the same. For what we have been seeing is the current strategy of an old project: the traditional defence of established values (among which cultural and aesthetic values have always been primary) and the resistance to any critical modes of thinking' (1993: *xiii*).

²³ Many critics rule out the role of taste in making judgements, thus continuing traditional aesthetics' denial of the social: "'Taste" is not a tool of criticism but a symptom of people. Tastes change. A switch in taste must, logically, involve untruth', claims Walker (1966: 4); 'Taste, far from being a valid part of the critic's (or teacher's) equipment, is an anti-artistic concept... all taste is still-born', agrees Keller (1987: 159-160).

²⁴ Bourdieu defines taste as 'the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects of practices'. He also claims that 'the idea of taste [is] typically bourgeois, since it presupposes absolute freedom of choice' (1984: 173,177).

²⁵ For Bourdieu, this requires that the term 'taste' be used in its widest possible sense; to include everything from the car one drives, to the music one listens to, to the food one eats.

²⁶ These include, as used in this thesis: Harker et al. (1990); Robbins (1991); Jenkins (1992); Calhoun et al (1993); Fowler (1997) and Swartz (1997).

²⁷ Bourdieu claims the general arguments of *Distinction* 'seem valid beyond the particular French case, and no doubt, for every stratified society' (1984: *xi-xii*). However, writers have questioned the applicability of Bourdieu's work to other cultural and historical settings; Archer (1993) states such universalisation is not

tenable. Many others have sought to adapt Bourdieu's concepts to allow for cultural differences, for example: DiMaggio (1987; 1991), Bryson (1996), Peterson and Kern (1996) and Holt (1997; 1998). The typical findings of these often practical studies is to claim that the upper class not only dominates the consumption of high art, but 'is also more likely to be involved in a wide range of low-status activities', contradicting Bourdieu's conception of elite taste being narrow (Peterson and Kern 1996: 900); see also DiMaggio 1987: 444).

²⁸ Typical of such comments are those of Garnham and Williams: 'a functionalist-determinist residue in Bourdieu's concept of reproduction which leads him to place less emphasis on the possibilities of real change and innovation' (in Wilson 1989: 56). This theme is covered by most critiques of Bourdieu's oeuvre (for example MacDonald 1977: 44).

²⁹ Many pick up on Bourdieu's rejection of a substantive working class aesthetic and the legitimacy of popular art. In popular music, both Frith (1996) and Shusterman (1992) have argued against this claim (see Shusterman (1996: 195); also Shusterman's justification of the legitimization of rap (1996: 201)). Thornton's (1995) introduction of the term 'subcultural capital' shows a similar adaptation of Bourdieu.

³⁰ Fowler writes: 'his intrusive stress on the competitive arena impoverish[es] the meaning of artists' strategies by reducing them too quickly to games of distinction' (1994: 145). See also Wolff (1993) and Jenkins (1992: 149).

³¹ These three texts were published in the original French in 1965, 1969 and 1970 respectively.

³² Bourdieu's labels for the three distinct aesthetics are legitimate, middlebrow and popular (1984: 16).

³³ The dominant taste is perceived as pure: about thought, mind, culture, free art, soul and distance; dominated taste is vulgar: about feelings, body, corporeal pleasure, mercenary art, body and involvement (Mercer and Donald 1982: 12). The popular aesthetic (dominated taste) involves a demand for immediate gratification and satisfaction, and privileges participation (1984: 32,34). As such Bourdieu says, it is the polar opposite of the Kantian aesthetic, putting function over form.

³⁴ According to Fowler, Bourdieu refers to four types of capital; apart from economic and cultural capital, she lists: 'social capital (power gained by the sheer number of family members, retainers or network of supporters), symbolic capital (reputation or honesty – including intellectual honesty)' (1997: 31). For my purposes, in that this thesis focuses on artistic value, a concentration on cultural capital will suffice. Berger suggests there exists some confusion over the various forms of capital, claiming Bourdieu often uses them interchangeably (1986: 1446).

³⁵ The education system is one of the most powerful of all structures, claims Bourdieu, in that it has the 'authority to enforce its own hierarchy upon a vast public'; it plays a major role in having legitimate taste recognized by all as the dominant taste (Laermans 1992: 252). See Green (1988) for a Bourdieuan study examining relationship between class, education and music.

³⁶ In an attempt to get away from what he sees as the simplistic and reductionist placing of individuals on a vertical continuum (i.e. the 'social ladder' that reduces all forms of capital to just one), Bourdieu provides a three dimensional space which accounts for volume of capital; composition of capital (ratio of the various forms of capital); and the changes in these over time.

³⁷ Indeed, this claim is commonly made: 'highbrow art, from Homer through Rembrandt to Schoenberg, had always made the greatest demands on its audience – and those demands, it has always been understood, resulted in the highest rewards' (Epstein 1996:181).

³⁸ A similar concept is used by Smith; she describes 'The-Other's-Poison Effect' (1988: 26). This is perfectly illustrated by Scruton's claims that music of bad taste, such as that of Vangelis, 'prompts that peculiar "yuk" feeling, the sense of being contaminated, which sends spasms of recoil through the body. The "yuk" feeling is a common social response to obscenity, to disgusting habits, to unwanted attentions' (1997: 386).

³⁹ Gans' text *Popular Culture and High Culture: an analysis and evaluation of taste* (1974) was one of the first substantial examinations of the creation of the high/low distinction, taking 'a socially committed, liberal analysis'. However, Gans holds onto belief in the ability to rank forms of culture, assuming that one's taste "improves" when "graduating" from low to high. Such an argument is common to traditional aesthetics (e.g. Goldman 1995: 173).

⁴⁰ Scruton claims that 'it is my view that the high culture of our civilization contains knowledge which is far more significant than anything that can be absorbed from the channels of popular communication'. In an comment that is a typical expression of cultural elitism, he goes on to say: 'this is a hard belief to justify, and a harder one to live with; indeed, it has nothing to recommend it apart from its truth... it is impossible to give a convincing defence of high culture to a person who has none' (1998: 2, vii). Levine, speaking of Bloom but in a comment relevant to others including Scruton, notes how the claims of these cultural conservatives of the late twentieth century so accurately mirror those writing at the end of last century (1990: 250).

⁴¹ Neither of which would be considered in the contemporary environment (an exception being the renaissance of Shakespeare offered by the big screen with popular adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III* etc). Levine also notes that the practice of the adding popular songs into opera was common in Europe, with Rossini deliberately leaving gaps for such additions (1988: 90)!

⁴² A Paris newspaper of 1839 reported that 'music has taken first rank in the distractions and pleasures of high society' (in Weber 1975: 17).

