THE COMPOSER AND THE CRITIC

LAZARE SAMINSKY

THE "litigation" between the critic, on the one hand, and Mozart, the fantastic pauper, Beethoven, the deaf madman, and Wagner, the arrogant manufacturer of "music of the future," is long over. But there is an invisible standing contention between the critic and the composer, his contemporary.

I am not in the least interested in discussing a shallow type of attitude in either composer or critic, nor a shallow type of their relationship. I refuse to consider the banal kind of critic who plays Jupiter in a sour disposition, or the humorless composer who sees himself as a focal point in the universe and each compilation of his an event in history.

The fact is that there is no relationship between the composer as such, and the critic. None whatever! Their *rancunes* and their differences—almost entirely back stage—arise from confusion in understanding, more than from bad temper.

The composer, in his habitual attitude toward the critic, is not an iota different from the tenor or other opera heroes or the concertizing fiddler.

He rarely realizes that the critic is solely an appointed agent of the public and has nothing to do with the composer. As a juror acting for the public and its instructor in the arts, the critic is simply out of the composer's domain and reach.

Toward composers the critic should feel like Gilbert (Sullivan's grim *alter ego*) among clergymen—"like a lion who fell into a den full of Daniels." Among composers the critic is an alien body in entirely unrelated environs. The composer's feeling for the congregation of critics should be the same, interested but unrelated.

True, the critic, being practically the main scource of information on the composer, is under obligation to bring him out in a useful way. But again, this is an obligation to the public, not to the composer. To the composer *as such* he owes nothing.

It follows, however, that while it is the inalienable right of the critic to be the protagonist or the antagonist of the composer, his ecstatic and unpaid, so to speak, press agent, or his detractor, there is one thing the critic may not do. He may not be silent, ambiguous or cryptic on the work he is appointed to appraise. He must speak and enlighten; he owes this to the public.

Having thus made my viewpoint clear it seems that the relationship between the composer and the critic is so simple and so slight that it is exhausted before they ever come into a related position. It seems that these "litigants" by misunderstanding have really no point of contact; that the discussion that comes up epidemically—"Does the composer need the critic," "Must the critic serve the composer" etc., are a part of that airless futility which the French call so aptly *"minauder dans le vide,"*—making faces in an empty space.

The situation has, however, its antinomies.

The critic does not need the composer, that is, the contemporary, in the same sense as the public does not need him—and never did. It is the living composer who creates or strives to create a demand for his work and thus imposes his music on his fellow man, which is quite right, of course. Only a weakling with little to say, an impotent schemer, a false genius can not force the world to listen to the address which a real creator is born to deliver.

But the composer, as it happens, needs not only his listener but also a critic (not *the* critic, mind you).

For the very reason that a man cannot hear his own true voice and needs to be advised on the matter, the composer drops with one side of his being into the line of people who are served by the critic as public appraiser and instructor in the arts. An artist of real size listens to any criticism with cool keenness. He sifts it and puts it to good use even if a judgment be ignorant or malevolent.

Criticism, no matter how warped by personal notion, is a springboard for perfection. This truism is a bromide ever good to take.

Any spiteful comment driven by personal malevolence is often a greater help to a craftsman than the mediocre gilded neutrality of "constructive criticism," just as the lash spurs the lazy knave better than the Ten Commandments.

Because I, too, have acted at times as critic, because I have not spared my fellow-composer and have never concealed even a most drastic opinion—I felt I owed the truth as I saw it—I wish to take the liberty of quoting some illuminating examples from my own experience with the bitter drink of the condemned. I have in mind some remarks made years ago concerning my own composition, comment lost in banality, inaccuracy and personal vilification.

In a criticism of an early orchestral piece of mine, amidst mockery at my "cosmic" stand or faith, with the inescapable "wagoner and the star" dragged in for good measure, amidst statements more ignorant than disparaging concerning my orchestration, I found a line dictated by sheer instinct and by a noble if unconscious sense of responsibility, a note on the wrong way I was said to have built my climaxes.

I did not realize at the time that this remark as well as the angry words of another critic "Lazare, Lazare, wake up" very properly censoring the over-contemplative, stagnant strain in my younger music, would forever cure me of the Russian academic torpor of my creative boyhood and would play an outstanding part in my later composition.

No one objects to a composer's foaming or fulminating at a critic; it is in the natural order of things. But detachment, sense of humor and a good ear for criticism are something the composer would not wish to be deprived of.

The real or even the imaginary foe's camp is the best place to learn.