Chicago on the Aisle

Claudia Cassidy's Music Criticism and Legacy

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Introduction

> Criticism of value is not a provincial art. It has nothing whatever to do with patting undeserving heads, hailing earnest mediocrities as geniuses, or groveling in gratitude before second-rate, cut-down or broken-down visitors for fear they might not come again. It is neither ponderous nor pedantic, virulent nor hysterical. Above all, it is not mean-spirited.
>
> Then what is it? Ideally, criticism is informed, astute, inquisitive, candid, interesting, of necessity highly personal. Goethe said, "Talent alone cannot make a writer. There must be a man behind the book." There must be a person behind the critic. Nobody reads a nobody. Unread criticism is a bit like an unheard sound. For practical purposes it does not exist.
>
> — Claudia Cassidy[1]

1. Claudia Cassidy, "The Fine Art of Criticism," *Chicago*, Winter 1967, 34.

In June 1956, *Chicago* magazine ran an eye-catching cover story. A castle composed of colorful shapes, as though rendered through collage, overlap over a parchment-white backdrop. In the form of one of the shapes is a black-and-white photo of a woman of indeterminate age: fair-faced, high cheekbones, half-lidded eyes, a string of pearls around her neck and a Mona Lisa smile on her lips. She is named, coronated, and damned in one headline: "Claudia Cassidy: The Queen of Culture and Her Reign of Terror."[2] When Bernard Asbell wrote this profile, Claudia Cassidy was the chief music and drama critic of the *Chicago Tribune* and at the height of her career. She joined the *Tribune* staff in 1942 after stints at the *Journal of Commerce* (1924–41) and the *Chicago Sun* (1941–42) and was named the *Tribune*'s chief arts critic in 1943, a title she would hold until 1965. Her frequent *Tribune* columns, On the Aisle, reached more than a million readers, but her popularity preceded her tenure there. Cassidy's columns were wildly popular at the *Journal of Commerce*, and Chicagoans devoured her *Sun* reviews "in the way that kids read Dick Tracy."[3] After more than twenty years at the *Tribune* and forty on the job, Cassidy didn't retire. She continued as a critic-at-large at the *Tribune* and as an active freelancer, contributing to *Chicago* magazine, the *Chicago Daily News*, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's and Lyric Opera's program notes, and more. Between 1968 and 1983, she hosted a half-hour program of arts commentary and criticism on 98.7 WFMT, which ended with a skirmish between her and program director Norman Pellegrini in 1983. Pellegrini had asked her to curb her critiques of performances at the Chicago Symphony (CSO) and Lyric Opera; Cassidy refused, accusing him of censorship. Then eighty-three, she quit.

Born in Shawneetown, Illinois, on November 18, 1899, Cassidy was introduced to the performing arts as a child through traveling showboats

2. *Chicago*, June 1956, cover.

3. Bernard Asbell, "Claudia Cassidy: The Queen of Culture and Her Reign of Terror," *Chicago*, June 1956, 26.

lazing down the Ohio River, then again during visits to Chicago as a teenager. As a girl, Cassidy was "fascinated by curtains waiting to be lifted."[4] Thus began a lifelong love affair with the stage, though Cassidy seemed to recognize early on that her preferred role was in the audience. Instead of majoring in theater or music performance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Cassidy graduated in 1921 with a degree in journalism—one of the few women in her class to do so—but studied music privately.[5] She moved to Chicago after graduation, where Glenn Griswold, the editor of the *Journal of Commerce* hired her as his secretary. She soon became a second-string reporter and sought advice from resident performing arts critic Paul Martin in her spare time. Double-booked one summer night in 1924, Martin assigned Cassidy to review a new play, *The Amber Fluid*. Cassidy's first review ran on July 1, 1924. Her bylines increased, and her vibrant prose and trenchant wit began to catch readers' eyes. Even her copy editors noticed. "Why the hell don't you write like Claudia Cassidy?" copy editor Sid Forbes reportedly griped to the *Journal of Commerce* staff.[6]

Audiences who encountered Cassidy two decades later at the *Tribune*, however, found her critical persona maddeningly elusive—and divisive. To her supporters, she was an impregnable judge of quality, consulted before any visit to the box office. To her detractors, she was a villain, embittered, according to rumors, by a luckless love life. (Never mind that Cassidy married stockbroker William J. Crawford in 1929, a union that lasted until Crawford's death in 1986.[7]) Her lack of public appearances

4. Linda Winer, "Goodbye to a Writer of Passion, Integrity," *New York Newsday,* July 26, 1996, B3.

5. Gerald Sullivan, "Claudia Cassidy and American Theater Criticism" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1968), 1.

6. Asbell, 25.

7. Chris Jones, ed., *Bigger, Brighter, Louder: 150 Years of Chicago Theater as Seen by* Chicago Tribune *Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 98.

—and quick exits from performance halls to meet evening deadlines, recognizable by her elbow-length gloves and flaming red hair—only deepened her mystique.

Asbell's 1956 *Chicago* exposé was a chance to lift the curtain and peer into the personal life and motivations of an enigmatic critic with a reputation for witty, sharp-edged commentary. If readers wanted to know more about the person behind the column, Asbell delivered, or even overshot. Asbell interviewed Cassidy's childhood neighbors, unearthed high school and college transcripts, detailed the layout of her East Walton Street apartment, cruelly revealed her brother as homosexual before graphically describing his death in a stage accident, and even divulged her hair-care regimen ("an application of camomile tea"[8]). Asbell concluded that Cassidy was unqualified, egotistical, an overlooked second child possibly jealous of her brother's stage career, shallow, and power hungry. These accusations went unchallenged for decades. Though Asbell apparently offered, Cassidy declined to participate in his article. "I like to write about people, but I don't like to be written about," she allegedly wrote to him.[9]

If Cassidy ever read Asbell's piece, her reaction is lost to time. However, Asbell's portrait lives on. Those who remember Claudia Cassidy described her with terse phrases and epithets, many of which are gendered: "Acidy Cassidy,"[10] "Catty Cassidy,"[11] "the Executioner,"[12] "that

8. Asbell, 23.

9. Ibid.

10. Jones, 97.

11. Ruth Ray, interview by Kenneth W. Whiteman, Feb. 1, 1986, 7, Samuel and Marie-Louise Rosenthal Archives, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (hereafter Rosenthal Archives).

12. "Exit the Executioner," *Time,* Sept. 3, 1965, 76.

woman at the *Tribune*,"[13] "the hatchet woman,"[14] "Medusa of the Midwest,"[15] "Dragon Lady,"[16] "that old witch,"[17] or, in the words of director Tyrone Guthrie, "that bitch."[18] Her very notoriety points to a historical moment before the bloom of blogs and social media gave new meaning to "everyone's a critic" and professional reviewers are being laid off from daily publications across the country. The thought that a critic—and a critic of the fine arts, no less—once garnered a broad enough readership and commeasurable scandal to warrant a lengthy exposé in a regional magazine like *Chicago* seems quaint.

However, her long shadow both testifies to and obscures the significance of her legacy. As I have studied Cassidy's life and criticism, I am increasingly convinced that she was ought to join the likes of Virgil Thomson (*New York Herald Tribune*), Harold Schonberg (*New York Times*), and Andrew Porter (*The New Yorker*) as one of twentieth-century America's defining classical music critics, though this is a designation scarcely entertained by contemporaries or scholars. Her exclusion may owe to her Midwestern base; though, as the "Second City, Not Second Rate" chapter of this thesis demonstrates, she remained in Chicago even when plum opportunities arose in New York City. However, given the misogynistic tinge of some criticism against her, her gender may have also played a role. Although she wasn't the first female chief music critic

13. Claudia Cassidy, "Carmen," in *Bigger, Brighter, Louder*, 97.

14. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive, Chicago History Museum (hereafter Terkel Radio Archive).

15. Richard B. Gehman, "Claudia Cassidy: Medusa of the Midwest," *Theatre Arts*, July 1951.

16. Winer, "Goodbye to a Writer of Passion, Integrity," *New York Newsday*.

17. Elsa Oldberg Zettelman, interview by Elizabeth "Lisbie" Zettelman Goelz, Feb. 9, 1995, 19, Rosenthal Archives.

18. Richard Christiansen, "Obituary: Former Tribune Critic Claudia Cassidy," *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1996.

to write for a Chicago daily—and indeed not even the first at the *Tribune*[19]—she was almost certainly the longest-serving and most widely-read woman in her role at the time she was writing. Considering her wide scope of covering five journalism beats (music, theater, dance, and, later, literature and film), nearly seventy-year-long career, and *Tribune*-funded trips to Europe for two decades (for her column Europe on the Aisle, 1949–68), a catalogue of Cassidy's criticism is a catalogue of the performing arts in the twentieth century. Whether Cassidy wielded her influence for good or ill remains, now as then, up for debate. What I hope to demonstrate is that few critics have done so much to shape the cultural landscape of one city. But how did a woman from small-town Illinois become one of the most powerful and prolific critics in America?

In this thesis, I probe what I believe to be key factors in Cassidy's rise. The first is her historical moment: Cassidy came of age in an exceptionally vibrant era in print journalism. She joined the *Tribune* at its peak, buoyed by the greatest circulation of any American standard-sized newspaper.[20] Her time at the *Tribune* also coincided with numerous formative developments in Chicago's musical scene: for example, the seminal directorship of Fritz Reiner at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the emergence of Lyric Opera, which would become Chicago's longest-running opera company. A second factor is her prose—lyrical, vivacious, and accessible. Avoiding musical terminology and adopting a candid, conversational approach to criticism, her reviews appealed to both the aficionado and the layperson, amplifying her reach. The last factor is Cassidy's strong

19. That honor seems to go to Ruth Miller, who served as chief critic for just one season, 1920–21. Miller reviewed notable premieres for the paper, including the first US performances of Holst's *The Planets* and Mahler's Symphony No. 7.

20. "Robert R. McCormick," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last updated July 26, 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-R-McCormick.

advocacy for her home city, which, besides fueling her atmospherically high standards, endeared her to legions of loyal local readers.

The incumbent *Tribune* drama critic, Chris Jones, argues that Cassidy "has been studied at some length,"[21] which is only true to a point. Gerald Sullivan's 1968 dissertation is a comprehensive study of Cassidy's theater criticism.[22] However, until very recently,[23] Cassidy's *music* criticism has gone generally unexamined, despite encompassing some of the greatest scandals of her professional career: her campaigns against CSO leadership, charges that she meddled inappropriately in Lyric Opera's administration, and her dismissal from 98.7 WFMT. Music criticism is also the sphere in which her expertise was most contested. I will examine the validity of these accusations, many of which have been inflamed by gendered readings of Cassidy's work. As Sullivan notes in his dissertation, a satisfactory examination of Cassidy's music criticism would "undoubtedly be a multi-volume work more appropriately explored by music scholars."[24] I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive, career-long analysis here, but will instead examine the key factors that heightened her influence.

21. Jones, 97.

22. Sullivan's assessment of her work and career is worth reading, though his impartiality is suspect: he appears to have met or known Cassidy and sent his finished dissertation to her with an affectionate inscription. See, Sullivan, dissertation, box 39, folder 491, Claudia Cassidy Papers, 1880s–1996, Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter Cassidy Papers).

23. David Hurwitz, "'Acidy' Cassidy and the Birth of the Modern Record Review: 1942–1950" (paper presentation, Music Criticism 1900–1950, Barcelona, Spain, Oct. 2016); and Douglas Shadle, "Witch with an Acid Wand: Claudia Cassidy Burns Chicago" (pre-conference panel, American Musicological Society, San Antonio, TX, Nov. 2018).

24. Sullivan, iii.

Atop Tribune Tower

> We need men in high places who know something about the arts, and maybe women in high places who can stir them to do something about it.
>
> — Claudia Cassidy[25]

As a young girl growing up in Shawneetown, Illinois, Cassidy tossed her writing into the family fireplace and watched the smoke snake out of her chimney. That way, she told *Newsday* critic and onetime *Tribune* apprentice Linda Winer years later, her words could "go somewhere."[26] By the time Claudia Cassidy ascended to the position of chief music and theater critic for the *Chicago Tribune* (then the *Chicago Daily Tribune*), her words were certainly going somewhere—at one point, into the pages of some 1,060,000 copies of the *Tribune* every day.[27]

Cassidy described that period glowingly to Winer as "a marvelous time" for print journalism. Indeed, her long career saw the rise and fall of a pluralistic press landscape—driven more by the fervent ideologies of publisher-tycoons than the whims of the market—but she found a singular kind of security at the *Tribune*, her professional home during the apex of her career. She was hired in 1942 by Robert Rutherford "Colonel" McCormick, the grandson of Joseph Medill, a nineteenth-century editor of the *Tribune* and a Chicago mayor (1871–73).[28] McCormick, a World

25. Claudia Cassidy, "From a Presidential Tribute to a Man of Ideals to Contemporary Bush League Antics that Move Podunk to Chicago," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1965, F7.

26. Winer, "Goodbye to a Writer of Passion, Integrity," *New York Newsday*.

27. *N. W. Ayers & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayers & Son, 1941), 241.

28. "Joseph Medill Is Dead," *New York Times*, Mar. 17, 1899, 2. Medill told his physician, "my last words shall be "What is the news?'"

War I veteran, strident conservative, and unerring advocate of the free press, presided over the *Tribune* as its idiosyncratic publisher and owner from 1911 until his death in 1955. Under McCormick's formidable leadership, the *Tribune* expanded to encompass radio and TV, attracted the greatest volume of advertising of any newspaper in the world, and increased circulation fivefold.[29] *Tribune* readership extended across five states, a territory McCormick dubbed boastfully as "Chicago-land."[30] More than the largest paper in the Midwest, the *Tribune* achieved the largest circulation of any standard-sized newspaper in the United States.[31]

No doubt, McCormick's hiring of Cassidy was a good deal for both sides: McCormick had shrewdly predicted that Cassidy's prose style and flair for bombast would attract a broader readership, while Cassidy was given the biggest critical soapbox in American daily journalism. McCormick's own affinity for Cassidy has been ingrained into local lore, if more in oral history than documented correspondence. Legend has it that McCormick recruited her personally as the *Tribune*'s chief drama and music critic, using his paper's financial clout to lure her away from Marshall Field III's *Chicago Sun* just one year after she'd joined its staff. A 1965 *Time* article on Cassidy's departure from the *Tribune* claims that her ending salary was $19,000, which, in 2017, had approximately the same buying power as $150,000.[32]

However, Cassidy's move from the *Sun* to the *Tribune* was not motivated purely by money. Her resignation letter to Field describes strife with an

29. "History," *Chicago Tribune*, last updated July 16, 2014, www.chicagotribune.com/chi-companyhistory-htmlpage-htmlstory.html.

