

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

AFTER MUNICH

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IT is inevitable that the so-called Peace of Munich should lead to stock-taking in all branches of human activity, even in those seemingly far removed from the field of politics. From 1933 on, when Germany and later all the other Central European countries which were the heart of the deepest and most widely-spread western musical culture were being lost to the free community of peoples, it has been self-evident that the consequences must be of vital importance to our whole civilization. It would be idle to presume that something new had befallen us in September 1938. The immediate loss of one more country, great as that would be in more normal times, was as nothing compared to the cumulative sense of decadence in the defeated forces, and the decisive quality of the lost battle. Up to the end of democratic Czecho-Slovakia, however, there was some reason to hope that the ground already lost might be recovered, that the elements of this rich musical life which concerns us here could be preserved in Europe and that they might again come to the fore among the peoples that had contributed most to this last epoch of musical history. Now we know that the epoch is really at an end and that a great culture has died.

The attempt to discover why a culture dies is always difficult and unsatisfactory. Even when we look back from a far perspective at such a definite curve as is shown, for example, by the decline of Greek art, and where there is so clear a connection with the surrounding culture, what is truly causal is hard to perceive.

We must be satisfied to uncover a few hidden facts and bring them into the focus of certain fundamental relationships. No comprehensive manifestation of a civilization, such as art or music, can ever be reduced further than its smallest unit, the individual. That individual is a biological entity, infinitely complex and resistant in the face of too definite analysis. All esthetic systems, no matter how brilliant and expert, break down and lose relevance when driven too far in defiance of the essential mystery of this living entity. This mystery is not mystical. It is a synthesis too complicated to be probed by the tools of reason and intuitive understanding. If a single work of art itself defies complete explanation in terms of reason, so will the history of a series of such works.

Even at this immediate distance we can perceive the curve of the last few centuries of Western music. We see that Palestrina and Orlando, though they bore within them seeds of future development, ended a great epoch. We can see clearly an interim, an age of destruction of style, of experiment, a little over a hundred years in which an art is born even as it disintegrates. With Bach our age begins; and probably the last true masterpiece of this age was Verdi's *Falstaff*, completed in 1893. There have been great works written since; but do any of them possess the breadth, the sustained vitality, above all the inevitability that constitute a masterpiece? This is the moment to face the true state of our art. The lack of contact between the composer and the public, which we all realize and deplore, is not a mere accident explainable by the external state of our society; it is also an intrinsic lack on the part of the composer. If we are objective, we must realize that the masterworks of our time, *Pelléas, Sacre, Noces, Pierrot Lunaire* and the few others are narrower in scope than those of the preceding century; their perfection of design is too often achieved at the expense of their intensity, or their intensity at the expense of their formal design.

In our century there has cropped up an over-emphasis on detail, a disproportionate reliance on arbitrary intellectual logic in one school; in another, we see the attempt to restore a lost continuity with a more objective pre-Beethoven style dribble out into an inconsequential imitation of things past, redeemed at

times by wit or the flavor of an aristocratic personality but none the less inherently sterile. Untapped folk resources have stood such lone individuals as Janacek and Bartok in good stead, but viewed in relation to the general course of European music, they seem mere episodes. Within this century, too, the curve of musical achievement moves alarmingly downward, the last twenty years bringing us much less that is important than the first two decades. The obtrusion of the composer's personality into his work has decreased its personal significance. Beyond the objective universal worlds of *Figaro* and *Falstaff* loom the most incisive and dominating personalities. The composer never mentions himself, as it were, yet he is always there. But with the great twentieth century composers, even those who, through intellectual realization of the danger, have sedulously attempted to remain in the background, a certain almost querulous insistence on self-affirmation comes between them and the listener.

To trace the causes of these symptoms would be an impossible task even if we had more perspective. An opinion as to whether this lower level of style and quality is a transition to another renaissance belongs in the fruitless realm of prophecy. We wish to look at the present. In the present, at this moment, there are few signs of a new, upward trend; and, returning to our original starting-point, the peace of Munich, there are in our general civilization no signs of a stimulating vitality, which might be transmuted into a musical revival.



Yet despite the decline in the *quality* of twentieth century music there was one aspect of the general situation which did give hope for the future. This was the extraordinarily high level and distribution of musical culture, its deep basis in the lives of the common people, in all the central European countries. The center of this influence was Germany; but a continuous and homogeneous musical civilization also extended into Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Czecho-Slovakia and Hungary. These countries showed no power to avoid the blight of general decadence settling down on the creative forces of European music, but they at least possessed the only culture capable of absorbing that artificial quantitative stimulus given to music by its mech-

anization (radio, sound-film, etc.), which was engulfing the more superficial musical life of the Western European and American peoples. In those countries there had developed, on a firm basis of popular participation and respect, a most manifold musical culture.

