

MUSICOLOGY FOR MUSIC

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“THE new music professor will begin his lectures but he had better do (i.e. compose) something before he starts speaking.” Thus wrote Carl Friedrich Zelter, the distinguished composer, to his friend Goethe on the appointment of the first professor of musicology in the University of Bonn. Let us oppose to this righteous indignation of a worthy member of the composers’ guild the dictum of the compilers of the French Encyclopedia in the eighteenth century, who held that a composer creates music as a painter renders nature on canvas, “but only the philosopher is qualified to discourse on their art.” Now we have obtained the two extremes between which the history and criticism of art must find their place in our intellectual life. But perhaps we should illustrate this curious contradiction by two examples. One of these much despised and often ridiculed early nineteenth-century musicologists, Forkel, was the first to recognize the greatness and significance of J. S. Bach at a time when the musicians could see in him no more than a “good fugue writer.” At the same time the pontifical loquaciousness of the philosophers so annoyed Rameau, the greatest musical mind of the era of the Encyclopedia, upon whose musical logic much of our modern system of harmony is based, that he withdrew from cooperation with the lexicographers. This cleavage between “practitioners” and “musicologists” still exists and it is now complicated by the lively activity of radio commentators and journalists. Yet there is no valid reason why these factions should eye each other with suspicion. On the contrary, our whole musical life would greatly benefit if instead of denouncing each other and intruding on their respective fields, they would conclude an alliance.

The issues are clear and simple. If we look at the hierarchy of the opposing parties it becomes instantly evident that the composer comes first and is indispensable. Without him, musicologist and critic would have nothing to nourish them, whereas the composer could exist in the absence of the musical author. Between these two groups are the executant

artists, or as they are more fashionably called these days, the re-creative artists, who often exhibit a tendency to monopolize the whole firmament by taking it for granted that the composer is there merely to provide them with a vehicle for the practice of their skill, and the writer to laud their performance. The general confusion resulting from such ill-defined spheres of action produces conductors and players who light-heartedly disfigure the composer's score, radio commentators who broadcast all sorts of irrelevant nonsense supported by nothing but a "cultured" enunciation, critics who dress down complex modern works after one hearing, musicologists who compose "missing sections" to some mutilated masterpiece of bygone centuries, and composers who – with the aid of the antiquated columns of Grove's once splendid *Dictionary* – discourse on weighty problems of musical history with enviable ease.

This situation can be remedied only if the most potent factor that shapes public taste and opinion, the radio, is reformed. Not so long ago the daily press was equally detrimental to the formation of a healthy musical life, but most of our first-line music critics are now responsible people who know the difference between reporting, "human interest," and esthetic criticism. But the radio remains adamant. It was not long ago that two distinguished music critics, speaking in the intermission of the Philharmonic broadcasts – and speaking about the *music* performed on the occasion – were displaced in favor of a new commentator who, belying his otherwise respectable musical talents, dishes out the rankest amateur nonsense to his millions of listeners.

But there is another and more promising side to the picture. Listening the other day to a performance of Randall Thompson's *Peaceable Kingdom*, I was again struck by his quiet and undemonstrative mastery of choral composition, a skill fully equal to that of the "old masters." Yet his is no imitation of sixteenth-century models but the expression of a creative spirit of our times. What makes it so convincing and accomplished is the undoubted loving study of the art of the past which enabled him to formulate his own idiom. And this is the ultimate aim of musicology; to unearth, restore, and elucidate music for the musician and music lover; to bring music which is not in the immediate repertory of the day to their attention, to enrich the enjoyment of their art, but also to provide them with powerful stimuli. The process leading to the realization of this aim of musicology is lengthy and entails arduous training, therefore it is a discipline reserved for people who are willing to undergo its entire course, but the latter must

never forget, as so many have done, that musical philology is merely a preamble and not an aim in itself. I have singled out Thompson because I heard his work recently, but there are a number like him; and a more understanding collaboration between the composer and the musical scholar would produce still others. First, however, we must re-distribute the roles; eliminate the unctuous announcer, the glib intermission story-teller, the smart master of ceremonies at silly quiz sessions, and replace them with people who know music at first hand; get rid of our teachers of "music appreciation" in favor of individuals who will teach the music itself and leave it to be appreciated by their disciples. But first and foremost, let us have more music, a more intimate acquaintance with the vast literature of music. This program calls for changed curricula in our colleges and conservatories. We still teach a system of composition, here "strict," there "free," which is based on early nineteenth-century precepts; yet while we accept this code of a bygone day for our own purposes, the musical literature for which it originally served is neither known nor digested. Anyone engaged in the teaching profession can easily ascertain this by asking advanced students – or for that matter, a good many teachers and composers – how well they know, for instance, Beethoven's chamber music or Weber's operas. (Opus 59, Number 1, and the *Freischütz* overture do not constitute a knowledge of the literature.) Here again the well-trained composer who has studied, let us say, his Rameau and C. P. E. Bach, will find new ways of teaching. Instead of rehashing the static academicism of the Kitsons and Goetschiuses, he will learn from the writings of those composer scholars who were cautious yet bold, learned yet adventurous, but above all actively engaged in making music and making it understood. And again I should like to cite as an example a contemporary composer, Walter Piston, who has given us a thoroughly practical yet scientifically sound book on harmony. This is a case where the composer-author profited greatly by consulting first-hand sources instead of reworking products invalidated by the passing of time.

All such activities come under the general heading of musicology in the best sense of the word, yet there is a widely accepted, fallacious idea that musicology is distant from and even somewhat alien to music proper. The musicologist, whose very title is suspiciously scrutinized by people who are not only reconciled to the existence of the archaeologist but thankful for his labors, is thought to be at best a person who can decipher neumes or make a catalogue of manuscripts in the Library of Congress.

This popular misconception must be eradicated. There is a little volume available to all of us which contains Brahms's studies of certain compositional devices used by the great sixteenth-century masters. It is interesting to see this earnest musician striving to comprehend the train of thought of his ancient colleagues. He could not have carried out his studies – later amply repaid in his motets and other choral works – without the arduous labors of the musicologists, who sought out the manuscripts and early editions, collated and deciphered them, and established the principles whereby the works could assume a graphic aspect that made them accessible to the rank and file. If this partnership between musicologist and composer which we are advocating becomes the rule and not the mere exception it will not be necessary for a priceless collection of Renaissance music, assembled by one of our eminent colleagues with the toil of a lifetime and representing the equivalent of the Renaissance wing of a great museum, to remain unpublished for want of interest on the part of legions of musicians and music lovers. The suspected enemy, musicology, is really the composer's faithful friend and counsellor, and upon its judicious cultivation depends the radius of our musical civilization, a radius that can be enlarged without perceptible effort if the casting of the protagonists in our musical theatre is done with an eye to their proper talents and inclinations.