30. "Debates Swirled about McCormick," *New York Times*, Apr. 1, 1955, 17.

31. "Robert R. McCormick," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last updated July 26, 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-R-McCormick.

32. "Exit the Executioner," *Time*. The article claims that Cassidy's last review for the *Tribune* was to be published December 1, 1965. Cassidy actually wrote regularly through the end of the year and continued writing weekly for the *Tribune* as its critic-at-large until about 1968.

imperious colleague and general disillusionment with the quality of the *Sun*'s entertainments section.[33] Rebutting Asbell's accusations of opportunism a decade later but affirming her own sharp-tongued reputation, Cassidy wrote to Field again: "It is important to me that you understand this is no erratic whim, but the considered decision of a person who prefers friends to enemies and asks only to be permitted to work in peace. To put it bluntly, I feel that I have been working in a sewer for months, and am just coming up for fresh air."[34] Her application to the *Tribune* also does not indicate that Cassidy expected, at least at the outset, to be paid more than she was at the *Sun*: she lists her *Sun* salary as $100 a week (meaning her yearly salary was equivalent to approximately $85,000 today), and writes the same amount in the "Salary expected" section. She filled out a formal application to the *Tribune* four days *after* her letter to Field;[35] it is possible, however, that she had spoken with McCormick in the interim, as she mentions being courted with offers from other papers in her resignation letter.[36]

Other more suspect rumors circulated in the press may well be the stuff of legends, including a persistent rumor that she had an affair with McCormick.[37] An anecdote repeated in a *Time* article, coyly titled "The Colonel's Lady," claims that Cassidy wrote a vitriolic review of Désiré Defauw that attracted two hundred letters to the editor. According to the tale, Cassidy brought the letters to McCormick herself and offered to resign, to which he responded: "Two hundred letters to the music department? You keep right on writing!"[38]

33. Cassidy to Marshall Field III, Sept. 2, 1942, box 2, folder 218 Cassidy Papers.

34. Cassidy to Marshall Field III, Sept. 10, 1942, box 2, folder 218, Cassidy Papers.

35. The Tribune Company: Application for Employment, Sept. 14, 1942, box 39, folder 486, Cassidy Papers.

36. Cassidy to Marshall Field III, Sept. 10, 1942, box 2, folder 218, Cassidy Papers.

37. Jonathan Abarbanel, "Legendary Critic, Claudia Cassidy, Dies at 96," *Chicago PerformInk*, Aug. 1, 1996, 2.

38. "The Colonel's Lady," *Time*, Feb. 5, 1951, 44. Of course, there is no way to

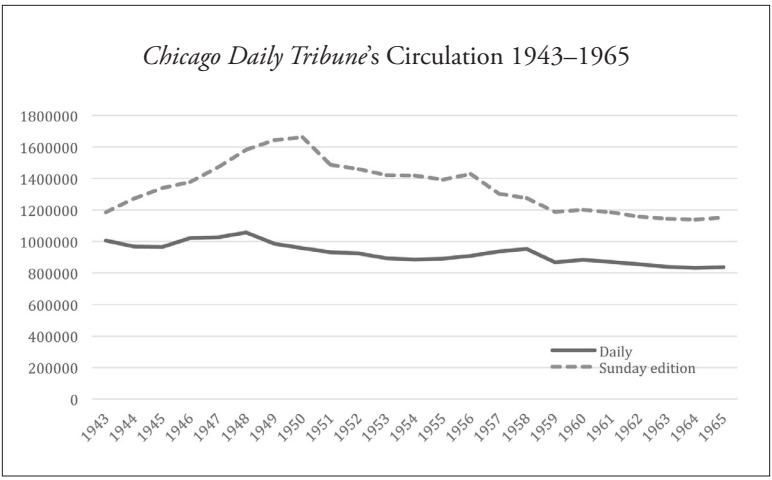

Figure 1: *Chicago Daily Tribune*'s Annual Circulation (*N.W. Ayers & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals*)

Asbell's *Chicago* profile not only argued that Cassidy's influence was undeserved, a claim that will be investigated later, but that her ascent was, by any measure far too swift: "Claudia Cassidy had moved from a circulation of 21,000 to 310,000 and … less than a year later ascended to the throne of critic at the *Tribune*, where before 1,150,000 reads she assumed rule over the city's lively arts."[39] By the time Cassidy began at the *Tribune* in 1942, she had already been reviewing for nearly two decades, primarily at the *Journal of Commerce*. However, Asbell is right to characterize Cassidy's ascent to the *Tribune* from the *Journal of Commerce* and the *Sun*—and the enormous increase in audience which accompanied it—as dramatic. In fact, it was more precipitous than Asbell knew: when Cassidy joined the *Sun*, its daily circulation was 58,869, double the *Journal of Commerce*'s, but

corroborate what appears to have been a private conversation between McCormick and Cassidy.

39. Asbell, 26.

certainly not Asbell's 310,000 figure. (He appears to have combined the circulations of the *Chicago Sun* and *Times*, which wouldn't merge until 1948.[40]) Nor did the daily edition of the *Tribune* break a circulation of 1.1 million during Cassidy's tenure, as he claimed (see fig. 1), though it did far outstrip any daily newspaper in the Midwest.

Despite these impressive circulation figures, Cassidy's omnipresence in Chicago's arts scene owes as much to her sheer productivity as it does her platform. In her twenty-three seasons covering music, theater, and dance for the *Tribune*, Cassidy wrote nearly a column a day, resulting in a massive and varied output. A *Time* article written near the end of her tenure spoke as much to the gender roles of Cassidy's era as to the extraordinariness of her career, when it wryly observed: "When [Cassidy] retires, the Trib will pay a high compliment to her energy and enterprise. It will assign two men to cover the beat that until now has been handled by one woman."[41]

Cassidy's career coincided with something of a Goldilocks period for Chicago's musical life. She oversaw its transformation from a fledgling, parochial scene to the home of internationally recognized civic institutions. Before the Gilded Age, Chicago's cultural life was predominantly fueled by traveling performers and troupes; the impermanence and general lack of large venues in Chicago made it difficult for dedicated local companies to take root. Like so much of the city's identity, however, Chicago's musical life jump-started after the construction boom following the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, which produced downtown venues like the now demolished Central Music Hall, the Art Institute (including the 370-seat Fullerton Hall), the Studebaker Building, and the Auditorium Theatre, then the country's largest building.[42] Orchestra Hall, built as the

40. *N.W. Ayers & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayers & Son, 1941), 217, 225–26.

41. "Exit the Executioner," *Time*, 76.

42. For an exhaustive examination of the relationship between institutions, spaces, and civic identity, see Mark Allan Clague, "Chicago Counterpoint: The Auditorium Theater Building and the Civic Imagination" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2002).

home of the Chicago Symphony, would follow in 1904. Thus, what performing arts institutions rose out of the late nineteenth century were still relatively young when Cassidy covered them in the *Journal of Commerce* and *Sun*, and much more class stratified. More than any development before it, the postwar economic boom would bring concerts within reach of an expanding, suburbanizing middle class. Though employed for propagandistic purposes, Cold War educational programming also brought music appreciation into the home via radio and television broadcasts, instilling Western classical music as a cultural signifier for young Americans. These broader societal shifts in American life indicate that Cassidy might have benefitted from her place at the intersection of two swelling potential audiences: her readership at the *Tribune* and Chicago-area residents who were likely to attend concerts at downtown venues.

Though Cassidy couldn't have known it when she joined the *Tribune*, Chicago's musical life was about to undergo several esteem-boosting developments. The first was the appointment of Fritz Reiner as music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. As a critic for the *Journal of Commerce*, Cassidy had covered the latter half of Frederick Stock's seminal tenure at the CSO, where he was music director for nearly forty years (1905–42). Like his predecessor, founding music director Theodore Thomas, Stock was German and championed high musical standards and innovative programming. Under his leadership, the CSO was the first American orchestra to produce a commercial recording, in 1916 for Columbia Graphophone; his aggressive recording crusade did much to boost the orchestra's reputation beyond Chicago.[43] In the ensuing years, he left behind a then remarkably long discography of 105 different recorded works with the Chicago Symphony and an even longer shadow.[44] To Cassidy and many other Chicagoans, his directorship was synonymous

43. Steven Smolian, "Which Orchestra First Recorded When (1887–1925)? So Victor's the Victor on Victor," *Classic Record Collector*, June 2006, 38.

44. "The Archival Discography of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra," Rosenthal Archives.

with orchestral excellence, a reputation that wouldn't be reprised until Reiner's appointment.

When Stock died, of a heart attack at the beginning of the 1942–43 season, Cassidy wrote the music director's obituary only a month into her tenure at the *Tribune* and the day after his death: "The bottom dropped out of Chicago's music life.… What Chicago will do now that Frederick Stock has left his beloved city in the only way he would have consented to leave it—that is something Chicago is too deeply saddened to think about. But Chicago knows one irreparable fact: He cannot be replaced."[45]

Over the next decade, Cassidy used the *Tribune*'s pages to promulgate that sentiment. She was routinely unimpressed by subsequent music directors Désiré Defauw (1943–47) and Rafael Kubelík (1950–53), and the single successor she deemed worthy, Artur Rodziński (1947–48), was promptly dismissed for clashing with orchestra management.[46] Cassidy felt her job as a music critic entailed more than just reviews: as the steward for Chicago's performing arts, the policies, performance, and personalities of the CSO's management, Orchestral Association, and trustees were as fair targets of her criticism as were the orchestra's performances.[47] To the CSO's chagrin, readers were taking Cassidy's assessments seriously, and ticket sales dropped when she embarked on her campaign against Defauw.[48] Though he was no fan of Defauw either, Robert C. Marsh, Cassidy's main rival at the *Sun-Times*, had his own theory for Cassidy's influence in the conductor's deposition:

45. Claudia Cassidy, "Chicago's Music Circles Mourn Frederick Stock," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Oct. 21, 1942, 7.

46. "Arthur Rodzinski," 2010, Rosenthal Archives.

47. Philip Hart, *Fritz Reiner: A Biography* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 153.

48. Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner: Maestro and Martinet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 147.

> The reason Miss Cassidy was so unusually powerful in this situation was in this period [the orchestra] was playing more subscription matinee concerts than evening concerts.… Miss Cassidy and the *Tribune* had an overwhelmingly female readership and a great many of the women subscribers simply took her word as law. The result was that she was able to control an extraordinarily large amount of influential opinion. When she wrote week after week that Defauw was a pathetic incompetent and had to go people believed it.[49]

Reiner, who led the CSO from 1953 to 1963, appeared to be the perfect antidote to the previous decade of conductors. A terrifying, exacting maestro cut from the same cloth as his contemporaries Toscanini, Klemperer, and Szell, Reiner was often at odds with his musicians in rehearsal. On the podium, however, he was even-keeled; Cassidy praised his tight, conservative, "vest-pocket beat" on more than one occasion. Igor Stravinsky once called the Chicago Symphony under Reiner "the most precise and flexible orchestra in the world";[50] thanks to the advent of commercial recorded sound, the world was able to hear that orchestra for itself. Reiner's RCA Victor recordings drew international attention to both himself and the orchestra, becoming practically synonymous for quality among collectors.

Cassidy and Reiner first met in November 1948. Knowing Cassidy's influence in Chicago, Reiner's press agent briefed him in a long letter about how to prepare for the meeting, which went well; Cassidy especially hit it off with Reiner's wife Carlotta, an actress. After he appeared with the CSO, in March 1950, Cassidy would become enthusiastic about a hypothetical Reiner-CSO partnership.[51] When he did receive an offer to

49. Robert Marsh, interview, Feb. 16, 1985, Rosenthal Archives.

50. Jonathan Horrocks, Also Sprach Zarathustra*: Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra*, Washington, DC, Library of Congress, 1954), www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/AlsoSprach.pdf.

51. Hart, 156.

become the orchestra's music director, Reiner—in a gesture of either friendship or strategic flattery—consulted Cassidy about the offer. She wrote about the episode after Reiner's death: "Reiner had asked me in New York, 'Shall I come to Chicago?' I said, 'Yes, if you have an iron-clad contract.'… He narrowed his eyes at me, and we both laughed, knowing how likely Reiner was to move a finger without having it amply protected."[52]

Whether or not Cassidy's respect for Reiner was genuinely reciprocated by the maestro, Reiner seemed to have understood that her goodwill paved the way for his acceptance in Chicago. Under his tenure, CSO management made announcements "on *Tribune* time," meaning Cassidy received orchestra news before other newspapers.[53] Additionally, Orchestral Association president Eric Oldberg hired Cassidy's assistant at the *Tribune*, music critic Seymour Raven, as orchestra manager during Reiner's tenure, where, according to the *Sun-Times*'s Robert Marsh, he "conducted affairs as if the Chicago Symphony was a wholly owned property of the *Chicago Tribune*."[54] Despite her coverage of Reiner's tenure, Cassidy remained friends with Carlotta. According to Reiner biographer Philip Hart, Carlotta and her husband occasionally disclosed sensitive information about the orchestra to Cassidy.[55] Cassidy never published information granted in confidence, but was known to pursue the Reiners' leads on the record.[56] Ultimately,

52. Claudia Cassidy, "Farewell to Reiner Who Came to Visit and Left Chicago the Great Gift of Making It a Better Place in Which to Live," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1963, D9.

