

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

THE FUNCTION OF THE CONCERT

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THE art of music clearly involves a double process: the original creation, and its subsequent performance. Music is a physical phenomenon, vibrations of air occurring in a process limited in time; its internal contents are revealed, it has real life, only when sound vibrations occur in the air. (Some professional musicians can read a score and faithfully reproduce its contents to themselves; but in this case what exists is not the music, but the image of it made by the reader.)

The sculptor or the painter conceives and carries out his work; when he completes it, there it is, existing exactly as it was conceived and executed. The musician's case is different: when he finishes his work he leaves only a written representation of his musical conception; the work does not exist as music, as sound vibrations. Someone must still perform it to give it real life. Two persons are necessarily involved in music—he who creates and he who performs; while only one is needed in the plastic arts.

I insist on this special condition of music in order to indicate the importance, in our time, of performance as a specialized technic.

In the course of the development of Western music we see the role of the performer becoming constantly more important. In primitive times, an impulse, a feeling, a musical idea, were immediately followed by their related expressions: an exclamation, a song. The priests of primitive tribes were in themselves either the creators and singers of their own songs or adaptors of tradi-

tional ones. In the great civilizations of antiquity, the musician *par excellence* was the one who created and performed his own songs. Most frequently, his creation was a reflection of the popular national musical wealth, but that is another subject. What I want to point out here is simply that in the beginning the two functions—creation and performance—were practised by the same person.

The specialization of these practices by two distinct persons, becoming more and more accentuated and obvious, paralleled the development of the writing down of music. A musician playing from notes is now clearly a performer, rather than a creator. When notation is rudimentary it leaves more to the performer's initiative, but as it is perfected it will more and more limit his role.

At the present time our notation is far from perfect; but it has nevertheless meant the complete specialization of the creator and performer.

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The musical organizations of today having the most powerful resources and the most effective means of action are institutions dedicated solely to musical performance. There does not seem to be any similar encouragement of the creation of new music—music which is not yet written, but which can be written.

For example, the great symphony societies and opera companies of the United States, Europe and South America carry on activities at an extraordinarily increased cost, with the sole object of performing the music of the past, the music that is "consecrated" and "beyond discussion." Meanwhile the production of new music is unable to find adequate stimulus. It is impossible to "consecrate" music that is not played, while, on the other hand, we forget that the music now "beyond discussion" was in the majority of cases hotly discussed in its own time. We have a horror of "discussing;" we want too much calm; above everything we want to "avoid the bother." We forget that the birth of creation is conflict. Our great body of consecrated music, the patrimony left to us by our forbears, was the product of discussion and conflict. All of it was *new music*.

We should not think of this term, *new music*, as applying to a sensational production which is academic in the final analysis; but rather as of something new in the natural sense of the term, in the same sense that Handel, for example, needed new operas for the theatre he managed; in the same sense that Bach constantly needed new music for his religious services; in the same sense that the Italian opera theatres of the eighteenth century incessantly sought for novelties; in the same sense that the noblemen, princes and dukes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constantly needed new music for their courts and salons. All the music of Bach, to cite only the most glorious example, was music written for a determined occasion, object, orchestra, chorus, or organ; all of it was *occasional music*.

The managers, the proprietors of enterprises, the noblemen, and the Church needed this new music for the better carrying out of the ends they followed—economic, social, and religious. For this reason, they rented the composers' services, either paying them monthly salaries or contracting with them for a stated amount. What else can we call the "commissions" a Haydn received for symphonies? Always, be it said in passing, the composers were poorly paid; and for this generosity the patrons were able to pass as great benefactors, magnanimous Maecenases.

The great noblemen knew well what they were doing; they supported orchestras as indispensable parts of their domestic establishments. The trumpeters were as important as the scullions or grooms of Prince Leopold; the instruments for the orchestra were part of the furniture and menage indispensable to a palace.

The unity was complete; there existed—forming parts of the same whole—the well established demand for a specific musical product, and the means of providing it at the opportune time and place. Also, this unity included the double functions of creation and performance, which—it hardly need be said—were, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, carried out by two persons who, though completely distinct, still lived together intimately in a constant process of mutual influence and identification. This identification of the composer and his performers is a very important point, on which a thousand observations full of vital interest can be made. For the moment, I want to point out only the

indisputable fact that their association was by nature indissoluble, functional. How can we imagine Bach writing religious music not intended for his organ and his singers?

In the nineteenth century things began to change. The concert flourished as a democratic institution; serious music was brought to the people; the musician—creator and performer—was liberated from the Boss-Maecenas, from the boss-church (from the boss-impresario his liberation was not so complete), and he felt happy.

The ivory-tower artist was the natural reaction against the functional unity, the collective entities of the preceding centuries. The concert nevertheless continued to prosper, because its mission was real and corresponded to a social necessity. But it never reached, has not yet reached, the category of a true institution like the other unities which brought together and coordinated necessarily the multiple functions of music: creation, performance, organization.

There were, without doubt, exceptional cases in the nineteenth century. Wagner had the energy and genius to create his own private functional unity. Liszt, on the other hand, was a typical *concert musician*. There have been, and will continue to be exceptions, but if the situation is judged as a whole it will be seen that the breaking of the functional unity and the consequent "emancipation" of the composer, have had manifest disadvantages for him, and that a consequent retarding of the development of new concert music has occurred. The composer finds himself more and more suspended in the air.

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In the midst of this sort of anarchy, the concert has lent itself to increasing the importance of the performer at the cost of the composer. And this fact, unfortunate in many ways, will sooner or later bring with it a serious lack for both—and for the public, a lack of repertoire.

The concert may seem to be getting along very well without giving the composer the necessary stimulus. But that is without doubt a misreading of the facts.

We admire our classics very much, but the concert will not be able to keep its public forever merely by repeating the same rep-

ertoire, even though the idiosyncrasies of our interpreters bring us "novelties" each season. This is clear for obvious reasons. It has been thought that the concert is in a period of decadence because of the appearance of the radio. I think, however, that it has not yet achieved its own true unity.

It must be clearly understood that the concert is by nature an institution which has in its care at the present one of the most important expressions of human thought. On the other hand, music has in our time a very important mission as part of the general education of the public. This is a new mission that it did not have in earlier centuries; or, rather, a reborn one, if we recall that in Greece it had a similar role.

The big symphony societies, the university, school, and college departments of music, and all the concert-giving societies in general must realize that they should round out the musical organization assigned to them by once more making the encouragement of creation the nucleus of their function.

The composer should be integrated into the musical life of the present, and should have in himself a full sense of reality about his work and about the meaning it will have for the public at whom it is directed. I might say, in default of a better expression, that music ought always to be playable and audible. The composer will understand this only when he lives constantly in the actual practice of music. On this point the case of Bach is again profoundly illustrative.

As for the musical organizations—what greater glory could they achieve than to fulfill their integral role in a musical flowering that might compare to the great periods of musical history?