Tossing Sugar Eggs in Tipperary: 
Andrew Lloyd Webber, Theatregoer, and the “Self-serving” Perils of Autobiography

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“I have shied away from writing an autobiography,” Andrew Lloyd Webber declared in 2011, immediately adding, playfully: “Autobiographies are self-serving which is probably why one day I’ll write one” (“A Note”). Lloyd Webber may not have written “an autobiography,” but he has written a considerable amount of autobiography over the years: not sustained narratives, but rather glimpses of experiences, memories, attitudes and thoughts which have appeared mainly in the unlikely medium of restaurant reviews. Lloyd Webber is not, of course, known as a writer, but as the most commercially successful composer the world of musical theatre has ever seen. Nevertheless, everything he does he does seriously, and his seriousness as a writer – in the literary sense1 – is evident in the particular body of autobiographical reviews-cum-essays from Theatregoer discussed here. They are worth analysis for what they reveal of a man whose particular artistic sensibility has had an extraordinary impact on middlebrow entertainment not just in Britain but around the world, and of his relationship with his public.

Lloyd Webber’s life has been shaped by four ruling passions: music and theatre, making money, Victorian art and architecture, and food and wine. He could have had a very successful career in any of these areas, but was clearly right to put music and theatre first as it has enabled him to
indulge, even to excess, in the others. In 1996, in a surprising career move, Lloyd Webber started writing a weekly restaurant column, “A Matter of Taste,” for the British *Daily Telegraph* and surprised many readers with his extraordinary knowledge of his new subject; as Michael Coveney says, “he communicated deftly as a discriminating, expert and sympathetic creature with strongly held, mostly reasonable, though conservative, views” (232). To Michael Walsh, the “columns … were surprisingly well-written, engaging and humorous” (269). After interviewing the composer at the end of the year, David Richards of the *Washington Post* reported that “Lloyd Webber isn’t sure how much he gets paid for it [the weekly column] – ‘$1,000 or $1,500 a week,’ he guesses. ‘Plus expenses’” (6). Lloyd Webber was clearly not doing it for the money: in 1995 it was calculated that his income from his theatrical works was a staggering £3,000,000 a month (*The Business*). He did it, rather, first to educate his public on the subject of food, and second, as he told Richards, because “it afford[ed] an outlet for ‘Webber, the man’” (6). The personal element is indeed strong: Coveney has several good pages on these reviews, and highlights the “[o]dd Proustian flights of autobiography peep[ing] through” (230). Lloyd Webber wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* for three and a half years, then gave up his column to concentrate on his new musical, *The Beautiful Game*.²

The present essay is concerned not with the *Telegraph* column, but with the much smaller, less accessible group of reviews Lloyd Webber wrote for *Theatregoer* between 2000 and 2001. *Theatregoer*, founded in October 2000, was a monthly magazine published by Lloyd Webber’s own Really Useful Group and it featured Madeleine Lloyd Webber, the composer’s wife, as the ostensible editor-in-chief alongside Ruth Leon as editor. The magazine was available by subscription but also, crucially, bundled with
programs at Really Useful theatres and thus placed in the hands of broad swathes of the West End theatre-going audience. Large quantities were, in addition, delivered to central London hotels. (Despite an impressive print run, most copies were presumably discarded and the magazine is already surprisingly scarce; the British Library appears to be the only library with a reasonably complete set.) The brief editorial in the third issue, over the signatures of Madeleine Lloyd Webber and Leon, is reproduced here and outlines their concept of the magazine.


The demographic had significantly shifted from Lloyd Webber’s *Telegraph* days. Readers of the *Daily Telegraph* were broadly defined by culture (educated, middle- or upper-class) and political persuasion (Conservative; hence the nickname the *Torygraph*); they did not necessarily have any interest in Lloyd Webber or musical theatre and in many cases positively disliked his shows. As a *Telegraph* columnist, Lloyd Webber was wearing a second hat and striking out on a new path. Readers of
Theatregoer, by contrast, were defined quite specifically by an interest in popular theatre and in many case were out-and-out fans of Lloyd Webber, likely to be actually sitting in a theatre waiting for one of his shows to begin (in October 2000 they had a choice of Cats, Starlight Express, The Phantom of the Opera, Whistle Down The Wind and The Beautiful Game). Here he was aligning his work as a columnist much more closely with his principal occupation as a theatre composer, impresario and owner and director of the Really Useful Group. This, and the facts that Lloyd Webber was now, in an intriguing sort of pretense kept up through the reviews, working for his wife, and that the column was quickly discontinued, make the autobiographical element here particularly interesting.

