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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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