

RECENT BOOKS

THE MUSIC CRITICISM RACKET

THAT form of advertising known as newspaper music criticism is not without its subtleties. Some of its readers do not realize that they are being worked on and some of its writers are unaware that their function is similar to that of the composer of radio plugs. The main business of this type of music criticism is undoubtedly to supply quotations for managers' and publishers' blurbs, as anyone can see by looking.

The newspaper employs the music critic for his entertainment value, to attract readers and sell papers, the way the comic strips do. His articles must therefore be interesting and zestful. That means get out the axe and criticize, because there is nothing the general reader loves more than to see someone lambasted in print, especially someone with a high reputation. This necessity doesn't impair the product's usefulness for quoting, however, since even the most violently adverse write-up will lend itself to quotations out of context which sound perfectly fine. Moreover, there is no field better than this one to prove the old saying that every knock is a boost. It is a matter of history that careers of performers and composers are rarely affected by professional criticism, complimentary or otherwise.

The other utility of music criticism, as now practiced, is to keep alive the public interest in concert activities. This is a more direct form of advertising and it does not mean that the remarks made need be complimentary. The main

thing is to keep musical events in the news. Supplying background information and news items does not of course come under the heading of criticism.

Virgil Thomson's new book, *The Musical Scene*, published in April by Alfred A. Knopf, is somewhat a disappointment in that it is but a collection of articles reprinted from the *Herald-Tribune*. After the brilliant *The State of Music*, one had a right to hope for another well considered and integrated summing up of what's what. This is perhaps the next best thing, however, furnishing as it does a striking example of what happens when a musician of distinction and authority, with strong artistic convictions, devotes himself to this peculiar field.

Living in the sticks, I had not had occasion to read Mr. Thomson's articles. People said his writing was flip-pant, petulant, and fatuous, but I do not find this to be true. On the contrary, the collection abounds in reviews of the most laudatory nature. Many could be characterized as glowing tributes, and might have been written by press agents. It is not clear why he felt he should say of his opinions, "I sincerely hope that they will not be considered as frivolously arrived at or too unfairly stated, my aim having been, as you may well suppose, to inform the reader rather than to protect anybody's career or to help perpetuate any given state of affairs." Isn't this what we call taking one's self a little too seriously?

The articles vary greatly in their readability and in their penetration. Some are little masterpieces, like "Paris Forever," while others read like undergraduates' tryouts for the Harvard Lamppoon, such as "Very Loud and Very Soft." The section devoted to operatic reviews is by far the best. Mr. Thomson has a real flair for the theatre, which he has demonstrated in more than one way. Here he pulls no punches and quite evidently knows what he is talking about. He is charmingly nervy when he says, "My advice. . . to the singers of the New Opera Company and to many at the Metropolitan is the same as Miss Garden's."

Criticism of one composer's work by another is most valuable as self-revelation on the part of the composer-critic. As a composer he spends his life working out as definite a pattern as he can for the approach to composition. Unless he is a weak spirit he will in the nature of things come to feel that his way is right and that other ways are partly or wholly wrong. The newspaper public will probably never understand this and the daily paper does not seem the appropriate vehicle for such specialized intellectual exchange.

Mr. Thomson seems a little suspicious of technical proficiency. Knowing one's trade is academicism and academic is a bad word. He has a passion for pigeonholing, for oversimplification. Any composer who looks to the past is called neo-classic. He thinks Brahms and Stravinsky are both neo-classicists. He is not alone in his confusion of neo-classic and neo-baroque as twentieth century movements, but he ought to get these straightened out.

The temptation to coin the apt,

trenchant phrase leads him to some statements which are sweeping, to say the least. For example, in writing of Koussevitzky, "French music escapes him utterly," and again, of Roy Harris, "He is not a master of anything."

The group of articles on recitalists is the most complimentary, many going right off the deep end. Mr. Thomson appears to be puzzled by the matter of rhythm. He has made the discovery that meter and rhythm are not the same thing, but he hasn't heard of harmonic rhythm and speaks of down beats as though they are synonymous with strong beats. If I understand him, he does not agree that the basic facts of rhythm apply to music of all periods and nationalities, not just to some.

Strangely, those articles which are not reviews but essays written more at leisure seem to me less strong than the others. Some are just dull, like the one on "Masterpieces." The observations on "Conducting Modern Music" are attractive on first reading, but I find myself in disagreement with the generalities arrived at. But as Mr. Thomson himself puts it, "Nobody is ever patently right about music."

The book as a whole makes entertaining reading. It is full of things which needed to be said but which other reviewers have not thought of. It is a great pleasure to read comments on music by a musician, a situation all too exceptional in the field of journalistic music criticism. Mr. Thomson's expressed views may not all achieve profundity but they are usually provocative. One still wishes it had been a freshly concocted dish instead of a serving of warmed over delicacies.

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