

YOUNG COMPOSERS AFTER THE WAR

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IT may be bad tactics to say so, but in a number of ways the American composer fares better today than he did ten or even five years ago. I refer, of course, to the composer who regards music primarily as an art. The man who approaches it as a business could hardly ask for improved conditions.

Factors favorable to the development of our creative talents are improved all along the line. There is a greater possibility for initial contact with good music in the home and in the school, even in the more isolated communities. Opportunities for thorough training are spread over a wider area. Scholarships and fellowships, not to mention prizes and commissions, are so plentiful that new talents are fairly pounced upon by the official distributors of benevolence and once the first hurdles are taken, it is possible to go on for years without the distractions of earning a living.

There may be some danger in shielding our young artists from economic realities for too long, because it is obvious that we are still a long way from that happy day when the serious composer will ordinarily be able to support himself by writing music. However, since recognition as a successful composer still brings with it various offers to do anything but compose there seems to be no harm in launching young talent as expeditiously as possible via the endowment route.

Opportunities for performance, so vital to the nourishment of the artist, are greater. This is particularly the case with the symphony orchestras, which have such an exaggerated importance in the mind of the public. Successful accomplishment in the field of choral, chamber, and operatic music, often much harder to achieve, receives less recognition from the public than a few strategic orchestral performances. This may be attributed to the immense prestige of the virtuoso conductors whose endorsement of any musical activity is sufficient to convince the public of its importance. In the past these conductors have found audiences

rather slow to respond to our native music, but with the increase of national pride which has followed automatically in the wake of the war, the same audiences grow apparently more understanding and cooperative.

Even more encouraging today than the impressive list of premieres scheduled by orchestras like the Boston and Philharmonic is the fact that American music seems to be gradually winning its way into the symphonic repertory. This season a number of native works are to be repeated in several cities. Now too, the American conductor, noticeably absent in the past from the American symphonic scene, will appear as regular director for two major orchestras, as guest for another. Although what will be done for the native composer remains to be seen, it is significant, for instance, that Alfred Wallenstein has already announced for Los Angeles a list generously inclusive of American music, with the emphasis on re-hearings of works already introduced elsewhere.

The effect of this enlarged opportunity has been to encourage the American composer to write more abundantly and more confidently than ever before. The quality of his work is steadily improving. I had a chance to discuss this point recently with a distinguished conductor who has established a number of reputations practically single-handed. He has also managed to create audiences favorably inclined to modern music. It is his opinion that American scores received today, as compared with those of ten years ago, show an amazing growth in artistic maturity as well as in technical competence. Whether increased opportunity for performance is due to improved output or vice versa is not important. Composers would probably have one answer, critics another. It appears to be a fact nevertheless.

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There is one tragic factor, however, in this story of war-time prosperity. Granted that we have achieved a momentum which would have seemed impossible a few years ago, what about the future? The entire generation of future composers – at least of those who are physically able to serve – has been compelled to abandon musical work and is in the services. The younger talents who would ordinarily be receiving their technical training in music are now deep in preparation for, or already involved in military activity. The whole current of artistic life of the country is for the moment dammed at the source. How long this will continue is, of course, unpredictable. But not only do these composers fail to share in the increased opportunities of today, many already have

had their careers interrupted for two years, longer than the entire period of the last war. In the present world situation most of them would not have it otherwise. But it becomes the responsibility of all who are concerned with the conservation of national talent, to take thought of the plight of these young people on whom the future of art in this country depends.

The substitution of the military for the highly specialized profession of music is, to say the least, drastic from the point of view of normal activity, outlook, and philosophy. However, musicians have shown that they can make the transition with as much agility as anyone else. There are of course some opportunities for musical activity in military service and both the Army and the Navy have demonstrated more interest in creating them than in the last war. The composer, however, as compared with the instrumentalist, particularly the wind player, has little to offer that is useful, and what little he can do is professionally undemanding. Such a man must devote his energies to pursuits which, however valuable for physical and moral welfare, allow the technical and intellectual skills, so painfully acquired, to atrophy from disuse. Even more dangerous for the artistic future of the individual is the lack of confidence that lack of practice in a profession engenders.

The problem of rehabilitating the artist at the end of the war will not be confined to securing a job for him so that he can earn a living. He will also need encouragement to reenter a profession involving more or less perishable skills – a situation which will apply to many other activities interrupted by the war.

If I may be permitted a personal allusion, my own experience in the last war will perhaps serve to illustrate what happens to a young man plunged into military service after intensive technical training in music. I entered the Navy the year I completed my studies at the Yale School of Music, fresh from the excitement of conducting a dubious orchestral composition entitled *Fantaisie Polonaise* which was the final hurdle for graduation. During the next two years my only musical activity consisted of playing the piano when off watch for shipmates whose chief delight lay in such musical amenities as *My Little Gray Home in the West* or *Mother Machree* . . . I did a little composing while actually on watch in the Bay of Biscay but it consisted of naval ditties which might contribute to the evenings of gaiety ashore. Any serious contact with music was confined to a concert or two in New York, a formidable operatic perform-

ance in Brest, and some records smuggled aboard ship. For two years I scarcely met a musician or had a chance to talk with anyone remotely interested in music. In this undernourished state I was demobilized, several months after the end of the war, completely shattered in professional morale. If a legacy from my father had not made it possible to go on with professional training, I am certain that I would not have continued as a musician. The idea of earning a living in music, which would have seemed natural enough before, was at the time preposterous. And, furthermore, even though funds were available, it was only because of the encouragement of Horatio Parker and some friends who thought I should go on that I felt justified in pursuing my studies.

There are many musicians in the service today, instrumentalists, singers, teachers, and composers who will be lost to music if they are not encouraged and assisted at the end of the war. The artistic growth of the country makes it necessary that this talent be not wasted. Plans for their future should be undertaken now before the crucial moment of demobilization arrives.

It is therefore heartening to learn that at least two of the foundations which have funds for the assistance of musicians in the United States, are already mapping out substantial help. Assistance will probably take the form of demobilization fellowships for composers whose accomplishments prior to military service were sufficiently promising to commend them to juries of selection. No provision has as yet been suggested for talents in a lesser state of development – equally important if more difficult to discover. The endowed conservatories whose graduates in the military services must be numerous might well consider this aspect of the problem, and set aside funds now which may be assigned upon application at the end of the war.

The problem is too difficult and will be too widespread for solution by any small groups or by a few individuals. It should be the national responsibility of our musical world to secure not only jobs, but sympathy, encouragement and support for these young artists who have served in the war, when that war is over.