53. Hart, 166.

54. Robert Marsh, interview, Feb. 16, 1985, Rosenthal Archives.

55. Hart, 167.

56. Cassidy's personal relationship with the Reiners is troublesome. An optimistic reading of Cassidy advising Reiner on his pending contract and recounting it in the pages of the *Tribune* speaks to a much different standard of reporting conflicts. A pessimistic reading is that, then and now, it represented an egregious conflict of interest, and Cassidy simply did not care.

Cassidy only turned on Reiner towards the end of his tenure for his failure, in her eyes, to embrace Chicago as it had embraced him.

The second great development, which coincided with Cassidy's *Tribune* tenure and which promised to shake up musical life in Chicago, occurred just four months later, due west at the Civic Opera House: the founding of Lyric Opera.[57] Opera has been heard consistently in Chicago since 1850—thanks to touring companies and productions, primarily from New York—but resident companies existed only in fits and starts. The Chicago Grand Opera Company (1910–14) and the Chicago Opera Company (1915–22) were the first resident opera companies, both mounting productions in the Auditorium Theatre. When world-renowned Scottish diva Mary Garden took over the Chicago Opera Company as music director in 1921, her decisive gamble to secure the rights to the world premiere of Prokofiev's *A Love for Three Oranges* ultimately ran the company under. After being fished out of bankruptcy by a principal stockholder, the company was rechristened the Civic Opera Company in 1922. It, too, performed in the Auditorium Theatre for seven years, before the Civic Opera House was completed in 1929, funded by business magnate Samuel Insull. Unfortunately, the building was completed just in time for the Great Depression; the Civic Opera Company, like its predecessors, fell, as would a second iteration of the Chicago Grand Opera Company (1933–35), the Chicago City Opera Company (1935–39), and a second Chicago Opera Company (1940–46, on hiatus 1943) in the same space.

On February 5, 1954, a new company, the Lyric Theater of Chicago, gave its premiere performance in the Civic Opera House. The woman behind the venture was Carol Fox, a twenty-eight-year-old impresario and trained singer with Garden's daring, plus the fortune and wealthy allies to back it up. She teamed up with Lawrence Kelly, a real-estate agent

57. This account of Chicago's operatic history has been adapted and condensed from Robert C. Marsh and Norman Pellegrini, *150 Years of Opera in Chicago* (Chicago: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 68–121.

and insurance broker, and Nicola Rescigno, a conductor who had led Chicago Opera Company productions. Fox led as general director, Kelly as treasurer of the Board of Directors, and Rescigno as artistic director. The triumvirate's formula worked, and the performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* inaugurated what would become Chicago's longest-lasting opera company.[58] The opening of its first full season that autumn was similarly fortuitous: in a major coup, Fox had secured the US premiere of Maria Callas, singing the title role in *Norma*. Cassidy wrote lavishly about the occasion: "If the Lyric Theater of Chicago turns out to be a mirage, at least it was lovely while it lasted.… But after last night's *Norma*, which opened the Lyric's first season in the Civic Opera house—well, don't wake me if I'm dreaming."[59]

As with the CSO, Cassidy allegedly used her clout to intervene in Lyric Opera's managerial affairs. Lyric's future was uncertain only two years later, barely riding out financial difficulties and plagued by squabbling among Fox, Kelly, and Rescigno. A draft of Rescigno's contract included a "veto clause" over repertory and guest artists, to which Fox objected, believing it was deliberately meant to undercut her power as general director. Kelly, for his part, refused to sign salary checks until the contract conflict was resolved. After continued ugliness, with the men at this point as allies, Fox asked Lyric's board on February 22, 1956, to authorize her to circumvent Kelly and sign the checks herself. Allegedly present at the meeting were Claudia Cassidy and her assistant Seymour Raven. (Cassidy had long been a friend of Fox, with Fox regularly consulting Cassidy on artistic matters.) During a deadlocked meeting, with the board split three-to-three, Cassidy allegedly told Rescigno that she would "run him out of town" if he did not waive the veto clause. Though other Chicago journalists were unaware of the *Tribune*'s involvement with negotiations, the press did weigh in: predictably, Cassidy sided with Fox;

58. Ibid.

59. Claudia Cassidy, "Callas' Brilliant Debut Sparks the Lyric's Stunning 'Norma,'" On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 2, 1954, A1.

Roger Dettmer and the *Chicago American* landed in Kelly and Rescigno's camp; and the *Sun-Times* and *Chicago Daily News* remained neutral.[60]

In his damning profile for *Chicago*, Asbell, too, claimed that Fox had initially agreed to vesting the veto power in Rescigno, but had changed her mind after consulting Cassidy. According to Asbell's sequence of events, Rescigno then took his contract to Cassidy, who gave him unsolicited advice not to sign it. Asbell wrote that "a few days later, Miss Cassidy attacked Rescigno in her column, proudly setting forth the details of how Rescigno came to ask her what to do." Asbell also wrote that Cassidy had ordered that the minutes of that fateful February 22 meeting be destroyed, but that they had been reconstructed after the meeting. Kelly threatened to use the reassembled minutes as evidence in future litigation, which would prove Cassidy had attended the meeting on behalf of the *Tribune*—a fatal conflict of interest.[61] This threat was enough for Cassidy to avoid reporting on the conflict further.[62]

Cassidy, for all her apparent involvement with the Lyric maelstrom, did not sound off on it much in the *Tribune*—perhaps lending credence to Asbell's claim that Kelly threatened her with litigation. However, Asbell appears to have mischaracterized the tone of these columns, which, while conspicuously omitting any criticism of Fox, cannot rightly be called attacks on Rescigno. Cassidy's first mention of the controversy on February 25, 1956, doesn't even make the headline of her On the Aisle column. In it, she outlines compromises made by the Lyric board to keep Rescigno, including salary increases and a "publicity clause" guaranteeing him "full credit for all services to the company." She notes that the three-year contract, with its veto clause intact, have remained ungranted, but does

60. The account of this episode is mostly taken from Marsh and Pellegrini, *150 Years of Opera in Chicago*, 137.

61. Just before my thesis deadline, Lyric Opera transferred its archives, which includes the meeting minutes of Board of Directors, to the Chicago History Museum. The archive was closed temporarily, making it impossible to corroborate this account.

62. Asbell, 29.

not editorialize further.[63] Her March 3 column outlining the conflict (for which Rescigno and Kelly apparently refused to comment) reveals her partisanship more clearly:

> What's wrong is this. Nicola Rescigno … has been absent from his post since he was refused power of veto over all artistic decisions more than two weeks ago. Lawrence V. Kelly … seems to support Mr. Rescigno's ambitions, and since the latter's walkout has appeared in the Lyric's offices so sketchily that some of the corporation's pressing business has not been completed. Carol Fox … is on the job where she always has been.[64]

This is, too, the column which troubled Asbell for its mention of Rescigno approaching Cassidy for advice. Not unlike a similar conversation with Reiner, which supposedly happened a few years before, Cassidy's decision to divulge her involvement in the pages of the *Tribune* seems jarring today. However, if her narrative is to be treated as testimony, the whole affair becomes less clear-cut than characterized, with Rescigno also acting deceptively:

> About two weeks ago Mr. Rescigno read me that trouble-making veto clause, here in my office. I said I thought it was unwise, that the public trust was vested in the three who had done the job so superbly … and why toss it over now? Mr. Rescigno agreed most amiably, said he didn't care about the clause at all, and added, "I give you my word that it will come out." I am sorry he changed his mind. I would be sorrier if this rift, so unwise and so unnecessary,

63. Claudia Cassidy, "Ballet Theater Off to Happy Start in the Civic Opera House," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1956, 11.

64. Claudia Cassidy, "Lyric Rift Finds Carol Fox on Job Rescigno, Kelly in Walkout," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar. 3, 1956, 15.

> could damage or destroy what we so proudly call the Lyric Theater of Chicago.[65]

Cassidy's column a few days later articulated her specific reservations about the clause: it would vest more power in Rescigno than was—and continues to be—conventional for the artistic director of an opera company. She anonymously quoted "a friend high in opera administration" who affirmed that an artistic director's exercise of veto power was rare, saying he knew only one conductor who wielded it: New York City Opera director Joseph Rosenstock, who resigned in 1955. According to this source, even Bruno Walter and Arturo Toscanini had not possessed veto power, except in special assignments (e.g., the Bayreuth and Salzburg Festivals).[66] Whether Cassidy genuinely feared the clause would allow Rescigno to become Lyric's "dictator"[67] or if this is simply the narrative she presented in the *Tribune*'s pages remains open to interpretation. However, personal affinities aside, she presented her arguments against the veto rationally in her columns, in contrast to the screed Asbell depicted in *Chicago*. Her main point of distress, at least publicly, was the unconscionable stalling of Lyric's operations for five weeks.[68]

In his foreword to Cassidy's illustrated history of Lyric, Saul Bellow observed that "the real mountains of Chicago are its cultural institutions."[69] Cassidy covered the city's towering performing arts institutions at the *Tribune* in the midst of their renaissance, and, due in part to her social

65. Ibid.

66. Claudia Cassidy, "Lyric Impasse in which Rescigno Wants More than Toscanini," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar. 8, 1956, C5.

67. Cassidy, "Lyric Rift," *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

68. Claudia Cassidy, "Guarantors Slash Lyric Stalemate, Offer Fox, Kelly Contracts," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar. 24, 1956, 15.

69. Saul Bellow, forward to *Lyric Opera of Chicago* by Claudia Cassidy (Chicago: Lyric Opera of Chicago, 1979), 7.

connections and friendships, she was in a position to exercise enormous influence on them. Not unlike her partnership with McCormick, this influence went both ways. In some ways, then, the Claudia Cassidy story is one of someone being in the right place at the right time. But unlike many such stories, her influence had staying power. Tracing the imbrications between power brokers and institutions gives us a rich perspective on Chicago's music network in the golden age of print journalism. Yet, what gave Cassidy her staying power was not simply her connections and influence. It was also the power of her words—the subject of the following chapter.

"Quotable Phrases, Sometimes Purple"

> As long as I can remember, I have been lured by, and oddly at home in strange places.… It might explain why I became irrevocably stage struck, especially in the sense that if the world's a stage, then it works the other way around, too.
>
> — Claudia Cassidy[70]

Seymour Raven once described Claudia Cassidy's prose as that of "an Irish poet."[71] In his *Chicago* magazine exposé, Bernard Asbell disagreed, writing that it "link[ed] lustrous, jingling phrases into outstretched and bumpy sentences which often beg for the momentary relief of a comma."[72] *Time* pithily described it as comprising of "quotable phrases, sometimes purple."[73]

70. Claudia Cassidy, prelude to *Europe on the Aisle* (New York: Random House, 1954), not numbered.

71. Linda Winer, telephone interview with the author, Feb. 24, 2018.

72. Asbell, 22.

73. "The Colonel's Lady," *Time*.

Regardless of how Claudia Cassidy's prose style was characterized, it was certainly singular, ensuring that no column under her byline was ignored. Plenty of her peers matched her in wit—look no further than Virgil Thomson's legendary dismissal of a violin recital by Jascha Heifetz as "silk-underwear music"[74]—but few matched her unabashed sentimentality, earning her detractors and admirers alike. Despite Cassidy's stylistic idiosyncrasies and enormous stature, at present, no collection of her arts criticism exists. This chapter aims to use representative excerpts to examine her prose's primary characteristics, as well as the controversies that resulted from what she wrote and how she wrote it.

Cassidy's approach to music was sensual: music was not just heard but felt, seen, smelled, and tasted. Objects of her highest praise were described vividly and plush with adjectives. (She wrote of the Reiner-CSO that it was "a dark, whetted brilliance in pinpoint equilibrium."[75]) In a 1966 interview with Studs Terkel, Cassidy divulged that she never explicitly wished to be a critic but had always wanted to be a writer.[76] Her predilection for the literary shows in her prose: she indulged far-ranging associations and romantic tangents, all in the service of the perfect metaphor, such as in the lede of her review of a Rudolf Serkin recital:

> In the south of France, by an inlet curve of the sea, you come suddenly and breathtakingly on a black cathedral built of lava thrust formidably high and sheer. It dwarfs the landscape and stuns the eye. It is grim, implacable, beautiful and somewhat jubilant, for it seems to be alive. You know it was born of violence and welded in

74. Virgil Thomson, "Silk-Underwear Music," *New York Herald Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1940.

75. Claudia Cassidy, "Fritz Reiner, Music Great, Dies in N.Y.," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1963, 1.

76. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive.

> fire, to which at any epic moment it may return. Odd, how clearly I saw it last night when Rudolf Serkin played Beethoven's "Waldstein" in Orchestra Hall.[77]

This review, like others, cross-referenced Cassidy's annual travels throughout Europe, underwritten by the *Tribune*. Her popular Europe on the Aisle column first appeared in 1949 and continued through 1968, after Cassidy had stepped down as chief music critic of the *Tribune*. Cassidy had hitherto never traveled to Europe, nor, presumably, had many of her readers. The reasons were practical (e.g., travel expenses for long overseas voyages) as well as political (the disruption of World War II). Cassidy's dispatches are colored by the war's looming shadow, often describing scenic landscapes and battle-torn towns in the same sentence. In one affecting column, Cassidy describes a visit to the thirteenth-century Abbaye Royaumont, about twenty miles from Paris, now a private home. The head of the house explained that his brother-in-law, the pianist François Lang, "was killed by the Germans." Cassidy shrewdly notes that this sentiment is "not quite the same as 'killed in the war'":

> The feeling grew stronger as I looked at the things that [Lang] had loved, so gently kept alive in that quiet room. The two pianos, the framed manuscripts of Bach, Wagner, and Chopin, the walls lined with scores, the mementoes of artists past and present, the table with autographed pictures of Monteux and Furtwaengler, the snapshot of a gay young man at a cafe table with Monteux and Artur Rubinstein. The sight of that merry meeting pulled the growing tension taut. "Do you mind," I said, "if I ask what happened?" What happened was this. François Lang was in the resistance, and he was caught. Flung into slave labor, he broke down almost

77. Claudia Cassidy, "Serkin's 'Waldstein' Crowns Recital which Also Honors Adolf Busch," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 3, 1952, B2.

at once. Before his stunned family and friends knew what was happening, he was discarded as useless and thrust into a gas oven at Auschwitz.[78]

On the other hand, and at its most unabashedly jubilant, Europe on the Aisle included some of Cassidy's most remarkable writing. A trip to the Paris Opéra in 1950 yielded the following:

L'heure bleue seems to me an understatement. The lovely name the French wrap around the hour of twilight can cling all night in an almost imperceptible series of crepuscular variations. You won't notice the mutations if you stay in the din and smoke of night club, or even sedately in your hotel rooms. But there is more than one version of Paris by night, and I think this will remain my favorite if I can spin my own sets of variations.

