

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## THE PUBLIC — HAS IT CHANGED?

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CONTEMPLATING with a reminiscent and somewhat jaundiced eye the stretch of years between the last war and the present day, I am moved to ruminate upon the progress (or otherwise) of the so-called contemporary idiom in music, and ponder the reactions of the public towards it during these past twenty-five years. Most of us have by now formed an opinion concerning the worth and durability of the idioms encountered during that period — up to and including the years of disgrace 1939-1942. Few, however, have been in a position to observe, on the one hand, the varying degrees of boredom, apathy, bewilderment, resentment, consternation; and on the other, enthusiasm, excitement, amazement, acclamation and fervor, manifested by the audiences who have frequented our concert halls during this frightening period of flux and perturbation of creative spirit. It has been my privilege to bring forward much new music to public attention since those remote days when "the war to end all wars" fizzled out, to its ineffective end — and people began to turn to the pursuit of things of peace and of the spirit under the misapprehension that the god of tranquil pursuits was once more in his heaven and all was right with the world.

I had watched the hysterical enthusiasm of the pre-war London and Paris audiences created by Diaghilev between 1909 and 1914, for those meaty dishes of Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, seasoned with the highly spiced novelties of the early Stravinsky, middle Ravel, Strauss, Debussy et al. The Babylonian season of Russian Ballet and opera at Drury Lane two months before Sarajevo was the culminating point of this era.

I had taken part in the post-war renaissance of those early roaring twenties when scarcely a week passed without the production of some significant piece of ballet, symphonic or operatic music, and when Diaghilev (whose company I conducted) again held sway because of his unerring infallibility of taste and his capacity to inspire those who surrounded him to a frenzy of creative exuberance. Again, all this to the accompaniment of vociferous enthusiasm on the part of the public. In 1921 I had given half a dozen expensive concerts of contemporary music in London, with a specially picked orchestra; and another half-dozen chamber concerts, the artistic results of which were as admirable as the financial ones were lamentable. The public swooned in an ecstasy of admiration. In '23, I was a member of the jury for the First Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music at Salzburg. Bartok, Casella, Ansermet and I had sat in Zurich poring over three hundred orchestral scores, and in four anguished days had finally selected fifteen of them for performance. The public, from all corners of the earth, flocked to the festival to admire and applaud.

In the fall of that year, as conductor of the newly-formed Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, I arrived in New York just in time to witness the foundation of The League of Composers, and later to conduct many of the concerts of its predecessor, the International Composers' Guild. The New York public, curious but vaguely hostile, smiled tolerantly, but nevertheless turned up in fair numbers at Aeolian Hall. Muriel Draper gave a pre-1914 cachet to the crowd in the foyer and Florence Mills sang songs by William Grant Still to the great joy of Toscanini — and many up-town visitors. Carl Ruggles, however, successfully scared everybody with his New England starkness and gave us anxious moments in performance. Three years later, conducting the first concert performance of Stravinsky's *Sacre* given by the New York Symphony Orchestra, I witnessed the spontaneous exodus of all Friday afternoon subscribers over forty years of age during the first two minutes of the work. (Helen Hokinson would have found an inspiration here.) A contrast to this was the performance of Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique* in the same year at Carnegie. Ten pianists, two aeroplane propellers, a pianola, electric balls, a steel sheet, nine rehearsals, twelve imperturbable performers, a hostile audience of some five thousand — the hall was scandalously overcrowded — yelling and shrieking, throwing missiles, waving handkerchiefs for forty minutes, are my principal recollections of the occasion. A year or so later, under the auspices of The League

of Composers, I conducted a movement from the *New England Symphony* of Charles Ives with the Philharmonic. This piece of sterling music was so complex that it necessitated an unheard-of conductorial technic, and very often I found myself beating simultaneously the counts of three, four, five and seven with my right hand, left hand, head and foot, respectively, in order to synchronize the various instrumental parts. The public was utterly bewildered, the composer delighted, and the musicians (including myself) amazed that we finished together.