⁴³ In a similar vein, a *New York Times* editorial of 1908 denounced the 'intolerable selfishness' of those leaving an opera during the last act, also asking 'has any sufferer noticed that these folks are generally the least tastefully dressed and worst-looking folks in the audience?' (in Levine 1988: 190).

⁴⁴ James describes the development of concert-hall distinction as 'a High Romantic, specifically Wagnerian, phenomenon', linked to the rise of the Romantic conception of the artist as the suffering genius and the conception of art as autonomous (1993: 233).

⁴⁵ The invented tradition is defined as 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuation with the past' tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1).

⁴⁶ In comparison, classical sales in the US are given as 3% of total sales (Gronow 1994: 194). As with figures for all music, classical recordings have fluctuated massively over this period; the most notable change occurred with the release of the compact disc as people replaced their records; in Britain, sales of classical music peaked at 11.1% of total sales in 1990 (Lebrecht 1996; Longhurst 1995: 206).

⁴⁷ The term crossover is generally seen as 'the move of a record or performer from success in one genre or chart area to another usually with a more mainstream audience' (Shuker 1998: 76). However, here I am using it specifically to refer to the classical crossover which is described thus: 'record companies believe that the key... is to package classical music in exactly the same way as rock music... They are promoting stars with the common touch or sex appeal; producing "sampler albums" made up of classical music popularised by films; and designing eye-catching record sleeves' (*Economist* 1990: 61-62). I have used the term crossover to describe classically based albums that have success in the popular charts; within this category are a number of sub-categories: the "jazzed up" classical works (e.g. *Hooked on Classics*); classical arrangements of popular works (the *ENZO* albums); and the classical work/musician marketed to appeal to a popular audience (*Three Tenors*, Nigel Kennedy, and, most relevant here, David Helfgott).

⁴⁸ Figures show percentages of classical records sold by class categories: AB – 41%; C1 – 25%; C2 – 17%; C3 – 17%. In comparison, the highest class category (AB) consumed only 18% of pop records sold and 10% of rock recordings (Longhurst 1995: 209). See DiMaggio and Useem (1978) for further examination of the relationships between cultural consumption, class and education.

⁴⁹ Small's argument is that the symphony concert is 'a celebration of the "sacred history" of the western middle classes, and an affirmation of faith in their values as the abiding stuff of life' (1987: 19). A similar argument is made by Fitzgerald (1994).

⁵⁰ Indeed, writing only three decades ago, Gotschalk states 'the belief that there is only one right verdict about a work of art and that the art critic should deliver it is usually not questioned fundamentally or seriously' (in Smith 1966: 349).

⁵¹ Bushnell analyses Dutton as playing the role of gatekeeper; 'of someone who feels passionately that there was something incredibly important about the things which they believe in, in the case the value of high art and the sanctity almost, if you like, the deep importance of music. They really would feel that they are protecting something, and that holding the permanent, true values, the real values of this musical form against the marauding hordes, the barbarians at the gate'.

⁵² Bushnell similarly questions the power granted to critics: 'We're certainly past the generations when you could point to some kind of sort of moral authority: that just doesn't exist anymore. And you can't any more, in the twentieth century, when all formal structures have broken down..., you can't say "oh, because I've been trained as an academician, I have the moral authority to be an art critic" for example'.

⁵³ Science, Godlovitch states, is a self-correcting process, with a goal of truth; art, on the other hand, with no 'fixed and final purpose', cannot be self-correcting as it 'is going nowhere' (1997: 368,369). He also makes the point that, in science, input from non-practitioners 'upon its development and direction' is not necessary or good for development in the field. Art, however, relies upon the contribution of non-practitioners for its development – what role would there be for art without art consumers? (1997: 370-371).

⁵⁴ Where 'consensus among science practitioners is taken to warrant belief in the approximate truth of the agreed-upon theory' (1997: 372).

⁵⁵ Godlovitch acknowledges the influence of Isenberg, who also writes: 'There is no other field in which we admit the existence of such scientific insight, unbridled by experimental controls and unsupported by valid general theory; and I do not think we can admit it here... The truth is that, in the present stone age of aesthetic inquiry, we have not even the vaguest idea of the form that a "law of art appreciation" would take' (1982: 265).

⁵⁶ Of course, at this stage what would be immediately picked up by Helfgott's critics is Levinson's phrase 'musically legitimated': their very point being that a performance such as that offered by Helfgott is illegitimate as it fails to meet any accepted criteria of performance. Any claim to the universal validity of this argument, however, is rendered impotent by the reinterpretation of value offered by Godlovitch below.

⁵⁷ The influence of technology on music and the arts in the twentieth century is one that is commonly commented on; note Benjamin's 1936 work 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin 1970). Eisenberg examines how 'in 1877 music began to become a thing' with the invention of the gramophone, arguing that technology played the major role in the commodification of music (1987: 13). Attali (1985) follows a similar argument to Godlovitch in emphasising the role of the phonograph in turning attention to the disembodied aural component. See also Scrutton (1997: 438).

⁵⁸ Button also outlines his concern that the distinction between concerts and recordings is not widely considered: 'the very first point which is not asked by people often enough is "what are recordings; what are concerts?" It's my view that they are complementary. Concerts can't do what recordings can do [and *vice versa*]. Concerts give you the personal involvement with an audience; they give you spontaneity. What they give the performer is adrenaline. The standards of technical performance at concerts is not as high as with recordings'. Button also emphasises the influence of technology: 'audiences today have a potential to be much more critical than what they're listening to because they have a chance to become enormously familiar to what they're hearing, to an extent that no audience in the past had that ability'. Bushnell agrees: 'some people in the music business say that is one of the very bad effects of the polish and consistency you can achieve with CDs: people expect this in live concerts as well as spontaneity and liveliness and so on. You can't have both, really: if you're going to have spontaneity, you're going to have mistakes'.

⁵⁹ For brevity's sake, this will henceforth be referred to by the acronym 'MEAO'.

⁶⁰ Godlovitch (1998) posits this argument as an anti-externalist theory of art labelled 'personalism': 'Various personalist focal points capture our interest and imagination, and often sculpt what we hear and want to hear. We are drawn to the personal details, and these seamlessly intertwine with our aesthetic expectations' (1998: 142).

⁶¹ Similar comments about the difficulties of determining categories for judgement were expressed by Bushnell when speaking of the New Zealand composer Gareth Farr: 'The interesting dilemma there is for a critic: how do you approach someone who's got feet moving, tap-dancing between lots of different camps. Where the divisions are blurred, what kind of bundle of critical responses are you going to bring?'

