

ON BOOKS ABOUT MUSIC

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MUSIC-literature is by way of becoming the fashion. Books on music are being published in America at an increasing rate; although they are a financial loss, they have become necessary to a publisher's prestige. This indicates both an actual and a to-be-continued advance in the size and quality of the public for music itself. For presumably only people who like to listen to music would actually read about it; and it is notable that the new literature is for the most part addressed to laymen. Music may not be precisely a public interest; some distrust of it is still displayed (for instance by the "cultural" magazines); but on the whole it is no longer suspected as a public enemy. These welcome facts, however, have a touch of fluke. The new popularity of music-literature, in part genuine, is in part also a fad, trading—perhaps too late—on the popularization-of-culture that went joy-riding across the country some years ago and that is now struggling along a rocky road. At present music-literature is something of a gamble, and whether it can consolidate its winnings depends, in a way, on the next administration. For the interest in culture is a luxury; and now with the turn of the wheel, the musical "superstructure" of prosperity is in danger of being ground under.

Meanwhile, how practical is music-literature proving? At any rate the moot question, can music be written about, has been reduced to a mute pun: music is being written about. Another barricade of the holy-of-holies has been torn down, and many hands are at last being laid on *Mlle. Nitouche*. The layman still feels music is a mystery; but as he begins to realize that the mystery is partly his own ignorance of a special terminology, he is less impressed and dares to approach. His ignorance, however makes him in turn a mystery to the musician, who feels as

if he were talking to a deaf person—how deaf, he doesn't know; so he talks up and he talks down, and the pitch and stress are likely to be quite wrong. He must either learn to explain himself in another language or merely shout a few catchwords and cover up the gaps with a vague bright sound. This is what frequently happens—and why it happens—in the new surveys, which substitute a bird's-eye appreciation for a measure-by-measure study of music. They have a much wider, more varied, and more conspicuous appeal than the traditional scholarly volumes. For one thing, the terrifying footnotes are left out; but now the context too is often simply assumed—in a sense, the popular surveys are all footnotes.

It is striking how many of these books are written by composers. In turning author, the composer steps out of his province; and he doesn't know exactly what he is stepping into. He skips about, not because he is irresponsible but because he is not sure where to alight; and he forgets that the layman has to go slow—although the trick of the popularizing vehicle is to make him feel that he is speeding ahead on a short cut. Momentarily the layman is charmed by the breeziness of it all, but later he usually finds that he has been left with a number of pointers to points unknown. The book was "stimulating," as advertised, but it gave him nothing durable. He is disappointed, and next time he will get something else; for even a bargain-hunter wants a real value. Frequently composers write well, with a flair that is really a fling of the artistic nature taking a vacation; but, usually they can't keep up the spurt. They do not "construct" since writing is something incidental for them. (Their observations are likely to be better than their progressions, their articles better than their books—their book, rather.) But "loose" writing alienates an intelligent layman, and the composer-author must take care that in gaining a reader he doesn't lose a listener.

American composers began writing about music in self-defense against the inadequacy of the American critic (his general ignorance and his lack of interest in modern music and American music). Confusedly, the composers attributed this inadequacy not to his being a poor critic but to his not being a composer; and they further assumed that merely by virtue of being composers

they were equipped to become critics. Now the reverse of their objection to the critic may be raised against them: the composer-author is an expert in regard to subject-matter, but a layman in the medium of expression. The critic, if only because he is working in his own field, is far more likely to write a better book. He knows the craft of writing, and he naturally addresses himself to an audience of readers, whereas the composer-author thinks primarily of an audience of listeners. Potentially, it is the same audience; and the critic's knowledge of it in both capacities can be of particular advantage to it in both.

The critics are the most reliable help in fostering a permanent interest in music through music-literature. The appearance of composers as authors, which has the immediate (publicity) value of personal contact, perhaps increases mainly the fad. (A composer's book is undeniably a personal utterance and expert opinion, as advertised, even though the real personality and expertness must be sought in his music.) For this very reason, however, it is to the interest of music that composers write about it. The new books on music are read: that is the important thing. A new lay-public of music-lovers is being created. (*"Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte,"* as the beheaded Archbishop said smilingly.) The problem now is to cultivate this public: a problem of ways and means, requiring less "smartness" and more common-sense in music-literature.

The best way to "build" a product is to make it more attractive and less expensive. In the first place, if something cannot be purchased, no matter how desirable it seems, it cannot be sold. Books on music must cost less. But they would also do better if they were less pretentious in style and more solid in substance: not solid and involved but simple and solid, easier to grasp. A little more information and definition, in support of the epigrams, would help. The fields covered should be smaller and the digging a little deeper. The composer-author's survey might be less in the nature of program-notes—his readers may be his audience, but a book is not a concert. So far music-literature has been a de luxe venture, trading too much on prestige; now the general demand is for greater serviceableness, and it must prove its utility.

Musical monographs offer a practical suggestion that has not been tried out to any extent in this country.* In Germany and France such monographs have throughout many years proved their cultural and commercial value. They reach every class of the public; the expert as well as the layman buys them, and for the same reason—they are a luxury he can afford. Their greatest success has been as “little lives.” The basic “human interest” appeal of popularization is used naturally and validly in this way (and is more profitable on its own than when “capitalized”); and the books can be written quite impersonally and professionally, which is to the reader’s advantage. Moreover, a “life” gives its own natural limits to the subject-matter; and to some extent the briefness of these biographies protects them from the tendency to turn into sob-stories. Information need not be disguised if it is enticing enough in itself. The great attraction of the German monographs, and what made their great success, is their illustrations. American publishers may object that good illustrations are too costly, but they pay for themselves: for even the “best minds,” as well as the tabloid-glancers, become brighter when the printed word is made “picturesque.” An illustrated background helps to fix dates and data without demanding study, and in a biography, for instance, makes the central figure appear less like a museum-statue. (A life of Händel, published by the Bibliographisches Institut, consists of forty pages of text—and forty illustrations! Another monograph—Insel-Bücherei No. 107—contains five of Wagner’s songs to Mathilde Wesendonck; it has sold over 31,000 copies.) The monographs are pocket-size, bound in colored cardboards, and cost approximately twenty cents. And they make money.†

Why doesn’t American music-literature develop this idea? “Little lives” would not interfere with the “definitive” tomes (or tombs). Monographs on prominent modern composers should have a special appeal. The round-and-round surveys might well be supplemented by a narrowing-down treatment of particular subjects. And a series of handy books on American composers (not only contemporaries) would be of great value in persuading our music-public that American music is not a foreign body in space, but its own cultural possession.

*The MODERN MUSIC pamphlets, *A Guide to Wozzeck* by Willi Reich and *Tonality* by Joseph Yasser, are among the very few publications of the kind.

†I should like to note that although these books are at present produced in Hitlerized Germany, they remain reproductions of quite a different culture.