In his Telegraph days, Lloyd Webber had become an increasingly confident autobiographer, within the range he allowed himself: essentially humorous pictures of his private life past and present. As early as November 1996, he was telling Richards “It’s loosely a food column, but as it’s progressed over the last six months, it’s much less about food than it used to be” (6). Accounts of restaurants began to give way to “Proustian flights of autobiography” and statements of opinion on all sorts of subjects; and on occasion they further developed into extended accounts of life in the Lloyd Webber household which dwarfed the summary restaurant reviews to which they were attached. Lloyd Webber was clearly preferring the dulce to the utile and the reviews increasingly appeared to strain toward being little familiar essays in the tradition of Montaigne and Charles Lamb. This tendency is further evident in the Theatregoer columns, where, until the end of Lloyd Webber’s brief stint as the resident restaurant critic, the matter of food is consistently relegated to secondary importance as he prioritizes extended autobiographical vignettes. In so far as any justification is supplied
for this, it appears in the third review: “Food reviewers prattle on about anything to put off the grisly moment when they have to assess the output of some over-hyped kitchen” (“Talking turkey” 15). But “pratt[ling] on about anything” is not quite the same as prattling on about oneself, which is what Lloyd Webber does (even when he expresses views on other matters, the personal element is always very strong). The general assumption is that the reader is more interested in Lloyd Webber himself than in deciding where to eat in the West End.

Lloyd Webber, indeed, writes about himself with an intense awareness that he is a celebrity, a Person of Public Interest, someone his readers will feel they already “know” to some extent. He both plays at being the public figure constructed by scores of biographers, critics, journalists and satirists and gently subverts that version of himself. The reader feels, constantly, that these autobiographical pictures are not about genuine “confession” (though they sometimes play at being confessional), not the sort of revelations a psychoanalyst would be interested in, but rather extended footnotes to an already mediatized personality. The inner man is only revealed (or for that matter concealed) in a series of external relations, whether to food, people (many of them famous), places, values, language, and – most interestingly – his reader. The pose of a familiar relationship with the last named is fragile, even though Lloyd Webber seems, in some ways, intent on showing that he is not the private, guarded man described by biographers.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Theatregoer columns, though, is that as well as striking a note of affected familiarity with the reader, they are in dialogue with someone who presumably knew Lloyd Webber’s private life as well as anyone: his wife. This is more complicated than it may appear. As noted already, Lloyd Webber maintains the pretense he is working for
his wife, but the reader needs no great powers of clairvoyance to realize that it is more the case that she is working for him: and those disposed to be cynical might question how and why Madeleine Lloyd Webber, with little or no experience of publishing, came to be heading this latest extension of the Really Useful empire. But if the Madeleine Lloyd Webber who appears in the reviews is a partly fictionalized character, sometimes little more than a narrative device (the boss who must be pleased, the wife who must be placated), it can be supposed, nevertheless, that the real Madeleine Lloyd Webber, a strong personality by all accounts, actually was reading her husband’s literary efforts, and perhaps influencing their content. The reviews thus negotiate both private and public relationships and in most cases appear to emerge from the private space Lloyd Webber shares with his wife, even if this is a semi-fictionalized space. The private man become public celebrity writes as the private man for his wife / editor / employee in an enterprise public and commercial in scope and directly linked to his celebrity achievements as a composer and man of the theatre: self-serving in a way designed to serve self.

So many generalizations need the support of examples and detailed analysis, of course, and the obvious point to begin is the beginning of the very first *Theatregoer* column:

From the moment I woke it was clear that the better half had an agenda. It percolated from her every pore while I cleaned my teeth. It simmered as I shaved. (How I hate shaving. Would someone invent a cream to knock stubble on the head? You can grow hair on a bald pate now, why can’t someone develop a decent anti-shaving lotion?)

It was, therefore, with my usual post-shaving morosity that I eyed
the orange juice and croissants and studiously avoided the eye of the apple of mine. The better half coughed. An infant, my gorgeous Bella – you will, I fear, hear more of her in subsequent utterings – was dispatched to the nursery. My wife’s agenda was about to be revealed.

Things started on the soothing side. There was quite a lot of stuff about a rather good new brand of coffee that I had been sent from a politically incorrect region. There was a hint of praise for my failing on the previous evening to have a mega top-up of the superb Château Gruaud-Larose 1993 that is the best buy claret-wise in town at the moment. So I was in average mellow fruitful mode when the bombshell dropped. “Darling, so many people loved your food reviews. Maybe they don’t like your shows so much, but they loved your food reviews. It’s time you did them again.” (“Eating Incognito” 15)

This initial piece of scene-setting taps immediately into the British (and not just British) fascination with the trivia of celebrity life demonstrated and massively developed by the great success of the so-called “celebrity lifestyle” magazines, especially Hello! (founded 1988) and OK! (founded 1993). Photoshoots of celebrities “at home” in carefully manicured domestic settings had become a staple offering of such publications, and Lloyd Webber produces a more informal verbal equivalent: this is what a morning in his household is like, in its ordinariness (“orange juice and croissants”) and extraordinariness (“infant[s] … dispatched to the nursery”). From the outset, it is clear that one of his central representational strategies is going to be to suggest that his wife, Madeleine, later lauded as “[t]he beautiful Madeleine” (15), rules this domestic space just as, allegedly, she will soon
come to dictate his professional activities. His second review refers to “my wife (Editor in Chief of this magazine, we’re all terrified of her)” (“Strange bedfellows” 16). The third represents him writing the reviews gratis in an effort to please his wife: “Brownie points would exude from every area of theatregoer’s [sic] editorial offices [if the review was sufficiently erudite]. I might get a Christmas bonus. I might even get paid” (“Talking turkey” 15).

