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THE COMPOSER, THE STATE AND TODAY

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"The ultimate purpose of the State is neither to govern nor to terrorize human beings nor to submit them to any power other than their own, but, rather, to free the individual of fear, so that his life may be as secure as possible and he may without harm to himself or others exercise to the full his natural right to live and function. It is not the purpose of the State to turn human beings, reasonable creatures, into animals or automatons, but, rather, to enable them to develop their spiritual and physical powers unendangered, to make free and independent use of their reason, and not to fight one another in anger, hate and treachery or to feel hostile towards one another. The true purpose of the State is freedom."

BENEDICT DE SPINOZA,
Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670)

I. OUR HERITAGE

BARUCH DE SPINOZA's conceptions of the relation of the individual to the State and the State to the individual was set down at a time when the rights of the individual as against society still needed special emphasis. The individual did not exist, practically speaking, apart from society. Society assigned him his position from the moment he was born. There were definite social classes, there was a strict social hierarchy; a person was a nobleman or a commoner or a peasant, and his life ran its course to the end in the confines set by the Lord and the authorities. It was almost impossible to break down the social barriers, and a nobleman would never have thought of becoming, say, an organist, no matter how much of a musical genius he might be,

any more than an organist would have dreamed of becoming a general or a high chamberlain, regardless of his talent for military or social strategy. The State, society, the community divided the population into groups, and prescribed how the member of each group should behave in every conceivable situation. The Church, licensed by the State, officiated with it and controlled all religious thinking, if necessary by force.

In return, compensating him for these coercions, the individual was made *a part of* the community. The community looked after him. The apprentice became a journeyman, the journeyman a master craftsman. Even the beggars were organized, and no member of the beggars' guild had to fear starvation. It is easy to see how *revolutionary* Spinoza's statement that the true purpose of the State was freedom must have seemed at that time. For the true purpose of the State was, precisely, the lack of freedom, coercion even in things of the spirit. The author of that statement, indeed, was taught the consequences of trying to be an "individual" by his own coreligionists; he had to work at a trade, cutting optical lenses, in order to live as an independent person, an individual, a free man in spirit.

The French Revolution changed all this. It gave the individual real freedom, at least apparently—independence of thought, independence of the bondage of birth: liberty, equality, fraternity. The artist, too, the musician, was set free. But at the same time the individual fell prey to economic coercions and conditions—a far more terrible bondage. None of the members of the Bach family, confined within the set limits of their craft, had any serious economic problems. They became cantors, organists or town fifers, they married and begot children; and Johann Sebastian's genius, although it made his social position more difficult (for it involved him in frequent quarrels with the authorities), did not make it impossible. It was not till his son Friedemann's time that the self-willed artist came into serious conflict with social conditions. Another genius of the epoch before the Revolution —Mozart—was destroyed by this conflict. If Mozart had obeyed his father and remained in the archbishop's service, he might possibly have lived ten years longer and, presumably, would have died as a snugly (or not so snugly) installed Salzburg

Kapellmeister. Instead, he established himself in Vienna as an "independent artist," depending on an aristocratic musical patronage that was already in decline, and in every practical respect proved a failure. The first to succeed in confronting the world as an individual was Beethoven. He was the first to have his existence assured by a few aristocrats without offering anything in return except his creative personality; and he was almost the last as well. Only Wagner, sixty or seventy years later, achieved something similar, and then the aristocrat was an eccentric king and the whole case a romantic miracle. Incidentally, even Beethoven had to contend with a world grown capitalistic and its representatives—music publishers, concert managers, opera directors. It was a bitter struggle, and he cannot be said to have triumphed.

