

ON THE APPRECIATION OF MUSIC *

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SUPPOSE someone paid a visit to the ancient buildings of Rome or the famous pictures in the Louvre in Paris, or read a poem by Goethe or an involved mystery story by Poe. What would his reactions be?

In Rome he might dream of the mighty Roman empire, of the slaves who built its monuments, the citizens who attended the public games. At the Louvre he might again surrender to his imagination. A religious painting reminds him of biblical stories, mythological sculpture turns his thoughts to paganism. Reading the poem by Goethe, he associates it with the life of this great man. Remembering the *Sorrows of Werther*, he goes on to think of the opera, *Werther*, by Massenet – who also wrote *Manon*, which he likes better.

A nice dream!

And he would be quite right not to resist the temptation of his imagination. But would the same attitude be advisable while he is reading a mystery story? Dreaming of more or less related subjects, interesting or beautiful though they be, can he absorb and remember the details which simultaneously hide and reveal the murderer?

It is not too serious *not* to discover the solution of such crimes. But if the first examples did not show the point I am about to make, then the case of the detective story must have made it clear: One cannot do justice to a work of art while allowing one's imagination to wander to other subjects, related or not. In the face of works of art one must not dream, but one must try hard to grasp their meaning.

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“Music Appreciation” often gives a music student not much more than the perfume of a work, that narcotic emanation of music which affects the senses without involving the mind. No one listening to popular music would be satisfied with such an impression. There is no doubt about the moment when a man starts to like a song or dance. It is when he begins to sing or whistle it – in other words when he is able to remember it. If

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Sketch by SOTOMAYOR
1945

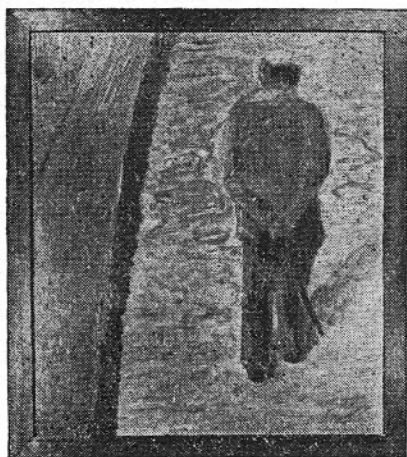


*Arnold Schoenberg
March 1944*
SELF-PORTRAIT
1944

SOME SKETCHES
OF SCHOENBERG



Sketch by FRUEH
1934



SELF-PORTRAIT
1910

this criterion is applied to serious music, it becomes clear that one does not like more than its perfume unless one can keep it in mind.

Remembering is the first step toward understanding. To understand as simple a sentence as, "The table is round," requires keeping the *table* in mind. Forget the table and only the perfume of the sentence remains. Historical facts, biographies of authors and performers, anecdotes of their lives, pathetic, humorous, interesting or instructive, may be of some value to people who are otherwise deaf to the effects of music. But all this cannot help anyone to absorb and remember the content.

Of course the best way to train a musical ear is to confront it with as much serious music as possible. Musical culture would spread faster if people would read music, play music or even listen to music much more than they do today. Extensive familiarity with serious music is the foremost requirement of musical culture. But even this is not enough without a thorough ear training.

Ear training, in the narrow sense, is practised in highschools and colleges with excellent results. Good methods have been developed, but, like teaching techniques in other musical subjects, they have become too abstract, to some extent have lost contact with the original purpose. A trained ear is valuable, but not especially so if the ear is the gateway to the auditory sense rather than the musical mind. Like harmony, counterpoint and other theoretical studies, ear training is not an end in itself, but only a step towards musicianship.

One often hears the question, "Why teach composition to people who will never try it again after their student days are over, people who have neither creative ability nor the creative impulse, for whom it is a nightmare to have to express something in an idiom quite foreign to their minds?"

The answer is this: Just as almost anyone can be trained to draw, paint, write an essay or deliver a lecture, it must also be possible to make people with even less than mediocre gifts use the means of musical composition in a sensitive manner. The prospect of having to listen to their musical products makes such a possibility seem rather dubiously desirable, and it is certainly not the purpose of theory teaching to produce a surplus of unwanted composers. Still, every good musician should submit to such training. How can one enjoy a game without understanding its fine points, without knowing when the ball is sliced or curved, without an idea of strategy or tactics? And yet there are performers who simply do not know the bare construction, not to mention the subtleties of musical pieces!

Understanding the fine points – that is, understanding the game at all – demands a thorough preparation. Harmony, counterpoint and form need not be taught as branches of esthetics or history. A few illustrations will

show how this training can be used to better purpose.

If a student of harmony not only writes his examples, but plays them afterwards, his ear will become acquainted with a number of facts. He will realize that chords are used in root positions and inversions and that there is a difference in structural weight between them. And when he hears a classical fermata on a six-four chord, he will not applaud, knowing that this cannot be the end of the piece. Even someone with absolute pitch might mistake the ending of the first section of a symphony for the end of the movement if he knew nothing of the structural functions of tonality. Sometimes a deceptive cadence is similarly misunderstood.

