

THE CASE AGAINST "GEBRAUCHSMUSIK"

HERMANN CLOSSON

PHONOGRAPHS, mechanical pianos and organs, radio and the sound films are inventions too startling and revolutionary, affecting the lives of too many people, not to bring with them important consequences. But from the point of view of music and musicians are the problems they raise really so essential?

We need not take up the question of the origin and application of "Gebrauchsmusik," "music for use," in the past. It would be easy to argue that a great part of the body of music has come down to us from such a derivation. For the sonata form derives from the suite which in turn is a succession of dances. Moreover the *Matthew Passion* is obviously a prime instance of music for use. But historical examples lend too much weight to any formula.

It is the public rather than the musician that has been influenced by mechanical music. And moreover, that kernel of the public which makes up the musical audiences of large cities has not been so much affected as it has been numerically increased by the addition of new, so-called connoisseurs of music. For the music lover the phonograph is interesting simply in its concert function. He buys only "good" records, that is the records of "good music"; his psychology in listening to the records is that of the concert audience. Recorded music offers him no pleasure peculiar to itself; his sensations are made up of recollections, allusions and conceptions of how the music might "really" sound. He graciously fills in the gaps of reminiscence and even takes a certain pleasure in so doing. As for that new public which does not know now and has never known the way to the concert hall, the phonograph is but an instrument of infinite variety, infinite facility, ever-present, cheaper than the piano, good for everything and right for nothing (except perhaps for dancing) always

[*Mr. Closson's article is published in this issue as an interesting antithesis to the "young German" point of view on the same subject, expressed by Mr. Gutman.—Ed.]

ready to add a cheerful, unobtrusive and not too taxing companionship to life.

These remarks are even more applicable to the radio fan. The phonograph devotee at least chooses the records himself to suit his own taste. However misled by his own ignorance, he nevertheless has the prevailing fashions and fads for his guides. The radio fan has not even this choice. Everything is selected for him. A glance at the international programs reveals their mediocrity.

Radio has the fatal vice of being even more convenient than the sufficiently lavish phonograph. Here human sloth finds complete fulfillment, beyond its wildest hope. What indifference, what casualness are the concomitants of these easy pleasures! The waves of sound not only fail to interrupt or moderate conversation or household activities, but the listener bounces unconcernedly from Bach to Offenbach from Scarlatti to Gershwin. What is really worse is that such transitions create not the slightest ripple of emotion, nor even uneasiness at the change. The phrase "Unterhaltungsmusik," conversation music, a paradox if it means music designed for such a purpose, defines radio remarkably well, for it is at its best in accompanying talk, brightening platitudes and filling silences.

It has been claimed for the phonograph and radio that they would promote musical education but the actual facts belie this optimism. The radio fan has no reason to attend concerts, where everything is arranged for his annoyance—set programs, tiresome music, silence and enforced immobility. Truly it is much more agreeable to listen to music while reading the newspaper. The very advantages of these recording and distributing devices render them harmful. Bringing music within the reach of everybody, they make it commonplace. The possibilities, slight as they are, of letting each person choose, of following his own taste and predilections, of self development, are destroyed by the diversity and confusion of all that is recorded and broadcast. Relative values dulled, prevent discrimination and finally disappear.

We are, in short, confronted with a new conception of auditory diversion which lies between noise and music and possesses the characteristics of both. Leaving aside the question of degradation of art, the reduction of music to the level of providing pleasure

of an inferior order is intolerable because it is unreasonable.

The composer has been promised new possibilities, a vast domain with a brand new audience that is isolated, distant, and to whom music must be communicated under special conditions and whose attention must be held by new methods. But this ideal audience does not exist and cannot be relied on. There is something dispiriting about an enormous number, a formless mass. One is at a loss whom to address and how. The composer is no longer dealing with a tangible group fixed in a concert hall, bound together by a particular atmosphere, at the disposition, one might almost say, at the mercy of the music. He has no hold over his new public, so vast, so careless, so diversified that the same stimulus can arouse in it completely opposed reactions.

Certain musicians fail to realize that the invention of the phonograph and the radio, miraculous as they may be, is far inferior to the very simple idea, for example, of putting pistons on the wind instruments. . . . Moreover, a medium is never sufficient for the creation or rejuvenation of a style. (We might expect something from the mechanical organ and piano. Here a single musical roll can perform the function of six or eight hands as Stravinsky has demonstrated. But the mechanical piano has already fallen into disuse, despised by those who prefer to kill off a work with their own interpretation, and abandoned by others in favor of the phonograph and the radio.)

