

## COMING—THE MASS AUDIENCE!

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**H**ERE is a pretty picture:

A first-rate composer writes a work. The work is a revelation of the composer himself, it is also an articulation of the life and times about him. Reflection, also prophecy. Performed by a first-rate interpreter, it is set before the public. The public grasps the work partially but with possession; sensing the reflection and the prophecy, as yet unable wholly to tie them up with its experience and imagination. The music and the public are in direct and alive contact; the relation is fertilized and complicated as well by the fact that other composers, other works, other interpreters are on the musical scene, functioning in similar acts; and by the existence of critics, teachers, students, amateurs. All these are parties to the musical act, they set up a spontaneous traffic of comparison, trial-and-error, controversy, re-education which passes between composer and public, between the work's meaning and the public's understanding of it. The groups coexist in almost geological formation; together they make up a soil upon which new works can flourish, new musical acts take place. Everybody concerned has a hand in creation; the flower emerges from the bud, which is the composer.

The picture is so pretty it hurts. Let there be no cause for alarm; it is not a picture of present-day musical life. The actuality is so different, so awry, that it may be asked whether we have any genuine musical life at all, with all the concerts and all the publicity. There is a crisis on; and music is in a state of crisis no less than economics or politics. In the first place, whether or not first-rate works are being written, it is certain that no new work is having any direct or alive contact with the public. The music seems to be aimed away from the public; the public seems to have lost its adventurousness. The programs emphasize the music of

dead masters, the modern work appears in the proportion of about one to twenty-five. The greatness of Bach, Beethoven and others is served up in the form of pathos and narcosis, solace and wish-titillation. Nor is it of any use, this effort to appease, this rendering alive music dead by placing it in a museum setting. The New York Philharmonic-Symphony board is worried. "A . . . complication this season has been the failure of attendance to maintain the level of past years. The subscriptions are said to have fallen off, while the individual seat sale has not mounted enough to balance the loss." (*New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1936) As to the critics, they are in general simply reviewers, endowed with disproportionate power, and quite content to palm off first-performance impressions as considered opinions. There is little study of a new score, little attendance at rehearsals, little time even to weigh a reaction before making a press dead-line. The great conservatories continue to accept magnificent young talents, to train them for exclusively virtuoso careers, and to hand them over to a completely glutted market—to what end, except to swell unemployment—and relief-lists? ("Culture is today being destroyed, just as cattle and crops are being destroyed, and for the same reason"—Brecht.)

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If these damaging signs were all, there would be no need to speak of a crisis; certain death would be the correcter prognosis. But something else is happening, far away from the Metropolitan Opera House or Jordan Hall or Rittenhouse Square. A few examples:

Last summer the office of the Workers' Music League was besieged (it is the only word for it) by the cultural committee of the International Workers' Order, and told that 75,000 members all over the country demanded to be "musically activized." They wanted lectures, concerts, recitals; they wanted choruses formed, orchestras started; they wanted their children to enter bugle and harmonica bands, fife and drum corps; they would pay. They wanted music—good music.

The Associated Workers Club have asked for thirty choral directors; they have groups ranging from fifteen to a hundred, who want to learn to sing.

The Downtown Music School was organized nearly a year ago by a group of modern composers and musicians as a school for workers and their children. Its aim was to make the best training available to them; to avoid the "social-service" angle, and also the thievery of the "learn-saxophone-in-five-lessons" racket schools. Within a week of its official opening three hundred registrations were recorded—a staggering number for a new school. Two branches have already been launched; others are due to follow.

The American League Against War and Fascism reported it was swamped by calls from all sorts of societies, clubs, etc., mostly labor, ready to pay—not much, but something—for concert performances, vocal, instrumental, choral, orchestral; for lecture-courses on modern music, on music appreciation, on music and society; for instruction; for general musical guidance.

A new federation, the American Music League, has been formed, allying itself to the concept of a broad United Front policy of workers and intellectuals throughout the nation. It comprises American, Italian, Jewish, Irish, German, Esthonian, French, Jugoslavian, Ukrainian groups and individuals, all dedicated to the cause of music as an active force in the community.