But Lloyd Webber’s opening mise en scene rings hollow. It is not just that men who routinely refer to their wives as “the better half” and speak of being “terrified” by them almost inevitably have strongly patriarchal values, but that anyone who has even a distant acquaintance with the details of Lloyd Webber’s career will find it impossible to believe his wife independently advanced plans for a theatrical magazine to be published by his company and then surprised him with an offer to write restaurant reviews one fine morning over croissants. The scene is imaginatively staged to distance Lloyd Webber from this literary extension of his vast theatrical empire: I’m just doing this for my wife; it’s essential for my domestic happiness is the conceit, but one not playful enough to win the reader over. The display of subservience is fragile: the hint of differences on the subject of the coffee is nicely judged, but the extended reference to the Château Gruaud-Larose 1993 comes across as overdone and leaves the reader in little doubt that Lloyd Webber calls the shots when it comes to choosing and buying wine. He has, in fact, something of a legendary reputation as an investor and trader in that commodity; in 1997 he auctioned 18,000 bottles for a stunning £3,500,000 (Coveney 232-33). The judgement on “the best buy claret-wise in town” is the voice of a confident, even boastful, connoisseur and businessman, not a nervous husband.

These introductory paragraphs are not, until the very end, an obvious
prelude to a restaurant review. They enter, rather, into the familiar essay mode that Lloyd Webber had earlier developed in the Telegraph. Central to the familiar essay is the digression, the sideways, associative movement of thought, and this will be a recurring feature of Lloyd Webber’s “pratt[ling].” The first of many digressions in these Theatregoer columns is the one concerning shaving which comes to dominate the first paragraph. In the context of evoking a particular sort of relationship between husband and wife, it is intriguing; no doubt a certain kind of literary critic would tease out emasculating connotations. But my interest is more in the tone: neither lightly playful nor comically exaggerated, as the subject seems to demand, it reads a bit too much like a dull grumble. It is not that Lloyd Webber is unwilling to joke – quite the contrary – but his jokes (“knock stubble on the head”) often come across as wrapping rather than product, as though they are there to hide an underlying seriousness. For there is hardly ever any doubt that Lloyd Webber is anything but a deeply serious man.

The tensions inherent in a basically serious personality attempting to strike a jokey, carefree, streetwise pose are illuminated by some comments that Ben Elton, Lloyd Webber’s recent collaborator on The Beautiful Game, made in the first issue of Theatregoer. Elton remarked on what he judged to be his and Lloyd Webber’s shared artistic temperament:

We are both achievers, eager to please and eager to believe the latest thing we’ve written is our best. We lack cool. The English really prefer their writers to at least pretend to be laid back, the way Tim Rice [Lloyd Webber’s earlier collaborator] always implies that he has knocked off a few lyrics during a Test Match and they probably aren’t that good. I can’t do that; I’ve always been relentlessly professional;
not necessarily good, but hard-working and keen. (qtd. Morley 22)

It is hard not to wonder whether Lloyd Webber, had he seen this before the issue went to press, would have objected to it being printed. Would he accept that he “lack[s] cool”? His biographers, broadly speaking, take the view that he does, and represent him as an introverted, socially awkward person (the antithesis of the extrovert, charming Tim Rice). Yet it is clear that Lloyd Webber’s self-portrayals in Theatregoer are trying hard to establish his “cool” credentials, even if, at the same time, the effort is too frequently apparent, subverting the aim. This is a matter of style as well as content: carefully worked-over prose attempts to sound slangy, spontaneous, naturally familiar.

A good deal of this is evident in those first three paragraphs, but there are better examples. One of the best can be found in the March 2001 column, one of Lloyd Webber’s most ambitious efforts in the familiar essay mode, but also, I think, one of the least successful in negotiating its various sidesteps from one topic to another. It begins by reporting that a new club, Teatro, has opened on Shaftesbury Avenue, notes that the building used to house the Inland Revenue, and then introduces “a tale of dire warning” (“Changing fortunes” 15). At first the tale in question seems to be that, in 1975, a “cove in the know” had told Lloyd Webber that “[t]he Revenue had infiltrated Annabel’s.” But this goes nowhere; Annabel’s is an upmarket private members’ club in Mayfair and appears to be mentioned here almost entirely to establish the fact that Lloyd Webber was a member by the mid-seventies (a certain amount of name-dropping goes on throughout these reviews, as it had those in the Telegraph). Lloyd Webber’s little essay instead segues into a story of how “in the late Seventies” (my emphasis) he
had attended “a huge charity bash in Belgrave Square in the form of a big funfair.” There had been a fortune-teller there, and, expecting good news, Lloyd Webber had his palm read, or, as he puts it, “I entrusted my mitt to her Romany clutches” (16). This is the sort of phrase he likes, seemingly aiming for a slangy nonchalance but feeling as though it has somehow been translated into slang with reference to a book of synonyms. The fortune-teller, a certain Madame Astrid, actually told Lloyd Webber that he should urgently change his career. Given his enormous success as a composer, and given, too, that by 2001 he was established as the sort of figure many people love to hate, there was an obvious opportunity for some self-deprecating humor here, but it is not taken; instead he continues:

I paid my fiver [i.e. £5] and descended the caravan steps to find a posse of black-ties, one of whom offered me a glass of bubbly.

