

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE COMPOSER

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**I**N the days when medical science was still ignorant of the fundamental causes of tuberculosis, beri-beri or diseases of the blood, the sick were badly off. It was believed that these illnesses were matters of chance, unavoidable blows of fate, or that an evil spirit had entered the sick person, to be exorcised only by prayer. After modern science developed methods of investigation and apparatus, it could be demonstrated that such diseases were not personal misfortunes but were caused by microbes and, if recognized in time, could be cured. Those were the great days of chemical therapy. Now scientific research has made an even more interesting discovery. It has been proved that many of these diseases could be forever banished, if social conditions were changed. What a wonderful development of human knowledge! Disease by fate is incurable; disease by bacteria, curable; bacteria depend on social factors, and social factors can be changed.

If only some of this objectivity, wisdom and knowledge could be transferred to the problems of modern composers! But that would mean replacing disorganized, chaotic, and futile chatter about art, by scientific method; which is precisely what modern music needs. For the crisis in music grows ever more acute as it falls farther into the depths of barbarism. Despite the great technical advances in music, people today are developing into musical illiterates. To successfully combat this anarchic and barbarous condition we need a new sort of composer, teacher and musician. I turn first to the composer, for, as the producer of music, he is the most important. It is high time for him to grow aware of his present environment and to change his habits.

The new type of composer must first conquer the old, and this struggle can be carried on only with scientific method, objectivity and judiciousness. It is necessary to submit the practise and theory of music to the same standards as prevail elsewhere in human thought today. Lamentable as it is, we must admit that in an age which has applied new principles of work and thought to industry, medicine, chemistry, physics, sociology and political economy, music is still practised in a completely antiquated manner, long discarded in other fields. Most of the responsibility here lies at the door of the so-called "modern" composer, and it now becomes necessary to re-define our conception of "modern," to determine what is progressive and what reactionary in terms of our age.



The crisis in music has been created by the general crisis in society. In music it appears definitely as a crisis in the technic of composition, which has succeeded in completely isolating modern music from life. The modern composer has become a parasite, he is supported by private connoisseurs and the benevolence of a few wealthy people, and he produces no sensible, social work. The composer today lives in a kind of insecure state of domestic appanage, much as he did three hundred years ago. He can no longer support himself exclusively by his compositions, —and that in itself makes his case suspect— and he must moreover, frequent fashionable salons to direct attention to himself.

To young people this is especially injurious, for it completely divorces them from the realities of life. The peculiar isolation which they experience is the reason modern works express nothing about the most pressing problems of our age. One group of composers is concerned with the problems of their own natures. Others have problems of form and technic. It is splendid for composers to consider problems of technic. But who would want to disturb their studies? Then, there are the so-called lyric spirits, who are extremely sensitive and deep, who know that spring is here and that the moon is shining in the clear night. But Hollywood takes care of all that in a much more popular

fashion. And finally, the modern composer claims that with his so-called "absolute" music, better described as music without words, nothing definite can be expressed. Above all, nothing whatever about the "pressing problems of the day." This he says is beyond the power of music without words, and is not even the aim of music. Music must find its goal only in itself—music for music.

But history tells us that so-called "absolute" music was the highest expression of a definite epoch. Beethoven's symphonies were the music of the struggle of the rising bourgeoisie against decaying feudalism. History also tells us that music was not always predominantly instrumental. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries instrumental music played a role subordinate to vocal. Instrumental music, and the concert as an organized form of music life, are not essential forms but historical. They arose and were formed in a definite social organization, in capitalistic society, and so they come to a crisis when capitalistic society does. In 1750, the "Symphonic School" of Mannheim was something revolutionary. In 1810 it was the highest musical expression of the age. In 1890 it appears as the flat naturalism of Richard Strauss, or the false, sentimental "Weltanschauungsmusik" of Gustav Mahler. In 1935, this field no longer offers any noteworthy accomplishments. Today it is not conceivable what the goal of a symphony should be. A really contemporary composer would recognize in it a completely outdated and antiquated art form, which is no longer in any real sense useful.

After the instrumental music of the nineteenth century we are now entering a new period marked by the flowering and predominance of vocal music. The instrumental must play a more subordinate, less significant role, for in such music alone we cannot find a solution to the musical crisis. Our experience of the last twenty years has made that plain. Modern composers have tried practically everything and the result is complete anarchy; the composer rests only on his private formula and taste. If this condition could guarantee a great music culture, well and good. But it has inevitably produced barbarism and ruin.

In the history of music there have been periods of great styles that were binding on all. It is not easy for example, without

extremely fine analysis, to distinguish an early Beethoven, from Haydn or Mozart. Certain cadenzas were uniformly binding, like certain formal methods, the use of traditional ideas, or the carrying on of ideas, or their resumption. And in spite of these uniformly binding elements of form, the composers were not regimented, but each was an individual.

A modern music will be possible only when there is a new modern style, pertaining to all, and useful to society. In an age in which modern music has no great public, but is carried on practically only in private, a composer can do whatever he pleases. He can compose like Czerny, with a few false basses, a sort of "School of the Lack of Fluency." He can transpose Brahms into the twelve-tone technic. Or he can sit at the piano and assert that he is expressing his inner nature. All these three methods are as useless as they are unmarketable, so the difference between them is unimportant.



