

## THE TEACHER NEEDS THE COMPOSER

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**M**USIC, as is generally known, is the only art whose past is exploited to the almost complete exclusion of the living present. The programs of any American orchestra for any given season will indicate the small percentage of new works among the total played. Explanations advanced for this impasse are generally two. First, the public is very conservative; second, the performers—instrumentalists or conductors—are very conservative. Since composers depend on these conservative performers to reach a conservative public, no one then need be surprised that works of the dead past are played, reviewed, discussed, purchased and studied, and that new works seldom have any of these exciting things happen to them.

But why are the public and the performers so conservative? A not inconsiderable number of dealers in modern painting and sculpture have piled up comfortable fortunes. Many contemporary architects, novelists and playwrights support themselves quite decently from the proceeds of their labors. Is their public entirely different, more intelligent, more alert than the composer's? Perhaps. On the other hand, these publics sometimes merge. Many enthusiasts for modern art and architecture are musically conservative; some have even studied music or have at least "taken lessons," and that is more than they have done with art and architecture.

The problem of course is complex. But a very important factor in developing musical taste, perhaps the most important, is the teacher of instrumental music. In the United States there are thousands and thousands of piano, violin and voice teachers who are today conditioning the musical point of view of an entire generation. This new generation of several million music students, good and bad alike, the professionals and the music public of tomorrow, will be on the whole rigidly conservative, even reactionary. For that is what nearly all the teachers are, and they merely exert their influence in a perfectly natural manner.

The music teacher has a curious function. He doesn't really teach music — at least that is not his primary objective. He teaches the playing of a musical instrument, a technical and almost purely physical process, like training someone to play golf. Of course the material is music, but the study of music is a secondary consideration for a number of years. First come the problems of mechanical and mental coordination. When he has taught mastery of the instrument he may take up the study of music. The art of music itself thus appears often to be only a by-product of, for example, piano study. Moreover since music is so complex an art, in the early stages the elements must be slowly and progressively presented. Because they lack the stamina to do the prodigious work needed to master an instrument, many students fall by the way before even reaching the threshold of the art of music. It is easy, then, to appreciate the difficulties that confront the music teacher.

A century ago when public demand for music was relatively small, the instrumental teacher was usually a composer or at the least a musician of advanced culture. He used both his natural ingenuity and his musicianship to invent musical solutions for his problem. As a result, a large teaching literature has been willed to us from the past and, in the main, it is this very literature which is being used today. The Czerny studies, for instance, though more than a hundred years old, still form the basis of teaching technic.

But musical language has expanded enormously since Czerny's time. Innovations of quite revolutionary character have been admitted into the musical idiom of the twentieth century. Realizing how much energy goes into the instruction of even the simple major and minor scales, it is at least comprehensible that the average teacher views almost any innovations with alarm. Let us not forget that a hundred years ago the teacher (generally a composer) taught chiefly those with a real desire for music. Today, the teacher is a specialist whose primary concern is to sugar-coat the bitter pill of music study for millions of indifferent youngsters who take lessons because they must. His stock-in-trade will include some musical knowledge, but much more important is his training in modern psychological approach, which he absorbs under the heading of *Progressive Teaching Methods*, and which has nothing whatever to do with the art of music. For him progressive development in the musical language simply means additional and almost insurmountable obstacles.

Nevertheless most teachers today are aware, however they may be-

grudge it, that time has carried music forward; nothing they can do will turn back the tide. "Polytonality," "atonality," terms apparently invented by theorists, are here to plague and challenge them. The teacher may even look about for help. When he does he is not likely to get it from the composer. The composer says in effect "I create the music. That's my job." The teacher then turns to a more articulate source – the musicologist. The musicologist's habit is to explain away the new music by definitions. Unfortunately these do not explain at all; word symbols are inadequate to convey the organic meaning of a musical composition, which is something vibrant and alive and carries within itself its own inner logic and justification.

The problem remains and it will not be solved until the composer leaves his ivory tower to solve it. After all, why shouldn't he? An enlightened body of teachers is an asset to the composer; in fact, it is a necessity for the wider comprehension of his music. He could, with profit to himself, stand off and make a brief survey of the teacher's viewpoint and his needs.

To the teacher the music of the past appears solid, and therefore comprehensive; crystallized. On the other hand, the music of today is in a state of continual flux. How then can he teach something practically that is not clearly defined, and doesn't "stay put" and is not easily available for study?

This problem is not unique to our time. It has existed before. In every age, moreover, it has been solved and very simply. Composers of the past had a keen sense that music may be enjoyed in two quite different ways – by hearing and by playing it. And so they wrote two kinds of music, music to be played by professionals for people who love to listen, and music for amateurs and students of limited technic who like to play. This classification is still recognized. Amateur string quartets play a Haydn work, not because they prefer it to one by Debussy but because it is easier.