It began, by amusing inadvertence, in the Wagnerian twilight of what Paris calls *Le Crepuscule des Dieux*, the uncut version not a bit shorter with a French title. So by 7:15 we are settled at the Opéra, by sheer luck in the front row center of the loge at the rear of the main floor, where I would always sit if I were king. With a swivel neck you can see everything—the circling tiers, the riotous décor, the voluptuous ceiling, the flowering dazzle of the chandelier as it comes to life and retreats into discreet dusk. You can even see what looks like, and is, the intrepid Elsa Maxwell chatting with the Aga Khan. When the lights dim you can rejoice in the uninhibited jouncings, swirlings and pouncings of George Sebastian's conducting, which seems to accompany Siegfried by riding a pogo stick down the Rhine.

The orchestra, recklessly augmented, is magnificent. The winds and brass so alien to Beethoven are wonderfully sensuous for Wagner,

78. Claudia Cassidy, "Because a Young Man Met a Cruel Death, the Abbey of Saint Louis Has a New Life," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Sept. 5, 1949, E7.

> a very love philter, in their high, sweet, liquidly incandescent tone the color and texture of honey just warm enough to pour. You have heard a nobler *Götterdämmerung*, probably one of more monumental brilliance, but surely never one more ecstatically distilled from the mysterious potions of the amorous.[79]

As a journalist, Cassidy wrote practically all of her oeuvre facing same-day deadlines, making the intricacy of her prose all the more remarkable. Music and ballet critic Thomas Willis, who worked under Cassidy at the *Tribune* for seven years, recalled that she could attend a matinee concert in Orchestra Hall, write the review on the streetcar back to the office, have dinner, cover the opening of a new play that evening, and submit both reviews on time. Then, she and her husband Bill "would go dancing at some night club where Claudia would be covering the opening of a new show."[80] Associates estimated that she worked sixteen hours a day;[81] Cassidy later joked that she became a professional the day an explosion rattled the *Journal of Commerce* offices a few minutes before deadline and she kept writing her evening review with plaster in her hair.[82] Colleagues at the *Tribune* were similarly impressed by the cleanness of her copy: not only was she a dauntingly efficient writer, but Cassidy rarely made mistakes.[83] According to Winer, a junior associate at the

79. Claudia Cassidy, "Bewitching Paris by Night, from Opera to Onion Soup: Flagstad Is Superb and the Crepuscular Streets Intriguing," Europe on the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 11, 1950, F1.

80. Sullivan, 3.

81. Ibid.

82. Sullivan, 31–32. The date of this incident appears to be the evening of June 8, 1936.

83. Linda Winer, telephone interview with the author, Feb. 24, 2018, and Lois Baum telephone interview with the author, Mar. 26, 2018. This can also be witnessed firsthand in typewritten drafts in the Cassidy Papers.

Tribune, Cassidy would "type her review as if it was in her head."[84]

With few exceptions, formal musical terminology was absent from her reviews, making them accessible to casual concertgoers and untrained music lovers. For example, contemporary music that pushed at the boundaries of traditional tonality was described not as "post-tonal" or "atonal" but as "acrid" or "rawboned." Her peers Felix Borowski (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 1942–56) and Roger Dettmer (*Chicago American*, 1953–74) had both studied composition, and their reviews showed it. However, their musical chops did not always translate to engaging reviews. Even John Defauw—the son of Désiré Defauw, the CSO music director whom Cassidy scorned in her columns—admitted that he "preferred reading Claudia because at least she could write."[85] In a letter sent to Cassidy after her semi-retirement from the *Tribune*, Ray Still, the former principal oboist of the CSO, affirmed that it was her prose which had eventually won his respect: "Yours is a great art! If only some of the nincompoops who are today's critics could catch one glimpse of your genius! I have, at times, in the past railed at you for technical errors but now I realize how meaningless these are when an artist can catch the essence of another's art!"[86]

As Still implies, Cassidy found words for what made a performance ineffable. Lois Baum, associate program director at WFMT, spoke years later about the appeal of Cassidy's writing for her fans: "[It] called up their own memories, which was a very pleasurable thing.… She could write about [artists] and help me recall my own memories [of them].… Her reviews were memories, because they *were* memories of what she'd seen that week."[87] A touching letter from a reader bedridden by illness for many years is a testament to the evocative power of Cassidy's

84. Linda Winer, telephone interview with the author, Feb. 24, 2018.

85. John Defauw, interview by Marilyn Arado, Feb. 1, 1984, 8, Rosenthal Archives.

86. Ray Still to Cassidy, October 23, 1972, box 2, folder 177, Cassidy Papers.

87. Lois Baum, telephone interview with the author, Mar. 26, 2018.

columns.[88] She wrote about the letter in On the Aisle in 1949: "For those of you who sometimes write from hospitals or other quiet rooms, I shall do my best to share a magic carpet. For I can never forget one letter, just about the nicest I ever received on my job. It said, 'I never leave this bed, and I go everywhere you go, hear all you hear, see all you see. Where are we going next summer?'"[89]

Cassidy acknowledged that her prose evoked memory and sentiment over claims to hard reportage—a quality that put her at odds with not only her peers at other dailies, but also the broader sweep of Chicago's twentieth-century literary tradition. While Cassidy was forging her career, modernist writers like Nelson Algren, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, and Richard Wright popularized a stark, angular realism that seemed to evoke the rough-and-tumble industrialized city, which Chicago had become. At a time when Chicago modernists were jettisoning ornamentation from their writing, Cassidy luxuriated in it, writing in a style that had far more in common with the American Romantics or Victorian novelists than her contemporaries. Her deliberate flouting of sober journalistic writing and the sparse muscular style of her literary contemporaries—most of whom were men—offers up another potentially gendered reading of her work. As Liesl Olson observes in her book *Chicago Renaissance*: "The claim to Chicago realism is also the claim to a masculine style.… The myth created by these men was that Chicago writers went for the direct hit."[90] To both detractors and supporters, Cassidy's prose might have been perceived as anachronistic and distinctly feminine, in a crude equivalence of sentimentality with femininity.

88. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive.

89. Claudia Cassidy, "Miss Cassidy Begins Tour of Theater and Music Capitals of Europe: Rome, Verona, Milan, Salzburg, Paris, Edinburgh on Itinerary," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 10, 1949, F1.

90. Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 23.

In his interview, Terkel pressed Cassidy on similar subjects, asking her what she made of the myth of the "objective" or "detached critic"—perhaps referencing her heart-on-sleeve tendencies, or perhaps obliquely nodding to her friendships with some of the individuals she reviewed, like Reiner. Cassidy responded: "Entirely. I don't see what else it could be! You take yourself—and [your readers] know that—and they can agree or disagree as they like.… I'm afraid that if a person was detached in that sense, that would be rather dull.… It's *you.* Why would you want to blot it out in what you write?"[91] Moreover, the charge that Cassidy's prose alienated musically knowledgeable readers is contradicted by her correspondence with professional musicians, which Cassidy often referenced firsthand. Professionals read her columns avidly. Ray Still, William Kapell, Maria Callas, Herbert von Karajan, Serge Koussevitsky, Eugene Ormandy, Lotte Lehmann, and Samuel Ramey, among others, responded to Cassidy's columns and kept in touch with her over the years, even when it was no longer professionally advantageous to do so. In a radio interview, soprano Edith Mason took notice of Cassidy's work, allegedly calling the critic "a perfectionist."[92] Cassidy recalled a similar plaudit from a performer: in midflight, the guitarist Andrés Segovia allegedly wrote a postcard to Cassidy "from an altitude of 30,000 feet, approximately the height of your literary ability." Cassidy claimed it was precisely this mutual respect that compelled her to be forthcoming and, at times, unsparing in her reviews: "If you hadn't gone through the trouble to say precisely what you thought [Segovia] was doing, he'd be disappointed."[93]

91. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive.

92. S. Serlin, "Voice of the People: Miss Cassidy Pictured," reader letter dated Feb. 3, 1965, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 6, 1965, 12.

93. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive. The postcard is not in Cassidy's papers, so I could not corroborate her account.

However, many of Cassidy's critics were skeptical that she *knew* what her subjects were doing musically. For them, her avoidance of musical terminology was not a stylistic choice but showed a lack of musical training that disqualified her as a music critic. (It didn't help that her New York peers were accomplished musicians or musicologists outside their columns: Virgil Thomson was a composer, and Harold Schonberg completed many tomes on musical subjects.) Asbell wrote that Cassidy's college transcript does not include any music courses and that her lack of formal training contributed to a number of embarrassing mistakes at the *Tribune*. He cites instances in which Cassidy was tripped up by program changes that ought to have been obvious to listeners with a thorough knowledge of the classical repertoire. During an Isaac Stern recital, she had missed an announcement of a program change, reviewing what was printed in the program book (Franz Reisenstein's *Prolog* and *Danse Fantastique*) instead of what was actually played (Ravel's *Tzigane*).[94] In a particularly galling instance, a double-booked Cassidy reviewed the second half of a performance by a Roosevelt University string quartet and, according to Asbell, confused Prokofiev's String Quartet No. 1 for Haydn when the concert order was swapped.[95] All this, topped off by Cassidy's refusal to participate in a televised panel with Rafael Kubelík and Chicago critics, was enough for Asbell to deduce that she was concealing her musical ignorance from an unwitting public.[96] Linda Winer, *Newsday*'s longtime theater critic who overlapped with Cassidy at the

94. Claudia Cassidy, "Bartók Sonata Peak of Isaac Stern's Recital in Orchestra Hall," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 9, 1950, C1.

95. Claudia Cassidy, "Evening's Catch: Segovia in a Guitar Quintet and a Girl with a Voice," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Apr. 19, 1951, B1.

96. There may be another reason for her absence from the panel: Cassidy was extremely camera shy. Few photographs of her exist, even among her papers, and she wrote to CSO manager John Edwards that she never listened to her WFMT broadcasts.

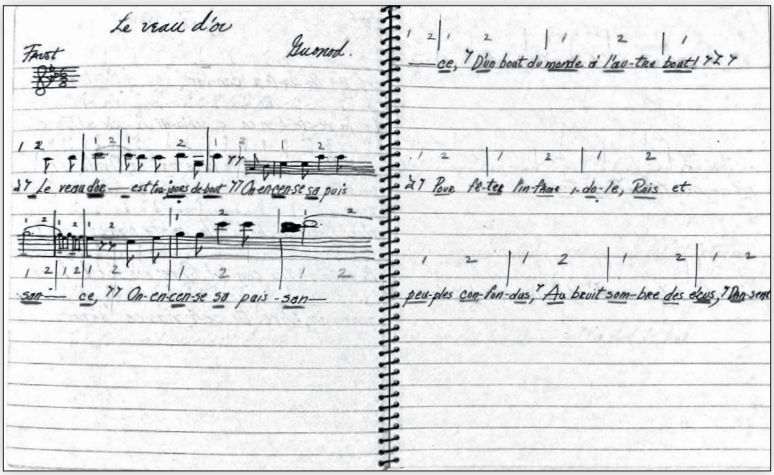

Figure 2: "Le veau d'or" from Gounod's *Faust,* Songbook.

The portion that Cassidy wrote out on staves is accurate to Gounod's original. The songbook also contains Richard Strauss's "Traum durch die Dämmerung," Leoncavallo's "Mattinata," and some popular standards, which are notated by Cassidy in the sparser shorthand without staves of the second page. (Songbook, n.d., box 40, folder 497, Claudia Cassidy Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago)

Tribune, affirmed that Cassidy's prose was more "impressionistic" than other critics', especially in music, which led some circles to suspect that she was musically ignorant.[97]

Slight evidence exists to the contrary. In his 1968 dissertation, Gerald Sullivan claimed that Cassidy, in fact, "studied music privately" at the

97. "There was this general feeling that, well, Claudia didn't know anything about music. She was writing much more impressionistically than we were taught to write about music. Maybe it was the era, maybe it was just her uniqueness. It's possible that her respect and legacy may be more in theater and dance than in music, because she didn't come at it as a trained musician." Linda Winer, telephone interview with the author, Feb. 24, 2018.

University of Illinois, but he does not offer any further details. One illuminating artifact in Cassidy's papers seems to imply that she, at least, could read and take notation: a small spiral-bound songbook of lieder by Gounod, Strauss, and others is transcribed in her handwriting (see fig. 2).[98] Outside of formal musical training, Cassidy had listened to classical records on her mother's phonograph and cultivated a knowledge of the classical repertoire from an early age.[99] A letter from a friend also documents that she owned a piano.[100] Though these clues suggest that Cassidy was not a serious musician, the accusation that she was altogether musically illiterate is likely exaggerated. Moreover, Asbell's emphasis on Cassidy's mistakes misrepresents the factual accuracy for which she was famous. For most of her life, Cassidy fielded calls from curious readers, whose questions ranged from the historical (corroborating the details of a past performance) to the linguistic (how to pronounce and spell composers' and performers' names). As Reiner's biographer recalls: "Professionals and public alike kept her phone ringing with queries of 'Who?' 'When?' or 'What?' for which she checked her voluminous files and answered with invariable courtesy in an uncommonly sweet voice."[101]

To her readers, Cassidy's expertise and insight went beyond fact-checking. Though her personal relationships with famous musicians undoubtedly presented a conflict of interest, her insights into their lives and temperaments gave Cassidy a unique insider status, which her peers at other papers lacked. This was especially critical during the Reiner years at the CSO, when she enjoyed privileged access to the orchestra. Cassidy often peppered her reviews with keen assessments of institutional stability or engaging anecdotes about

98. Songbook, n.d., box 40, folder 497, Cassidy Papers.

99. Hart, 153.

100. Louis C. Lamb to Cassidy, Nov. 9, 1965, box 1, folder 92, Cassidy Papers.

101. Hart, 153.

particular performers—all reflecting knowledge not accessible to the general public and compellingly diminishing the distance between audience and performer. Though her reviews may not have reflected musical authority, they exuded social and institutional authority.

