

Lost in the stars

Seriously, four and three-quarters would be useful... Why star ratings can be the scourge of a reviewer's working life

[Jessica Duchon](#)

Feb 28, 2026



Can you remember when it was that reviewers started having to give star ratings for everything? There was a time, In The Olden Days, when this wasn't the case, but it is lost in the stars... Ratings out of five: much simpler for the 'consumer'. But a real headache for a music critic. How can we even begin to think that there are empirical truths in music-making? Yes, on one level you're assessing how 'good' the playing is, but if an artist has made a recording for a top company you reckon you can assume a basic level of competence (or you could until recently). Beyond that, it is all about taste: theirs, yours and the audience's. You hope they match. Often they don't.

Thanks for reading Twangle: Music and Words, with Jessica Duchon!
Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

Star-ratings are fine if you're talking about kitchens. This washing machine, that salad spinner or a particular brand of cat litter is:

- 5) Excellent
- 4) Very Good
- 3) OK
- 2) Disappointing
- 1) Poor.

Buy it or don't, accordingly. Yet art works created by human beings – a book, a painting, a concert, a recording – are not like cat litter ('My cat refused to use it and pooped on the doormat' - 1 star) or a washing machine ('Clothes came out nice and clean' - 5 stars). Those rely on provable fact. Clothes are clean, or they're not. Salad spins and is no longer watery. The cat does what she does where she does it. Internet reviews sometimes get manipulated, but that's another issue.

What if you're assessing a recording by a famous artist or ensemble and the playing is completely stunning on nearly every level, yet there is something about it that you...just, personally...do not happen to *like*?

I've had that twice this week. As these are commissioned reviews that aren't published yet, I won't tell you what they are, but let's just say they are both by significant musical forces. Using the fat paintbrush of star ratings, they're classifiable as 5-star 'excellent'.

Do I like them? Kind of. Will I listen to them again? In one case, possibly; in the other, probably not. Because however excellent the sound of the playing, I don't enjoy the feeling that I'm being hit on the head whenever there is an accent, or being tripped up by a dramatic rallentando introduced to put a point under the microscope when you can see it perfectly well already.

And yet...this is a joyous piece and the musicians sound as if they're loving every second of it. In a concert hall, the same playing with those same levels of projection would send that exultance and fervour to the very back row; at the end, the audience would leave walking on air. Nevertheless, on a CD on a wet Monday afternoon, the effect can veer towards the slightly irritating.

There's a fad at the moment for interpretative exaggeration. Again, in the Olden Days, there wasn't...or was there? Did it perhaps just take a different form? It leaned instead in the direction of what Woody Allen might call 'heaviosity'. Forty years back, a performance of the St Matthew Passion could take up almost all of Easter Sunday and there'd be a lunch break in the middle, à la *Götterdämmerung*. Maybe they still schedule it like that, I don't know, but HIP tempi have shaved many minutes off the thing since about 1982 and mostly it sounds very much better.

If nowadays you can pop on a recording and find it's so fast that you think something is wrong with your machinery, it's simply a different manifestation of the same syndrome; maybe a backlash, maybe idiosyncrasy, but either way, probably more about fashion and zeitgeist than anything else. The bashing-over-the-head effect relates to society's wider atmosphere of discourse in which you are right and everyone else is wrong and you have to insist very, very hard in order to be heard at all...

Empirically, this very joyous joyfulness is superb. The fact that I find it exaggerated is *my* problem. My personal taste. Have I the right, as an official reviewer, to cast aspersions on it - ie, to give it four stars rather than five - just because I personally prefer the scratchy old LP that I grew up with in the 1970s?



I don't happen to think that I do. My preference should not invalidate that of the musicians, or that of other audience members, which I can't second-guess. I assume that the fad for exaggeration has taken hold because listeners respond strongly to it. It's certainly not *boring*, which is the eighth deadly sin in the current environment (and no, I don't like 'boring' either).

Sometimes, I admit, I err on the mean side of star ratings. Take the performance of *Madama Butterfly* at the Royal Opera House to which I gave four stars, but others awarded five because of

the astounding lead soprano. I found glitches in the staging, weaknesses in other areas of the performance, etc, so I chose four for the overall experience. Then I felt guilty – because of the astounding lead soprano. Four and a half, or four and three quarters, would possibly have done the trick - but we can't use those.

Nuance? There ain't any. And maybe, just maybe, there needs to be. Because you apply a five, when it isn't quite there, or a four, when some parts are maybe more than that – and neither is right.

Also, you can't give a rating *higher* than five stars. (Some cruise-liners now attract six or seven, but this hasn't reached CDs yet.) This means that a fabulously played yet (to me) slightly irritating recording like this would end up with the same star rating as my Desert Island Discs Of All Time (like Krystian Zimerman and Pierre Boulez in the Ravel Piano Concertos, András Schiff in the Goldberg Variations and Kirill Petrenko conducting *Die tote Stadt* at the Bavarian State Opera).

That recording is getting five stars. So, too, is one by a magisterial pianist who happens to have a sound that bothers me a little bit. His playing is so sophisticated, so marvellously managed, that it leaves my jawbone in pieces - yet the actual touch on the keys sounds heavier than I personally would like. *What's causing this effect?* Is it him – his personal sound? The piano? The placement of microphones? The venue's acoustics? All of them? Or is this response simply my personal preference? Sometimes it is, quite literally, impossible to tell.

I'm reminded that Myra Hess preferred a heavy, slow touch on her pianos because it helped her, paradoxically, to manage the gradations of quieter shades of sound - so maybe this piano is loose-touched, or voiced up? I don't know. I do know that I've heard this same repertoire played with airy marvellousness by others who do not have a heavy-sounding touch.

If there were no star ratings, I would not have to put this new recording into the same strata as, say, one by Martha Argerich. He is, however, *so* good, empirically, in every other respect, that I can't give him fewer than five stars. Four and three quarters doesn't exist. There are as many approaches to a piece of music as there are musicians to interpret it and the idea that we're potentially perceived as somehow evening them out by shoehorning them into just five categories is somewhat uncomfortable.

A lot of musicians get four stars. Really a lot. In a way, it can become almost the default setting; everything is good, you can't fault it, but you mightn't remember much about it in a year's time. Three stars is also not bad. I've had thank-you letters from musicians for three-star reviews on occasion (though on others have had run-ins about them, which seems daft as three stars does mean 'good').

With two stars, though, you're reaching the territory where you might remember a performance for all the wrong reasons. As for just one - ouch. You don't want to write those unless you really have to, because you will feel truly awful afterwards.

That's the critic's perspective. What about the audience's? Let's face it: nothing in the arts pages is more fun to read than a full-on hatchet-job, written with wit and invention and total cattiness. I sometimes envy colleagues in the film and TV departments who can and do let rip. I've written a few stinkers, but after 30+ years I can still count them on my fingers. I only write them if it's cathartic - as, regrettably, it can be when you've spent two days you'll never get back on hearing half of the worst Ring cycle on the planet.

In the end, star ratings are as useful as those other star issues: horoscopes. They can work for some. Don't rely on them, however, to make all your decisions.

The system is far from perfect. It is, however, what we have and we have to do our best within it. Therefore please rest assured that we all try to the utmost to reflect honest responses as accurately as humanly possible. And never forget, in the end it's just one person's opinion...

*Thanks for reading Twangle: Music and Words, with Jessica Duchon!
Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.*