

Greg Sandow

How to Kill Classical Music: Bad Press Releases

My wife and I are both critics; we both get press releases, announcing classical music events. Their quality, it's fair to say, is dismal. Which isn't to say they aren't written with professional skill, or some reasonable imitation of that. But they don't say anything.

Example (chosen just because it came in the mail today; it's no worse than many others):

43d Young Concert Artists Series Presents
the New York Debut of
Romanian Cellist Laura Buruiana

March 9, 2004 -- On Tuesday, March 23, 2004, at 8:00 PM, Young concert Artists presents Romanian cellist Laura Buruiana at the 92d Street Y, in The Jerome L. Greene Foundation Concert, marking her New York debut.

Notice how cleverly the first paragraph tells us, for the second time, exactly what was in the headline. At the very least, the headline could say something different, something catchy, something designed to catch our interest:

Two-Headed Cellist Makes Debut

See how it works?

But -- seriously, now -- the headline ought tell us why Ms. Buruiana (whom I don't mean to make fun of, and who might be an extraordinary artist, for all I know) is worth attention. "Arresting Cellist Wins Award, Will Make Debut." Why not say something like that?

But then nothing in the press release answers the very crucial question of why anybody ought to care about this cellist, or her concert. Here's the next paragraph:

Laura Buruiana won First Prize in the 2003 Young Concert Artists International Auditions in New York. She also won the Young Concert Artists European Auditions in Leipzig, Germany in 2002, hosted by the Hochschule f?ik und Theater "Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy." This

season, Ms. Buruiana performs all of the Beethoven Sonatas with pianist Alexander Meinel in concert series in Schneeberg and Leipzig, Germany.

Translation: Laura Buruiana is a young cellist who's doing fairly well, especially in Schneeberg (where I'd assume she'll get more attention than she'll get in Leipzig). But why should we care? (And why, by the way, do people in the U.S. need to know who hosted those auditions?)

Next we read:

Born in 1980 in Bucharest, Laura Buruiana began to play the cello at the age of 10. *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* (Bari, Italy) called Ms. Buruiana "An artist of instinctive musicality, gifted with absolute mastery of the instrument. She knows how to totally immerse herself in the score and draw out the profound essence of the music."

Why do publicists keep using such ecstatic quotes from publications their readers have never heard of, and whose reliability they therefore can't assess? Quite frankly, it smacks of both incompetence and desperation. When I read the paragraph above, here's what I think: Laura Buruiana either has only played in small cities, or hasn't gotten good reviews in big ones. And until I'm proved wrong, I'll have to assume that the *Gazzetta* -- the only newspaper in Bari, a small Italian city -- overpraised her. The review is on its face implausible. "Absolute mastery"? "Draw out the profound essence of the music"? You couldn't think of three cellists in the world who'd deserve such praise.

Ms. Buruiana (for whom I wish only good things) is playing Georges Enescu, Franck, Hindemith, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky. The press release ought to tell us something interesting about her and her approach to music. Maybe she's irreverent: "If I were Norwegian, I'd be playing Grieg. But since I'm from Romania, I have to play Enescu." What was it like growing up in Romania, one of the most unpleasant of all communist countries, and a wreck since communism fell? What obstacles stood in her way? What kind of cello teachers did she have?

And what's her favorite piece on her concert program? What's her favorite moment in that piece? Who's her favorite composer? What cellist does she most admire? What's the most distinctive thing about her playing? What music does she listen to for fun? What does she do when she's not making music?

These are simple things, hardly complex or profound. But if you don't mention some of them -- or others like them -- you won't give anybody any reason to attend the concert. Or to care about the cellist. Or to believe that classical music isn't dead and empty, with nothing of any human or artistic interest going on for anybody.