

# MODERN MUSIC

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## WILL MODERN MUSIC ENDURE?

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I COULD as well have chosen the title *The Future of Modern Music*, for the fate of modern music permits some conjecture. Can it expect what is called "immortality in art," or does it place milestones, as it were, on a road which under certain circumstances may lead thereto? Immortality in art has another name—classicism, a concept which is however just as relative. Henrick Ibsen estimated the "immortality" of art products at about thirty to fifty years, thereby rendering an accurate opinion on his own work which, apparently timeless, was yet so dated—acute social criticism but lacking in poetry. From old Verdi this drew the protest "And how about my *Rigoletto*?"

The concept of classicism is vague and ambiguous. Our grandfathers saw it embodied in the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven as also in the graphic arts of antiquity and of Raphael and Michelangelo. But just as this field has been enlarged to embrace Eastern Asia and the primitives, on closer acquaintance with Bach the music classics have been extended to include the "old masters." Who knows but that in the general picture of culture, musicians like Dufay, Josquin, Ciprian de Rore and the younger Monteverdi will be ranged alongside Giorgione, Tintoretto or Greco.

To become a classic, one must have the luck to be born at the right time. Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven had this good fortune. We—that is the creative musicians of today—certainly have not. Ours is like the situation of the first masters of monody and of opera around 1600 who had the painful task

of setting their poor, stiff, purely "programmatic" efforts against the ripened and finished art of polyphony. The artists born in a fortunate age find definite forms at hand, definite enough to be stable, new enough to permit further exploitation and new content. Those who have rough going are the composers arriving too soon or too late, who find forms so primitive that nothing final, well-rounded or complete can be stated within them, or forms superannuated, exhausted and over-ripe, which permit repetition only or, at best, variation. Perhaps we poor musicians of the first third of the twentieth century have arrived on the scene both too early and too late. Works born in such a period generally have a slim prospect of attaining the permanence called immortality.



The first to realize this have been the publishers—for the most sensitive part of the human body is the pocketbook nerve. I do not doubt, and a glance at the catalogs confirms this, that new works continue to be printed. But modern music in general is not being published. I will not dwell further on the economic, cultural or political reasons for this. It all boils down finally to a vicious circle: the new music is not being printed because there is no public to buy it and there is no public to buy it because it is not being printed.

But should everything written expect and deserve publication? This was not the custom of the past. A sharp distinction was made between what should and should not be permitted to share in the immortality which is the apparent guarantee of publication. Printing a piece of music had a quite different significance from that of today. Lasting works were found only in the church, a conservative force; in the old days it was the only institution unconcerned about the age or novelty of a mass or motet. Especially was this true of Rome where masses by Palestrina were still sung in the seventeenth century and the *Improperia* of Allegri in the eighteenth century.

The publication of the first lay pieces by Petrucci, the earliest and greatest music publisher of all time, was a codification rather than a practical edition. The practical editions of later ages were motivated principally by the dedications, for only a wealthy pa-

tron was in a position to recompense a composer for his efforts. This was also true of the first opera editions which were merely expressions of ostentation, as when later the All-Christian kings gave orders to print the operas presented by the Académie Royale in Paris. Nearly all works which have gone into new editions were preserved not for artistic but for pedagogic reasons. Even Bach published nothing without a teaching purpose; he thought little about "immortality" and permanence, especially for his *Inventions*, the *Wohltemperierte Klavier*, the *Choralvorspiele*, the *Kunst der Fuge* and, least of all, for the church cantatas he produced as a tree bears fruit which rots on the grass if not gathered. And, as we know, not all of Bach's fruits were gathered. Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and even Schubert were not concerned with the idea that some day there would be a complete edition of their works and that critics would reproach them with having included too much that was mediocre.

It was the nineteenth century that first gave to us the "artist" who held that every note he wrote was important and must be handed down to posterity. It was the nineteenth century which first assigned to publication the function of bringing the greatest works to the masses (as well also as the greatest rubbish), and at the same time fostered that apparently senseless phase of publication, the printing of works which had no public—a senselessness one may choose to call idealism.

I hold it is no great misfortune that this idealism has begun to pass modern music by. But with one reservation, which is that new music should instead be *heard* all the more. What did it harm Mozart that only eighteen of his opus numbers were published during his lifetime, that he never saw the printed score of even one of his operas or symphonies? Composition today needs no further stimulus than Mozart's, no claim on posterity, merely the desire to make the work at hand, whether opera or divertimento, as good as possible.

It is no more disgraceful, no more unfitting a task to write music for a film, than for Mozart to write music for a fairy extravaganza in a suburban theatre where the principal features were the decorations and the machines. We might indeed wish

that the films of 1937 were as good as the libretto for the *Zauberflöte* of 1791. What is to prevent film music from becoming "immortal?" From winning the permanence that lasts for decades? Anyone familiar with the history of any country favorable to the growth of opera, like Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even to some extent, today, knows that enduring works, from Rossini's *Barbiere* to Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, are winners in a lottery that contains hundreds, thousands of blanks. An opera fiasco is not so tragic in Italy as it is in Germany, France or elsewhere. The life work of Verdi, even in its latter part, before *Aida*, bears witness to many such miscarriages. One great success is enough to bring the less worthy music into the light and give it life until, after the composer's death, the "Collected Works" appear, to preserve even mediocre and unimportant compositions. To compose *one* great, successful, enduring work is enough.



No formula guarantees permanence. The only recipe is to remain true to oneself—provided one has the proper authority and is not merely a follower. It has been said that out of all modern music there has not emerged a single enduring work, that only experiment has been cultivated. Even were this true, it is no reproach and would merely confirm the unfortunate situation of today's generation. But it is not the case. Actually modern music, like all movements, has minor satellites whose names already have faded away. But they are characteristic of every age; such names are found only in encyclopedias and will never be resurrected, no matter how strong an urge there may be toward "historical research." The residue of the new music of the last thirty years which still remains alive or has claims on life is as great as that of any age, and is at all events greater than the epigonal music which flourishes today as it always has.

Let me note at random, and in brilliant succession, the names of the symphonic composers who were presented at an early international music festival in Prague in 1924: Ostrcil, Rieti, Szymanowski, Schmitt, Honegger, Erdmann, Prokofieff, Malipiero, Bax, Roussel, Bloch, Stravinsky, Horwitz, Suk. Not all of these are "modern musicians," and by no means are all real creators. Important names are also absent—like those of Bar-

tok, Schönberg, Berg, Hindemith and Krenek. Finally not all the music performed then is extant or alive today. But the *new work* lives. To have character is apparently worth while. Schönberg's *Klavierstücke* and Stravinsky's *L'Histoire* will have a longer life as art works and documents of the time than numerous tradition-bound pieces that are prized today as the only sanctified masterpieces. It would be better indeed to talk no more of "documents of the time." As far back as 1921 Busoni said, in his essay *On the Unity of Music*, "The period of experiment and the overvaluation of expression mediums at the expense of content and artistic permanence is rapidly drawing to a close." Enriched by them, what is positive, in contrast to the "opposition," will again take its rightful place.