Ultimately, this same insider status, paired with her opponents' suspicion that she was a fraud, colored one of the tenser moments in Cassidy's career. After Reiner's death in 1963, Cassidy's expectations for Reiner's successor were characteristically high, as they had been after Stock's death two decades before. Infamously, Cassidy's initial distaste for Georg Solti kept him from immediately succeeding Reiner in Chicago, deferring a monumental chapter in the CSO's history.[102] (She later warmed to the music director once he took over the CSO in 1969.)

To everyone's surprise, however, Jean Martinon, the silver-haired Frenchman who became the CSO's music director in 1963, won her over immediately. According to Richard Oldberg, a hornist in the orchestra, his uncle, Orchestral Association president Eric Oldberg, called Cassidy to ask her who she wanted to see as director of the CSO. She'd answered Jean Martinon.[103] She superlatively praised his first residency at the CSO the year before, writing in her column that "it has been a long time since a conductor has rivaled Jean Martinon's second and third weeks of concerts with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Orchestra hall"—the last time being, of course, Fritz Reiner's CSO debut.[104] Her effusive plaudits spilled over well into the 1963–64 season, comparing Martinon's "centrifugal intensity" to Herbert von Karajan's[105] and writing of Martinon's

102. For a concise summary of the bad blood between Solti and Cassidy, see Marsh and Pellegrini, 142.

103. Richard Oldberg, interview by Frank Monnelly, July 27, 1989, 26, Rosenthal Archive.

104. Claudia Cassidy, "Jean Martinon's Farewell Concert Lifts Esteem for Him to a New Level," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* Mar. 16, 1962, B13.

105. Claudia Cassidy, "Martinon's Brilliant Bartok against Memory's Indelible Backdrop," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 25, 1963, B13.

interpretation of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 that she looked forward "to the same symphony in the same hands five and 10 years from now."[106]

There were exceptions to her optimism. A week into Martinon's directorship, she bemoaned an "unfortunate program" comprised of the *Romeo and Juliet* suites by Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, and Berlioz: "It was a dull evening, not in the least like Mr. Martinon, and even less like the Chicago Symphony Orchestra." However, her final verdict was forgiving: "There is no doubt of [Martinon's] quality, or of the orchestra's in his hands. This program may have been a straw in the wind of inquiry."[107] She was similarly uninspired by a year-end program of Rossini, Sessions, and Brahms, which she characterized as "tentative, even dubious." Again expanding her purview to offstage happenings, Cassidy alluded darkly to trouble brewing backstage at Orchestra Hall: "Emotional upheaval that brings people together can result in a great surge of eloquence. Picayune squabbles aired with name calling can jar an institution to its foundations, and when that institution is an orchestra, the results can be disastrous."[108]

Indeed, not all was well at 220 South Michigan Avenue. In January 1960, Seymour Raven, assistant music critic alongside Cassidy at the *Tribune*, was hired by Eric Oldberg to serve as manager of the CSO; many believed the hire was a direct attempt to appease Cassidy.[109] Raven remained at the CSO after Reiner's death, becoming Martinon's main point of contact as the new maestro took over. However, tensions mounted between the two men. Martinon politely expressed frustration with Raven's unresponsiveness, while Raven longed for a vacation,

106. Claudia Cassidy, "Martinon Concerto of Stunning First Movement in Brilliant Performance with Szeryng," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 15, 1963, B13.

107. Claudia Cassidy, "Mercutio Scene Stealer in Some Odd Choices from 'Romeo and Juliet'," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 18, 1963, B15.

108. Claudia Cassidy, "Turmoil Routs Triumph as Martinon Ends First Part of His Season with the Orchestra," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1963, B15.

109. Hart, 222.

exhausted by months of negotiations with the musicians' union and an ailing wife.[110] Though the exact chronology remains unclear, what is certain is that Martinon and Raven reached a breaking point partway through Martinon's first season. Unable to work with one another, both allegedly submitted resignations to the Board of Trustees and the Orchestral Association in March 1964. Oldberg weighed both letters heavily; after consulting with CSO musicians, ultimately, he, the board, and association only accepted Raven's resignation.[111]

For the remainder of the season, Cassidy's criticism of Martinon swerved from predominantly positive to overwhelmingly negative. Just two weeks after publishing a glowing Martinon review, in which she christened him "one of the finest Stravinsky men around,"[112] Cassidy wrote her most damning review of Martinon yet, describing Martinon's interpretation of Mozart's *Symphonie Concertante* as "a series of disappointments stirring serious doubts about Mr. Martinon." In a radical departure from her previous reviews, which had been ambivalent at worst, Cassidy went on to say that "some nights we have the distinguished conductor who came here as a warmly welcomed guest. Some nights we have a changeling."[113]

Martinon's longtime secretary, Myrtha Perez, suspected that Cassidy's change in critical appraisal was not coincidental:

110. Martinon-Raven correspondence, Sept. 1962–May 1963, Rosenthal Archives.

111. This series of events has been reconstructed from Robert Pollak, "Story of Symphony Skirmish," *Hyde Park Herald*, May 27, 1964, 4; and interview transcripts in the Rosenthal Archives: Robert Marsh, *Sun-Times* music critic (1956–93), Feb. 16, 1985, Myrtha Perez, administrative assistant and personal secretary to Jean Martinon, interview by Jon Bentz, July 7, 1989, and Richard Oldberg, CSO hornist and nephew of Eric Oldberg, interview by Frank Monnelly, July 27, 1989.

112. Claudia Cassidy, "The Great Serkin on the Big Night that Martinon Took Over," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 13, 1964, B13.

113. Claudia Cassidy, "Two Good Soloists in Concert that Stirs Some Serious Doubts about the Conductor," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 27, 1964.

> One thing I began to observe was that every morning between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m. there was always a call for the Manager from Mrs. Cassidy. And the secretary would call out in a rather loud voice—she would say "Mr. Raven—Mrs. Cassidy is on the phone for you!"… and he would be on the phone for about an hour or more.… And mind you, this happened every morning. Now at that time I did not know [w]hat that meant. But after the second or third month I noticed that Martinon was always having problems with Mrs. Cassidy in the paper and this coincided with the problems he was beginning to have with the manager.… Then we started to put two and two together because it was so obvious. Of course, neither Martinon nor I could ever talk to anyone about it.… I think it is time to open up and say something[:] that this was a real connection … and it was a very destructive connection.[114]

The simmering conflict between Martinon and Raven, and Cassidy's possible entanglement in it, was not widespread knowledge until May 27, 1964, when Robert Pollak, the music critic of the *Hyde Park Herald*, laid out the case that Cassidy, seeking to avenge her friend, had launched a smear campaign against Martinon:

> It at least appears that her aesthetic judgments changed sharply when her managerial preference is threatened. This phenomenon leaves something to be desired as it relates to the lofty realms of criticism, but then us girls is human.… That any civic institution should have been tempted to knuckle down to a lady journalist with an urge to play musical politics makes a sad page in our local history.[115]

114. Myrtha Perez, interview with Jon Bentz, July 7, 1989, Rosenthal Archives. Emphasis in original transcript.

115. Pollak, "Story of Symphony Skirmish," *Hyde Park Herald*.

Newsweek—Jeff Lowenthal

Cassidy: A woman's prerogative

Figure 3:
Jeff Lowenthal, "Cassidy: A woman's prerogative," *Newsweek,* Apr. 26, 1965.

The following season, a concertgoer, Richard F. Kinninger typed up a pamphlet ("Does Chicago Have a Jekyll–Hyde Critic?") of Cassidy's press clippings over the 1963–64 season, highlighting the change in tone that coincided with Raven's resignation.[116] On at least three occasions, Kinninger passed out copies outside Orchestra Hall before concerts.[117] He mailed Cassidy the pamphlet and forwarded a carbon copy of the letter with the pamphlet to Silas Edman, Raven's replacement at the CSO:

> After reading your column "On the Aisle" for over twenty years, respecting but disagreeing with many of your comments, it was only after serious consideration I felt compelled to put together the

116. According to an obituary, Kinninger was "a great lover of opera" and retired from Morton Salt in Chicago. "Kinninger, Richard F.," Fostoria.org, accessed Oct. 20, 2019, www.fostoria.org/index.php/component/content/article?id=18756#14.

117. "Queen of Chicago," *Newsweek,* Apr. 26, 1965, 84–85.

> attached brochure. I will continue to read your column but I no longer respect the comments in regard to Mr. Martinon, the Chicago Symphony or the Management at Orchestra Hall. It also leaves serious doubts in my mind as to the fairness of your comments on other items.[118]

As a consequence of Kinninger's sleuthing, the affair exploded. Carter Davidson, the host of WBBM-TV's *Views the Press*, mentioned the debacle on a live broadcast:

> In terms of the theatre it is a sordid drama which might be entitled, "Everybody's Out of Step But Claudia." The plot is the picayunish effort by the *Tribune*'s lifetime critic Claudia Cassidy to unseat Monsieur Jean Martinon as director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Monsieur Martinon is well received by symphony-goers and is widely renowned as a conductor. The three other music critics on Chicago daily papers, all of them, unlike Miss Cassidy, well back grounded in symphonic music, generally applaud the conductor in print. Miss Cassidy did so too when Monsieur Martinon first took up the baton five years ago. She even persuaded the symphony trustees to install one of her *Tribune* assistants, Seymour Raven, as orchestra manager. When Raven lost a power struggle with Monsieur Martinon and lost his job to boot, Miss Cassidy lost her taste for Martinon's music. Her critiques of Chicago Symphony Orchestra concerts are now vicious hatchet jobs on Monsieur Martinon. It has been going on for weeks, but last week it reached a new low, when the critic scolded the audience in print for applauding the conductor.[119]

118. Kinninger to Cassidy, Apr. 8, 1965, Rosenthal Archives.

119. Carter Davidson, *Views the Press*, WBBM-TV, transcript, Apr. 4, 1965, box 40, folder 493, Cassidy Papers.

Newsweek brought the feud to a national audience later that month, describing Cassidy's writing, which *Time* magazine had called "purple prose" a decade before, as "napalm prose." The scathing column was accompanied by an unflattering photo of Cassidy (see fig. 3).[120]

Later that month, Eric Oldberg—by then no longer president of the Orchestral Association—responded to the "scurrilous" *Newsweek* column. He defended his hiring of Raven, writing he had "known and respected [his] ability, integrity, and character for many years," and claimed that when he presented Raven as a candidate for general manager of the CSO, he was "unanimously approved" by the Board of Trustees. As for Cassidy, Oldberg writes: "The only feeling I had with respect to Miss Cassidy was one of mild trepidation over her possible private reaction to the loss of a trusted colleague and associate. It did not occur to me then, and it does not now, that that would in any way color her critical opinions." He concludes his column welcoming any internal investigation of the orchestra.[121]

Cassidy's most direct commentary on this issue came years later, in response to a 1983 *New Yorker* article that mentioned her feud with Martinon.[122] In a surviving letter draft to *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, she stuck to her story that "no one was more pleased" than she when Martinon was initially given the post, but that things "went from bad to worse." She points out that, after becoming the *Tribune*'s critic at large in 1965, she did not review Martinon for the duration of his five-year contract, which ended in 1968. "I write only because what were not facts were presented as facts. I do not want a thing done about it."[123]

120. "Queen of Chicago," *Newsweek*.

121. Eric Oldberg, "Manager and Critic," *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 23, 1965, 20.

122. She appears to be responding to the first of a two-part series on André Previn by Helen Drees Ruttencutter, "A Way of Making Things Happen," *New Yorker*, Jan. 10, 1983, 36–79.

123. Cassidy to William Shawn, c. 1984, box 2, folder 281, Cassidy Papers. Riddled with typos, which is unusual for Cassidy, the letter is almost certainly a draft.

Though Cassidy's verdicts seem to be those of an overzealous and biased critic, her insistence that Martinon was not the right leader for the CSO turned out to be prophetic. In his final years as music director, Martinon buckled under mutinying musicians—most famously principal oboist Ray Still, who publicly feuded with the maestro—and a deeply divided ensemble. Musicians began to resent his insistence on absolute control; hornist Richard Oldberg even echoed Cassidy's specific criticisms that Martinon "conducted very stiffly … as if [the CSO] were a second-rate orchestra" and was "out of his depth."[124] Still also adopts Cassidy-esque language in his 1972 letter when he brands Martinon's tenure the "era of mediocrity."[125] Martinon's directorship would be remembered for years thereafter as a particularly tumultuous one for the orchestra, though it resulted in adventurous programming and a number of high-quality recordings.

The *Sun-Times* critic Robert Marsh would also take issue with Martinon as his tenure reached its end. Nonetheless, years later, he agreed that Cassidy had picked the wrong hill to die on and risked her professionalism in the process:

> Miss Cassidy here overplayed her hand. She was working at the *Tribune* with a so-called lifetime contract given to her by Col. McCormick. There's always some doubt as to whose lifetime was involved here. As it turns out it was the Colonel's. The practical effect was Miss Cassidy retired as music critic of the *Tribune*. The

124. Richard Oldberg, interview by Frank Monnelly, July 27, 1989, 4, Rosenthal Archive: "There was no fluidity in his beat.… And as a result things were not very exciting because you had to rein in your individual attempts at playing in a soloistic or warm or emotional ways.… I really think he was out of his depth.… He conducted the orchestra as if it were a 'second rate orchestra' and a lot of times it sounded like it as a result."

