

# MODERN MUSIC

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## THE COMPOSER AND HIS CRITIC\*

AARON COPLAND

IT IS generally agreed that the writer on music in our daily newspapers influences the opinions of his readers to an extent that is unknown in other countries. This is probably explained by the fact not so much that our music critics are more competent than those abroad, but that our public is more docile. Whatever the reason is it follows that the opinions held by our music lover on the subject of American music will largely be formed by the opinion of his musical mentor, the daily music critic. It is of prime importance therefore that the critic should take his job seriously and that he be wide awake and intelligent in his attitude toward our native music, since he has it in his power, at least temporarily, to further or to hinder the immediate future of our musical development in no small measure. It is particularly important *now*, when, with each passing year, American music is coming more to the fore as regards general recognition and public performance.

No sensible critic would deny that the relationship between himself and the American composer is a significant one; moreover it is a relationship which is in a continual state of flux and perennially open for discussion. The critic has, in the ordinary carrying out of his function as critic, sufficient opportunity to express himself on the subject of the American composer, his qualities and his failings. Let us, for a change, examine the critic from the standpoint of the composer and see if we cannot point out wherein he is lacking in relation to American music.

\* On May 1st Mr. Copland made an informal address at the conference of composers and critics held during the opening festival of American chamber music at Yaddo. The discussion was reported in a misleading dispatch to several of the newspapers and resulted in the publication of a number of "replies" by critics in the East. Mr. Copland here sums up his point of view on the subject.—Ed.

It is always only with the greatest difficulty that the critical fraternity can be brought to consider why the American composer should find fault with their critical efforts. They are convinced of their own good intentions. I do not mean for a moment to question those good intentions. Our critics are all honest men, all desirous of doing what they can to further the art of music in America. They are all, according to their individual talents, ready and willing to judge an American work on its own merits with an open and unprejudiced mind. They are even prepared to greet enthusiastically the rare American work which is capable of meeting with their thorough approval. But in doing so much they have the illusion of doing enough and it is this idea which must be exposed for what it is worth.

In the first place there is one outstanding point of which the American critic is undoubtedly aware, but which he does not keep sufficiently to the fore either in his mind or in that of his reading public, namely, that the composer in any country is the central focus of the entire musical situation. It is particularly important that this fact be emphasized in America, for it is only here that the composer is called upon to play so menial a role. In every circumstance—whether it be the critic's week-end column or concerts for the unemployed or the foreign tour of an American orchestra—the American composer is the last to be thought of, if at all. Not so long ago the native composer deserved no more attention than this, but that time is past and the composer is now justified in demanding his rightful place in the scheme of things.

For it is a truism that so long as a country cannot create its own music—and recognize it once it is created—just so long will its musical culture be in a hybrid and unhealthy condition. A true musical culture never has been and never can be solely based upon the importation of foreign artists and foreign music, and the art of music in America will always be essentially a museum art until we are able to develop a school of composers who can speak directly to the American public in a musical language which expresses fully the deepest reactions of the American consciousness to the American scene. It is the elementary duty of every critic who recognizes this fact—and they all do—to

realize that the time has come when he is expected to take more than a passive part in the encouragement and development of an indigenous American music, when he must be prepared to exert himself in its behalf.

The music critics may in all sincerity ask "What would you have us do?" (The majority of the press however, has the conviction that it already does all it can and that to do more would be "chauvinism" and "flag waving.") Our first and foremost demand is "Acquaint yourselves with whatever American music already exists." It is my contention that the music critics of our country have only superficial knowledge of the music of our best known contemporary composers, whether they be radicals or conservatives, and that they are absolutely ignorant of the greater proportion of the music written in America during the past ten years. Their blanket statements as to its "lack of virility" or its "imitation of European models" are based upon an outmoded and insufficient familiarity with the music itself and constitute an unfair attack on a body of composers of whose work they know little or nothing.

We have the temerity to demand that our music critics be as thoroughly grounded for the formation of an authoritative opinion on the subject of our leading composers as our dramatic critics are when they speak of O'Neill or our literary critics when they speak of Dreiser. Has anyone ever seen an American music critic with the score of an American composer under his arm? Yes, possibly, if it is an opera which has achieved the standards set by the Metropolitan Opera Company. Otherwise, our critics are dependent for their judgment of even our best known men on a single hearing in a premiere performance (which seldom does justice to the work) of scores which are admittedly not easy to comprehend in the first place. Unfortunately music cannot be re-visited like a play or re-read like a book so that the critic of music must discover some other methods of procedure.

For our leading composers are in dire need of criticism, real criticism I mean, which will point out their shortcomings and weaknesses as well as their qualities, and if the critic of the daily press is unwilling or unable to criticize in this real sense

let him not obfuscate matters by setting up first impressions and half-baked opinions as standards by which a man's work can be judged.

If the critic is so little familiar with the work of our leaders, what can be said of his knowledge of our less celebrated composers whose compositions do achieve performances, but not, as it happens, in Carnegie or Town Hall. They know the names of these composers well enough, but not their music. And so long as they deign to ignore the concerts at which this music is performed (such as the Sunday afternoon recitals of the League of Composers or the Pan-American Composers programs) they cannot know the music of our younger men.

If they knew all this music, and knew it well, they would realize that there is something alive and growing on our own soil which deserves to be championed; for, like any new growth, American music needs nurturing. They would consider it just as important to insist upon the potentialities of this new music as they are insistent about the qualities of, let us say, Sibelius. They would give space in their newspapers commensurate with the interest they knew they could arouse. They would display an a priori curiosity in the composer's work, not merely in his finished product, but also in the fate of the work just done and in the creation of the work to come. In so doing they would help to dispel the sense of a vacuum in which every American is forced to create. They would consider it part of their function to demand the performance of valuable contributions to American music which for one reason or another have been overlooked—to name but one glaring example, the *Symphony* of Roger Sessions. They would see to it that their foreign correspondents reported at as great length the playing of all-American concerts abroad as the playing of any other music. They would bring to our attention the playing of an American work by an out-of-town orchestra with as much interest as they reprint the activities of some obscure provincial band in Hungary.

What we want, finally, is an American critic who will concern himself in the creation of an American music to the same degree as Edward Evans in English music, of Henri Prunières in French music. Is that too much to ask? What we want is a newspaper

critic of discrimination and authority who will not depend for his knowledge of American music on whatever a conductor may happen to choose to present to him, a critic who will seek out rather than avoid our music, even if it necessitates going to concert halls below Forty-second Street or above Fifty-seventh Street, a critic who will think it worth his while to travel even two hundred miles when he is given an opportunity to hear the works of nineteen representative men at a festival of American music, a critic who will have some curiosity to meet and to talk with the composers themselves. There is no doubt in my mind that this critic will soon be found. What we shall want from him is honest criticism, not chauvinistic criticism, and judgments which are based upon a sound knowledge and comprehension of the music itself.