

RECENT BOOKS

LITTLE MAGAZINES AND MUSIC CRITICISM

TODAY avant-garde magazines no longer reflect the sweeping rebellion of the first third of this century. Special distillations of attitudes that once were all-embracing are what they give us. A crude case in point would be *Politics* and, say, the old *Masses*. A more complex one would be the *Partisan Review* versus the *Dial*, or perhaps even its own earlier self.

In the field of art, this specialization is acutely set off by the levelling out of criticism elsewhere. Literate monthlies of general appeal have almost disappeared. The few that remain – *Harper's* and the *Atlantic* – are pathologically resistant to esthetics. The weeklies discharge their duties to art chiefly in book and record reviews. Less critical than the daily press are the news magazines whose anonymous expressions of opinion seem sly, impertinent, almost contraband.

It is the little reviews – the quarterlies, the six, eight (only occasionally twelve) times-a-year magazines – that now cover art in any concentrated way. Their present isolation gives them a certain sharp functional intensity, an air almost of Required Reading.

Failure to study this change adequately is one of several weaknesses in *The Little Magazine* (Princeton

University Press, 1946), a book which has already won for its subject amazing publicity. The authors, Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, Carolyn F. Ulrich, have assembled many facts about avant-garde reviews since the turn of the century, and a bibliography of no less than 500 titles. Put together, end to end so to speak, the little magazines acquire a very imposing air. Their multiple small circulations add up to almost half a million, their content, so often and contemptuously tagged as Red, Pink or Bohemian, now seems very profound and cultural. All in all they present a great big problem deserving respectful treatment.

This calling-to-attention is the book's chief service. For in the handling of material it is incredibly wasteful. The authors have elected to chronicle the intellectual life of their time, but they go about this business with the air of distracted barkers at a sideshow. Their attempt to impose order on the disorder of American letters only aggravates a very real confusion. Besides, all the literary movements of our day have already been defined by critics suitably equipped for that job.

Advance reports on the book had warned me of these errors, but I was unprepared for omissions of research in such a collection of assorted

findings. Where else is one to look for a survey of little magazine finance? The authors are as naïve about money as about literature. Private patronage is represented as an expression of individual generosity, never of a social need as great as the need administered. The universities, we are told, are increasing sources of subsidy – but to what extent and why? Foundations are mentioned casually when, as is well known, they have been, at many times and in many places, deeply involved. Nothing is said about England, or even France where the government itself has come forward with a subvention for several magazines born in the resistance movement.

Just as bewildering is the failure to visualize the little magazine public. We can take for granted that every review has a following of professionals, that poets read about poetry, as musicians obviously read MODERN MUSIC. But, except by occasional reference to “library” subscriptions, the book ignores the continually renewed younger generation, the largest consumer of such literature. Once it was only the daring young pedagogue who subscribed. Now any student anywhere may find avant-garde reviews on his list of collateral studies. A little investigation would also have thrown some light on the growing exchange between the world of art and the world of scholars.

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The criticism of music, in fact of any art other than literature, is passed over lightly in this volume. There is no mention of MODERN MUSIC or of any highly specialized periodical, though several exactly meet the au-

thors' sketchy definition of a little magazine. This seems to be due to lack of confidence in dealing with their subject and a failure to recognize the relation of other arts to the pursuit of letters.

Their cautious under-emphasis however has been remedied by the general press. When Paul Rosenfeld died last July, not long after the book appeared, the obituaries, which were long and detailed, centered attention precisely on his role of music critic for the little magazines. From this aspect of his career the press chose to review the early history of a number of them.

Rosenfeld was not what one might call an habitu  of MODERN MUSIC. He appeared here occasionally as a Guest Artist. His proper identification is with the *Dial*, the *Seven Arts*, the *American Caravan* – that is to say with the period of large and general protest, between 1914 and the early thirties. And his activity in the musical scene declined as criticism was channeled into the more concentrated forms that set the present off from the recent past.

To place him in perspective most commentators found it necessary to go back to Huneke. Huneke was himself once the editor of an early little magazine and a frequent contributor to the intellectual press. A fabulous legend has grown up about his wit, wisdom and tolerance. The references to Huneke were in fact so persistent that shortly after Rosenfeld's death I found myself examining the collected musical essays of both men.

