

## IN DEFENSE OF MODERNISM

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THIS is a plea for modernism by one who is at heart a conservative. A conservative because of a deep appreciation of the experiments of the past, of the long and arduous struggle which has slowly brought order out of chaos, or, to be more exact, a struggle through which mankind has learnt empirically to understand the musical elements in nature and to so combine them that with them might be constructed the great works of art which are our treasured heritage. The struggle, the achievement, is, indeed, one of the great sources of comfort and hope in these distracted days of darkness and doubt.

De Maupassant in the admirable and still very pertinent introduction to *Pierre et Jean* says: "We do not need the bizarre, complicated, vast and Chinese vocabulary which is being forced on us today in the name of artistic writing to establish the nuances of thought; but one must discern with extreme lucidity the modifications in the value of a word depending upon the place which it occupies. Let us have less nouns, less verbs and less adjectives with almost imperceptible shades of meaning, but more phrases diversely constructed, ingeniously wrought, full of interesting sonorities and rhythms. The French language is a pure water which affected authors have not been able, and will not be able, to trouble. Each century has thrown into this limpid current its modes, its pretentious archaisms and its preciosities and none of these useless tentatives, none of these impotent efforts has been able to survive." The same might be said of music and yet it is in this very essay that de Maupassant takes up the cudgels for freedom of expression and originality of thought.

"Talent stems from originality which is a special manner of thinking, of seeing, of understanding and of judging. And the critic who pretends to define the novel (this is an essay on the literary novel) according to his ideas of it, based on the novels which he likes, and to establish certain invariable rules of composition, will always come into conflict with the artistic temperament which brings something new. A critic absolutely meriting this name should be an analyst without tendencies, without pas-

sions and, like an expert in paintings, appreciate only the artistic value of the object of art which is submitted to him. His understanding, open to everything should absorb his personality so completely that he should be able to discover and praise even those books which he does not like as a man but which as a judge he must understand." De Maupassant adds: "This has already been written a thousand times. But it must always be repeated."

The mentor in contemporary musical thought who condemns as bad all that he cannot understand is surpassed in the unfortunate influence which he exerts on his public only by the one who, following the most precious of all traditions, thinks that all which is unclear and recondite must necessarily be good. The latter, lacking perhaps a clear perception of the difference between that which he understands and that which he does not understand, is often unduly impressed by music which has little to recommend it but its own unintelligibility.

The case of Roger Sessions, who has recently suffered severe blows at the hands of some of our critics, brings to mind much which is interesting. Sessions has obvious "faults;" his over-seriousness, the apparent abstruseness of his thought, the lack of contrast — a lack of moments of relief and of free breathing such as Mozart, consummate artist and unerring psychologist that he is, almost invariably gives us after episodes particularly fraught with harmonic or contrapuntal stress — in short, a lack, in Sessions, of some of the fundamentals of showmanship. And in addition, this music has still another error which, to my mind, is far more fundamental; an error which Sessions shares with quite a number of his contemporaries. Their music is too far removed from the natural sources of harmony, too far removed from the system of harmonic overtones. For the sake of what they consider added harmonic or contrapuntal interest they have sacrificed the natural free play of sound: their music does not ring out; it is acoustically choked. It is futile to argue, as some do, that our music is not based on these natural laws, for after them all our instruments are constructed and even the human voice, on their basis, finds some intervals more difficult to sing than others.

Some recent experiences have confirmed this opinion. A broadcast: one of the most expert and gifted of our contemporary European composers comes across the air with muffled confusion; atmospheric conditions appear bad. Mozart follows; conditions seem suddenly improved and the musical reception is brighter and clearer by many degrees. A New York concert

hall: acoustics seem poor and the performers play with a tone which is gray and dull. There follows a composition less removed from the natural sources of sound: both players and hall seem changed and vastly improved.

But though Sessions may lack the acoustical freshness and clarity which I, for one, consider so highly desirable, there is in his music a logic which is inescapable; his harmonic sense is consistent and carefully planned. There is no lack of that sense of tonality which is an absolute necessity of any music worthy of the name. He is obviously aware of the fact that a single note, sung or struck, does not ring out alone but that it is accompanied by a series of overtones which bring to it harmonic implications of far reaching importance; implications which vary with the place in the phrase, to return to de Maupassant, which the note may occupy – harmonically, melodically and even rhythmically. In this welter of sound one note and its prime harmonic implication – its triad, minor or major – must be our focal point, from which we travel and to which we return. This sense of the importance of tonality as an architectural force is, in Sessions, particularly strong and it does much to recompense the careful listener for the absence of a more obvious acoustical brilliance and charm.

