

The New Criterion

Music

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Juilliard plays Stravinsky

by [Alexander Coleman](#)

On the Juilliard Symphony's performance at Alice Tully Hall, New York

I saw Igor Stravinsky conduct only once, at Carnegie Hall in January 1957, when the New York Philharmonic performed *Perséphone* (1934), a "melodrama" in three parts, with a text by André Gide. (Vera Zorina narrated, Richard Robinson was the tenor soloist.) Stravinsky's conductorial manner lived up to its reputation for idiosyncrasy. Unlike most of the flailers and sawyers occupying major podia, Stravinsky often did not move a muscle for entire pages. Crouched over the score, he gave almost no clues to the orchestra. Every so often he would majestically raise his left hand to his lips in order to moisten the fingers for a more rapid turning of the page below. As would be expected from any professional orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, along with the soloists and mixed chorus, busied itself with an attentive sonic realization of the work at hand. A few churlish types must have asked whether, during ...

a long-time contributor to *The New Criterion* and a close friend of the editors. He died on June 17th, 2002. He was 67 and had been battling cancer for over a year. We met John in the early 1990s at a monthly seminar on modernism sponsored jointly by *The New Criterion* and New York University, where John taught Spanish literature from forever (as he said) until his (early and eagerly sought) retirement in 1997. From the start, it was clear that John was a man of rare wit, capacious learning, and eager if gently ironical curiosity. At those seminars, John displayed his easy mastery of literature--not just Spanish and Latin American literature, but the entire modernist tradition. He was an expert in Borges (whose work he translated, edited, and expounded), and had a deep grasp of Eliot, Henry James, Stevens, Santayana, and many other figures. But it soon became clear that John's greatest passion was for music. He had an impressive command of the classical repertory, and, we are told, an equally impressive command of jazz. Indeed, John did not discriminate among genres: only between good music and bad, the excellent and the false, sentimental, or poorly executed. In order to distinguish himself from another writer named John Coleman, our John Coleman had always written under the name Alexander Coleman. He published on a wide variety of subjects literary and musical. For *The New Criterion*, he wrote delightfully erudite pieces on such neglected figures as the Portuguese novelist and man of letters Eça de Queirós, an abundance of music criticism, and incisive "fever-chart" reports on the cultural situation in the (generally balmy) places his inveterate travels took him. We include here a brief Coleman sampler that shows something of John's range of interests. John's charm was as invigorating as his cooking was delicious. You knew you had entered the circle of his affections when he began addressing you as "Doctor" or "Maestro," forms of address that his friends found irrepressibly infectious. John's passing is a loss for our readers, who will no longer have the benefit of his engaging criticism. For

us, the loss is deeper. It is hard to believe that we will no longer be welcoming him around our table, glass of wine in hand, pertinent anecdote on tongue's tip. Farewell, Maestro. We shall miss you.

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