Discovering Huneke at this date is something of a shock. His thunderously hearty style is Mencken-Nathan-

ism at its worst and his "impressionism" banal beyond belief. Rubinstein brings from the piano the sound of "distant waters and horns from elf-land." Of a new symphony he writes that "in magnitude it beats Berlioz." Something about Henry James (Huneker was an authority on literature, too) is "like our sister planet, the moon." His tolerance is even more embarrassing than his general plausibility. He patronized Matisse, Joyce, Stravinsky, with profuse apologies to his countrymen. When he heard *Pierrot Lunaire* abroad, he advised the folks back home about it, with an expression of pious hope that he would never come to like it. Two years later when a Schönberg quartet was rather warmly received in New York itself, Huneker was busy making explanations.

But what set Huneker apart from the arid journalism of his day is clear enough. He was a man of the world, who felt at home anywhere. Though he wandered about as a Philistine making concessions to the living great, he was at all times moved by a genuine curiosity. And certainly music was for him – a more than gifted amateur musician – always a warm, living experience.

In his warmth, his worldliness, his broad range of interests there is the thread of connection with Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld perhaps had less specific musical knowledge (though he had more than his later extravagantly "intuitive" writings might lead one to suspect). But his culture was sound and his critical insight penetrating. Like Huneker he found himself often out on a limb but he clung to his dangerous perch with courage and

tenacity. Where Huneker was in revolt against the taboos of the late Victorians, Rosenfeld set himself the far more difficult chore of tearing into the apathy of the American upper class, what he called its "neurotic stupidity before the contemporary artistic experience."

In the extraordinarily prescient article written just before Rosenfeld's sudden death, Harold Clurman has seized on his subject's special distinction – the capacity to make one feel music as an expression of life itself. This emphasis on the *vitality* of art was Rosenfeld's major contribution. As one rereads his early criticism, which was written with a certain simplicity and directness that disappear in his later style, we can still receive from it some of his joy of discovery, the freshness he experienced in a stale indifferent world.

But this work of discovery, of "liberation," was accomplished more speedily than he himself realized. The reaction came from the quarter where it hurt most – the composers themselves who were his life-long and grateful friends. It is not, I think, accurate to speak of neglect in Rosenfeld's case. Having been discovered, launched, labeled (Rosenfeld had a weakness for the pat phrase – Harris, the Western cowboy, Varese and Copland, the steel men of the city, Chavez, the earthy Indian), the composers could still feel that much remained to be said about the music of their time. The tendency to generalize, to reach out through all seven arts at once seemed to grow on Rosenfeld with the years, while elsewhere in America, criticism became more technically informed, specific and immediate.

It was in MODERN MUSIC first, later in other mediums, that men like Sessions, Copland, Thomson showed us what music means in the life of musicians. Rosenfeld had used all his resources to make the American world

accessible to them. In the end they established their own communication in terms that were precise, personal to themselves, and with an effect which will surely prove more lasting in its influence.

Minna Lederman

MUSIC OF OUR TIME, MUSIC OF OUR COUNTRY

THERE is one basic rule which the author of any omnibus of musical information ought to follow: Never pretend to know more than you really do. Two recent books, both of which contain – among many other things – extensive treatment of the contemporary scene, illustrate in opposed ways the force of this rule. John Tasker Howard's third and revised edition of *Our American Music* (Thomas Y. Crowell) provides an immeasurably useful work of permanent reference, because there is almost never reason to suspect that the author has lost control of his material; whatever is in the book is generally dependable and worth having on hand. Adolfo Salazar, on the other hand, in *Music in Our Time* (W. W. Norton) fails repeatedly to distinguish between fact and hypothesis, between literal statement and metaphor; consequently, despite flashes of brilliant insight into the procedures of certain composers, the book as a whole is one to be approached with suspicion and doubt.

As an encyclopedist of the work of American composers, Howard commands great admiration. He does not omit many names, and he has a gift for setting down in a small space

those facts likely to prove useful. The recent activities of some musicians, such as David Van Vactor and Eric DeLamarter, have quite escaped his notice. But all people of first-rate significance and all Easterners seem to be well and accurately handled.

The chief defect of *Our American Music* lies in the author's ambiguous attitude toward the composers whose achievement he chronicles. He does not seem to have decided whether he wants to take responsibility for personal critical views toward their music. David Diamond – to choose one of many so treated – a composer of challenging gifts, is represented only by the dry facts of his birthplace, study, prize-winning, and dates of performance or publication of a variety of works. Others, such as Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti, are characterized by fragments of criticism quoted from the New York press. Still others, Copland and Harris among them, are subjected in greater or less degree to Howard's own opinions, which, it must be said, are never ungracious. On the whole, the purely statistical treatment is best, since both the quoted observations and Howard's own are so superficial as to be in-