⁶² This has particular relevance to the argument expressed earlier in this chapter, namely that reconceptualisations of the classical concert are increasingly common (and increasingly attacked!). In an article suggesting ways to reverse the decline in support for orchestras, Botstein can be read as looking towards the MEAO: 'the dynamics within the audience, the notion that the concert is an event with an aura, and the interaction between stage and audience must display some theatrical spark and magnetism... We must find ways to make the orchestral concert uniquely memorable and an experience that cannot be gotten elsewhere' (1996: 192).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Most of the world could be forgiven for not being aware of David Helfgott before 1996. A son of Polish Jewish migrants to Australia, David was regarded as a child prodigy on the piano; initially taught by his father, David went on to enjoy considerable success in competitions in his teenage years. Help by a scholarship and fundraising, David traveled to London to study at the Royal College of Music. While his time there included some musical achievements, including two medals and a scholarship to enable a fourth year of study, it was also marked by David's increasing mental instability, resulting in his return to Australia and, in turn, confinement to a psychiatric institution. For much of the following two decades, David was in and out of such institutions; returning to the outside world, he took up a job as a bar pianist where he met his would-be second wife, Gillian.

Gillian set about improving both David's mental health and piano-playing, taking him to Europe for coaching and performances. David had also come to the attention of a film director who was interested in the story of his life. After many years of organising, the film *Shine* was released in 1996 to much popular and critical acclaim. Controversy quickly surrounded the success, with other family members and friends questioning the accuracy of the film. Most notable have been the efforts of David's sister Margaret, who claimed the film portrayed itself as a true story yet contained many deviations from reality, especially in its portrayal of their father, a man the film holds responsible for David's mental problems.

With the success of *Shine*, in 1997 David embarked on a world-wide tour performing to full houses of ecstatic fans. The response from the critics was a complete contrast from that of his adoring supporters. He was labeled a freak for his unusual behaviour, behaviour that included constant babbling throughout his performances. He was also trashed for what critics saw as his below-par playing standards. The gap between critical and public reaction was massive, though the bad reviews apparently did little to dent Helfgott's popularity as he continued to sell out concert halls throughout the world. It was not to last. Another tour the following year failing to bring in the crowds; today, Helfgott is little more than a fading memory in the collective minds of the public.

The resultant spin-offs from *Shine* amounted to much more than Helfgott's world tours: indeed they amounted to a large-scale and multimedia extravaganza. A large number of

recordings have been released since the film: all are of works from the Romantic period, a style intimately associated with Helfgott; the most famous is his recording of Rachmaninov's *Third Piano Concerto*, a work that had special significance within the film. As with his performances, in spite of scathing criticism, the early recordings enjoyed huge sales. Helfgott also found himself immortalised in the written word, with the screenplay of *Shine*, two big-selling biographies, Margaret Helfgott's retelling of his story, and an academic examination of Helfgott's success being published within a three year period. His name and story were also picked up by the wider media with articles in magazines and newspapers, and appearances on television programmes. Even than trendy form of communication, the internet, could not escape Helfgott, with official sites for the tour and the film as well as web-sites produced by devoted fans.

When taken together, the various facets of Helfgott - the film, performances, recordings, texts, television appearances et cetera - all work together to make up the multimedia spectacle that has been labeled the Helfgott Phenomenon. While this thesis has attempted to cover all these aspects, it has focused on that apparently enormous gulf between public adulation and critical dismissal. It is regularly claimed that no musical event has caused such an extreme division between audience and critic: this thesis concentrates on the significance of this division as seen from the particular perspective of the critic. As such, it is apparent is that there is no singular view of 'the critic' towards Helfgott and his audience, but rather a wide range of attitudes that go a long way towards highlighting the complexities and conflicts so apparent in this case of discord over cultural value.

The *critical* response to Helfgott and his audience was similar the world over – comments made at the start of his tour in New Zealand were often repeated in the US and the UK. Thus, in chapter three it is argued that that the reactions of New Zealand critics offered an accurate exemplar of the debate over Helfgott, justifying the focus of this thesis specifically on the local situation. While commentary on Helfgott from New Zealand critics already existed, it was apparent that such data required further supporting evidence: the use of interviews was an obvious tool to gather contextual information about the broad issues surrounding the Helfgott Phenomenon. In choosing those to be interviewed, a coverage of the wide range in opinions was needed: two academically-based critics with backgrounds in aesthetics (Stan Godlovitch, Denis Dutton); two music critics, writing reviews for dissemination in the media (John Button, Ian Dando); and a media arts commentator (Paul Bushnell) offered such a coverage. Interviewed face-to-face using a basic and fairly informal interview, the data gathered was duly transcribed and roughly sorted and resorted into appropriate categories. This data, supplemented by other writings by the five interviewees, forms the primary basis of this thesis.

Helfgott first came to world-wide attention in New Zealand as he set out on his world tour in 1997: the division between an adoring public, as Helfgott filled hall after hall, and despairing music critics who derided his playing became obvious in heated dialogue played out through the media. This perceived distance between critic and fan, specifically as seen from the critics' perspective, is considered in chapter four. In beginning such an examination, the starting point must be *why* the critics believe Helfgott to be a musical failure. In making this judgement, critics compare Helfgott to the standards expected of a professional concert pianist. There is general agreement from all critics interviewed that on these grounds Helfgott is a failure: this judgement can be separated out into three distinct areas, relating in turn to the performer, the composer and the audience – the standard “tripartite” of performance.

First, Helfgott is seen as a failure on a technical level; the critics claim that he does not have the required level of skill to claim a position within the canon of the ‘great’ pianists. Second, the interpretative skills he brings to a performance are seen as lacking; Helfgott is perceived as being “unfaithful” to either the composer or, more generally, the tradition of music. Finally, the personal idiosyncrasies Helfgott exhibits while performing are felt to be out of place in such an environment; that his behaviour – chatting, playing up to the audience et cetera – is disruptive, primarily as it removes the focus from the true purpose of the event – the music.

On the standard expectations of a professional classical musician, the critics uniformly judge Helfgott a failure. However, how can this judgement sit beside the undisputed claim that many in the audiences gained considerable enjoyment from Helfgott? In answering this question the critics reached the conclusion that many in the audience felt that the criteria used to judge Helfgott a musical failure were irrelevant. Thus, in order to understand this perceived breakdown in respect for the apparently immutable and universal laws of classical performance, the critics must turn to an analysis of the actual audience as they perceive them.

