

NEW NOTE ON A FAMILIAR THEME

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THE problem of contemporary music in the orchestral repertory involves more than the ideal of doing right by the composers of our own time. It concerns intimately the future of the organizations themselves. Can they, after all, continue indefinitely as museums dedicated chiefly to the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? To raise this question is not to imply that the older music should be stricken from the repertory — there is no point in changing a distorted perspective simply to distort it in another way. But can not the choice of exhibits be better balanced?

Nor is the issue merely one of propriety. Those whose interest and enthusiasm are reserved for antiques form a public of connoisseurs. They vary in their degree of sincerity and discernment; but inevitably they are limited in number — and symphony orchestras are too expensive to exist on their support alone. A larger audience, more concerned with its own time and with its own cultural product, must be reached, and that audience, which cannot be satisfied by a daily fare of symphonies by Beethoven and Brahms, asks for more than a study of the comparative esthetics of Stokowski and Toscanini.

There is of course a larger public today for what is commonly known as "good music" than ever before. This is probably due to the radio and to the increasing number of orchestras in cities hitherto unexposed to the symphonic literature. To a tremendous number of new listeners the older music is still unexplored. One may gauge the situation more accurately by observing conditions in the Eastern centers where this literature is an old story and where the public is choosy beyond belief. When a Toscanini or a Stokowski departs, a considerable portion of the subscription audience departs with him. The performance counts more than the music, which is taken for granted. Without the stimulus of a forceful interpreter, the familiar symphonies fall a little heavily upon sophisticated audiences. The

music has nothing new to offer, and though the conductor sometimes has, even his capacity is limited. In the case of Mr. Stokowski one may observe what lies beyond the normal limit of intensity, and it is not always pleasant to contemplate. And when the more recently developed centers reach this point of saturation – as they must – they will find themselves in a predicament now familiar to New York and Philadelphia.

No, the solution is hardly to be sought in better performances by better orchestras and better conductors, for it is unlikely that present standards can be appreciably improved. The nineteenth century public probably never heard a symphony by Brahms and Beethoven played better than it is played today by a good second-rate orchestra. But they did hear music that was an expression of their own time, conceived in terms sympathetic to their own experiences and creative instincts. Nor will the transcription for modern orchestra of old music, conceived for other ensembles, answer the purpose. That is merely a stop-gap method of enlarging a literature already sufficiently represented in the repertory.

The established literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is of course among the finest expressions of civilization at one stage of its development. But in a Bartok concerto, for example, we find more of ourselves and our own time, reflected in a manner which we can both admire and accept.

It will require a good deal of courage to assure the continuance of music as a vital part of contemporary life. Orchestras are afraid of contemporary music because it offends the old subscribers, and they hesitate to risk their present support in the uncertain enterprise of attracting a new public with programs appropriately balancing the past and the present. The compromise we accept satisfies no one and contributes little to the growth or progress of art in this century. A certain amount of contemporary music is performed each season as a perfunctory gesture of good-will toward the living composer and toward such as are interested in him. But only the tiniest portion of the scores written ever reach the conductor's desk, and even that portion is not played frequently enough to bring it into the repertory. As I have pointed out before, it is used chiefly for purposes of novelty and prestige, and then forgotten, regardless of its demonstrated quality. There is a disposition in certain quarters to blame the unhappy compromise upon public apathy. This is a confusion of cause and effect. Apathy is not a suitable subject of blame unless the blame is directed at the cause of apathy.

It may be, as some contend, that the art of music, as we have learned to know it, has already played its part and has nothing new to offer. Perhaps the new music hasn't the organic strength to push itself to the top and stay there. The symphony orchestra is conceivably an outmoded instrument. In any of these cases the jig is up, no matter what is done. But if, as seems more likely, we are faced with no more than a digestive interlude, some sort of course toward a more productive scheme of things can be arranged. Just as there is no reason to forget or ignore the music of the past there is also no reason why we should be exclusively dominated by the esthetic concepts of earlier generations. Or why an affection for the past should distort our approach to the present.