125. Ray Still to Cassidy, Oct. 23, 1972, box 2, folder 177, Cassidy Papers.

> new *Tribune* management didn't like the idea of the newspaper being this deeply involved in the operation of a cultural institution.[126]

However, Cassidy did not retire from the *Tribune*. Though she passed the title of chief music and ballet critic to Thomas Willis in 1965, the same year that the "Jekyll–Hyde Critic" furor reached its boiling point, Cassidy continued to write for the *Tribune* weekly as critic at large through 1968, and occasionally for about a decade thereafter. However, she seldom covered the CSO during that period. Where McCormick might have delighted in the degree of influence Cassidy—and by extension the *Tribune*—exerted on Chicago's cultural sphere, the new guard seemed to chose professionalism over power.[127]

To her detractors, this episode confirmed that when it came to Martinon, as with Désiré Defauw and Rafael Kubelík, Cassidy had been more swayed by personal bias than a trained ear. WFMT associate program director Lois Baum noted that Cassidy tended to cling to first impressions of performers, even if they had improved over their career. There are exceptions to this rule, though it was conspicuous in some cases, such as her persistent dislike of mezzo-soprano Janet Baker.[128] Ultimately, this tendency is just as, if not *more* revealing of another enthralling but fatal flaw of her prose: her general unwillingness to strike a convincing middle ground. Cassidy called the two Martinon-CSO concerts in Carnegie Hall "less than

126. Robert Marsh, interview, Feb. 16, 1985, Rosenthal Archives.

127. Cassidy to Lois Baum, n.d., box 2, folder 218, Cassidy Papers. The Martinon affair apparently became ingrained in the *Tribune*'s institutional memory. Years later, Cassidy was disheartened when a letter inviting her to write for the *Tribune* magazine directed her to avoid "polemics, invective, or self-promotion," which she describes to Baum in this letter.

128. Lois Baum to WFMT program host Don Tait, email, Oct. 2013. Shared with the author with permission.

laudatory."[129] In contrast, Harold Schonberg and Raymond Ericson, writing for the *New York Times*, are decidedly ambivalent, but not searing: Schonberg bemoaned a point in the concert at which the orchestra "got a little out of control";[130] and Ericson lamented an "aggressiveness that was not very winning" and general lack of interpretative cohesion.[131] Aside from these measured moments of negative critique, both reviews are otherwise positive. While Cassidy's theater writing could be more temperate, Martinon's case demonstrates the degree to which she resorted to extremes and absolutes in her music journalism. Even her more tempered early reviews of Martinon held the conductor to a superlative standard, disappointed as she was by anything less than "definitive … [like] the great nights of Bruno Walter"[132] or which, to her, stopped short of the Chicago Symphony's "remembered brilliance."[133] Thanks to her evocative prose, which, for her readers, recreated the sensory experience of listening to music, Cassidy emerged from the Martinon debacle with her readership and stature relatively unscathed, if not her reputation.

Cassidy's slow retreat from the *Tribune*'s pages ushered in a new chapter of her career. In 1968, WFMT program director Norm Pellegrini invited Cassidy to be one of the hosts of *Critic's Choice*, a half-hour program of arts criticism on the station. She joined Harry Bouras (plastic arts), Herman Kogan (literature), and Bill Russo (jazz), covering Chicago's

129. Claudia Cassidy, "Catching Up on the New Orchestra and Opera Seasons, with Some Reminiscent Notes on What It Was Like to Come Back 10 Years Ago," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1964, G9.

130. Harold Schonberg, "Music: Led by Martinon," *New York Times*, Apr. 17, 1964.

131. Raymond Ericson, "Martinon Offers Daring Program," *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1964.

132. Claudia Cassidy, "Requiem with Orchestra, Chorus One of Martinon's Better Concerts," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 19, 1965, B13.

133. Claudia Cassidy, "Music Sacred and Profane Looks Up a Bit in Orchestra Hall," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1964, A1.

classical arts scene. Knowing her potential reach, Pellegrini was eager to seal Cassidy's contract; he told her that bringing her on as a host was "one of the best [things] in a long time" he'd done for the station.[134] To sweeten the deal, Cassidy was given the best time slot of the four *Critic's Choice* hosts: 12:30 p.m. on Sundays.[135]

Pellegrini's instincts were correct: Cassidy's program was one of the station's most successful, at least judging by the amount of fan mail she received. Again, what attracted listeners was not only what Cassidy said but how she said it: Lois Baum, who worked with Cassidy to produce her program, recalled that she would receive so many listener requests for carbon copies of Cassidy's on-air scripts that it was impossible to honor them all.[136] The scripts were characteristically meticulous; well trained by more than forty years of meeting newspaper deadlines, Cassidy was always on time or early with her material, which amounted to about seventeen to twenty pages of typed script a week. She would fine-tune her reviews until the moment Baum started recording, to ensure that "what she said was what she felt and meant."[137] Despite her reputation as an explosive wordsmith at the *Tribune*, as an on-air critic, Cassidy self-censored her reviews; Baum recalled that her off-mike commentary could be even more colorful than her broadcasts.[138]

Cassidy continued reviewing on WFMT for nearly fifteen years, but in early 1983, something changed. Pellegrini was often present to hear Cassidy's snarky asides about CSO and Lyric management before her tapings, giving him the impression that her on-air assessments were similarly withering. Pellegrini feared that Cassidy's reviews might threaten the

134. Norman Pellegrini to Cassidy, July 11, 1968, box 2, folder 137, Cassidy Papers.

135. Lois Baum, telephone interview with author, Mar. 25, 2018.

136. Ibid.

137. Ibid.

138. Ibid. "Behind the scenes, she used to sometimes speak her mind more clearly than she did in her reviews, especially if she didn't like something."

station's relationship with the CSO and Lyric, which were the station's biggest sponsors and offered exclusive rights to live broadcasts. He asked Baum to listen to all of Cassidy's programs to find objectionable coverage of the CSO and Lyric Opera, but Baum did not find any of the "vindictive" sentiments that Pellegrini claimed Cassidy's reviews contained.

One Sunday, Baum was listening to *Critic's Choice* when she noticed that material was missing from what she'd previously recorded with Cassidy. She confronted Pellegrini, who confessed to editing Cassidy's programs between recording and broadcast. He'd cut anything which he believed "didn't belong there"—in other words, any mention of CSO or Lyric Opera performances. Baum objected, as the station had not received Cassidy's consent to edit her programs. Pellegrini "dropped" the subject for a month or two, until one night, while leaving the station, he allegedly said to Baum, "Lois, the time has come to demise Claudia Cassidy."[139]

Pellegrini raised the question of Cassidy's future employment at WFMT in a subsequent staff meeting, with most vehemently opposing her dismissal. According to Baum, among Cassidy's supporters was Ray Nordstrand, the station's chief executive and steward of the station's financial health. Like Baum, Nordstrand found no evidence of strained relations between the station and management at both the CSO and Lyric Opera. Despite opposition on all sides, Pellegrini refused to back down.[140] He confronted Cassidy before she taped what would become her last *Critic's Choice* for WFMT, demanding that she refrain from reviewing all CSO and Lyric performances on her program. Cassidy refused, objecting that it was impossible to ignore the two largest cultural institutions in Chicago. When Pellegrini refused to budge, she recorded her final episode and quit.[141]

139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.

141. Lois Baum to Don Tait, WFMT program host, email, Oct. 2013, shared with the author with permission.

When her departure was announced shortly before her final *Critic's Choice* aired on March 27, 1983, listener outcry was enormous. While the average host received about ten to fifty calls and letters per week, the station received over three hundred letters from listeners and dozens of calls, the vast majority of which opposed her dismissal. Baum could only recall one other incident which inspired a greater listener reaction: WFMT's temporary loss of broadcast rights to the Salzburg and Bayreuth Festivals.[142] The fan mail expressed admiration for the way she conveyed her opinions, despite not always agreeing with the opinions themselves.[143]

Shortly after quitting her position at WFMT, Cassidy wrote CSO general manager John S. Edwards relaying her side of the story—how she'd left because she "do[es] not care for censorship," how she had not noticed Pellegrini cutting her programs because she "never listen[ed] to herself," and letting Edwards know that some material relating to the CSO may have been excised from her program without her consent.[144] Edwards's response is remarkable:

> Ever since I heard the first rumors of your leaving WFMT, which I find hard to believe, I have been wanting to do something to help clear up that unhappy situation. I am fundamentally opposed to censorship as you are. I listen almost every Sunday at 12:30 with the greatest enjoyment.
>
> I would be very grateful if you would send me copies of your original scripts, which you have so kindly offered to do. They sound terrific and I am sure they read every bit as well. Your voice will certainly continue to be heard in our land, as Kup [*Sun-Times* columnist Irv Kupcinet] so deftly suggested today.

142. Ibid. She estimates the pro-Cassidy to contra-Cassidy letters at about five to one.

143. Ibid.

144. Cassidy to John S. Edwards, Mar. 13, 1983, Rosenthal Archives.

> I can only tell you that our exchange of notes has been one of the great pleasures of my management here.[145]

It is possible that Edwards was simply being magnanimous or perhaps sweetening the letter as a hedge against the uncertain dimensions of her continuing local influence. At face value, however, this correspondence confirms Baum's reading of the Pellegrini-Cassidy feud—namely, that there was no reasonable threat of retributive action from the CSO regarding Cassidy's reviews and that Pellegrini's insinuations of financial peril and loss of sponsorship were excuses to sideline Cassidy. Regardless of where the middle ground can be found, Edwards's sentiments speak anew to the power of Cassidy's prose: as it had with Désiré Defauw's son, her writing sometimes won her even the most unlikely of admirers. The watcher of institutions, it seemed, had become an institution herself.

There remains an unexplored factor that may explain why Cassidy was so widely read and embraced, despite her divisive opinions. The high standards that made Cassidy a subject of controversy at the *Tribune* and WFMT were not fueled by simple perfectionism but civic pride—a pride she was unafraid to flaunt in her columns and which gained the sympathy of her readers. This brings us to the third factor in Cassidy's influence: her self-identification, above all, as a Chicagoan.

Second City, Not Second Rate

> What makes Chicago unique, at least to me, is its combination of big city and small town with wide open spaces—especially before high rises jagged the horizon—walking with the lake stretching illimitably on one side, the city roaring on the other. Where else

145. Edwards to Cassidy, Mar. 1983, Rosenthal Archives.

> would a rescuing traffic policeman send a critic a Christmas card of himself as Saint Christopher?
>
> —Claudia Cassidy[146]

Cassidy was a lifelong Illinoisan. Born in Shawneetown, on the banks of the Ohio River, she moved to Chicago after graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1921. Though she spoke sentimentally of both downstate locales, Chicago was the city that became her lifelong muse. She lived here until her death in 1996, primarily on the Near North Side and then in the Drake Hotel after her husband's death in 1986.[147] In On the Aisle, Cassidy often used "Chicago" as a collective pronoun to describe the city's artistic opinions and desires. Obviously, the gesture was rhetorical—a royal "we" of sorts—being that even her most devoted readers frequently disagreed with her.[148]

Generally unacknowledged is Cassidy's practice of airing readers' opinions and experiences verbatim. Gerald Sullivan notes in his dissertation on Cassidy's theater criticism that Cassidy "often" printed dissenting letters in her column, and Cassidy certainly did publish many reader letters in her twenty-three years at the *Tribune*.[149] Contrary to Asbell's *Chicago* magazine profile, which pilloried Cassidy as a cultural dictator, Cassidy's responses to reader mail convey delight at the plurality of public

146. "Panorama," *Chicago Daily News* (typescript), Dec. 1972, box 22, folder 379, Cassidy Papers

147. Richard Christiansen, "Former Tribune Critic Claudia Cassidy," *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1996.

148. Cassidy quipped that she could only "speak for herself, not for Chicago," and she "could more wisely become a producer, and get rich," if she could read the minds of Chicagoans. Claudia Cassidy, "When You Solicit Private Subsidy for the Arts It Takes a Little More Evidence than Just that You Need the Cash," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 4, 1962, D9.

149. Sullivan, 6.

opinion: "People often disagree about reviews—heaven help us all the day they don't."[150] In a 1960 column, Cassidy juxtaposed two letters that exemplified this diversity: "As for the boos at *Fedora*, which were in truth no less justified than, say, cheers at [Lyric's] *Die Walkuere*, I have two amusing contributions in the never dull mailbox. One angry 'patron' of the Lyric says those boos, if any, could have been mine, and only mine. The other letter starts, 'It was I, dear critic, who booed Wednesday evening as the curtain fell on *Fedora*…'"[151]

On the Aisle even facilitated dialogue between readers. In a pair of columns in 1961, Cassidy quoted a letter from a disgruntled Ravinia patron who griped that "rude" Ravinia ushers take up precious sitting room in front of the standing area.[152] Thanks to Cassidy's column, a Ravinia usher was able to explain patiently that said seats are actually reserved for ushers and are, in fact, often stolen by entitled patrons.[153]

As she had for her "magic carpet" letter, Cassidy often based entire columns on her favorite letters. A particularly affecting 1961 column sprouted from a trilogy of letters she'd received from a preteen "on the far south side" named Robert:

> He had been to the opera and the opera had claimed him for its own.… He got there, heard *Don Carlo*, and was not entirely happy with my review. He felt that it should have been more glowingly

150. Claudia Cassidy, "Smile When You Write That, or Don't Be Too Sure Laissez Faire Is a Virtue in Any World, Especially that of the Arts," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 13, 1963, G9.

151. Claudia Cassidy, "Boos, Bows, Cheers, and Walkouts All Liven the Stage and the Mailbox," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 30, 1960, B3.

152. Claudia Cassidy, "On the Aisle: Ballet Dream Boat from Balanchine to Volkova to Fred Astaire, and the Rude Awakening to Some Omnipresent Ballet Facts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1961, D7.

153. Claudia Cassidy, "'Verklaerte Nacht' in Original Form High Point of Chamber Concert," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1961, C5.