Meantime, up to a couple of years before the death of Diaghilev in '29, I had regularly returned to London and Barcelona to conduct the spring and summer seasons of the Russian Ballet. *Biches, Matelot, Pastorale, Fâcheux, Parade, Choût, Train Bleu, La Chatte, Roméo* and similar confections by "Les Six," Satie, Sauguet, Lambert, et al continued to interest the Western Europeans. But in proportion as the virility of the new American idiom of composition began to manifest itself, that of Europe began to decline into a train of effete but not un-amusing preciosities. The vogue for the "new-at-any-price" across the Atlantic was fading in direct ratio to the increasing paucity of significant output. By 1930, the public in Europe had relapsed into a completely reactionary indifference concerning contemporary music, an indifference which mirrored itself in the increasing dullness of orchestral programs. So that when, at this time, I tested out the London public in a couple of special concerts at Queen's Hall, it took the enormous paraphernalia of Respighi's *Feste Romane* to arouse them to any kind of demonstration comparable to former days. Moreover, from this period onwards, increasing political unrest and the first signs of the ghastly catastrophe which was to follow seemed to act as a paralyzing influence on the composers of Europe. Only in England and Russia did they show signs of any real vitality, and it seemed almost as though the concert-going public perversely welcomed the lull which had fallen upon the strenuous activity – whether superficial or not is a question – of the hectic 'twenties and their composers.

Over here, at that time (about 1930), things were stirring. Having assimilated the European devices of technic and idiom they needed, and discarding the superfluous ones, our leading composers were beginning to make hay while the creative sun set over Europe. Copland, Piston, Sessions, Hanson, Harris, Gruenberg, and other young names were not only appearing more and more in the symphony programs of American orchestras, but it was also evident that besides having something of importance to

say in their own right, they were finding in the country of their birth quite a source of inspiration to help them say it. True, they were twenty years behind their colleagues, the painters, in this respect, but the graphic arts have always stolen a march on music in the matter of local color. (You had only to visit the Carnegie shows at Pittsburgh in the 'twenties to realize this!) Since the turn of the 'thirties to the present day – in other words, during the last thirteen years – the development of the American composer is a matter of record. No other country during a similarly short period at any time in its history can show such a correspondingly rapid and significant growth as can the United States. It would be superfluous for me here to enlarge on this. We can honestly say that as compared with 1930, eighty percent more American music is today being written and performed for a public many times as numerous and, sometimes, as sympathetic as existed at the close of the 'twenties.

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May we not, therefore, fairly ask ourselves whether, in comparison with these present times, the public of that day was any less intelligent than that of today, or conversely, whether our 1942 audiences, especially in the light of radio facilities and increased opportunities for listening to contemporary music, have shown a proportionately greater enthusiasm and capacity for intelligent appreciation than did that handful of keen listeners in pre-network days? Personally, I often doubt it.

True, the cult of music in America is today nationwide, thanks to the far-reaching influence of radio and the increase in the number of communities blessed with orchestras, however modest their operations. The audiences in the big cities today are amply served by a group of conductors who, it must be admitted, recognize for the most part their responsibility to the community in the matter of keeping it in touch with the latest manifestations of the contemporary language. But do the audiences bring to the concerts a higher average of discernment, discrimination and general intelligence than in those dim days twenty or thirty years ago when they youthfully started assimilating in gentle doses the physic known as "modern music?"

During the past nineteen years I have guest-conducted every orchestra – save one – in the land; not once, but many times. On these occasions I have observed audience-reaction very closely, particularly at certain times when the resident conductor happened to be in charge. I have – regrettably

be it noted – watched the vague atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust creep over sections of the audience when the performance of an unknown piece of contemporary music has started. (The bristling-up of those quills of defense-mechanism in the inherently suspicious listener is as evident in his expression as are the quibblings of a person subjected to the lie-detector.) In the past ten years I have watched an audience in Carnegie Hall superciliously condescending to sit through a good American piece whilst deliberately refusing to be carried away by its virtues, and completely intolerant of its intricacies. Equally, I have watched morose audiences in certain other centers of reputedly high culture confronted by the magnificently prepared performance of a work which while it presented certain problems to the listener, ought, because of the repute of its composer and the high integrity of its interpreter, to have merited at least a sympathetic hearing and an un-biased reception. In all these cases a weak splutter of applause was the reward to the composer for months of labor, and to the conductor and orchestra for long hours of preparation.