Knowledge of harmony alone will not suffice to correct such errors. Further studies are necessary to fortify that knowledge and to anchor it firmly in instinct. Even people without absolute pitch can learn to recognize modulatory sections. Why should a composer write such sections at all if they have no effect upon the layman? A well-trained student of harmony will also have at least an acquaintance with the effects of centrifugal harmonies.

The study of counterpoint develops the capacity for listening to more than one voice. A listener who hears in a fugue only the repetitions of the theme may well complain of monotony. But if he perceives also the accompanying voices, which are often second and third subjects, he will come closer to understanding the true nature of contrapuntal composition. Even in homophonic compositions there are cases where one must hear more than the principal voice. Many extensions in the music of Mozart and Brahms are produced by a movement of the harmony controversial to the melody, an effect which is lost on anyone who listens to the melody alone. Every note a master has written should be perceived. How much pleasure it gives the connoisseur to watch the second violin in a Mozart quartet, as it accommodates itself to the first, assists or contradicts it, expresses sympathy or antipathy by characteristic interjections.

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These examples may already have given a clue to how much more might be achieved through the study of form and orchestration.

It is a great mistake to believe that the object of form is beauty. There is no beauty in eight measures because they are eight, no lack of beauty in ten. Mozart's asymmetry is not less beautiful than Beethoven's symmetry. The principal function of form is to advance our understanding. Music should be enjoyed. Undeniably, understanding offers man one of the most enjoyable pleasures. And though the object of form is not beauty, by providing comprehensibility, form produces beauty. An apple tree does not exist in order to give us apples, but it produces them nevertheless.

Forms are primarily organizations to express ideas in a comprehen-

sible manner. An attempt at self-expression is a useful approach to understanding the methods of the great composers. A student knows by experience that the repetition of a section may on one occasion be good, useful or inevitable, on another poor, unnecessary or monotonous, and he will recognize the meaning of repetition in the works of others. Repetition, if not monotonous, helps to convey a musical idea. Anyone trained to vary the basic motive of his own composition will probably be able to follow a complicated melody without involuntarily dreaming of irrelevant images.

It is the organization of a piece which helps the listener to keep the idea in mind, to follow its development, its growth, its elaboration, its fate. If you have been taught to provide your themes with limits, to distinguish principal and subordinate ideas, to combine fluency with lucidity, to divide distinctly into parts what cannot be conceived undivided, you will know how to make use of these earmarks in masterpieces as symbols to remember. The theme of the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Quartet in A Minor*, Opus 132, consists amazingly of ten measures and, still more amazingly, in its tenth measure makes a provisional ending on the seventh degree of A minor: G major. Scarcely a musician would recognize the singularity of such a procedure if he had not been taught that themes like this ought to consist of eight measures only, and to end on the first, third or fifth degree. But anyone who knows this will easily recognize the theme whenever it appears in the development.

Without remembering, how could we understand variations? When a composer calls his piece *Variations on X*, he obviously wants us to understand every variation as a derivative of his chosen theme. The Haydn theme of Brahms's *Variations* has an "A" section which consists of a ten-measure period characteristically subdivided at the fifth measure. It is difficult not to recognize this in the variations. Furthermore the third section is unusual in that it is prolonged through an extension. No one, at first hearing, can grasp all the fine points of Brahms's variation technique, the harmonic and contrapuntal combinations, the many ways he treats the unevenness of his five-measure sections. Perhaps all this is not absolutely necessary for a good response to the music. But it is certainly a good approach to what the composer himself wants to tell us.

Composing trains the ear to recognize what should be kept in mind, and thus helps the understanding of musical ideas. Characteristic deviations from the norm, irregularities, will be guides in the no-man's-land of great ideas.

Now to speak of orchestration. My concept of color is not the usual one. Color, like light and shadow, in the physical world expresses and limits the forms and sizes of objects. Sometimes these elements serve as a camouflage. A musician likewise might want to hide something. For in-

stance, like a good tailor, he might wish to hide the seams where sections are sewn together. In general, however, lucidity is the first purpose of color in music, the aim in the orchestration of every true artist. I do not wish to be a killjoy, but I must confess that I find the joy in colors somewhat overrated. Perhaps the art of orchestration has become too popular, and interesting sounding pieces are often produced for a reason no better than the making of typewriters and fountain pens in different colors.

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It is obvious that not even a small percentage of music students will become composers. They could not and they should not. It is also evident that many would-be composers and musicians who, through some study, have acquired a superficial knowledge of music, may presume to judge the activities of good artists and real creators. This is where a correct attitude on the part of the teacher becomes most important. He must convince his students that the study of composition will not make them experts or acknowledged judges, that its only purpose is to help them understand music better, to obtain that pleasure which is inherent in the art. To have one's ear trained through composing should not enable a man to humiliate his innocent and less fortunate neighbor. It should give only one pleasure: the pleasure of balance between the joy he expects from music and the joy he actually receives.