Music regarded merely as a function of human activity has not played a negligible role; it has stimulated the creation of remarkable works, admirable popular and folk songs. But this is a kind of music whose quality is determined by necessity, it is the very fruit of necessity. Negro spirituals are not exactly "compositions," they are born of usage and bear the mark.

Present day "Gebrauchsmusik" seems to be principally music for the dance, the sound films and "music for amateurs." Dance music, universally represented by jazz has been too well defined to cause any confusion. Attempts to transplant jazz into other forms have been on the whole, without consequence. A splendid means, an instrument of varied resource, jazz grows inadequate and unbearable when it is diverted from its original purpose, an "immediate effect." (The theories of M. Wiener and his col-

leagues notwithstanding, the tiniest fugue of Bach is more essentially polyrhythmic than all the jazz in the world.)

Up to now the sound film has given us only wretched results. Obviously no well defined formula has as yet been found. Producers have been content to record a musical adaptation which has been carefully made, not for musical reasons, but because, being finished once and for all, it must therefore be made decently. There never has been a proper definition of the nature and the results of a union between the moving image and music. It is not merely a question of breaking the silence, as is demonstrated by the intelligent choice often made by the adapter. But the music must always be appreciably secondary to the screened image, inferior from a dynamic point of view and lacking in a certain emotional force. For it sometimes happens in the movies that the music suddenly asserts its rights, taking one away from the visual images into a blind world of sound. This of course is not permissible.

The sound film relegates music to the inferior role of accompaniment, a sort of running bass that contributes merely a kind of emotional atmosphere. The composer writing specially for the "talkies" is in danger of falling back into the form of the symphonic poem and all the mistakes of program music, or, still worse, into a hazardous impressionism. On the other hand if he permits the music to take precedence over the picture he again faces the unsolved problem of the proper role of music in opera.

The objective of "Gebrauchsmusik" is undoubtedly a "return" to music for the amateur, a conception warmly defended by certain musicians of central Europe. They assert that music has become too difficult, too learned, that it is conceived only for specialists and has been diverted from its primary function. To this contention they bring the support of innumerable historical arguments. There is of course no way of putting the question of the origin and eternal goal of music to a plebiscite. My own conviction is that the art of music has always been the product of specialists, from the periods of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and that neither the motets of Lassus, the organ works of Buxtehude, the sonatas of Beethoven nor the works of Schumann were made for "everybody." If certain works of Couperin, some

quartets of Haydn, some small pieces by Chopin are more or less generally accessible, it is in spite of themselves. Nor is the idea now advanced altogether new. The virtuosi of the last century, writing works for their own performance, deemed it advisable to create that "easy" salon music of which the *romance* and *pot-pourri* are the choicest flowers. Who has the dismal courage today to return to them?

"Simplicity is an essential of all 'Gebrauchsmusik'", to quote one of its advocates, who adds that simplicity does not imply fatuousness. This latter observation is so obvious as to be self-understood. It is apparent to everyone that polyphonic complexity has reached its climax, that we must "come back" if we have not already done so. But the desired simplicity must be organic, derived from the innermost conception of the musician and not imposed by external elements or determined by the feeble capacity of the interpreter. The conditions of execution, the problems of *tessitura*, of volume, etc. should play only the role of limitation in the pursuit of order and control.

In his recent work, *Lehrstück*, Hindemith invites the public to take part in the performance. The melody is written on great placards so that all may join in the chorus. Apart from the "Salvation Army" aspect of the combination, a rather serious confusion results. For it is not an irrational distinction that slowly but ever more clearly and firmly has grown up between the two musical attitudes, the active and the passive. A communicated emotion may be more powerful than a personal one, and in fact its very character is expressed by this difference. For in collective emotion, the choral song or popular fanfare, there is something undeniably gross, an embarrassing unanimity.

It is important in the interest of music, of its integrity, to maintain this distinction. Music is not an art of agreement, something exactly common. It must be selected, unusual and aloof. And these new mechanical elements tend to vulgarize and drag it down. Music must be militant or give up the ghost. Fortunately there are others who like myself feel that "mechanization" is not, all appearances to the contrary, the proper image of our time. In the defense of music it is necessary to denounce its worst enemy—pseudo-modernism.