For about five years the thing has been happening. On the one hand a sickness and ill-functioning of the old set-up for music; on the other signs of thick swarming life from new strange quarters. The art is renewing itself. A new fact, a new idea is becoming apparent. A public is storming the gates. In the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries the select court public of aristocrats became absorbed into the bourgeois public—as a result of the growth of large-scale industry and capitalism. Today another "invasion" is on, vaster, with more far-reaching implications. The great mass of people enter at last the field of serious music. Radio is responsible, the talkies, the summer concerts, a growing appetite, a hundred things; really the fact of an art and a world in progress. You can no more stop it than you can stop an avalanche. A thrilling thing is taking place under our noses—an economic thing, which has definite and visible effects on music and musical life; a cataclysmic change such as has happened only once or twice before.

And as before, the cry of "barbarians" and "the death of Culture" is heard. Of course nobody likes to lose his property; if it is war, you recruit God to your side, if it is leisure-class music you recruit Culture. It is useful to remember that Beethoven and Wagner are some of the fruits of the early "invasion;" and that our modern concert-hall and orchestra are with us because a performance for three hundred listeners became at one time a performance for three thousand—an economic fact with certain consequences dealing with the need for more space and more sound. And just as the taste for chamber-music has not by any means died, so there is no point in talking of a "killing-off" or a "dying-off" of present-day concert-music.



Good composers (even bad composers sometimes) have an acute sense of smell. Long before the new fact was known, long before anyone talked about it, there was appearing a groping instinctive response to it in certain music. Moussorgsky's *Boris* contained the nascent germ for it, as for how many other developments. What is called "modern music," a Tower of Babel, and at one point a most damning tribute to the bestially anarchic policies of "rugged individualism," (every man for himself, every man with his own language, his own style, his own coterie) was nevertheless shot through with dreams of a more communicable art, of a music to answer a new need. Ferruccio Busoni is an instance. He was one of the first experimenters, he was also an intense anti-Wagnerian. Each of his works fails; but each shows the unmistakable wish for non-grandeur, non-depiction, non-delirium. *Doktor Faustus* is an amazing compendium of good and bad music, possible and impossible methods, with the "third-tone" system battling a dimly conceived new diatonism. The *Berceuse* for piano, perhaps the worst single piece of music written by an important man in our age, shows the struggle too. Its three pages are crowded with a combined Scriabinism and Debussyism, a temperamental pretentiousness and a latter-day simplicity; and they die out weeping on Wagner's grave after all. Busoni left behind him the sort of gleaming mess out of which things are born and grow.

Eric Satie comes to mind. In 1913, while the various agonies and brilliances of the *Sacre*, *Pierrot Lunaire* and Debussy's *Feux d'Artifice* were attacking the conservatives, Little Satie was trundling forth his slightly sad, slightly apathetic waltzes ("d'un Précieux Dégouté"), really much more odious to them; neither exciting ("stimulating") nor sedative ("dreamy"); very easy to follow, rather repetitious, rather flat. His obvious stature as a musician gained for his work the serious if eccentric attention of musical Paris, and for his ideas the imposing aspect of an "esthetic." He admitted the boulevards, he refused to get worked up or to add dynamic-marks when his *Socrate* downed the hemlock. He said simplicity to the point of talking silliness, both meant and unconscious. Whether he replied to Chabrier's *España* with an *Españaña* or told Debussy the form of the three pieces was obviously that of a pear, he was looking forward, he was debunking, he was making music safe for the world. The power of the future was with him although he was all alone. Satie the composer has importance; but the real Satie is the fomenter of an idea: music within reach!