But there is a brighter side to the picture. How many times have I not played to an audience of students in one of the many beautiful college auditoriums of this country when some provocative piece of Americana (listened to with rapt attention) evoked at its conclusion an outburst of genuine appreciation! How often have I not encountered adult audiences, sensitive in mood and generous in appreciation, to whom seemingly nothing that one could play could ever prove baffling! How often, by a few preliminary explanatory remarks concerning the works to be played, all fears concerning their incomprehensibility have been immediately allayed in the minds of a discriminating, intelligent audience.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the public as a whole is disappointingly allergic – or, if you wish, apathetic – towards what is being written and performed in the way of contemporary American music. There is far too much of the “I-know-what-I-like, and like-what-I-know” attitude among our audiences today. It displays itself in a thinly veiled indifference to everything new and unfamiliar – especially American – except certain highly-publicized and sometimes wholly admirable contemporaneous works. An artificial and quickly-whipped-up enthusiasm for Shostakovitch is by no means an indication of sympathy for the New Music. Neither was that suspicious yearning for the more esoteric Sibelius of two or three years ago. Yet the people are not altogether to blame for their seeming inability to capture the voracious spirit of the old European audiences of

1914 and '21. Quite frankly, the cause of the contemporary American composer has yet to be properly "sold" to the concert public. In spite of many distinguished and notable exceptions, some of my colleagues of the baton have still to learn the necessity of winning over their audiences in this respect by a judicious and *systematic* presentation of the best contemporary work in their programs. Two or three indifferently chosen works played at random during the season just won't work the miracle!

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People go to a concert primarily for entertainment. Why quibble about it? The doses of uplift and culture they absorb in the process are purely subconscious and incidental. The sooner composers and conductors acknowledge the possibility of a person being at one and the same time deeply moved and likewise *entertained* by music, the sooner will both discover the secret way to the hearts of their audience. Composers can no longer afford to preserve that attitude of subjective isolation which results in long, sententious symphonic works, filled with a morbid self-contemplation, and devoid of the one element which puts them in sympathy with their audience. The public, in short, insists on adopting a very realistic attitude about the whole business, and there is little one can do about it. Notwithstanding any suggestion to the contrary in this article, I have known audiences strive with all their might to find the key to a work which the composer has so effectively hidden that he might have spared himself the trouble of writing the work at all. This is not a matter of "idiom." The opus can be as contrapuntally, harmonically and rhythmically "advanced" as you like. (The public will probably like it all the more for that.) But there comes a psychological moment in any piece of music when, unless the composer has already established some kind of "rapport" with at least a fraction of his audience, the conductor might as well stop and proceed to the next item on the program. There is here no question of "compromise" on the part of the composer, but rather a question of the composer having something interesting to say, and knowing how to project it to the listener. I have been present at most of the premieres of the great masterpieces of our day during the last thirty years, and not even did such an abstraction as Schönberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* (which I played under the composer's direction in 1912 at its European premiere in London) fail to register with at least a small part of the audience – alive to the sensitive but strange beauties of the astonishing *Number 3 – The Changing Chord*.

Mention of this still – to most people – baffling work prompts me to wonder whether its revival today by our major orchestras might not serve as the acid test of comparison between present-day tastes and enthusiasms and those of what I still prefer to think of as the good old days of “modern music” referred to at the beginning of these remarks. If the public, as many people claim, has made such enormous strides in the matter of musical appreciation and is the sophisticated, blasé group it is represented to be, then these Schönberg pieces should prove as assimilable and palatable to the audiences of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, etc. as Thompson’s *Second Symphony* or Copland’s *Quiet City*. But I’ll stake everything on the prediction that “monstrous,” “cacophonous,” “insulting” will be heard throughout the land when such a revival takes place (and it will, for I have scheduled the work for revival in March!) If this product of 1911 – even conceding the revolutionary nature of its idiom – is still indigestible to audiences of 1942, what kind of reception awaits the avant-garde American composer at the end of this war, in the concert halls of our big cities? Certain it is that he will have something just as provocative ready for public consumption by then, and, just as was the case after the last war, there’ll be a spate of creative activity more uncompromising than any hitherto imagined. And if it brings with it phenomena compared with which the painting movements of post-impressionism, cubism, vorticism and surrealism prove but feeble straws in the wind, it behooves the American public to gird its loins and prepare, not to resist, but to *enjoy* the coming onslaught. In preparation for it, conductors and composers alike can, and must, combine to win over, intrigue, educate, and entertain the public in anticipation; not by offering it syrupy concoctions in the manner of a weak compromise, but by strong vigorous doses of first-rate, important music, as American as the painting of Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, and the writings of Steinbeck and Hemingway.

Then, and only then, will our concert public be mentionable in the same breath as the rousing, fighting, new-blood-at-any-price, perceptive, alive audiences of the old Europe of 1914 and the early ’twenties.