I explained that I had just been advised urgently to change my profession. A black-tied’s eyes welled with condolence. “Do you think that my fiver is an allowable expense, tax-wise, against the closing down of my current profession or an allowable start-up expense against my new vocation?” I queried. Theatregoers will understand that Madam Astrid’s diagnosis was causing me deep distress.

The bubbly-profferer gave voice. “That’s interesting,” he said with an unusually pensive expression for a stranger. “You will need professional advice young man. You see, I am a senior inspector of the Inland Revenue.” After this we got on famously, but prospective Teatro clubbers, heed me: You never know where these chaps are lurking.
It is a poor return for the reader who has now read through a great deal of “prattling” and still not heard a word about food. The issues involved are hardly likely to excite the average theatregoer, for whom the presence or not of off-duty taxmen in any particular club is of little moment; but the anecdote really falls flat because of the witticism Lloyd Webber attributes to himself. The whole thing would be a great deal funnier if he had represented himself as an unworldly young artist, lamenting the loss of a “fiver,” being given advice about allowable expenses by the “senior inspector.” In that case, the eternal fountain of comedy in which ordinary ignorance encounters professional pedantry could have been richly tapped and readers would have aligned themselves with Lloyd Webber and laughed at the inspector. As it is, Lloyd Webber represents himself at the age of thirty or so – he was born in 1948 – speaking the language of taxmen, or businessmen, and making a witticism designed to appeal principally to them: indeed seemingly designed, in context, to flush them out. The majority of theatregoers are rather left out of the joke. All this might be redeemed if it was clear Lloyd Webber was sending himself up, given the many criticisms he had received to the effect that he was more businessman than artist, but it is very far from clear that such was his purpose. On the contrary, the story seems designed to make him look cool, and we sense a double awkwardness: his desire to impress the “posse of black-ties” in the late ’70s and his desire to impress his readers in 2001. If there is any self-deprecation at all, there is certainly not nearly enough of it, at least for the “English” taste as formulated by Elton.

Lloyd Webber succeeds much better in the June 2001 review, “In the dog house,” his most achieved and clever attempt at a restaurant column with virtually nothing to say about restaurants. This is mainly concerned with
events surrounding a piece of institutionalized eccentricity of the kind for which the English upper classes have long been famous:

It had all begun with the saga of the Great Easter Sunday Egg Throwing Competition. This is a major event in the Lloyd Webber household and traditionally takes place on the slope down to the river below our beloved Tipperary homestead.5

A quantity of eggs are hard-boiled and painted to resemble the family, house guests and any other dramatis personae who might turn up. This being Ireland – and bearing in mind there is local knowledge of the wine that is served at the event – the occasion is always extremely well attended. The person whose egg travels furthest without its shell cracking is the winner. (15)

The game described is, in its essentials, a variant of a traditional one known as egg tossing or egg throwing. It has long been practiced in Britain, where the World Egg Throwing Federation is based. Needless to say, though, it is very much a minority sport and the reader senses immediately an intrinsically amusing situation and the potential for considerable fun. The main story concerns Lloyd Webber’s unsuccessful attempt to cheat: he and his son Alastair had discovered some replica eggs made of icing sugar in a shop in Venice; they were “hard as rocks.” These were, with difficulty, painted in the same way as the regular hard-boiled eggs and substituted at the last moment. Lloyd Webber himself made what would have been the winning throw, but a local dog, portentously introduced as “the Kiltinan Stud Yard Dog” (16), reveals the deception by biting into the egg and eating it, along with the other false ones. The dog becomes sick, and as Lloyd
Webber was known to take “a dim view of the mutt,” “[t]his gave rise to accusations of my attempting to poison it.” All is told with a light touch and this review (if such it can be called) showcases Lloyd Webber’s talents as an autobiographical writer better than anything else he wrote for *Theatregoer*.

The whole misadventure of the false eggs is worked into a framing narrative in which Lloyd Webber needs to placate his wife’s anger, for she was – in addition to being his editor, he reminds the reader – the “organiser of the aforementioned splendid event” (15). He represents the fallout from the deception, surely with comic exaggeration, as a marital crisis of unexampled seriousness: “an urgent rapprochement was needed with the fair Madeleine. A romantic à deux was needed of an unprecedented nature” (16). This conclusion is reached about three-quarters of the way through the column and neatly leads, or seems to lead, into the review proper. But Lloyd Webber continues to play with his reader’s expectations. He describes taking Madeleine to a restaurant called (absurdly, as he notes) Zilli Fish Too, but they find no intimacy there and leave without tasting the food. Finally, in three short, concluding paragraphs we read that they transferred themselves to J Sheekey and that everything there was very good: “Thanks to the exemplary service, even before the revelatory potted shrimps, Madeleine had forgiven me.”

The review thus becomes a fall and redemption story operating at two levels: the knight placates his “fair Madeleine” in her role as wife with a fine meal and in her role as editor by a public confession for *Theatregoer*. Yet the two levels have a symmetric rather than parallel relationship: as a wife, “fair Madeleine” is a somewhat humorless authority figure (did she really not enjoy the joke?); as an editor she allows herself to be sent up as the strict and highly principled spouse who can be, nonetheless, bought with
potted shrimps. “In the dog house” reveals Lloyd Webber’s mischievous, boyish side, and in terms of presenting him in an attractive light it hardly goes wrong, even his recurring tendency to translate natural English into unnatural slang being held in check (though there are lapses: “you guys are probably getting the gist of my gib” [15]). But here, too, even though one can almost forget his underlying seriousness, it breaks through as he details the difficulties of painting a sugar egg and suggests that he was determined to win the contest himself rather than letting young Alastair carry off the sullied honors of the day.