Since Beethoven there has been little fundamental change. He completely revolutionized the relation of the composer to society. All the ties that bound the composer to the various institutions of society were loosened by his example; or rather, he is the most powerful, the clearest example of that loosening by the rationalistic eighteenth century and its outcome, the French Revolution. For whom are his symphonies written? Obviously not for Viennese society, but for Napoleon, the destroyer of the old world (not the profiteer of the Revolution)—that is, for the whole world. And his piano sonatas? A lonely soul, an individual, writes them for all other lonely souls—an invisible community. His mass, although performed in church in Vienna, is unsuitable to divine service. Church and composer have lost contact, never since regained. In the entire nineteenth century not a single fugue for organ or choral prelude was written like the Bach organ and choral preludes, in which an individual expresses himself fully and freely *within the body* of the Church, that is, as part of a community of faith, and therefore creates something eternally valid. What is written for the Church later on is minor functional art, inwardly dead. It is the climax of absurdity that the musically most "interesting" Protestant organ works of the nineteenth or twentieth century were written by Max Reger, a Catholic who was obsessed by Bach. To whom are Beethoven's last string quartets addressed? They are mono-

logues in four voices, so aloof, so subjective, so transcendental that they have been grasped only by later generations and can be truly experienced only in a concert-hall by a small community of kindred spirits.

That brings us to a dire subject: the concert-hall. If there is such a thing as a social achievement of the nineteenth century in music, it is the concert-hall. The significance of the opera, too, changes in the nineteenth century, most of all in Germany, least of all in Italy: it ceases to be a court or high society function and becomes a product of middle-class or state art-presentation; but it remains the opera. The concert-hall, however, is no longer the place where the composer and his listeners, harmoniously giving and taking, form an ideal community; it is now simply a room where an utterly heterogeneous assembly is admitted, upon payment of a certain fee, and the hard task of *binding* these individuals into a community is left to the artist. Of course there are gradations: from the choral concert, at which (it is hoped) at least the performers enjoy themselves, and the orchestra concert, with its own subscription public, to the solo recital, where a handful of people in free seats constitute the audience and a few unfortunate specialists furnish the public credentials known as criticism. In this same concert-hall everything produced by the past is indiscriminately reproduced: the *St. Matthew Passion,* which Bach wrote for the Good Friday service at the Thomas-Kirche, and *The Mass of Life* by Frederick Delius; the little Haydn symphony of Eszterház and the monstrous *Alpine Symphony* of Richard Strauss; Mozart's intimate sonatas and Liszt's exhibitionist sonatas; Schumann's songs, written for the home, and Hugo Wolf's Goethe songs.

II. THE COMPOSER AND THE COMMUNITY

That is our heritage: one so heavily mortgaged that it would be wiser to decline it. For by this time the crisis is even sharper; the gulf separating the composer from the community has widened steadily. By crisis, I mean the outer as well as the inner crisis. The trite statement must be repeated: the composer, the creative musician, also suffers from the economic crisis. Since

he doesn't live on the moon, he, too, is affected by prosperity and its reverse. Concert-halls do exist, after all; there remain a few pianists who do not content themselves with Chopin, a few conductors to whom the *Pathétique* by Peter Iljitsch Tchaikovsky seems somewhat outmoded, a few violinists who think they have played César Franck's *Sonata* in A-major often enough: and so the composer, too, is naturally anxious to have people keep on going to concerts and to have his works performed. And since there are still some such creatures as music-lovers, who take an interest in contemporary production, it is important that pianos and violins should continue to be bought, music-teachers engaged for the children, and music written for the new generation. If the family has no money, to put it drastically, the publisher, too, will have no money with which to commission, print and pay for music for the use of the family. If the economic situation of the world were better, the composer, too, would profit a little. Never has the power of the old masters—of Bach and Mozart and Beethoven—been greater than it is today; never has their realm been so far-reaching, never has the demand for music been so large and the appreciation of music so developed. But it must be admitted that there is little hope of the composer's sharing in a possible "prosperity."