The critics claim that the audiences of Helfgott's concerts were not typical of the standard classical recital; many were apparently new to classical music. Thus, it is accepted, such an audience would be less concerned with how Helfgott compare to the canon of performers and composers. This ignorance of and/or disrespect for the critics' own pronouncements on Helfgott is accepted at face level; all the critics agree that an audience has the right to make up its own mind using its own criteria. However, for some critics, such claims of true plurality evidently hide a scathing attitude towards Helfgott's fans, and a

belief in the superiority of their own judgements. Such a high-handed attitude, Godlovitch claims, was acknowledged by Helfgott's supporters, and was shown in a public backlash against music critics. These supporters continued to claim that Helfgott's concerts were a marvellous occasion. However, as the critics believed that such claims could not be based on the standard forms of musical judgement, exactly what criteria were Helfgott's fans using to support their more positive assessments?

In answering this question, critics acknowledge the necessity of bringing into any analysis the role played by non-musical criteria. Such criteria, which I have titled "social value", offer a different method of evaluating what at first appears to be the same artistic object. The relative importance placed on these two forms of value is a much-debated point; indeed, this debate causes considerable friction between the critics. Helfgott's flouting of conventional behaviour within the classical music environment is a classic example of the foregrounding of social value. The response of many critics to this flouting, and to the audiences' own complicity in Helfgott's unusual behaviour, is one of sheer horror that musical value should be so subsumed and thus damaged. Other critics, however, suggest that such an approach misses the very point of the Helfgott Phenomenon: that it is possibly the very behaviour that audiences found attractive, especially as it deliberately breached the stultifying and inherently conservative nature of most classical music performances. While some suggestions point to some particular reasons for the audience's response, they do not explain what it was that first drew Helfgott to their attention.

The reason behind this attention, and the reason for Helfgott's success in filling halls, all the critics agree, can be summed up in one word: *Shine*. It was the association of Helfgott with the film that raised interest in his public performances and recordings. As to *why* he was so attractive as to encourage participation from an audience fairly unaware of classical music, there are various interpretations. Most agree, however, that *Shine's* story of genius, madness and redemption appealed to many viewers by evoking personal understanding and sympathy towards Helfgott. The experience of seeing the man live was a chance to be part of the man's life; some claim the concert hall was simply an extension of the screenplay.

In regarding the "David Helfgott" of the stage as a direct extension of the "David Helfgott" of *Shine*, the audience, the critics claim, were basing their attitude on a belief in the accuracy of the film. Yet it is apparent that *Shine* deviates considerably from the truth. Critics disagree over whether a knowledge of this fact would change the audiences' interest in Helfgott. There is also disagreement over the selling of Helfgott as a masterful pianist; some critics state that such claims are misleading as his playing does not reach the

standards expected by a professional musician. Godlovitch retorts that such marketing hyperbole is typical of the contemporary environment and is rarely believed anyway. Indeed, it is often claimed that Helfgott shares many similarities to popular culture icons and that it may be these similarities that make Helfgott attractive to his fans.

Placing Helfgott in the context of popular culture also allows for understanding of the short-term nature of his career, though different critics make the same point with widely different attitudes. For some, namely Dutton and Dando, the demise of Helfgott is simply more proof of the idiocy of his fans and of the inconsequential nature of popular culture (and, by association, the superiority of the classical tradition). Godlovitch and Button question this line as it is based on the assumption that a valid verdict can be reached solely in terms of musical value. Both suggest that such thinking is invalid when approaching Helfgott as the audience of his recitals held different values, and were attending for different reasons from those typically associated with a classical concert. At this stage of the thesis, it is obvious that fundamental distinctions are becoming apparent in the critics' discourse. The debate over the role musical and social value played in determining Helfgott's aesthetic worth is further examined in chapter five, where these differing forms of judgements are placed in the wider context of the determination of artistic value.

The wide variety of music critics' response to Helfgott highlights the very role and purpose that criticism plays in society. A relatively new development dating from the eighteenth century, music criticism is usually disseminated through the media in the form of reviews of concerts and recordings. Criticism, by its nature, is about making value judgements: it is the critique of a performance that is the focus here. It is expected that the critics have a deep and wide level of experience and knowledge in the field on which they are passing judgement; some even make the claim that the critic is a superior judge. The influence that critics have is debated strongly; most suggest they can have considerable power over their audience, influencing which events to attend and even how one should respond to an event, though Dutton claims the critics' power is over-rated.

Music critics in this country played a major role in the disputes over Helfgott; while a generalisation can be made that world-wide critical reaction towards Helfgott was negative, the New Zealand critics interviewed offered wide variations in opinion. These were roughly divided into two disparate camps organised around the contrasting views of Denis Dutton and Stan Godlovitch. The remainder of the thesis provides an in-depth examination of the arguments espoused by these two critics, suggesting that they present two distinct analyses of aesthetic value.

The approach of Dutton to issues of aesthetic value can be considered to be fairly representative of the dominant style of thinking in contemporary aesthetics and, particularly, music criticism. This approach I have titled traditional aesthetics; it relies heavily on early writings in the field, notably those of Kant and Hume. The influence of these philosophers on Dutton is evident in his comments and writings. Both Hume and Kant start off with the premise that an aesthetic judgement is a judgement of taste; both also claim that such a judgement is subjective, yet go on to state that there are true and false judgements. However, their paths in reaching these claims do differ considerably.

Hume starts with the claim that it is 'natural' to seek a standard of taste; he then suggests there is an ideal critic whose judgements are superior as they are free from all prejudice. Hume also emphasises the role of longevity: it is through the passage of time that an artwork's value is proven, a theory very much subscribed to by Dutton. Turning to Kant, it is obvious that his input into the realm of aesthetics has been enormous. Of most relevance to this thesis is Kant's insistence that a true judgement of an artwork is achieved through disinterested contemplation; again, this relies on the elimination of personal biases. Such a claim rests ultimately on a belief in the universal qualities of human cognition, a point also argued by Dutton. It is this traditional presentation of the aesthetic by Hume and Kant that Dutton *et al.* use to "prove" David Helfgott is a failure (as shown in chapter four) for he does not match up to the expectations established through the canon of musicians. Although the traditional approach to aesthetics remains dominant, it has recently been criticised as both unconvincing and ideological.

The logic of traditional aesthetics comes in for heavy criticism from Smith (1988). Smith titles such an approach 'axiologic logic' in that it attempts to turn subjective judgements into objective universals. Hume's concept of the 'true judge' is found to be unprovable in general, and untenable over variations in time and place. Smith concludes that Hume's many qualifications result in the useless truism that taste is relative, the opposite point to that he set out to prove. Kant's theories do not escape any better. Smith argues that Kant's reliance on a universal cognitive apparatus (itself an unproven theory) objectifies aesthetic judgement, undermining the claimed importance of subjectivity. Major doubt is also expressed over the possibility of ever realising the state of pure contemplation that Kant believes is required for making an aesthetic judgement.