When a composer's idea is greater than its embodiment the idea itself runs the severe risk of deteriorating; since the followers have to feed on theories rather than on music. The two generations of Satie disciples have gone to seed. The first group, (1918-28) *Les Six*, was a sort of music-tasters' club of composers which produced the authentic Milhaud, the confused but more gifted Honegger, and two minor poets, Auric and Poulenc. In their early days, they were all sprightly and charming, they dished up Satie's notions in the most agreeable forms, adding point and spice, and nearly nullifying the notions themselves; above all they gave him a vogue, they made him *chic*. (Satie, assistant postmaster at Arcueil, and a member in good standing of the Communist party!) The second generation, self-styled *Ecole d'Arcueil* (1928 - ?) which formed the nucleus for the present *Sérénade* group, have run Satie's idea aground, what with infiltrations of clique, cult, and snob. The concept, instead of taking on power through the addition of music of force and weight, proceeds towards a paler and paler negativism in the effete pieces of Sauguet and Massimo. The goal is no longer the

common ear, but just triteness *qua* triteness. Since it appears that only the few very advanced, very nuanced ears can grasp the subtle essence of triteness, the public is arbitrarily limited to a select roomful.



The term *Gebrauchsmusik* was probably coined by Hindemith. As a movement in Central Europe (about 1927 to Hitler), it constituted the first conscious concerted effort to reach the new embryonic audience; it derived from Satie, Russian Communism and American jazz. It is true that at first it looked like high-class musical charity, "bringing music to the people" and all that. Hindemith's plasticity and inventiveness turned out to exist only within his prescribed concert idiom; when he tried to avoid that he found himself pretty rigid. *Neues vom Tage*, aside from one hysterical ragtime tune, is exactly like other Hindemith of the same year. Kurt Weill was more adaptable and had more courage; he let himself go, and wrote really "gutter" music; again a misapprehension, but the intention was there. (Weill's natural sweetness and softness are probably the cause of the *Dreigroschenoper's* enormous and mistaken success. Brecht wanted the middle class audience to shrink in horror at the rotting, callous, spineless underworld characters, saying "This is ourselves!" Instead, they exclaimed with joy, "Why they all have hearts of gold—the dear pimps and whores!") Weill's other works, Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf* and the pile of radio music, film music, school music and family music were all examples of the crusade to "write down." As I pointed out some years ago, Mr. Gershwin was busy at the same time "writing up." My reaction then was a fastidious disdain at the breaking of the barriers. It is clear to me now that the necessity for breaking the barriers was acting (still is) chemically upon various composers all over the world, and in different ways.

When we come to the music of Eisler, of Volpe, the Soviet Union composers and the left wing faction in America, the picture of an artist striving to reach a public is strengthened and clarified by a directive philosophy. The dominant entry of the working class into our midst, say these men, is no fluke, no sudden unaccountable phenomenon. It partakes of the great social up-

heaval; it answers the problems of the crisis. No activity among men can be divorced from it; music becomes an ally in the fight as well as an ideal aim. The individual composer achieves his pure ultimate undisturbed individuality only on the basis of a smooth and balanced social machinery; it is his function as a musician to aid in the building of such a machinery. This philosophy has already forced out two musical forms: the Mass Song (Eisler, Davidenko, Adomian, Shechter, Sands, Swift) and the *Lehrstück* (really a theatre-form; but its best examples are musical).

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What the new audiences are going to demand of music, how music can, must change because of the new fact, is engrossing as the watching of any epochal historical event is engrossing. First of all they will have to learn; the hope is that some sounder and more consistent method of training will be found than the makeshift one which has operated on present audiences. Secondly, it is likely that musicians will learn from them. There is no telling what may happen to Tradition when the huge eager innocent mass, completely earnest, completely without piety, takes charge. (We are smugly used to depending upon Time as the Great Decider; except when some enterprising conductor hauls out a dusty forgotten work, and in one sudden flash we see what we may have missed, may be missing.) How much of the Sacred Repertoire of the Classics will stand up? One thing is certain—the face of our musical life must change, if we are once again to realize the ideal picture of a composer and his music in vital traffic with the public. This time it will be the entire public—everybody; an economic fact which will induce certain consequences. It may mean the end of the platinum Orchestra Age. It may mean a participation of audiences in music to a degree unheard of since the Greeks. It may even mean a revival of chamber music, with one program having a “run” of nine-performances-a-week throughout a season, like today’s theatre—why not? But one place music had held in society is on its way out, and another on its way in. The experimenters of “modern music,” the pioneers who spoke of “the musical revolution” spoke more truly than they knew.