To maintain its vitality, art need not always be continuously at a high creative level. An Alexandrian age which preserves and distributes the achievements of the past, while at the same time encouraging further experiment for the future, may be of profound use in keeping alive the inner cycle of energy at the root of a great artistic movement. One condition however must be fulfilled: maintenance of the highest standards of knowledge and practice. This condition was certainly met in the German musical world from 1918 to 1933. There was, above all, an individualistic cultivation of chamber music in the home on the one hand, and the communal institution of the opera on the other. In Germany alone there were several hundred opera houses to which the states and municipalities contributed. Recalling the great number of instrumentalists, solo and chorus singers, conductors and coaches that could be educated and absorbed by this system, and further the democracy and liberalism that controlled it, one can form some picture of the intensity of that German musical culture. But the comprehensive nature of the opera as an institution giving employment to musicians of all categories is not the sole explanation of its function as the center of the community's musical life. The intrinsic nature of the form, the interrelation with visual and dramatic art which is so often deplored by the fanatics of absolute music, in short its more obvious accessibility, make it the ideal means for bringing music spontaneously into the lives of children and the less sophisticated people who form the true reservoir for a living art. No matter what its inherent musical defects may be the opera is the ideal antidote to the over-specialization and isolation of music in our present civilization. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that it was due to the unique position and wide distribution of opera in Germany that that country was able to combine its high musical standards with so large and active a popular participation.

While the music of the great German period naturally dom-

inated its operatic and concert repertoire, the music of other nations and epochs was by no means excluded. There were infinitely more publications and performances of medieval music and of the works of contemporary composers of all nationalities in Germany than in any other country. Education both in the schools and universities and in the numerous specialized musical institutions was based on an incomparable brand of scholarship and practice.

Today we know there is no hope for this civilization to recover in our time. After Munich not only must we realize that Central Europe is finally lost to us, but we must face the prospect also of Western Europe lapsing so drastically either in a political or economic sense or both, that the ground for free development or even maintenance at its present questionable level of musical culture can no longer be found on that continent.



From now on the musical life of the United States will bear an ever increasing burden of responsibility as it becomes more and more the sole repository of a free European musical tradition and culture. With all due respect for the degree of excellence attained in certain branches of American musical life we do not feel that the general level of activity is such that our European heritage can be taken over without creating a serious rift in the curve of occidental music. For one thing we are confronted here with the concentration in a few cities of an intensive musical life without the healthy juxtaposition thereto of a broad base of folk music. The peculiar nature of our long period of colonization and the dominance in that period of the Anglo-Saxon civilization in its most unmusical phase is certainly responsible for this; it is not a symptom of any inherent absence of musicality. This lack of deep-rooted musical instinct, of any homogeneous or definite contour inspires the almost frantic efforts of so many composers to find an American style. What is usually offered to us as the musical reflection of our pioneer spirit, our industrial age, our youthful quality or what you will, turns out on calm perusal to be only a bit more flat and stale and certainly as European in its essential vocabulary as the frankly academic music of our previous American generation. It would be much more

characteristically American not to waste energy on such artificial quests, but to undertake to form the practical basis of an indigenous musical culture by raising the general standard and diffusing it throughout the country.

First of all in resolutely facing the true situation we must realize the present inadequacy of our educational institutions to meet the needs of a nation of one hundred and thirty million people. It is true that progress is being made in this field also, but too often that only serves to produce a state of complacency in the face of a need for further advance. Here we encounter a vicious circle. The majority of our teachers have little practical experience as general musicians; and the pupils who are turned out, even if they are well prepared, are simply in the position of being all dressed up with no place to go. Up to the present this problem has been evaded. The star system, the concentration of hopes for the few rich prizes in available positions, and the over-centralization of music through the radio, whereby a few orchestras and soloists can spuriously fill the musical needs of the nation, may negate the value of much that has been done for the progress of American musical life in the past years.

Of course not every aspect of the German musical system is perfect in itself, or even capable of transplantation in its original forms to America. But when such a system has flourished so long and with such tangible results of artistic achievement much can be learned that would help us to solve our own problems. As the first numbing effects of the European catastrophe wear off there appears to be a great deal that we can salvage from the culture of our mother continent. The endowed educational institutions, the great private foundations, and the government, have let a strange puritanical tendency influence them. An individual may be helped, a school even, above all the more static institutions like libraries and museums. These are encouraged and supported. But let the question arise of helping to found and run an orchestra or an opera which would offer practical training, experience, and careers to a whole generation of musicians, and at once the feeling prevails that these give too direct a pleasure to people. They are not quite safely educational enough. They are, in short, in an unconscious way felt to be immoral and as

such untouchable by our great, objectively-run public institutions. Is it Utopian to ask that some of our richly endowed foundations employ a carefully selected group of American and foreign musical experts to make a comparative survey of the Central European and American musical cultures, to evaluate the various elements in both, and recommend certain necessary changes in our musical life?

Throughout the country people are striving to found local orchestras, many groups toy with the idea of a local opera. We complain that we have no conductors. Is it a wonder that Central Europe has produced so many when musicians scarcely out of the conservatory must coach singers, prepare performances, and eventually conduct them in the very beginning of their normal careers? We could even use the score or two of experienced conductors, composers and teachers who have taken refuge here from fascist persecution in Europe to train Americans for the many new jobs which must be created before the musical needs of America can even begin to be filled. A little planning, a little direction, coordination and support given to those individualistic strivings of which we are so proud can rescue our musical activities from the many dangers that threaten them, from the encroachment of big business and monopolistic tendencies which pervert and strangle our concert and radio life now. Above all, the creation of local operatic centers would go far toward furnishing the one necessary, but hitherto lacking, fundamental for any large-scale musical life of the community.

The defeat of freedom in Europe has given us the responsibility but also the opportunity to renew the universal European culture in our own country. If we can infuse our own youth and vitality into the great tradition given now into our keeping we will have fulfilled our mission and at the same time have created that true American music for which we all are searching.