

THE PRESTIGE OF GOOD MUSIC

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“**T**HAT art is *prima facie* and in itself a good cannot be doubted,” says George Santayana. “It is a spontaneous activity, and that settles the question.” He is speaking incidentally of music.

Indeed, the musician needs no more justification of his activity than his simple impulse to be interested in music. Although society may discourage him by not offering him a living for his interest, it ordinarily does not interfere with him.

Many amateurs of music, including musicians, are satisfied to be left to their tastes. They believe society owes them something, or in any case owes itself good music. Why?

The belief takes strength from tradition. In some of its most prosperous times good music was an adornment to the powerful classes of society. Princes played with it and with musicians. They used it first for the religious ceremonies of which they were guardians, then for their entertainment. They paid the expenses of their pleasures from the pockets of their subjects.

Since they were cultivated men, they frequently learned taste. Even by the musician's measure their standard of music was high. So far as their humbler contemporaries heard music it was either imposed upon them in church service, or they reverently followed the tastes of their betters. Then good music did not have to explain itself; it was in power.

The social order has changed, and the nature of musical activity has changed with it. A democratized public is freely indulging the universal human impulse to enjoy music, but in the modern commonwealth the populace chooses its own pleasures, and follows its own taste with little reference to the suggestion of specialized authority. The feelings of good musicians are hurt as they see their able ministrations neglected.

Or, egotistically assuming their own tastes alone to be authentic, they are zealous to refine surrounding barbarians. Hence is derived the present campaign to justify good music, and to spread it where it is not easily absorbed.

Because the eighteenth century nourished good music into virtual monopoly is no reason why the free-born populace should accept it exclusively now. Where part of the public is ambitious for social prestige, however, it can be made willing to assume the artistic adornment of a past day whose human order it strives to imitate.

Propagandists of good music extol its educational value. It is true that careful study of an art is required before the most devoted intelligence can thoroughly appreciate its best qualities, but such education is strictly specialized. There is no plain evidence that even the commonest moral virtues are developed by the study of music. Ethics in the music business, which deals with art and artists as commodities, is at best no more reverently observed than in other commerce. The manners of artists, in fact, have been historically so bad that a special myth of picturesque temperament and spiritual independence has been of necessity popularized to retain for their persons the admiration aroused by their works.

The partisans of good music speak of its profound spiritual qualities. One need not repeat here that modern psychology dissolves much of the poetry of their enthusiasm into rhetorical vapor. Even conceded mystical interpretations of the effects of good music, how can it be disproved that crude music serves the unrefined sensibility as well as good music the expert? Gounod's *Ave Maria* may be ipecac to good taste, but in the well-intentioned ignoramus of music it may induce the holiest of emotional purgations. The man whose best aesthetic impulses respond to a Sousa march will probably be mortified and appalled by the turbid tonal waste of a Brahms symphony.

If the common man sees beauty in vulgar ugliness, can he honestly be chided for a lack of some sense of beauty? To all practical purpose he has such sense, or at least enjoys pleasures to his taste indistinguishable from the genuine. To the expert musician he may be laughable, pitiable, or despicable, but when

he himself does not feel his "shortcomings" they do not exist as such. Is it necessary to force upon him advanced standards when he resists them? His low standing as an aesthete may be balanced by admirable qualities of another kind, special expertnesses to which the cultured musician could not be trained.

There is, of course, a practical reason for the spirited promotion of good music among those who do not know it, whether they can eventually be made to welcome it or not. The fine art cannot flourish without resource, and its passing would be a fierce blow to those exceptional persons who are unconquerably disposed to train their taste in it. In a time happier for music the social order and religious ritual took care of it handsomely. Nowadays it can hardly exist without popularity—the resources of nearly every extensive twentieth century institution are gained from its possible benefits, real or imagined, to the masses. Individual patrons of music are exceptional, but in most instances even they are enlisted to the cause through susceptibility of social conscience. The ideal condition of the support of good music would be the plain love of it by those who contributed their aid.

Sometimes the condition exists. At other times, in the effort to get prestige and help, good music uses all available forces of argument, whether they have their strength in fact or in traditional fancy. Good music is by no means least honest when it shows a practical value, such as its service in advertising a city that supports it. It is on solid ground, too, when it appeals to patriotic bias, and would have local music best just as everything else local, from athletes to climate, must be best.

In effect, no doubt, good music's least tenable position proves its strongest. When practitioners of other arts, familiar unto contempt with their own media but ignorant of the medium of music, speak of it as most heavenly because its language is untrammelled, the musician, who suffers from his labor with earthly technique in tones exactly as they do in paint or images or words, willingly forgets that if they only knew it, his lot is theirs, and he enjoys the special glory they donate. Thus music gains a prestige among the arts it hardly deserves. When the cultivated amateur makes sophistic distinction between the in-

toxication his favorite music brings upon his sensibility and that which a less subtle manner of expression draws over untrained and correspondingly unsubtle senses, he tries to give good music a prestige in general music that it also does not actually deserve.

Those who know good music and love it intelligently can find joy in nothing but the best. Their disrespect for what they are qualified to consider inferior music is human. But for the whole wide world to labor to specialize an appetite that is just as healthy when voraciously crude is a policy suggested by the egotism of amateurs of good music, or actuated by the desperate necessity of a fine art not easily sustained in a pre-occupied economic environment.

Our argument leads us to Santayana again, who nicely adjusts the prestige of good music when he remarks: "Music is essentially useless, as life is; but both have an ideal extension that lends utility to its conditions. That the way in which idle sounds run together should matter so much is a mystery of the same order as the spirit's concern to keep a particular body alive, or to propagate its life. Such an interest is, from the absolute point of view, wholly gratuitous; and so long as the natural basis and expressive function are not perceived the mystery is baffling. In truth the order of values inverts that of causes; and experience, in which all values lie, is an ideal resultant, itself ineffectual, of the potencies it can conceive. Delight in music is liberal; it makes useful the organs and processes that subserve it. These agencies when they support a conscious interest in their operation give that operation its first glimmering of justification. . . ."