The radio furnishes a warning. It is almost the only great institution of the present day that could act as a patron for composers. In a certain sense it has done its part. Its consumption of music is so enormous that it has been compelled to take even works by modern and ultra-modern composers, despite the inevitable protests and "Letters to the Editor" of indignant listeners. In the early days of the radio, when people were still interested in theoretically exploring the possibilities of the new, revolutionary invention, it was recognized that there could and should be a music specially composed for wireless transmission, for the isolated listener: a music without inflated or empty spots, transparent in sound—what might be described as a music occupying no space, a "two-dimensional" music. So far as I know, all attempts along this line have been given up long ago, and the radio now sends out the whole of musical literature from Wagnerian opera to the latest popular tune, without differentiation.

But it no longer commissions music by modern composers. It should do so again.

The only other possible employer for the modern composer is the talkie. It has become even more important than the radio, and it will continue to be important because the industry is forced constantly to cope with new problems. Theoretically speaking, these problems are always artistic too, and could be solved artistically. But it lies in the very nature of the industry that it will always employ only routine specialists, because it has to consider the undeveloped instincts of an international mass-public. Arnold Schönberg once wrote a couple of ideal film-music scenes, but his remains a unique case. In those bygone years of experimentation, efforts were made to derive the acoustic and visual elements from a common source, and Darius Milhaud composed extremely subtle and witty accompaniments for various scenes of a typical "newsreel." The prospects then were still bright for modern young composers. Today the talkie industry will deal only with those modern composers who have facility and are willing to compromise. And today we would even be lucky if only there were more *modern* composers who had at least facility.

The radio and the talkies are the only economic fields that could offer the modern composer work, big and little tasks, if they chose. For the rest, the composer has become more and more isolated. He stands alone, without ties, confronting the gigantic whole of society. And this society feels that it has no obligations towards him. In a way it is right, or at any rate justified. We have not yet mentioned another nineteenth century achievement, which in previous centuries was unknown on this scale—namely, the conservatory. The old conservatories in Naples and Venice were charity institutions designed for specific religious and secular demands, the church service and the opera. The conservatories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are institutes of musical education, which in all *good* instances, it is true, accept only more or less talented pupils without, however, being able to provide for the utilization, the future of these talents. And so we have young people trained as piano virtuosos who become piano teachers, male and female singers who vainly besiege the offices of opera agents, conductors for whom there is

no orchestra, and composers whose works find no publisher.

The composer is in the most desperate situation of all. His only chance is the modern music festival. If he is lucky, his work is accepted by the jury; if he is even luckier, it is carefully rehearsed by a conductor or a string-quartet or a pianist, and receives good notices. Then, perhaps, it may even be published. A direct approach to interpretative artists is usually hopeless; for, especially if they are celebrated, they are almost insuperably "afraid of novelties." In both hemispheres there are not a dozen conductors, pianists, violinists or singers left who consider it their duty to be pioneers for composers who have not been dead at least twenty years. Outside of Italy there are no longer half a dozen opera-directors who can risk accepting and producing a new work purely on the basis of its *artistic* merits. Germany, during the period of 1919-1929, was the country where that was possible; then the economic crisis and later the so-called political revolution demolished German opera so completely, crushed the budding of a modern operatic art so utterly, that a new harvest is out of the question for decades to come.

What is true of opera holds for all other branches of music as well. The composer's field is narrowing. His customers—church, school, choral societies—are becoming fewer and fewer as the State arrogates more rights. Church and school are essentially conserving, conservative powers and will not take even their new problems to a composer who must still prove his creative ability. Consequently new groups were formed, at any rate in Germany, to foster music as an expression of a new state of mind; they ignored all "romantic" music, the classics included, they sought a tradition in Bach and even earlier art, they cultivated the playing of primitive instruments and, above all, communal singing. Music was to be taken out of the concert-hall; the passive listener was to be replaced by an active participant; music was once more to become a part of life. It was a pity that this movement, too, attracted only "small fry" among the composers. Hindemith devoted a part of his work to it; but as the reactionary State immediately sensed that here was a real talent it "cut him out" and condemned him to silence.