> written in more refulgent prose, and he gave me pointers by way of illustration.… All these things kept Robert popping into my mind now and then, along with his hope that his mother would let him go back to the opera. I hope she did. But what made the letter so hard to answer was this: completely enamored of opera and the opera house, Robert wrote, "Altho I am a Negro, I hope to sing there."[154]

Having not yet responded to Robert's letter personally because she is "not the best of correspondents," Cassidy instead devoted her column to pioneering African American opera stars. (Cassidy especially singles out mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry, whom she had heard early in her career at a master class at Northwestern, for praise.) Cassidy's aim was to show Robert that "the invisible barrier against Negroes in opera ha[d] diminished," though she did not indulge in the fiction that the playing field was level. After naming numerous singers and their most memorable performances, Cassidy, as though catching herself, wrote: "All this is to the point, but it is not quite the point. To indicate success is not to show the ladder." Cassidy ended her column with a memory of Dr. J. Wesley Jones, music director of the Metropolitan Community Church Choir in Chicago, who had once thanked her for her service to African American performers in Chicago. When a puzzled Cassidy asked him what he meant, Jones apparently responded: "You have expected us to be as good as anyone else." "So that's the way it is, Robert, and good luck," Cassidy wrote.[155]

Though she wrote and worked during the apex of the civil-rights movement, it would be disingenuous to present Cassidy as an ally to the movement, or even as particularly politically engaged. This column marked one of the few in which she addressed racial inequities in the arts.

154. Claudia Cassidy, "A Long Delayed Letter to Robert, which Was Waiting for a Chance to Be Not So Much Hopeful as Helpful," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1961, S9.

155. Ibid.

As evidenced from the above excerpts, Cassidy seems to have limited her commentary to the performing arts and her own subjective and qualitative point of view, with little thoughtful criticism of institutional barriers facing black musicians. Additionally, she was known to produce blatantly caricatured descriptions of artists of color, as reviews of Marian Anderson[156] and even excerpts from her column to Robert demonstrate. Nonetheless, as Chris Jones has noted vis-à-vis Cassidy's early endorsement of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Cassidy's public support of black artists in the late fifties and early sixties could be considered remarkable, given that they ran in the conservative *Tribune*.[157] For example, her predecessor at the *Tribune*, Cecil Smith, all but refused to review a 1937 open-air performance of William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* ("an unimportant piece of music") by describing the view of a twilit Grant Park instead of the piece playing in front of him.[158]

Rarely, but occasionally, Cassidy's column would function literally as a forum for reader opinion by presenting a full reader letter in lieu of On the Aisle, though its reproduction was not always synonymous with endorsement.[159] The only opinions she would *not* tolerate, it seemed, were

156. Claudia Cassidy, "Miss Anderson Back, Her Voice a Lovely Ghost," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 22, 1950. The review was a rather sympathetic one of an artist past her prime, but described Anderson's voice as "a gray and elusive shadow of the dark torrent that once poured in such black majesty from that somehow primitive throat."

157. Chris Jones, "'Acidy Cassidy,' that Woman from Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 11, 2013. The article was excerpted from Jones's *Bigger, Brighter, Louder*.

158. Cecil Smith, "Park Twilight Ideal Set for Negro Piece," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug. 14, 1937, 7. Credit goes to Phillip Huscher, CSO scholar-in-residence and program annotator, for this find.

159. See, Claudio Cassidy, "Chicagoan with Chicago Theater on His Mind Comes Up with a Blast of Conviction, Roaring, Pointing and Calling Names," On the Aisle, *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 18, 1960, D7. The article quoted, in full, a letter by Alan Edelson, a show publicist and former journalist. Edelson shared Cassidy's uncompromising convictions that theater in Chicago was lacking in quality.

those that implored her to soften her criticism. She once ridiculed a letter from a reader that "said without a trace of irony that while our current crop of shows may not be much it is all we have, so why knock it?"[160]

Cassidy also used On the Aisle to answer readers' questions, a responsibility she took so seriously that she often apologized in print for her tardiness. If she had been inundated by a particular question or concern, she often would address it in a later column. One amusing example demonstrates Cassidy's well-known research and thoroughness:

> A flurry of letters has come in complaining about the lighted torches juggled by the Rudenko brothers in [the musical] "Carnival." Everything is fireproofed. The cast is trained to watch for trouble. The stage manager stands in the wings with chemical fire extinguisher in hand. Torches are extinguished the instant the men leave the stage by dousing them in a metal container designed and carried for that purpose. All cleared with the fire marshal. So relax.[161]

Readers and listeners consulted Cassidy's authority in all matters artistic because she had a reputation as a historian and archivist of Chicago's performing arts. Cassidy assumed this role gladly, thumbing through her "critic's scrapbook" to answer questions about bygone performances and corroborate facts. At one point, the Auditorium Theatre Council's historian contacted Cassidy for help with records *he* was missing: "In my job as historian here, I have access to all our own archives[,]… but I know that there is a lot of stuff I haven't tracked down, and some of it may not have ever existed—at least on paper. And that's where you come in."[162] Cassidy's departure from the *Tribune* in 1965 let her embrace this role more fully.

160. Cassidy, "On the Aisle: Smile When You Write That," *Chicago Daily Tribune.*

161. Claudia Cassidy, "Met's First 'Ariadne' Has Karl Boehm Conducting Opera Dedicated to Him by Richard Strauss," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 11, 1962, B11.

162. Bart Swindall to Cassidy, n.d., box 2, folder 185, Cassidy Papers.

In 1967, she delivered a sold-out lecture at the Chicago Drama League;[163] the following decade, she spoke about the history of Chicago theater and opera for the Chicago Public Library[164] and the Winnetka Lyric Guild, respectively.[165] Even in old age, when she could no longer reliably honor engagements, she remained in high demand as a speaker. She was invited to deliver a dance lecture at the Newberry in January 1989 as part of a series that included John Neumeier and Robert Joffrey.[166] A 1993 letter by the president of the Arts Club of Chicago speaks to her intergenerational appeal, citing a "sizeable number of members under forty" who wanted to meet the ninety-four-year-old critic.[167]

After "retirement," Cassidy contributed to the program books of the CSO and Lyric Opera, the two musical institutions she covered most as a critic, and wrote an illustrated history of Lyric Opera in 1979.[168] Notably, in February 1971, she trawled the CSO's archives and collated what she believed to be the orchestra's twelve most spectacular concerts, its "Dazzling Dozen,"[169] spanning from the first music director, Theodore Thomas, to the current director, Georg Solti. It is a testament to the longevity of Cassidy's career that all of the concerts, save for three (two under Thomas, one under Stock), were performances Cassidy had

163. Irene Powers, "Capacity Crowd to Hear Critic," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 9, 1967, C16.

164. Claudia Cassidy, typescript, July 22, 1976, box 22, folder 392, Cassidy Papers.

165. Claudia Cassidy, typescript, May 7, 1976, box 23a, folder 405ii, Cassidy Papers.

166. Charles T. Cullen (Newberry president and librarian) to Cassidy, Jan. 27, 1989, box 1, folder 26, Cassidy Papers.

167. Stanley M. Freehling to Cassidy, Nov. 29, 1993, box 2, folder 46, Cassidy Papers.

168. Claudia Cassidy, *Lyric Opera of Chicago*.

169. Eleanor Page, "An Affectionate, Nostalgic Look at Our Orchestra at the Age of 80," *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 8, 1971, B1.

attended. Interestingly, there are two Solti inclusions—she had warmed to the conductor by this point—and only one Reiner selection, perhaps owing to Cassidy's conviction that Reiner's performances were polished but the programs unimaginative.[170] Later the same year, Cassidy penned her most far-reaching work: a colloquial history of Chicago's performing arts, which she wrote for the Chicago Historical Society. In it, she melded oral history and personal recollection, referencing her CSO archival project and delivering testimony of long-forgotten performances to a new generation of Chicagoans.[171] Cassidy included one of her oft-repeated adages, first said by writer Hugo von Hoffsmanthal and passed along to her by the conductor Bruno Walter: "The roots must be more splendid than the foliage." She goes on to write eloquently of Chicago's artistic heritage, tipping her hat to America's greater journalistic and critical heritage while doing so:

> Call it a reassuring truth—rather than a reproach—that Chicago's roots are more splendid than its foliage. Call it a sobering but not daunting challenge that the cost of cultivation has reached astronomical figures.
>
> Is it worth the cost? Only, I think, if we demand the best, which once upon a time we had. I always remember what [journalist] Henry Mencken said of [arts critic James] Huneker, who made reading a critic of the arts a pleasure. Mencken said, "Because of him, art is no longer, even by implication, a device for improving the mind. It is wholly a magnificent adventure."

170. Notes and correspondence regarding the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's program books, Feb. 3, 1971, box 22, folder 389, Cassidy Papers.

171. Claudia Cassidy, Chicago Historical Society (typescript), Dec. 1971, box 22, folder 381, Cassidy Papers. It's unclear whether Cassidy dictated the piece in a public lecture or submitted it for print to the society. The exact fate of a 1987 submission to the society about the Auditorium Theatre, also existing in typescript at the Newberry, is similarly unknown.

When that idea strikes root, who knows what adventurous foliage?[172]

Cassidy's knowledge of Chicago's artistic roots was unparalleled, and she was, some would say to a fault, invested in its future foliage. She had moved to Chicago during the halcyon days of Mary Garden's opera companies and admired their "dazzling" standard for years thereafter.[173] Cassidy wasn't above using her influence to play impresario during the scrappy, pre-Lyric chapter in the history of Chicago opera. When Ottavio Scotto's lauded United States Opera Company found itself broke and stranded in Chicago in February 1947, she helped arrange a concert engagement for the singers that supported their travel back to Europe.[174] Later, she was one of Lyric Opera's most vocal cheerleaders. As Robert Marsh and Norman Pellegrini recalled: "No one in town wanted resident opera back more than [Cassidy] did."[175] She felt particularly indebted to Lyric cofounder Carol Fox for her role in bringing permanent opera back to Chicago, supporting Fox as general director even when it was obvious she was no longer suited to run the company.[176] In the late 1950s, Cassidy even tried to facilitate a co-venture between Lyric and the CSO, but was ultimately obstructed by prohibitive costs on the side of the still-fledgling Lyric, Maria Callas's departure from the company, and Fritz Reiner's reluctance to collaborate.[177]

172. Claudia Cassidy, Chicago Historical Society (typescript), Dec. 1971, box 22, folder 381, Cassidy Papers.

173. Claudia Cassidy, "When Are Deficits a Good Investment? Possibly When They Make a City a Gayer and More Rewarding Place to Live," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 9, 1962, F7.

174. Marsh and Pellegrini, 121.

175. Ibid., 130.

176. Lois Baum to WFMT program host Don Tait, email, October 2013. Shared with the author with permission.

177. Hart, 165.

To Cassidy, Chicago's arts institutions were meant to represent the city—a philosophy which ultimately led to her most public break with Fritz Reiner. Since 1955, Reiner had wanted the CSO to tour Europe. He imagined a hypothetical six-week tour in late summer to early fall, with an itinerary encompassing major European capitals;[178] most of these would be "behind the Iron Curtain."[179] A stint in the Soviet Union qualified the tour as a diplomatic mission of the President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations, which was facilitated by the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) and underwritten by the US State Department. Though not the only genre of music included in ANTA programming abroad, classical music occupied a privileged place because of its perceived "universality" compared to show tunes and folk music.[180] This emphasis was reflected by the aesthetic slant of its Music Advisory Panel, which included critic-composer Virgil Thomson, critic Alfred Frankenstein, and composers Howard Hanson and William Schuman, who were also, respectively, the directors of the Eastman and Juilliard Schools of Music.[181] Numerous other highly qualified American orchestras were considered for the tour, planned for 1959, including Eugene Ormandy's Philadelphia Orchestra, Charles Munch's Boston Orchestra, and Leonard Bernstein's New York Philharmonic; if selected, the tour would have been a reputational and political coup for the CSO.

On May 29, 1958, CSOA president Eric Oldberg announced the tour formally.[182] Reiner's wife, Carlotta, had already told Cassidy, in confidence,

178. Ross Parmenter, "European Tour: Chicago Symphony's Loss Is N.Y. Philharmonic's Gain," *New York Times*, Mar. 15, 1959, X9.

179. Hart, 205–7.

180. Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Classical Music and the Mediation of Prestige," in *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

181. Ibid.

182. Hart, 207.

that the tour was in its planning stages.[183] However, shortly after the announcement, the venture faltered. Robert F. Schnitzer, the ANTA official for tour logistics, informed Reiner that the tour would likely be eight weeks, not six, and that it might be impossible to tour all the promised cities in Western Europe. Unbeknownst to Reiner, the actual duration being considered by Schnitzer and CSO manager George Kuyper was closer to eleven or twelve weeks. Reiner objected, stating in a November telegraph draft that he refused to conduct more than eight weeks of concerts, citing his and the orchestra's stamina, their remaining commitment in Chicago, and the tour's Cold War "propaganda" content, among other grievances.[184]

In February 1959, Reiner announced the tour's cancellation to the orchestra. CSO musicians, who would each lose a projected $2,000 in wages as a result of the cancellation, were livid.[185] Allegedly, they hissed at his announcement and staged backstage protests, one of which included hanging an effigy of the conductor.[186] Officially, the tour was "deferred," but it was obvious that the CSO had, in fact, missed its chance. Leonard Bernstein announced two days later to a cheering New York Philharmonic that they had laid claim to the tour itinerary initially intended for the CSO.[187] The philharmonic set off on what was ultimately a nine-week tour that August.[188] As Cassidy would sum up in her column years

183. Ibid., 206.

184. Ibid., 208.

185. Ibid., 212.

186. Ibid., 211. Reiner denied that musicians ever hissed after the announcement (see Ross Parmenter, "New $6,000,000 Theatre in Vancouver to House Festival Events This Year," *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1959, X11), and CSO management subsequently contested the existence of the effigy.

187. ANTA may have favored the Philharmonic all along because Bernstein was American born and trained. See, Fosler-Lussier.