Smith's dismantling of traditional aesthetics exemplifies the increasingly critical and sociological approach to culture that came with the rise of new disciplines such as post-structuralism and cultural studies, most notably occurring in the late twentieth century. While most fields, such as art history, have acknowledged and adapted to this new way of

thinking, classical music has remained stubbornly fixed in its reliance on the neo-Kantian position, and has even showed open resentment to any “socialisation” of the aesthetic. However, I argue that any valuable critical approach must openly acknowledge the social and historical contingencies of the aesthetic. Highlighting such contingencies develops our understanding of what lies behind the oft-unquestioned assumptions of aesthetic value.

A most powerful tool in this quest to “socialise” the aesthetic is offered by the writings of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. In the seminal text *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu aims to reveal the relationships between taste, power and class in contemporary Western societies. He argues that taste – taken to mean everything from choice of food or clothes to aesthetic preferences – is heavily influenced by the individual’s background, most notably the family and education system; thus taste is also strongly contingent on one’s class context. Indeed, Bourdieu claims that there is considerable contestation over the legitimacy of tastes, as each class aims to maximise its resources. Thus class struggle is not just a battle over economic capital but also a battle over cultural capital, fought using taste and culture as a weapon.

Cultural capital plays a vital role in creating, sustaining and contesting social differentiation. Taste becomes a tool which is used to improve one’s position in the class structure, creating a *distinction* from others. However, forms of cultural capital have no intrinsic value; they must be assigned a weighting that then determines the ways in which they are used. The granting of value to cultural forms is typically determined by a narrow sector of society: the upper (or dominant) class, the holders of what Bourdieu has titled ‘legitimate culture’. It is this class that produces what is taken as the legitimate conception of the aesthetic. Much of Bourdieu’s effort in *Distinction* feeds into a critique of axiologic aesthetics, which he directly identifies as a social construction of the upper class. Through the domination that this class enjoys, promulgated through the education system, their concept of the beautiful becomes the dominant aesthetic, widely accepted as both legitimate and normal. This is most exemplified, for Bourdieu, by the field of classical music.

Bourdieu claims that the inherent superiority of the dominant aesthetic is no longer tenable once we are aware of the links to class and distinction. A similar exposure is presented by the sociological critique of the divide between high and low culture, a divide that is shown to be a social creation. Again, the area in which such class-motivated constructions are most apparent is classical music. Through detailed historical research, many writers have documented the increased social differentiation that occurred in classical music in the later half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, linked to rapid improvements in living standards and increased leisure time (for some at least) due to the industrial

revolution. It was in this period that the modern concept of the classical concert developed. There were notable changes in expected behaviour: the distance between performer and audience became marked, for example audiences are required to be totally silent, openly signalling pleasure only through applause at the conclusion of each work. It is worth pointing out that these changes to classical music culture are a relatively recent development. Such an unveiling of historic contingency makes a fascinating comparison with the ideology inherent within classical music discourse, where emphasis on tradition and longevity conjures a history dating back to time immemorial.

The creation of a high/low culture split and the increasing formalisation within the former has, Godlovitch and others claim, resulted in making classical music and its concerts alien to many of the population. Playing a role in the maintenance and creation of such distinction is the music critic: simply through acting as a guide to a work of art, the critic is encouraging his or her audience to perceive the work from the critic's position. Such is the role of critic as gatekeeper, playing an active role in the determination of artistic value and sustaining the dominating neo-Kantian aesthetic.

The axiological logic of conventional music criticism raises many issues of concern, primarily over the legitimation of critical authority: why should the views of the critic be accepted as anything more than the claims of a particular group with its own agenda? Criticism, for Godlovitch, attempts to find its validity through convergence of thought (i.e. increased validity of judgement through a general consensus). Such attempts, however, are simply unsustainable as judgements of art are inherently self-referential. This self-referential quality seriously undermines any belief in critical authority, as criticism is exposed as a highly subjective and relative arena. The criteria used in judging are shown to be arbitrarily selected and socially motivated.

Such criticisms of traditional axiology have enormous implications for any interpretation of Helfgott. Traditional critics judge Helfgott on the basis that musical criteria are the only correct values to use; on this basis, Helfgott can be dismissed because he fails on technical, interpretative and behavioural grounds. Such a claim, however, is no longer valid in a world without ultimate critical authority. Thus attention is turned to examine the audiences' appreciation of Helfgott. It is suggested that there is more than one valid way of examining an aesthetic object; further, the audiences' judgement of Helfgott is but another valid (albeit inexperienced) viewpoint. However, I argue that such an approach is flawed for a number of reasons; primarily, it makes the assumption that the object under examination by the audience is singularly the same object judged by the critics.

Godlovitch highlights the point that Helfgott can be “consumed” and judged in more than one way. More significantly, he states that *the critics and audience were addressing different objects*. The object “Helfgott” so derided by the critics differs markedly from the “Helfgott” adored by his fans. For Godlovitch, this divergence highlights traditional criticism’s sole focus on the aural elements of a performance; anything that lies outside the sound is deemed to be irrelevant (and irritating) to forming a judgement. However, this aural domination is a relatively recent historical development. It is evident that changes in technology, combined with the re-invention of classical music as a symbol of distinction *par excellence*, has resulted in a heavily condensed conception of the aesthetic object. For Godlovitch, Helfgott personifies the antithesis of this narrowing. In this substantial re-conception of artistic worth, both musical and social values are integral to an understanding of Helfgott. Indeed, “Helfgott” for his fans is made up of an enormous array of elements; his attraction lies in the very interconnectedness of all elements that make up the Helfgott Phenomenon : taken together, these interconnections make up what Godlovitch calls the ‘massively extended aesthetic object’ (the MEAO).

The response from other critics to this radical reinterpretation of aesthetic value is, not surprisingly, lukewarm if not openly hostile. Much of the criticism revolves around Godlovitch’s stance that the elements of Helfgott Phenomenon are all intricately intertwined and cannot be separated out. Bushnell disagrees: ‘I think they can be separated, I think that’s what makes discussion about this possible. Because an artist is a popular artist, I don’t think that means that’s immune to criticism, or impervious to analysis at all’. Dando is even more extreme in his belief that separation of the elements is essential: ‘I completely reject that chap [Godlovitch] because I don’t think that Helfgott or his life enters into the picture at all, because the focus is on the composer and his music’ – all one does in not separating out the elements is ‘delay the evil moment of judging’. Dutton equally has problems with Godlovitch’s reappraisal of artistic value. He attacks the MEAO on two grounds: first he suggests that as the audience had not openly expressed such a view, it was not relevant:

They wouldn’t have said “well, it was a great event. I liked his clothes, I enjoyed the lighting, and do you know he has a disability. The playing, of course, by a pianist’s standard was shit but I enjoyed it”. If you’d heard that widely from people, then of course Godlovitch would be right.