The teacher problem, with all its broad consequences for raising the general level of musical culture, will be solved if composers once again write music to be used in the teaching repertory. Material is needed for the teaching of the elements of instrumental playing. The teacher seeks music that will make this rather painful process as pleasant as possible. In fact, he never can be altogether free of this specialized need during the entire period of music study, from the initial lessons until approaching virtuosity. This necessity has been recognized of course, but not in the

best quarters. Quantities of music have been written of late, much of it in keeping with the trend of progressive teaching methods; as music, however, it is just so much candy-covered dross, something to shudder at.

Until recently composers made no strong distinction between "music" and "music for educational use." When Bach wrote his *Well-Tempered Clavichord* and his *Concerti*, he also provided an approach to these works with his *Inventions*, the *Anna Magdalena Book*, and the *Little Preludes and Fugues*. Chopin wrote his simple *Waltzes*, *Nocturnes* and *Mazurkas*; Schumann gave to millions of grateful teachers and students his *Kinder-szenen* and *Album for the Young*. Mendelssohn wrote his *Kinderstücke*, Beethoven the *Bagatelles* and *Sonatinas*, Mozart and Haydn their *Student Sonatas*, Tchaikovsky his *Album for the Young*. There are almost a hundred simple lyrical pieces by Grieg, and a great deal of music by Gade, Heller, Dussek, Reinecke, Gurlitt, Scharwenka, Clementi and Steibelt, all important musical figures in their day. More advanced but also of the teaching genre are the piano studies of Brahms and Chopin.

Today, there is a definite decline in such production, at least from our best composers. Some scattered few have continued the tradition: Bartok with his *Bagatelles* and *Children's Pieces*, Casella, Florent-Schmitt, Hindemith, Stravinsky with their simpler piano works. Recently too the United States has shown a first awakening to this need. In Brazil, Villa Lobos has made extraordinary efforts to bring music within the scope of the young student.

On the whole though, there is a fear prevalent among contemporary composers that turning out simple pieces is an inferior practice and involves a degree of "writing down." This is an altogether indefensible position. The capacity to meet any technical limitation is a sign of competence in a composer. When he composes for two clarinets he doesn't think in terms of two pianos. His concerto for cello and orchestra will be written in a simpler language than his concerto for organ and orchestra. Filling the teaching needs of today requires precisely such adjustments. For example, one could think in terms of three kinds of pianos; pianos of very limited technic, of intermediate and of transcendent technic. The problem simply is to meet the special requirements of each of the three instruments to be played by students at various levels of development.

Much of our music today is too difficult to perform. Every composer has surely been told at least once by a symphony orchestra player that such and such a passage in his work was "unplayable." The source of trouble may have been an arbitrary disregard for the technical limitations of the

instrument, or even a persistent adherence to the cult of difficulty; for there are composers who seem to feel that the harder they write, the better. Beethoven is supposed to have composed *Lenore*, *Number 3* because he found that *Lenore*, *Number 2*, which is larger and more involved, was too difficult to perform. Both overtures are based on the same musical material, but *Number 3* is a simplification of *Number 2*. Today *Number 2* would certainly pose no problems for our modern orchestras. Yet one rarely hears it because *Number 3* is so much more direct, clearer and in fact finer.

Simplicity of concept and simplicity of execution are not necessarily synonymous. Composers must, and in fact always do think in terms of instrumental limitations. Since that is so, a resolution to write in terms of easier execution should affect neither their integrity as artists nor their basic thought. The only consequence to a piece of music is that it will sound better and be easier for the public to understand.

But how much can be eliminated, and how much simplified in the interest of clarity? How far can we go without endangering our essential musical idiom? Here, indeed, is a problem but it too can be solved, by every individual composer. To my mind, it is a salutary procedure for anyone to attempt occasionally to express himself in the simplest possible terms. The sign of mastery in a structure is the absence of irrelevance, unnecessary effect, useless decoration or bombast. Obviously the self-discipline of reducing one's thought to its natural unadorned logic is not practised often enough, otherwise there would be fewer bad symphonies that might have made fairly good preludes.

Composers alive to the teaching need can meet it, as they meet any other limitation, by writing music that is functional. It will be functional if it is designed to help the teacher surmount his perfectly obvious difficulties with the contemporary idiom. There are intelligent and progressive teachers, a minority to be sure, but a sufficiently important group nevertheless, who in response to the pressure of the day are anxious to modernize their practice. Any bridge across the gap that has grown steadily wider between the teaching profession and the art of the living composer will lead to an advance in the general level of musical culture. The music of our time and the public of our time are almost as far apart as it is possible to conceive; it is questionable whether they can be brought together without a definite educative plan. Let the composer remember that the links in the chain are not composer – performer – public, as we usually think, but composer – teacher – performer – public. Or sometimes even more directly composer – teacher – public.