188. Parmenter, "Chicago Symphony's Loss," *New York Times*.

later, the cancellation "opened a Pandora's box of orchestral and other resentment" against Reiner.[189] Reiner's biographer claims the cancellation accelerated the already precipitous deterioration of labor relations between CSO musicians and management.[190]

Cassidy was nearly as upset by the loss as the orchestra musicians were. *Sun-Times* critic Robert Marsh remarked years later: "Claudia had a civic booster spirit that was irrepressible and to her cancelling that tour was an act of betrayal."[191] The tour cancellation emboldened Cassidy to unstop her festering grievances with Reiner. In subsequent issues of the *Tribune*, Cassidy leveled that he had never become "deeply a part of the Chicago scene," treating the CSO as a vehicle for fine performances but neglecting a music director's civic duties outside of subscription concerts. She pointed to Reiner's indifferent to CSO traditions like the children's concerts, Saturday night "popular" concerts, and the Civic Orchestra. Additionally, Cassidy claimed, he took only a marginal interest in other Chicago institutions; Cassidy remained frustrated by Reiner's earlier refusal to join forces with Lyric Opera, despite "being an opera man at heart." Moreover, she argued, he did not even live in Chicago, spending most of the year in Westport, Connecticut.[192] Of course, the trade-off was that Chicago heard performances of a caliber unheard since the Stock days (by Cassidy's reckoning). However, the disintegration of the 1959 tour opened Cassidy's eyes to the shortcomings of Reiner's artistic single-mindedness: if he had also possessed civic pride, Cassidy implied, the

189. Claudia Cassidy, "Luck Seems to Be on Both Sides as Jean Martinon Chooses and Is Chosen to Be the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's 7th Conductor," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 13, 1962, G9.

190. Hart, 212.

191. Robert Marsh, interview, Feb. 16, 1985, Rosenthal Archives.

192. Claudia Cassidy, "Superior Orchestra, Renowned Conductor, but after 7 Reiner Seasons All Is Not Rosy in Orchestra Hall," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 15, 1960, E11. Of course, the traveling-maestro model is de rigueur today, but it was not when Cassidy wrote this column.

tour would have never fallen through, because Reiner would have understood how much was at stake.[193]

Another grievance of Cassidy's was that Reiner was turning the orchestra into "a private orchestra for RCA Victor recordings," implying that the record company had undue control over the CSO's artistic direction. According to Cassidy, the RCA arrangement eroded the quality and creativity of CSO concerts because it compelled Reiner and the orchestra to treat performances like rehearsals of recording sessions.[194] "When the recording tail wags the concert dog, the cart is far worse than before the horse—it just isn't going anywhere, except possibly downhill," Cassidy wrote in a review published around the time tour negotiations broke down.[195] Reprising the subject in a later column, she asserted that "an orchestra's primary obligation is to its audience"—a statement also tinged with civic pride.[196] Despite her disappointment that Reiner's affection for the city did not match her own, for his obituary Cassidy wrote that he "left Chicago the great gift of making it a better place in which to live" and that the maestro's greatest legacy was, in her eyes, a hyper-local one.[197]

For Cassidy, the tour cancellation also revived another sore subject: Chicago's perceived artistic subordination to New York City. "The New York Philharmonic with Leonard Bernstein [is] due to take off next August on a wonderful tour while our orchestra sits home and mumbles, or maybe screams," Cassidy wrote that March, as though gritting her teeth.[198] Chicago already had a reputation as a "try-out town" for the

193. Ibid.

194. Claudia Cassidy, "Two Faces of Publicity on Reiner Resident and Greco Transient," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar. 8, 1959, G7.

195. Claudia Cassidy, "Winded Warhorse for Stereo at Afternoon Concert," On the Aisle, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1959, B1.

196. Cassidy, "Superior Orchestra, Renowned Conductor," *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

197. Cassidy, "Farewell to Reiner," *Chicago Tribune*.

198. Cassidy, "Two Faces of Publicity on Reiner," *Chicago Daily Tribune.*

performing arts before touring companies and artists went to New York. Cassidy believed that Chicago was too often treated as a mere rehearsal for New York, and, when Chicago tour stops came after New York, she sensed that performances were anticlimactic. These complaints were more prominent in her opera and theater criticism than her concert music criticism, especially in the pre-Lyric era of omnipresent touring companies. Cassidy's only two contributions to the *New York Times* were direct appeals to New York theater producers: "The funeral bak'd meats of the New York theatre feast do coldly furnish forth our first-night tables, and until New York is satiated, Chicago starves.… If Chicago is to be more than a good town for a popular show it's up to the theatre, not Chicago,"[199] and Chicago's "show-going public, or what remains of it, is suspiciously tilted back on its heels, from sad experience expecting the worst. Shows meticulously produced for Broadway are farmed out for touring to less resourceful showmen, who cut cast and production but not prices, and who shriek with outrage at less than ecstatic reception."[200]

Full as she was of her "irrepressible civic booster spirit," Cassidy bristled when the New York press condescended to Chicago's home institutions. It was even more humiliating when their criticisms were founded, as she believed they had been years later when Martinon took the CSO to Carnegie Hall.[201] In March 1959, she wrote witheringly of the New York coverage of the CSO's cancelled European 1959: "When it came to making an announcement, it was told in Chicago that with

199. Claudia Cassidy, "Lament from Chicago: A Critic Reports on the Lean Drama Fare of a 'Second-Season' Show Town," *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 1948, X1.

200. Claudia Cassidy, "Chicago's Plaint: New York Productions Arrive Late and Frequently with Too Little," *New York Times*, Aug. 17, 1958, X1.

201. "Less than laudatory reviews of Mr. Martinon's pre-season tour concerts [were] what you might expect New York critics to write about Chicago's orchestra." Cassidy, "Catching Up on the New Orchestra and Opera Seasons," *Chicago Tribune*. See Schonberg, "Music: Led by Martinon," *New York Times*, and Ericson, "Martinon Offers Daring Program," *New York Times*.

our orchestra not going, New York's would step in. It was told in New York that the Philharmonic was getting the most delectable tour yet handed out by the state department. At least one New York newspaper said in a tag piece that the Chicago Symphony had canceled 'a tour.' It might as well have been going to Podunk."[202]

Cassidy could have defected to New York City. She had gained national fame for her reviews at the *Tribune*, as articles dedicated to her in national magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Variety* attest. After Cassidy wrote a heartfelt obituary for the operatic soprano Rosa Raisa in 1963, a friend and executive at Columbia Artists Management, Inc., commended her in a letter and then lamented: "I am more than disenchanted with the kind of press coverage certain events have gotten here [in New York City]. A kind of dry rot is already in evidence, and I can only paraphrase Wordsworth (I am sure it was Wordsworth) when I say, 'O! Cassidy, New York hath need of thee!'… You are very much admired here, and not only by myself; many of us wish avidly that you were in New York."[203]

Marsh alleged that Cassidy was tethered to Chicago thanks to a "lifetime contract" at the *Tribune*;[204] whether this is true or not, she could have become a regular contributor to other national publications once she wound down her time at the *Tribune*. It's unknown which New York publications formally made offers to Cassidy, but she received at least one tempting offer from Irving Kolodin after leaving the *Tribune*. Kolodin was a juggernaut music critic and historian in New York City, with bylines in the *New York Sun* and *Saturday Review*, as well as the New York Philharmonic's and Metropolitan Opera's program books. He was also Cassidy's friend. When he heard in 1966 that she was no longer writing for the *Tribune* full time, he urged her to contribute to the *Saturday Review*: "If you feel the urge, our latch string is always out.… Please make us your

202. Cassidy, "Two Faces of Publicity on Reiner," *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

203. Richard O'Harra to Cassidy, Oct. 23, 1963, box 2, folder 132, Cassidy Papers.

204. Robert Marsh, interview, Feb. 16, 1985, Rosenthal Archives.

first 'outside' contact. I leave the subject to you, and the length.… A page is about 1,000 words, and a good unit, but more is also welcome. Also, we pay a lot better than we used to. I'll be watching the mails…"[205] Though Cassidy's response to Kolodin is lost, she did submit one piece to the *Review* in 1972, but it does not appear to have been published.[206]

These outside flirtations notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of Cassidy's writing appeared in Chicago-based publications. In her post-*Tribune* years, Cassidy wrote most frequently for *Chicago* magazine—a different, albeit identically named publication from the one in which Asbell's "Claudia Cassidy: The Queen of Culture and Her Reign of Terror" had appeared in 1956. She also wrote book reviews and miscellaneous articles for the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Sun-Times* through the 1970s.[207] It speaks to Cassidy's dedication to the city of Chicago that she so frequently wrote not only about its arts but explicitly *for* its citizens, even after she stopped writing for the *Tribune* full time. Chicago was Cassidy's chosen home, and Chicagoans her chosen audience. Her fans felt and appreciated her devotion to the city; one letter published in the *Tribune* after her death lists her among the "Top 20" Chicagoans of the twentieth century, alongside denizens like Mayor Richard J. Daley, Colonel Robert McCormick, Mike Royko, and Nelson Algren.[208]

At the end of every artistic season, Cassidy's highlights column was more fulsome than the numbered and somewhat detached "Best Of" lists common today. These were twice as long as her usual columns and doubled as a State of the Arts in Chicago, with Cassidy commenting on areas of growth and atrophy in the city's cultural sphere. Though dedicating

205. Irving Kolodin, to Cassidy, Jan. 15, 1966, box 1, folder 85, Cassidy Papers.

206. *Saturday Review* (transcript), 1972, box 23, folder 405, Cassidy Papers.

207. See "Other Works, 1950s–1980s," box 22, various folders, Claudia Cassidy Papers.

208. Harlan Helgeson, letter to the editor, "Top 20 Chicago Figures of Century," *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1999.

only a few words to each performance, Cassidy's "scrapbook" roundups gave the impression that, no matter how skimpy the season, there were always almost too many highlights to name—a deluge of praise from a notoriously exacting critic. In these it is stated most unequivocally: Cassidy's colorful criticism came from a place of passion for the arts and her unerring faith in Chicago's artistic greatness. In an especially heartfelt December 1959 retrospective, Cassidy memorialized artists who had passed away in the previous decade, linking their artistry with a resonant pronouncement on the arts in Chicago: "The legacy they left us is beyond price, and many of them had this in common, which was said long ago by Toscanini: 'I burn or I freeze—I cannot be lukewarm.'"[209] When it came to defending the integrity of Chicago's performing arts, neither could Cassidy.

Postscript

Claudia Cassidy: [Art] is dangerous, and if you're not willing to think so, I don't know why you bother! Because that's where the greatness is.… There is that willingness to risk everything, which I think is terribly important. In fact, I think it's living. I've always been out on a limb, because I'm never quite sure I'm there; I'm not aware of it until someone begins to saw.… I don't think [artists] think they're risking, because I don't think they can do anything else. Safety can be very attractive, but it's not very exciting.

Studs Terkel: You realize, you could have been a very popular critic! You realize that? [Cassidy laughs] You could have written marvelous, beautiful things about everybody, and in fact, you could have been society editor, too, I'm guessing!

209. Claudia Cassidy, "Brave New Decade—Some of Its Inheritance and Some of Its Obligations," On the Aisle, Dec. 27, 1959, D9.

> **Cassidy:** Well, I wouldn't have wanted anybody who believed in me to be disappointed. That's true. People have always been most extraordinary. When I was starting—goodness, you wouldn't believe. The trouble they all went through.… You know, they could be so charming, in such a gay way.… I always felt that you owe it to anyone you're writing about to do the best that you can, whatever that may be.[210]

When Claudia Cassidy died on July 21, 1996, she was memorialized in newspapers across the country. Some obituaries—like those by Richard Christiansen[211] and Linda Winer,[212] beloved colleagues at the *Tribune* and personal friends—were sentimental, while others preferred to repeat Asbell's opinion of Cassidy as a terror.[213] None, however, denied her power and influence. Jonathan Abarbanel said Cassidy "saw Pavlova dance, heard Rachmaninov concertize, saw Barrymore and Dusa act, heard Mary Garden and Chaliapin sing. It is not just a critic who has died, but a monumental piece of the living history of the performing arts in Chicago and the western world."[214] These assessments of Cassidy's criticism have overshadowed her historical import. At the time I wrote this study in 2018, the value of Cassidy's historical legacy seemed to be very much up for debate. In some respects, this is the critics' lot. Jean Sibelius—whose music Cassidy called "a sound of mystery and grandeur, of simplicity and

210. Claudia Cassidy, interview with Studs Terkel, Nov. 30, 1966, Studs Terkel Radio Archive.

211. Richard Christiansen, "Cherished Notes from a Critic who Was an Artist," *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 1996, 71.

212. Linda Winer, "Goodbye to a Writer of Passion, Integrity," *New York Newsday.*

213. William Grimes, "Claudia Cassidy, 96, Did Not Mince Words in Chicago," *New York Times*, July 27, 1996, 11.

214. Abarbanel, "Legendary Critic, Claudia Cassidy, Dies," *PerformInk*.

Figure 4: Claudia Cassidy Theater, Chicago Cultural Center, photograph by Hannah Edgar, Apr. 24, 2018.

indestructibility … [with] a kind of obdurate eloquence"[215]—famously quipped to a fellow composer that one ought to "never pay any attention to what critics say," for "a statue has never been built in honor of a critic."

A monument in Chicago offers a counterpoint to Sibelius's words. In the Chicago Cultural Center—a landmark building, nucleus of arts and culture, free and open to the public—stands the Claudia Cassidy Theater (see fig. 4). Dedicated in 1997, the 298-seat theater hosts events as varied as the performances Cassidy covered in life.[216] In an unintentional double entendre, the plaque outside the theater describes the woman who witnessed so much of the twentieth century's arts as "the Premiere [*sic*] Critic of Theater, Music and Dance…. A titan of Chicago journalism,

215. Claudia Cassidy, "Reiner Honors Sibelius as Symphony Begins Its 67th Season," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 18, 1957, A1.

216. "Cultural Center Honors Critic Claudia Cassidy," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1997.

she raised the standards for performing arts criticism." Such may well be the thesis for this study. Prolific, provocative, and always passionate, Cassidy surely raised the standards for the performing arts in Chicago, but she ought to be included in any informed discourse of American criticism on the whole. By taking her influence as its subject of inquiry, this small volume hopes to assert Cassidy's place in the pantheon of notable arts critics everywhere. ❍

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