Second, Dutton returns to the traditional aesthetics argument, insisting that musical value has precedent, indeed is the only appropriate value, when judging Helfgott. Dutton rejects the relevance of the audiences’ interest in non-musical features, attacking the audience in the process:

You're not serious about that analogy, Jonathan. That an opera goer's interest in the intentional costuming of characters in an opera is comparable to David Helfgott's blousey shirts that he wears. [For his audience, yes]. That's because they're a bloody, damn pig-shit ignorant audience. It is important what an opera singer wears in a production. It's not important what a pianist wears. [Maybe not for you – but it maybe for some] Yeah, because they're not interested in piano music.

There is also concern expressed that Godlovitch's position is simply arguing for an extreme form of relativism; an "anything goes" attitude in which standards are thrown out. The fear of such a move is expressed by Schick: 'An extreme relativism which grants each opinion the same worth as the next... would breed artistic chaos. Value judgments would be reduced to mere statements of personal feeling without other validity' (1996: 92). Bushnell also expressed this sentiment, saying 'the feeling I got from [Godlovitch] is that what he was saying was "oh well, what are you worrying about? I mean it's only pop?" Well, I think that's complete bullshit, so from that point of view I disagree very much with Stan'. Dutton stated similar concerns: 'Stan makes this other jump, this sliding into a belief in the absolute relativism of all artistic judgements. One came away from his article thinking that he was a relativist'.

These accusations of relativism are undoubtedly accurate if critiquing the simplistic 'multiple interpretations of art' schema. That there can be more than one correct way of listening to a musical work and more than one acceptable way of performing a piece is widely accepted. However, this line can slip too easily into the undeniable and unquestionable equality of all judgements – a more controversial claim. It is apparent that Bushnell and Dutton classify the MEAO as suffering from this form of relativism, a claim that Godlovitch is quick to deny:

It's not relativistic, anything goes for this reason: one of the points I was trying to make was that appropriate criticism must be proffered to the object of criticism. Whereas I'm perfectly happy to accept that within the spheres of criticism in which the object of criticism is clearly identified, there are arguably better forms of criticism than others and that there is a degree of expertise that can be established and claimed for the critic.

The two points that Godlovitch wants to emphasise is that first, the criteria used by the critics are wrong as they ahistorical, universalist and ideological; second, the criteria are wrong as they are inappropriate to the object under consideration. The critics were looking at (or more accurately, listening to) Helfgott the pianist. The audience were forming their judgement based around the *totality* of the Helfgott Phenomenon – Helfgott's performances

are inseparable from all other aspects. To separate these aspects is do a violent injustice to the aesthetic object, much in the same way, for example, if technical and behavioural elements were totally subsumed by interpretative elements in a traditional approach to a musical performance.

In developing the concept of a massively extended aesthetic object, Godlovitch has presented a fascinating interpretation of the construction of aesthetic value. The MEAO allows for cultural and historical change; it is thus compatible with the critical studies used in this thesis that have shown the traditional aesthetic to be socially determined. But how far can this appeal to social determination be taken? In the end I must agree with Wolff's (1991) claim that the aesthetic can never be fully explained away by social, political or ideological forces. That social forces play an undeniably substantial role in aesthetic choice is inherently logical, but can my preference for Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* over his *Eighth Symphony* or my partiality to Perahia over Ashkenazy be totally reduced to my socialisation? The very contradictory impressions I gained from seeing Helfgott perform highlight the fundamental issues that most likely do not have any ultimate answers, either from history, sociology, aesthetics or any other discipline. Surely the question "where does artistic value lie?" will continue to be debated as long as there are humans still alive.

APPENDIX I

SHINE PLOT SYNOPSIS

Shine is inspired by the life of David Helfgott, a virtuoso pianist. The film begins in Australia with David lost in the rain one night. He stumbles into a wine bar and plays the piano. Although the proprietors find him eccentric, they are impressed with his brilliant skills. Ultimately, Sylvia, the owner, gives him a job playing the piano regularly in the bar. Through flashbacks, we learn about David's childhood. His domineering father, Peter, a Polish Jew who emigrated to Australia and once had performing dreams of his own, pushes David to excel as a pianist. However, he cannot bear for his son's success to be achieved away from the family which he holds so tightly together.

When David receives a scholarship to study in London, Peter refuses to let him go. An elderly writer named Katharine, who has helped nurture David's career, encourages him to accept despite his father's objections. When David follows her advice, Peter banishes him from home. At the Royal College of Music, David's musical genius reveals itself under the guidance of Professor Cecil Parkes, who replaces Peter's unyielding demands with support and encouragement. Sadly, David's isolation from his family proves emotionally devastating, and he is unable to care for himself properly.

Following a virtuoso performance at a major concert, he suffers a complete breakdown and returns to Australia, where he lives in and out of institutions for years and abandons playing the piano on advice of his doctors. David meets a woman, an astrologer named Gillian, who sees beyond his eccentricities and appreciates him for who he is. Gillian brings stability and love into David's life, helping him come to terms with the memory of his father and resolve the traumas of his past.

Source: *Shine – A Study Guide* (Lifetime Learning Systems 1996)

APPENDIX II

CD LINER NOTES

Liner Notes for *Rachmaninov: The Last of the Great Romantics*

David Helfgott is music. Helfgott has thrown his boomerang at the Lord, and it comes back in a miracle of music, the listener is irresistibly moved. It seems incredible that one can sit in an entirely ordinary villa north of Copenhagen and be exposed to such shocks of musical intensity and extravagance. Without Gillian, his wife, it would certainly never have been possible. For David Helfgott is an enigma, a mental unicorn, a freakish angel with antennae stretching far out into the universe to catch impulses that find explosive expression in bursts of gut reaction. Having spent more than ten years in psychiatric wards, where he was forcibly subjected to strong psychopharmacological drugs, Helfgott's intellect operates on a completely different wavelength which picks up cosmic noises and vibrations.

One barely understands how he got away with his talent unscathed. Not surprisingly, his musical genius and extraordinary fate have challenged other artists. "I am lucky, lucky, lucky," whispers David Helfgott, as he hugs and squeezes the writer of this. As indeed, Helfgott hugs and squeezes the entire front row of listeners after his recent performance of a ravishing "Apassionata" in the fashionable Beethoven Haus in Bonn.