The three passages examined thus far give a good idea of how Lloyd Webber introduces lengthy passages of “light” autobiography into his Theatregoer reviews. I want to proceed now to look at the attitude to food revealed in the columns, and at Lloyd Webber’s allusions to the world of theatre and music. When it comes to food, Lloyd Webber does a reasonably good job of imagining the matter of eating out from a typical middle-class reader’s point of view: no mean achievement given his fabulous wealth and the fact that restaurateurs presumably often make a special effort to please him. Glimpses of snobbishness do break through. Doubtless shocking – calculatedly so – to many British readers, for whom turkey is a standard part of Christmas, is an attack on that institution: “… the boring hormone-infused two-legged bird that struts its tasteless stuff on to our plates at Yuletide. Frankly you only eat turkey for what its cavity is stuffed with” (“Talking turkey” 15). Sometimes Lloyd Webber seems to forget his large readership in the interests of addressing a much smaller one: “You’ve just finished your post-theatre dinner of scallops with sweet chilli and crème fraîche followed by duck confit falafel with guindilla chilli and pickled red cabbage at the Sugar Club. You overhear a bloke at the table next door declare that he has
eaten a dish of sublime revolutionary simplicity” (“French fancy” 13). The previous month he had described the Sugar Club as “London’s premier fusion restaurant,” appealing to “a determinedly trendy crowd” (“2001 West End” 40), and Lloyd Webber is in fact sending up that “trendy crowd” – but this is humor likely to go well over the heads of most people who see his shows. Taken altogether, Lloyd Webber’s reviews celebrate the pleasures of eating and drinking along with conscious connoisseurship: the knowledge one is eating well. His children have clearly grown up on no ordinary diet and Alastair in particular is praised for being an apple fallen close to the parental tree: “Alastair has the best palate of any child I have ever come across. You can’t fob off Alastair with a trip to McDonalds” (“In the dog house” 15). Perhaps Alastair would not have wanted this particular issue of Theatregoer handed around at Eton.

For Lloyd Webber, it is important that good food is available, and he is not obviously bothered by ethical issues concerning the larger food economy. His wife’s views on his “politically incorrect” coffee are treated with gentle humor; the quality of the coffee, in his view (and perhaps hers?), justifies its purchase. The fact that turkeys are “hormone-infused” is bad for those who eat them, not the birds. A more extended glimpse of his values concerning food production is found in his account of foie gras:

When I was driving through Perigord last May [May 2000], my eye was caught by a roadsign directing punters to the Museum of the Goose. This transpired to be an enlightening establishment. First you saw baby geese being hatched. Next you saw them at various stages of their lives, during which you were much encouraged to feed the poppets. Big ones, huge ones, vast ones followed, all eating of their
own volition like the clappers until, finally …

I have to draw a veil over the next part of the educational experience.

Suffice to say that you wind up in a gallery where the edible reason for this improving experience is much on display at reasonable prices. ("Talking turkey" 16)

It is a little descent into the abyss narrative, from the idyllic connotations of driving through Perigord in May, to seeing the cute baby geese, to the unspeakable, but not uneatable, horrors of prematurely full-grown birds force-fed until their livers massively enlarge and possibly become diseased (scientists disagree on whether it is, technically, a disease). Back in the 1830s, when cruelty to animals was much more widely accepted, Walter Savage Landor fulminated magnificently that "He who could partake of such an abominable luxury [foie gras], knowing its process, ought not even to be buried where men are buried, but (in strict retributive justice) given to the kites and crows" (16: 217). Lloyd Webber was obviously in the position of "knowing its process" after his visit to the Museum of the Goose (though one supposes he knew it before and that such a farm would not show the worst of it), and it is unlikely that he was unaware of the gathering momentum against foie gras around the world (a 1998 European Union directive cleared the way for its production to be banned across most of Europe). But though he apparently found what he saw unpleasant, he rises from the abyss with seemingly undiminished appetite and his usual shrewd sense of what constitutes a reasonable price. Product, he implies, excuses process.

