Beyond Preference: Rick Beato and the Defence of Standards

By Patrick Keeney

American musician and musicologist Rick Beato recently criticised a list of the 30 greatest contemporary American songwriters compiled by music critics from The New York Times.

He dismissed the exercise as meaningless. His objection was not primarily to compiling such a list, nor to the names nominated, but rather to the dubious authority of the critics themselves.

Rick Beato is among the more knowledgeable commentators on contemporary music. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Classical Bass from Ithaca College and a Master's Degree in Jazz Guitar from the New England Conservatory of Music. He is an accomplished performer and has lectured at various prestigious music schools. His YouTube channel has more than 5 million followers.

Yet he noted that none of the critics from The NY Times had any formal musical education. Their background lay instead in journalism or the broader humanities. The result, in his view, was a set of personal preferences and judgments untethered from the technical and theoretical knowledge of songwriting

that would lend their evaluations validity.

This does not mean that only trained musicians may speak about music, any more than it means that only trained lawyers can have an opinion about the law. But it does suggest that serious criticism requires some degree of apprenticeship to the art in question. In music, one must learn to listen with discernment, and such learning is neither automatic nor trivial. It is cultivated through attention, disciplined study, and exposure to a range of works that, with effort, gradually refine one's powers of discrimination. Without such understanding, compiling a list of "the greatest" becomes merely a matter of idiosyncratic preference rather than of informed judgement.

At first glance, this may seem a familiar complaint about the specialist's irritation with the generalist. One can imagine the music critics' retort: that art is not reducible to theory, that the experience of music does not require a conservatory credential, and that critics, precisely because they stand outside the technical guild, are free to register a work's broader cultural significance.

Yet Beato's irritation points to something more serious than professional pique. He raises a question that extends well beyond music criticism: what constitutes authority in artistic judgement, and what kinds of knowledge are required to sustain it? In a culture increasingly comfortable with opinion detached from discipline, the distinction between informed judgement and impressionistic reaction has blurred.

Traditionally, the music critic occupied a difficult yet necessary position, neither merely a technician nor simply a consumer. The critic's task was interpretive: to mediate between the work and the audience, to situate it within a tradition, and to illuminate its structure and significance. This required not only sensitivity but also extensive knowledge of musical technique, tradition, the canon of

recognised achievement, and the cultural life in which the art moved and from which it drew its meaning.

What troubles Beato is the erosion of this formation. When music critics lack even a rudimentary grounding in the technical dimensions of the art they assess, their judgments risk becoming curiously weightless. They may describe how a song moves them, or what a work appears to signify within the ever-shifting currents of culture, but they are less able to say how the musical work achieves its effects, or whether those effects are achieved with distinction or skill. The language of evaluation becomes thinner, more reliant on personal response. One is left with a kind of aesthetic impressionism: vivid, perhaps, but difficult to anchor in anything other than the personal preferences of the critic.

In music, this problem is particularly acute because the art itself is structured in ways that are not immediately transparent. Harmony, rhythm, form, voice leading—these are not arcane technicalities but the very substance of musical composition. To speak meaningfully about songwriting is, at least implicitly, to make claims about how these elements are handled. A songwriter’s melodic inventiveness, harmonic sophistication, and formal coherence are constitutive of the work. To ignore them is not to liberate musical criticism from pedantry but to evacuate it of content.

What is at stake, finally, is not the reputation of any particular songwriter, nor even the authority of any particular group of critics. It is the question of whether musical criticism itself can be sustained as a meaningful activity in the absence of knowledge of how music functions. To judge is to discriminate, to weigh, to compare, and to give reasons why x is superior to y. It is to acknowledge that judgment is not merely an expression of personal preference but an appeal to impersonal standards that transcend both the critic and the work of art under review.

If criticism is to be more than a catalogue of idiosyncratic reactions, it must recover some account of what it means to know an art, and of the responsibilities such knowledge entails. Without this, the language of evaluation will continue to drift. We begin to lose the idea that our opinions, if they are to matter, must answer to something beyond ourselves.

The loss is not merely professional but cultural. For those who love music, criticism ceases to illuminate the art itself and instead becomes another form of impressionistic commentary, untethered from the disciplined knowledge that gives judgment authority and depth. In such a climate, the language of criticism gradually loses its capacity to distinguish between what is merely popular and what is genuinely excellent.

Behind all this lies a broader cultural shift. The authority of expertise has, over the past several decades, been widely questioned, often with good reason. Institutions that once commanded public trust have, in many cases, squandered it through ideological conformity, political partisanship, or simple intellectual complacency. At the same time, the democratisation of media platforms has allowed a far wider range of voices to enter public conversation. This has undeniably enriched cultural discourse, breaking the monopoly once held by a relatively small class of gatekeepers and critics.

Yet this democratisation has also produced a flattening effect. The distinction between the informed and the uninformed, the trained and the untrained, has become increasingly difficult to sustain without appearing elitist or exclusionary. To suggest that criticism requires knowledge, discipline, or technical competence is now often heard as a defence of gatekeeping rather than of standards. But the alternative to standards is not a more democratic culture of judgment. It is a more arbitrary one.

When standards are abandoned, they are not replaced by freedom so much as by fashion. Judgment becomes untethered from criteria that can be articulated, defended, or meaningfully debated. What prevails instead is the shifting consensus of the moment, shaped less by sustained reflection than by cultural mood, social prestige, and algorithmic visibility. The attentive critic, formed through long acquaintance with an art and capable of explaining why one work surpasses another, gives way to the curator of preferences, whose authority rests largely on visibility and cultural positioning.

Beato's complaint, then, is best understood not as an exercise in snobbery, but as a defence of standards: not rigid or exclusionary standards, but the minimal conditions under which evaluative claims can be taken seriously. To say that a songwriter belongs among the greatest of his or her generation is not merely to express admiration. It is to make a comparative judgment that presupposes knowledge, criteria, and the capacity for discrimination, however implicit those standards may be. Without such grounding, the language of greatness risks collapsing into little more than rhetorical inflation, a vocabulary of superlatives detached from the discipline of judgment itself.

The result has been a flattening of judgment, a certain intellectual shallowness in which all opinions appear equally valid precisely because the criteria by which they might be assessed have become obscure or contested. What is ultimately at stake, then, is not the reputation of any particular songwriter, nor even the authority of a particular group of critics. It is the more fundamental question of whether judgment itself can continue to exist as a meaningful intellectual activity. To judge is not simply to express a feeling. It is to discriminate, to weigh, to compare, and to give reasons. It is to acknowledge that some works are better than others. Crucially, it is to take the stance that such claims are not merely my private preferences but propositions

open to rational consideration and debate.

One need not be a musical connoisseur to recognise the force of Rick Beato's unease. If criticism is to possess authority, it must recover some account of what it means to know an art, and of the obligations such knowledge entails. Serious criticism demands disciplined attention, standards of excellence, and the capacity to explain why one work succeeds where another does not. Otherwise, judgment collapses into mere preference and opinion answers to nothing beyond itself.

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