"But David's interest is sincere. He simply has no ego, and his music is pure because it gives expression to the very special soul that flows through him," says Gillian. But where, one wonders, would this extraordinary pianist be without her? "He'd probably have still been playing in that wine bar in Perth, where women were always offering him cigarettes, so he was always playing with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. David smoked 120 cigarettes a day and when they asked him to play Beethoven's Fifth, he'd say, 'concerto or symphony?'" According to David Helfgott, a cloud enveloped his brain when his father refused to let his fourteen-year-old son study in New York on Isaac Stern's recommendation. His wife believes that the event caused a family neurosis to erupt in her husband at a time when he was in greatest need of love and affection, "It was wrong to hospitalize him. People don't like to talk about these things – but God knows how many Davids are committed to psychiatric hospitals around the world."

As a soloist, David Helfgott is the grand, romantic virtuoso, but collaborating with other musicians he is gentle and attentive. This latter quality was strongly in evidence when David Helfgott performed Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with Copenhagen's Philharmonic Orchestra. To attend a performance by David Helfgott is a moving experience. The listener is admitted into a heart-rendingly fragile universe that encompasses both a sensitive human being and his wonderful music" wrote one critic after his concert.

Actually one question has to be asked; Why did Gillian give up her career as an astrologer to marry this extraordinary prodigy, ten years her junior? "Somebody has to take care of these fragile artists. Great talent means vulnerability. Bastards bring other people down, but sensitive people bring down only themselves," she whispers. But her husband has heard nothing. Music is the thinnest of veils that conceals divinity, and David Helfgott has already penetrated to a place far behind that veil. Besides, no one can ever forget David. You won't be able to either.

Author: Elisabeth Saugman, November 1995

Liner Notes for *Brave New World*

Listening to David Helfgott is more than a pleasure, it is a treasured experience. What emerges from his being and his art is the essence of music. Too genuinely ingenuous to resort to bravura “demonstrations” by which dramatically cunning players such as Shura Cherkasky and Arturo Rubinstein asserted their uniqueness and power in the realm of professional playing, David has tuned his whole life to music and uses that art to express his joy-of-life.

Immersed in his ‘dreaming’ of the music’s arcane form and, as it were, walking a tightrope between inner certainty and societal innocence, dare we say “awkwardness”, and blissfully uncaring of either, to the point of almost audibly counting bars, he manifests the truth of the adage “joy is the natural state of man”.

When those bravura players “wow” us with their brilliant technique, even if it is unintentional, what they do manifest is an assumed superiority. They place their interpretation, as it were, above the music, and above us. When David Helfgott plays, unashamedly human, unpremeditatedly divine and uncaring equally of praise or blame, not seeking to achieve effects, intent on doing his job, vulnerable, open, totally honest, what reaches the audience is music itself – natural, lyrical, graceful, disarming, enchanting: a creation delicate as a spider’s web, enduring as a golden thread – the pure of art of David Helfgott.

Author uncredited, 1998

APPENDIX III

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

Introduce myself and topic
Outline broadly the areas the interview will cover

Interviewees' Details

Philosophers:

What are your qualifications?
What is your musical interest/training?
What academic work have you done in this area?
Why are you interested in the Helfgott case?
What has your involvement been in the case?
What influence have you had on the debate?

Critics:

Why did you become a critic?
What training did you have?
What background do you have in music?
Which forms of media do you work for?
What audience is your work aimed at?
What role have you had in the Helfgott case?

Journalist:

What does your job entail?
What are your qualifications in this area?
What is your musical interest/training?
Why are you interested in the Helfgott case?
What has your involvement been in the case?
What influence have you had on the debate?

Main Themes

- A. Music Criticism
- B. Aesthetics and Taste
- C. Helfgott

A. Music Criticism

What is a critic?
 Would you see yourself as a critic?
 Are there different types of critic?
 What are the differences between styles?
 Differences between academic and 'public'?
 Are some ranked higher than others?
 Schick argues everyone is/can be a critic – do you agree with this?
 What skills does it take to be a critic?
 What training should we expect from a critic?
 Who is the usual audience for music criticism?
 For what reasons do people read music criticism?
 Do they take notice of music criticism?
 What sort of influence do critics have?
 What influence should they have? And why? (quote Auden for non-dogmatism)
 Should critics be questioned?
 What should a critique contain? Contents: evaluative versus descriptive?
 What are the various categories that are relevant for criticism?
 Can one rank these? Are any more important? How can this be?
 What makes a bad/good performance?
 What makes a bad/good composition?
 Does music criticism move with the times, or, if it holds to 'innate' premises, is it static?
 What interaction should occur between the various parties – critics, audience, composer/performer?
 With whom does the critics' loyalties lie?
 Relativism: is it possible to critique non-Western music with the same criteria?
 Jazz and popular music?
 Can different members of an audience experience the same event in different ways? Are all ways valid?
 Is objectivity possible?
 Can a division be reached between what is a musical variable and an extra-musical variable? If so, how?
 Stolnitz argues critics perform an 'indispensable function':
 Are critics necessary?
 Is there a possibility of a world without critics?
 What role do critics have in helping decide public taste?
 Cultural gatekeepers?
 Music criticism in NZ?
 Standard? Style? Community?
 State of music industry: is it under threat? Why?

B. Aesthetics and Taste

What are the foundations of music criticism? – aesthetics?
 Are the arts 'autonomous'? – Walker argues this for music
 Do 'objective and universal truths' exist? Are these what the critic seeks?
 Is there one, ideal aesthetic that all should share?
 If there is a possibility for multiple aesthetics, who holds these? Class?
 If there is one aesthetic, how does one cover for the differing attitudes towards certain art over time, and compare the art of other cultures?
 What is taste? How does taste influence critical judgement?
 Taste – social versus psychological?

'Within a particular culture, however, there are objective standards of conduct, although these may differ from those of its neighbors' (Schick 1996: 91) – does a society share one set of standards? Is there not a battle over defining these? Aren't there a number battling for supremacy? Can more than one set of standards exist at the same time?

C. Helfgott

Any other equivalent cases in the past to Helfgott?

What of the hype – 'genius', 'one of the world's leading pianists' etc.?

What is Helfgott's success due to?

Can Helfgott the man (and story) be separated from the music?

In the audience eyes? In the critics?

Is fact and fiction mixed up?

Can they be separated?

Isn't it really a different audience that Helfgott appeals to?

What does the audience seek from Helfgott?

Are they using different criteria to judge the performance by?

Has the audience been duped?

Godlovitch – is his position asking for a form of full relativism?

What did the critics do wrong?

What did the public do wrong?

Was the public right for criticising the critics?