It is worth grilling Lloyd Webber a little further over his attitude to foie
gras, and this will lead naturally to the matter of musical and theatrical referencing. The section of his column concerned with his Perigord experience carries the subheading “FEED THE BIRDS.” Coming from almost anyone of Lloyd Webber’s generation, but especially a composer of musicals, that looks like a clear reference to the famous Sherman Brothers’ song “Feed the Birds,” written for the musical film Mary Poppins (1964), which has the slightly dubious distinction of being Walt Disney’s favorite song. Disney apparently never tired of hearing it, endorsing it with the words “Yup, that’s what it’s all about,” having come to think of it as “his own, gentle anthem” (Sherman 391). The “what it’s all about” is the need for charity: the song encourages kindness to the birds, whose young are said to be hungry, and to the old woman who makes her living selling bags of crumbs for birdfeed. In Mary Poppins, the song is used to challenge the capitalistic values of George Banks. Lloyd Webber’s allusion is thus thoroughly perverse: buying food to feed the birds as an expression of kindness is parodically twisted into investing in the force-feeding of birds so as to harvest the “abominable luxury” of foie gras that generates potentially large profits for suppliers and high end food retailers and restaurants (not to mention any additional profits made by letting people watch!). The casualness with which the allusion is slipped in, the sense that Lloyd Webber perhaps hardly thought about the implications, is distasteful, for the song is sullied by the new associations he forces upon it as much as the “educational experience” he elides is mocked by the juxtaposition of Disney’s sentimentality (the reader reminded of Mary Poppins may of course proceed by association to thoughts of all sorts of anthropomorphized birds and beasts).

Here, then, Lloyd Webber’s twin obsessions with musical theatre and
fine food, and his artistic and business sides, collide. One might expect more of this: if not collisions, at least little detours into the world of musical theatre with which he is indelibly associated. In fact, though, there are very few. The very first column contains the most substantial allusion to Lloyd Webber’s primary area of expertise:

The West End is a restaurant boom area. Parts of it are so vibrant that the gorgeous, forgotten Rodgers & Hart song *A Tiny Little Flat in Soho* takes on a new meaning. (“Eating Incognito” 15)

This is very recondite. The song in question, correctly entitled “A Tiny Flat Near Soho Square,” comes from the musical *Lido Lady*, written for London in 1926; it later travelled to France and Australia but never reached Broadway and did not outlive the decade in which it was composed. Neither lyrics nor music are easy of access. Some gramophone records were made of the original cast singing six of the songs; these were re-released on compact disc on the specialized Pearl label in 1994, and that is probably the most likely route through which Lloyd Webber came to know “A Tiny Flat.” (He may, though, have obtained the original gramophone record, or the printed sheet music of the song, both of which are very rare.) Charles Haynes, who wrote the booklet notes for the Pearl release, states “it seems that no score or libretto was ever published” (n. pag.). Such summaries of the plot as exist seem to rely on contemporary press reports (Hischak 160; Gänzl 2: 1199). *Theatregoer* readers without access to the Pearl CD – in other words, the vast majority of them – would be unable to establish Lloyd Webber’s point. Opinions on this are likely to vary. To some, the obscure nature of the allusion will make it inappropriate for a popular column (a bit like references
to “duck confit falafel with guindilla chilli”), while others will probably read it as a fascinating glimpse into Lloyd Webber’s inner jukebox – he has, after all, often described Richard Rodgers as his greatest inspiration. I hesitate on this, unsure how to balance the undoubted loveliness of the song against my feeling that the reference carries insufficient point independent of its demonstration that Lloyd Webber is equipped to make it. The song is a duet by a financially strapped young couple asserting that even “A Tiny Flat Near Soho Square” will be heaven in the presence of love. Unfortunately, the lyric makes it all too clear that Lorenz Hart’s interest in Soho began and ended with the name itself, which he works through a series of double rhymes that outstays its welcome: “go-ho” (twice), “blow-ho,” “glow-ho” (twice), “snow-ho,” “ho-ho,” “know-ho,” “low-ho,” “oh-ho.” If the “restaurant boom” gives the song “a new meaning,” then that meaning would seem to be that in 2000 Soho is no longer a place for impoverished young lovers to set up home. Yet if that is Lloyd Webber’s point, he certainly chose an oddly cryptic and ironic way of making a simple observation about Soho’s altered status in the British real estate market. Perhaps he was just misremembering the song.

Madeleine Lloyd Webber may have objected to the obscure nature of her husband’s allusion for, remarkably, no subsequent references of this kind appear in his Theatregoer columns. Nor, for that matter, are there many mentions of the theatre at all. The first review includes, besides the reference to Lido Lady, references to Lloyd Webber’s shows in general, Cats in particular, and John Chapman’s 1950s farce Dry Rot. The second again contains several references to shows, songs and performers. Yet by the third column, such references have almost entirely dried up – apart, that is, from the allusion to “Feed the Birds” – and they put in only very occasional
appearances thereafter. The only later one of consequence appeared in February 2001: “Alan Ayckbourn and I had a song about Aunt Dahlia’s legendary chef Anatole in our *Jeeves* musical … It got cut in Bristol” (“French fancy” 14). 6 This is the sort of information that fascinates dedicated fans.