The composer's surest support at the present time would still

seem to be private patronage. It still exists in the United States, England, France. Is the special preference of the early "new music" for the string quartet to be attributed to an internal cause or to this patronage? Probably to both. The string quartet is the ideal vehicle for a transparent, pure, abstract and yet emotional music; neither the orchestra nor the piano can equal it in this respect. Even today a "problematic" work written for string quartet is the easiest to get performed. It is not an accident that the most celebrated patroness of new music favors chamber-music. Perhaps the "most enduring" works of new music owe their existence to this protection. The composer of today, facing, a huge indifferent world alone, could count himself happy if wealth and the love of art were more often combined to form such patronage.

III. MUSIC AND THE STATE

This brings us to the subject of "Music and the State" which includes "Music and Politics." The relation of the composer to politics matters so little that it can be disposed of in a few words. The artistic quality, not the political viewpoint, is what counts in a piece of music. It is a special stroke of luck that *God Save the King* and to an even greater degree the immortal *Gott erhalte* of Joseph Haydn happen to be such good songs, and a special stroke of bad luck that, say, the *Horst Wessel-Lied* of the Third Reich is such wretched, bungled hackwork. It is a tribute to the musical power of the radical Hanns Eisler, for instance, that his choruses are for the most part full of interest, force and strength; but they would be no less so if the texts were, so to speak transposed. The viewpoint is nothing, I repeat; the individuality, the ability are everything. What a flowering of "revolutionary" music should otherwise have been produced by the political change in Russia! But nothing of the kind is to be found; the composers of the Soviet Union are not more daring or free than those of other countries—as a whole they are if anything a little more reactionary. The most daring, free, individual Russian composer, Stravinsky, obviously no longer has much in common politically with his former fatherland. Switzerland is a very democratic country, but I am not aware that it produces

democratic music, nor would I know how to define democratic music. The numerous male choruses that are sung there are good or bad, as the case may be, but at best they have merely liberal or democratic texts.

Plato offers a prototype for the relation between the composer and the State. Platonic political science tells us that if the great philosopher had been a ruler or dictator, he would have forbidden Homer because the Homeric heroes fail lamentably to live up to the strict concepts of ethical dignity held by the ideal State. Plato would have established a committee of experts to subject artistic products to rigorous examination, and like all such committees it would have made incredible blunders, fostered mediocrity and suppressed real greatness. If Richard Wagner had had the misfortune to be born in the fifth century B. C. he would have had to flee from the Platonic State not only because of his revolutionary activities but because of his revolutionary *art*. The nineteenth century A. D. at any rate appreciated, supported, petted the revolutionary artist in his old age.

But Plato was not entirely wrong, and the relation of the State to the *great* artist has remained "platonic." Whatever the organization of the State may be—and it is always organized—the great artist is invariably a symbol of imagination and innovation, a restless, unbridled, ungovernable element. That is true of Bach as it is of Handel or Mozart, Beethoven or Wagner. To the State, the great composer is always more or less suspect. And so a great artist has little to hope for from the State. If things go well, the State gives *commissions;* the artist obeys an inner *compulsion.* Regardless of the value placed on the work of Dr. Richard Strauss, it may be presumed that *Till Eulenspiegel* or *Ariadne* will outlast the *Olympische Hymne* that he has composed for 1936 and that has been duly submitted to and approved by the "head of the government." The artist who obeys his inner compulsion is stronger than the State. The Florentine Republic, which exiled its greatest citizen, vanished long ago; but Dante has become a spiritual force whose realm extends beyond the frontiers of Italy and through the centuries. The realm of Bach, of Mozart and Beethoven has grown to unbelievable dimensions —unbelievable if one compares their poor, small, personal lives

to these vast reaches; unbelievable, too, even if one considers only the material values they created, to the profit of a large mass of people the world over and therefore, in the last analysis, of the State itself. There remains the bitterness at the creator's personal fate; but also the hope of his final victory—now as ever.