We find the same anarchy in esthetics. There is no longer an esthetic standard in music, for the question of beauty and ugliness has become a matter of personal experience and taste. The conceptions "beautiful" or "ugly" which played so important a role fifty years ago are outdated. They no longer appraise value and should be replaced by a newer criteria. Many of my colleagues believe that the only criterion is good or bad music. But this is hardly sensible, for unfortunately today we can no longer determine what is good or bad. Some composers regard Stravinsky as primitive, others Schönberg as passé. There is a group of very gifted composers whose style, according to certain standards, is technically bad—unclear voice leading, looseness of form, lack of contrapuntal knowledge. But there are others to defend these men, who assert that the style is deliberate, fashioned knowingly to achieve a definite effect.

It is perhaps sad that the terms "good" and "bad" alone are no longer relevant criteria, that they are as little applicable as "modern" and "antiquated." Though it is not generally admitted, the technical standards of the modern composer have

deteriorated. Instead of originality we find, even in the best of them, mannerisms. Instead of style, imitation. Instead of fundamental, technical, craftsman-like knowledge, a superficial practise of tricks. Anyone who studies a so-called polyphonic work of any gifted young composer will find little counterpoint, but only the imitation of counterpoint, or certain contrapuntal affectations. The terms "good" or "bad" can be applied today only with the greatest caution.

But, if we combine these standards with the new yardsticks of "useful" and "useless" perhaps we can make better progress,—especially if we go further and ask: useful to whom?



The composer today must learn to understand that the development of the crisis in music is the result primarily of the development of technical devices. The radio, the phonograph and the sound-film have created an entirely new situation. Compared to the sound-film, the concert is just as antiquated as the stage coach in relation to the airplane. The sound-film and the radio have destroyed the old ways of listening to music. There is a great difference between hearing a symphony at a concert and over the radio. There is indeed a contradiction between classical music and the modern forms of production. Let us make the simple experiment of turning on the radio in an automobile while riding through the streets of a great city. This music will be perceived at once as contradictory to the modern forms of life. Classical music demands a passive listener, whose emotions are easily aroused and who can shut out thought. The classic technic of composition depended on this condition. Heard over the radio or in a sound-film, many formal procedures seem antiquated,—for example the principle of reprise, of development, in fact the whole sonata-form. The sound-film is breaking the great masses of people of the habit of abstract listening to music and, at the same time, it accustoms them to see pictures taken from real life together with the music. A "realistic" type of listener is replacing the former "idealistic" concert-goer and it is an interesting process. The film industry may be producing a barbarous, cultural product, a means of politically and morally

dulling the intelligence of the masses, but that does not alter the fact of change. Whether the film is to be a glorious art-medium or a species of damaged goods, is a potent question but it is political, not esthetic.

The sound-film will also decisively alter the condition of instrumental music. Experiments have already been undertaken toward the synthetic creation of music on the sound track. Tone symbols are drawn on the film according to a composer's score. Thus the graphic appearance of the note A on the film is so comprehended that the symbol can be transformed into music again. The physical handiwork of the musician is replaced by the machine, which is the prelude, of course, to a complete revolution in the technic of composition. The composer will be rendered completely independent of the inadequacies of the instrument and the musician—the conductor, virtuoso, instrumentalist become superfluous. Nor is this so far off in the future—let us remember how short a time was required for the development of the sound-film. Music-making by human beings will become exclusively the function of the connoisseur, the amateur. (Exactly as railroads, automobiles and flying machines have not completely replaced walking and hiking). Great music will be inscribed directly on the apparatus by the composer, with the help of engineers, but no longer of "artists;" there will be no further questions of tempo or interpretation.

These are the material fundamentals and axioms for a new style in music.



In such a presentation, it is not possible to develop the problems systematically, they can only be sketched. However, it is enough to indicate here the lines along which the new type of modern composer will have to think, to attain a new practise.

What is the main difficulty? Definite social situations have produced definite musical forms, that is, a definite musical speech. When the material productive energy of a society develops faster than the music, then there is a contradiction between the music and the society. The peculiar problem of the modern composer is that he lives in a void, since there is no way of solv-

ing the slightest technical problem. All the disputes about a new technic and a new esthetic die away with no result; there are no victors, only losers.

And even when a few composers have succeeded in agreeing on a few questions, along come a different sort of people with coarse voices and horny hands who pound on the table and ask: What is it good for? And that is the question of prime importance. In order to fight against the downfall of music and to gain a new technic, a new style and thereby a new audience, the modern composer must abandon his void and seek a social standing. This is no question of sentimentality, but of music itself.

It is to the interest of music that the modern composer transform himself from a parasite to a fighter. He must ask: What social attitude is the most useful? When he understands that the present social form has produced musical barbarism, he will seek to change it. But that is a difficult task, not to be achieved without struggle. He cannot carry on this struggle alone, but must ally himself with those others who suffer under the present system of society and fight against it. Here is the tie between the progressive intellectual, scholar, doctor, engineer, artist and the workers. The composer must finally realize that only in this alliance is there any hope of bringing order to the completely disorganized state of music. It is a long and difficult path but must be traversed in the interests of music. There is, moreover, a question of character involved, between being a useless dreamer (and what is useless is also a liability) and a modern man, a realist who can plan and fight. In a period of great struggle for a new world, why should the musician be a skulker? Let him join this struggle, and so do his best to serve his own cause, which is the cause of music.