Possibly Lloyd Webber decided to self-censor talk of the theatre out of his columns, but there is no obvious reason for him to have done so, and I think it more likely that his wife steered him away from such material, perhaps seizing on the reference to *Lido Lady* as an example of what not to do. But it is not the case that he was steered toward more focus on food, for as the theatrical references virtually disappear, the quantity of non-food-related autobiography actually increases. These shifts seem to point to some uncertainty, or even disagreement, about the nature of Lloyd Webber’s contribution to the magazine, which leads to the great mystery of his *Theatregoer* columns: why they are so few. The first slight hint that something might be wrong came in the May 2001 issue, when there was no restaurant review despite Lloyd Webber still being listed in the “Every Month” gallery of regular columnists. He reappeared the following month, as though nothing was amiss, but this turned out, unexpectedly, to be the last in the main series of reviews. The magazine then entered a rather uncertain period in its history: for some reason issues published over the next four months (July through October) were not dated, and as far as I can determine, only three issues were published in these months. It is easy enough to place them in sequence. 7 The first carried a brief editorial by Ruth Leon explaining:

Yes, it’s still *theatregoer* [sic]. We just look a little different this month, but not as different as we’re going to look in the near future. We’ve been listening to our readers and you’ve been telling us what
you want to read and how you want to read it. Just watch us grow! …
Change is in the air …

At this transitional moment, Lloyd Webber’s series of reviews was broken off, though it was not immediately apparent for this first undated issue included his article on the subject of his commission of a vast group portrait of various celebrities from Ronnie Wood (of The Rolling Stones fame) for the Ivy Restaurant. The decisive demonstration that Lloyd Webber was on the way out of what was virtually his own magazine came in the second undated issue, when there was again a restaurant review, but now written by Maureen Lipman and Astrid Ronning – both friends of Ruth Leon’s, who “sort of did it just as a hoot” (Ronning, email). Lloyd Webber returned to his old column just once more, in the third undated issue, but with a very different style of review. And then, surprisingly given his prominence in the early issues, he stopped writing for Theatregoer altogether.

It is not just idle curiosity to speculate on what breakfast time conversations between Lloyd Webber and his “better half” preceded his unannounced and unexplained departure from her team of writers. The obvious person to explain with some degree of objectivity what happened is Ruth Leon, but all my various attempts to contact her have gone unanswered and it seems clear she does not want to comment on the matter. Given this, the scholar is obliged to weigh up the various possibilities and then speculate on the most likely. In my understanding, the three main ones are:

- Lloyd Webber lost interest in his column or found himself so burdened with other commitments that he did not have time to write it.
Readers had complained about the large quota of Lloyd Webber’s autobiographical trivia and expressed a wish for a restaurant column more focused on the practicalities of dining out in the West End.

Readers had simply expressed a dislike of the image of Lloyd Webber set forth in the column.

The first of these is certainly not impossible, but it is the least likely in my judgement. Unlike Lloyd Webber’s weekly Telegraph column, Theatregoer was only a monthly commitment. There is no obvious reason why he would have suddenly become much more busy in 2001 (his next show, The Woman in White, did not open until September 2004) and the reviews themselves strongly suggest that he was enjoying what he was doing and just starting to get into his stride: “In the doghouse,” I have argued, is his finest piece of writing for the magazine. Given the general shake up of Theatregoer at this juncture, purportedly in response to reader feedback – “you’ve been telling us what you want to read and how you want to read it” – the other explanations seem, on the whole, more likely.

The main evidence bearing on the question is the matter of what happened to the restaurant column after the changes made to the magazine in summer 2001. The last of the Lloyd Webber reviews, that for October 2001, is remarkably different from his earlier review-cum-essays and far more focused on food. It is a useful comparative guide to the various restaurants on Shaftesbury Avenue (“five intriguing restaurants … six if you count that old bistro stalwart Mon Plaisir in Monmouth Street as an honorary member” [“Food for thought” 21]). Halfway through a very brief and discreet insight into Lloyd Webber’s personal life is included in an account of the new
Conrad Gallagher restaurant: “A recent lunch with my ex, Sarah B, was the best I have had since I lunched at Le Gavroche [an upmarket Mayfair restaurant] earlier this year” (22). Readers were obviously expected to pick up the reference to Sarah Brightman, whose marriage to (1984), and divorce from (1990) the composer had sparked intense media interest – Brightman at one time described them as the second “most famous couple in the world” (qtd. in Coveney 106). But apart from establishing that he was on good terms with his famous ex-wife, and recording that they “were given a taste of all” the puddings (22) on the occasion in question, no further details of the meeting are supplied. There is a striking contrast with the April review earlier in the year, where Brightman had featured prominently. That review, entitled “Brown sugar” – presumably in tribute to The Rolling Stones, this being the period of Lloyd Webber’s commission to Ronnie Wood – had presupposed public appetite for celebrity autobiography; the October review, by contrast, offers merely a pinch of that as seasoning.

After Lloyd Webber’s departure from *Theatregoer*, Astrid Ronning, who had co-written the September 2001 review, took the restaurant column over on an occasional basis, making no attempt to produce a review every month. It was the November 2001 issue – immediately following the last issue in which Lloyd Webber appeared – that pointed the way to the future, however. Here Ronning authored a feature devoted to the questions: “Where do celebrities go when the curtain’s down and the hunger pangs are setting in? What do they eat?” (“Midnight feasts” 28). By the end of 2002, a formula had been established in which different famous people, mostly from the worlds of entertainment or gastronomy, would be asked to write about their favorite restaurant(s) and dishes. This allowed for a combination of celebrity interest with practical advice on where to eat without involving extensive
detours into autobiography.