His phrase structure, though involved, is neither careless nor arbitrary; he is clearly mindful of the fact that the phrase is the basis of the musical structure of a whole composition. A well wrought phrase should constitute an entity almost complete in itself; although it appear to merge into that which follows, it should nevertheless give one the feeling that one can see above, below and around it. It should be as tangible as a three dimensional object. This has always been so in all good music. From the apparent vagueness of Orlando di Lasso, through the obvious clarity of a Mozart, to the apparent – but only apparent – vagueness of Debussy, we have, actually, running through music, a series of phrases which are well defined, well wrought and clear. It is as difficult for me to conceive of a large piece of musical architecture based on phrases which are unfinished and ill conceived as it is to imagine a great work of literature based on sentences which are incomplete. This sense of the importance of the phrase Sessions has; he is, indeed, one of the comparatively few among our contemporaries who has had the courage to face this problem which is the first and most fundamental of those which a composer has to solve.



Very different is the case of Sibelius. Here we have a composer whose outward aspects are admirable. His orchestration is ingenious and at times

he achieves overpowering effects by means incredibly simple; enchanting and exciting effects by means both subtle and direct. His tonal climaxes are the Conductor's Dream of Bliss. But the externals of this music cannot conceal the nature of that which goes on within. The phrases, as I understand them, are ill formed and vague; they start but they do not finish and they do not, so to speak, "come 'round the corner." They lack the clarity, the plasticity, the sense of completeness, which, as I have stated above, is characteristic of the phrases upon which all the great music of the past has been built. And if the phrases seem incomplete in themselves, their inter-relationship appears equally mysterious and unsatisfactory. Neither in substance nor in mood does one seem to grow out of the other and this lack of inter-relationship is further accentuated by contrasts in orchestral weight and density which are so violent and disproportionate that the whole is inexplicable except in the light of some programmatic, some extra-musical idea. It is no wonder, then, that edifices constructed on these unsolid bases should appear to crumble before our eyes, leaving one listener, in any event with a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction almost unparalleled in his experience in music. The rather complicated explanations which have been offered of the Sibelian principles of form do little to dispel the disheartening sense of futility which the writer has experienced after hearing performances of some of Sibelius' larger works.

His moods, with few exceptions, are obvious and trite. Within the primeval forests of Tapiola there dwells the bogey-man. And even where the conceptions are more truly grandiose they are, in any event, those of a nineteenth century romanticist who happened to be born too late. Romanticism itself is the answer to one of the deep-seated cravings of mankind and as such it is an eternal pole-star of art. But it would be a pity for our epoch if it had nothing else — nothing more characteristic of itself — to express than the lush and romantic moods which are Sibelius'. It seems scarcely probable that of the composers of our day all should be out of step . . . but Jan.

But when all of this is said, Sibelius still remains, for the mass of his productions and for the number of their recent performances, something of a lone giant on a fairly distant horizon. For the obvious brilliance of his works, for the effectiveness of his orchestration, for the magnitude and daring of his pictorial conceptions, one might be tempted to say of him that he is the Hadley of the North.

"The great artists are those who impose upon humanity their own

particular illusions. . . . We must allow them to be free to understand, to observe, and to conceive as they may wish, as long as they remain artists." And let us judge each according to that which he has to say, remembering that contemporary criticism is inevitably uncertain. When, in the history of mankind, has not some critic, at some time during his life, proclaimed that he was living in an age of full decadence? Is not this despair a reflection of his own impotence rather than of the futility of the works of art which he has apparently been unable to understand? A sign that he has been unable to follow along the path which artists of originality and of serious purpose have found it necessary to pursue?

It is as improbable that at any given epoch men and women of talent should cease to exist as that beauty, or man's desire for it, should perish from the earth. As long, then, as he keeps his roots within the ground hallowed by the tradition of acquired knowledge let us give the man of talent free way and encouragement to go ahead!