APPENDIX IV

LIBERACE

Understanding Liberace: Grooving with the Fey Heckler

Liberace was a pianist. But oddly enough, he's remembered for his showmanship and for his lifestyle, not for his skill at the keyboard. It didn't seem to matter what or how Liberace was playing, only that he took stage, and that he took it well. He always did. Ask anyone to describe Liberace's style at the ivories, and they'll likely say something like "flamboyant" or "lavish," but have precious little to say about whether he was inspired in the slightest, or whether he contributed anything to the continuum of great pianists. To be fair, Liberace was a great pianist from a technical standpoint, but a completely uninspired one...

Although Liberace sincerely believed himself to be the reincarnation of Liszt, his arrogance belied his skill. To be sure, his contributions to the pop culture were vast - perhaps incalculable—but they were all to the world of fashion, to the world of visuals and showmanship, not to the world of the piano. The keyboard was just the vehicle—the excuse, if you will - for his life and lifestyle, for an archetype of proto-indulgence and absolute hedonism. What Liberace cared about was opulence and taudry sex, not classical music, and the man who once played vaudeville piano in cheap dives under the name Walter Busterkeys fought like hell to escape criticism from his moralistic fans for the lifestyle he championed.

His mission was one of defiance, to play to the mainstream without being critiqued on the same accounts that anyone else as aesthetically crazy as he would be. Who else could get away with what Lee did and not be laughed out of town? Who else could wear 200 lb. outfits of ermine and rhinestone with total impunity, and not be heckled as a self-indulgent flamer?

Author: Scot Hacker (date unknown)

The Weird, Wild, Wonderful Liberace

I was lucky enough to see Liberace before he died. The concert was a weird, wild, wonderful spectacle, and it left me awestruck. I couldn't believe that a entire performance (not to mention a several decades long career) could be construed from such unrestrained, indulgent superficiality. The majority of the show consisted of Liberace parading around the stage in outrageous outfits to the "oohs" and "ahhs" of the audience, which was dominated by women over the age of forty. At one point he appeared in what he claimed was the world's most expensive fur—a Norwegian blue shadow fox cape with a train 12-feet wide and 16-feet long. "There's only two of these in the world," he giggled with child-like glee, "and I've got both." At another point he pranced around in a pink, glass suit embroidered with silver beads, which lit up during the encore. He was all gooey smiles in dimples, wavy hair, and outlandish rings. "Well, look me over," he said with a devilish grin. "I don't wear these to go unnoticed." The audience roared with delight. It was a real lovefest. I was stunned by the gleeful absurdity of it all.

Of course, he played lots of music too, songs like "The Impossible Dream," "Send in the Clowns," "Theme from Love Story," "Close to You," and "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head." Liberace's piano playing was just like his clothing—showy, sentimental, and absurdly fancy. At every opportunity he ran his nimble fingers up and down the keyboard in endless fills and trills. The audience evidently took this for great skill. Not that the music mattered much. It was just a light diversion to break up the costume party. At the end of the exhausting two-and-a-half hour show, he cracked, "I've had such a marvelous time I'm ashamed to take the money"—pause, wink, wink—"but I will." The cheering and smiling and blowing of kisses started all over again. Elderly women filled the aisle in front of the stage to kiss his cheek. Liberace kept grinning like there was no tomorrow. Even his teeth gleamed. Liberace had elevated style over substance until there was no substance left at all...

Liberace's musical repertoire included a unique mix of classical, boogie woogie, movie themes, cocktail jazz, and sentimental ballads. He knew thousands of songs and could play almost any request from the audience. He freely edited long classical pieces down to four to six minutes. "I took out the boring parts," he quipped. "I know just how many notes my audience will stand for. If there's any time left over, I fill in with a lot of runs up and down the scale."

This approach enraged serious music critics, who were mostly male. They wrote vicious reviews of Liberace's music, particularly in the beginning of his career. For instance, in 1956 a British tabloid called Liberace a "deadly, winking, sniggering, snuggling, chromium-plated, scent-impregnated, luminous, quivering, giggling, fruit-flavored, mincing, ice-covered heap of mother love." In case his position wasn't perfectly clear, the writer concluded that Liberace was "the biggest sentimental vomit of all time." Liberace's pat response was, "I cried all the way to the bank." By the end of his career, the critics realized that criticizing Liberace was a fruitless endeavor. The women loved him anyway, and Liberace just didn't care. He was too busy raking in the dough. He also amended his response the criticism with this zinger: "Remember that bank I used to cry all the way to?" (Pause, smile, wink.) "I bought it."...

To this day Liberace's astounding success seems puzzling. Why would middle-aged, midwestern family gals, generally an extremely sensible group, swoon like schoolgirls at the sight of an outrageous piano-playing borderline drag queen? The mystery deepens when you consider that he maintained superstar status for almost four decades. Maybe he brought out the maternal instincts of these women with his sweetness, gentle humor, and sentimental nature. Liberace's appeal couldn't have been related to his talent. He wasn't admired for his singing, songwriting, or acting; his piano playing was ridiculous; and he didn't sell nearly as many albums as other famous musicians. "I'm no good," he once admitted. "I've just got guts."

Maybe the secret of his success had something to do with the fantasy world he created on stage. In that world everything was romantic and fun and silly, no expense was spared for the finest things, and, most importantly, the dirty, ugly aspects of everyday life did not intrude. Only the style, the frilly expensive clothing, the piano fills, the candelabra, and the corny sentiment had any meaning. His female fans, perhaps longing for an escape from the everyday humdrum, bought into this dreamland wholeheartedly.

Author: Mike Walsh (date unknown)

I sent copies of these two articles to Stan Godlovitch; he responded via email, commenting:

'The one notable difference between Liberace and Helfgott, if one is tracking down motive, is that the latter doesn't seem from all accounts to be particularly driven by a lust for money. At least, he's scarcely the epitome of opulence and showy prosperity. If the film is at all psychologically fair, Helfgott plays for the love of his listeners. But that too may be just another angle of the whole show. We have here at least two highly adored (by their fans at least) men who flaunted their person as much as anything else, and created what shouldn't be taken as other than personae. Of course I was struck by the utter predictability of the comments about Liberace that he contributed nothing to "the piano" as if there's some shadowy Form "The Piano" hovering over all this enterprise to which one approximates or not at one's peril. That focus I just take to be just one focus upon one sort of aesthetic object, probably an increasingly dated one, and certainly one to claim no pride or privilege of place. I wonder why these folks have such a devil of a time identifying the proper aesthetic object, as if by dint of someone's using a piano they simply must be conceived under "The Piano". [Rather like missing the brilliance in a film just because, say, it doesn't have the dialogue structure of a stageplay.]'

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