If *Theatregoer* really was trying to give readers what they wanted, then the conclusion must be that there had been a negative reaction to Lloyd Webber’s generously autobiographical restaurant column. It is important to keep in mind that The Really Useful Group is first and foremost a commercial enterprise, and there can be no doubt that the Lloyd Webbers would have agreed that the primary aim of this new wing of the empire was to sell as many copies of *Theatregoer* as possible, hence gaining market influence and value. If Lloyd Webber’s columns helped achieved that goal, all well and good; if they hindered it, they would have to go, or change, in the same way he closed or changed his shows when public appetite for them waned. But it is impossible to say (without further information) whether the reaction was primarily to the quantity or the nature of the autobiographical material. The latter is certainly a possibility. As noted above, there is almost nothing in the reviews to illuminate Lloyd Webber’s shows or creative processes: something which probably did not matter much in the *Telegraph*, but may have disappointed readers of *Theatregoer*. There are no personal revelations of any depth or significant import. There is, finally, surprisingly little gossip such as readers may have wanted and expected – again, to a greater extent than *Telegraph* readers. Ben Elton, at his first dinner with Lloyd Webber, “spent the evening getting as much rock and pop gossip out of Andrew as possible, you know the sort of thing … which boy bands actually sing on their records? Is Cliff Richard as nice as he seems and how many times did Mrs Thatcher see *Evita*?” (Elton). This sort of material does not appear in the *Theatregoer* column. Rather, Lloyd Webber follows and intensifies his *Telegraph* strategy of presenting lightly humorous – intended, at least, to be humorous – pictures of himself at home, lunching and dining.
out, and experiencing the privileges and tribulations of wealth and fame. Readers of *Theatregoer*, the evidence seems to suggest, had limited appetite for these: something future Lloyd Webber scholars may well regret, for a seam of autobiography was thereby closed and it has not been reopened in any systemic way.

Any piece of autobiographical writing is “self-serving” in the sense that it serves the self to a reader: and as with a dish in a restaurant, the reader can relish, pick at, leave, or for that matter complain about what is served. But in referring to all autobiographies as “self-serving,” Lloyd Webber obviously means that they profit the writer in some way, manipulating facts in the interests of self-promotion. In this sense, Lloyd Webber’s *Theatregoer* column was a kind of public relations exercise, designed to endear this very divisive entertainer to those who had paid money, or might consider paying money, to see his shows. To a much more obvious extent than his *Telegraph* column, it was a supplement to his theatrical work, a “companion” in a sense, as his wife and Ruth Leon described the whole *Theatregoer* enterprise. But the attempt to collapse the distance between Lloyd Webber the artist and Lloyd Webber the autobiographical columnist was not, in the event, self-serving in the promotional sense.

Perhaps *Theatregoer* as a whole did not serve the Really Useful Group in the way intended either. In spring 2005, the Group sold the magazine to Bandwidth Communications Limited and Madeleine Lloyd Webber’s short career in editing came to an end.
Notes

1 I mean the literary as opposed to the scholarly. Even as a boy, Lloyd Webber wrote several (unpublished) books on old buildings, of quite outstanding scope and seriousness for one so young (Walsh 27-28). In more recent times, he has regularly spoken of taking time off from writing musicals to write a book on Victorian art (Walsh 263), something he is certainly qualified to do, as comments from John Russell, former chief art critic of the New York Times, richly confirm (Walsh 268-69).

2 For Lloyd Webber’s reasons for leaving the Telegraph, see the first of his Theatregoer reviews, “Eating Incognico.” His whole period of writing regularly for the Telegraph coincided with an odd lull in his compositional career. “This is the first time I can truthfully say that I don’t have an idea for a show at all” he told a National Press Club luncheon in December 1996 (Walsh 268).

3 In fact, nothing more is heard of Isabella (born 1996), Lloyd Webber’s youngest child. This is the first of several clues to the fact that the column did not develop as he initially intended it to: a matter discussed below.

4 The comparison is doubtless unfair, but Robert Southey offers a first class example of how to make an entertaining complaint about the necessity of shaving (394-99). He coined the word “shavery” (394).

5 Lloyd Webber had purchased Kiltinan Castle Stud in Fethard, County Tipperary, in 1995. The “tradition,” then, was a new one.

6 Jeeves was given a trial run in Bristol in 1975, before being transferred to London. Since 2001, the detective work of Simon Murgatroyd has established that the song in question was first called “Aunt Dahlia (menu song),” then renamed “Food’s Old Sweet Song” and finally “Food Of Love.”

7 The first of the undated issues, which can be loosely designated “July,” originally featured Matthew Broderick on the cover. Substantially the same issue was then repackaged with a picture of three children looking through a theatre curtain on the cover to promote a “Kids Week” feature. As the “Kids Week” took place at the end of August, I take the view that this second version of the issue served as the “August” number, perhaps only briefly, before the “September” issue could be rolled out. The next wholly new issue (“September”) features Judi Dench on the cover; and the last of these undated issues (“October”) features Joan Collins.

8 Theatregoer was certainly attracting negative criticism. In the December 2000 issue, readers were asked to express their views of the magazine. Five readers’
letters were subsequently published in the February 2001 issue, three of them positive and two negative. One of the negative ones referred to the magazine as “a lot of superficial rubbish about the theatre and advertising” (Wagener).

9 There is probably an allusion here to the favoured nomenclature of the Spice Girls, the enormously successful 1990s pop group, one of the members of which was widely known as “Mel B” (to distinguish her from “Mel C”).

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