

MODERN MUSIC

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MUSIC AND NATIONALISM

Some Notes on Dr. Göbbel's Letter to Furtwängler

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IT is hardly any longer necessary to discuss the practical workings of the policy of the present German government in regard to music and musicians; the outside world has been kept closely in touch by its informants with developments in Germany, and whatever inaccuracies may have been reported involve only the details and not in any sense the essentials of those developments. The policies of the government have been proclaimed in quite unambiguous terms, as has the *mélange* of "ideas" which underlies them; in Berlin last spring one could often hear the opinion expressed by well-informed foreigners that a page from either one of the official Nazi organs, translated each day in the foreign newspapers, would prove a far more effective argument against the Nazis than any number of chronicles of terrorism.

The effect of the government's policy on cultural activities, too, is well-known. It has not been limited to the exclusion from musical activities of real or suspected Jews, pacifists, or so-called "Marxists" and "Kulturbolschevists"—a term which has been applied to practically all, if not all, those whose practice or even whose opinions are contrary to the wishes of the party in power at the moment. The storm of execration which burst from the already "gleichgeschaltete" musicians last spring against Thomas Mann for having used the expression "dilet-tanté," in an extremely qualified sense, in connection with Wagner—their manifesto was signed even by Richard Strauss—may

be taken as a slight indication of the lengths to which the conception of "Kulturbolschevismus" may be carried.

In practice, Germany has been deprived of such personalities as Walter, Klemperer, Schnabel, Busch, Schönberg and dozens of others, whose offenses range from "Kulturbolschevismus" and "non-Aryan" descent to unorthodox opinions in regard to Wagner or Beethoven or merely to personal affiliations of an unorthodox nature. In one case a singer was consistently baited by the Nazi press because, herself a Czechoslovakian, she dared to sing, in her native country, in a performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in the Czech language. Such a classic as Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* has been banned from certain concert programs, not to mention modern works which, in the opinion of the present arbiters of such matters, depart from the true German tradition, while it is rumored that even Brahms' music has become suspect on account of a Jewish strain in his ancestry. In a survey of the theatrical situation made in private conversation with a well-known German conductor last April, the writer of this article was able to verify the fact that even at that time there was not a single opera house of importance in Germany which had not suffered severely through the loss of intendant, régisseur, or one or more of the leading conductors or singers. Other musicians, who had taken little or no interest in politics, found themselves in a position of the utmost and most painful moral uncertainty through being forced to come to terms with a set of conditions and standards entirely extraneous to those which had previously concerned them, as performers, composers, teachers, or critics, in the practice of their art. Musical education has been weakened, and the situation of the musicians affected made incomparably more difficult, by the denial to Jewish musicians even of licenses to engage in private teaching in their own homes; while discrimination on racial or political grounds in the matter of the payment of royalties and the fulfillment of contracts of all kinds has become increasingly general with the virtual cessation of legal protection for persons belonging to the affected classes.



These conditions which now prevail and which seem for some

time likely to prevail in the country which has (together with its neighbor Austria) for the past two hundred years led the world in musical culture and activity, raise in a most intensely actual form the question of the relationship of music and of culture to nationality, race, and political and economic ideas in general. The following notes make no claim to originality nor exhaustiveness; they are simply the expression of an attitude which the writer believes to be true, and as true in this age as in any other. Their point of departure is an exchange of letters which took place on April 6th of this year between Wilhelm Furtwängler and Reichsminister Dr. Göbbels, in which the latter, replying to Furtwängler's protest against the exclusion of such personalities as Walter, Klemperer, and Reinhardt from the artistic life of Germany, defines the Nazi point of view in regard to German music and to art in general.

Furtwängler's thesis may be summed up in the following quotation: "In so far as the struggle against Jewry is directed against those artists who, uprooted and destructive, seek to assert themselves through 'Kitsch' (i.e., bad taste, banality, sentimentalism), dry virtuosity, and the like, no one could take exception to it. The struggle against such elements and the spirit which they embody—a spirit which also has its representatives of Germanic blood—cannot be waged energetically or consistently enough. When the attack, however, comes to be directed against the true artist, it does not operate in the interest of the artistic life." To which Göbbels replies: "The task of art and the artist is not only to bring diverse elements together (*verbinden*); it is, far more, to give form and shape, to remove what is diseased, and to create a free channel for what is healthy. For this reason I, as a German political man, cannot recognize only the one line of demarcation which you would establish: that between good and bad art. Art must not only be good; it must be conditioned by the needs of the people—or, to put it better, only an art which springs from the integral soul of the people can in the end be good and have meaning for the people for whom it was created. Art in an absolute sense, as liberal Democracy knows it, has no right to exist. Any attempt to further such an art would in the end cause the people to lose its inner relationship to art, and the

artist to isolate himself from the moving forces of his time, shut away in the airless chambers of 'art for art's sake.' Art must be good; but beyond that must be conscious of its responsibility, competent, close to the people, and combative in spirit.

"I admit gladly that art is not in any condition to be made the object of further experimentation.

"It would, however, have been fitting to protest against artistic experiments at a time when the artistic life of Germany was governed almost exclusively by the experimentalism of elements foreign to our people and our race, and when therefore the prestige of German art was discredited and compromised before the whole world. . . .

". . . it is my opinion that the way to unhampered activity should be freely opened to every true artist.

"But—as you yourself say—he must in that case be a constructive, creative personality, and may not range himself on the other side—that of the elements which you yourself decry as rootless and destructive, levelling and disintegrating in tendency, and for the most part grounded in a merely technical proficiency. . . .

". . . Artists of real ability, whose extra-artistic influence does not conflict with the fundamental standards of state, politics, and society, will, in the future as always in the past, receive from us the warmest encouragement and support. . ."



It is difficult not to agree to a large extent with the letter, at least, of much that Dr. Göbbels says in his definition of "good art." Such considerations as he implies in his elaboration of the words *volksmässig* and *volksnahe* would seem to be fundamental to any such definition. Who would deny that art must have vitality, as well as perfection, originality, or any other of the current criteria? Indeed the whole essence of artistic form is the intensity of the artist's creative vision, and such a vision cannot grow and develop in isolation, in the dusty atmosphere of esoterism and of theory, either conventional or "radical." Art must certainly be "near to the people," but in the sense that it must be rooted in the soil, and in the deepest human impulses that spring from man's contact with the soil and with other human beings; in the sense that the complete development of a

personality, and therefore of the art into which it pours itself, cannot take place in a void, and that the richness of a personality is to be measured not so much by the variety as by the depth and warmth of the contacts which nourish it. Like every other living thing, it may and indeed must grow far out of the specific range of its roots, but as soon as it ceases to be nourished by them it will inevitably begin to wither and to die.

To say this, however, is very different from saying that art must subject itself to the momentary passions or whims of whatever modern demagogues may choose to call the "people." The artist, like any other complete human being, must remain autonomous, at least in relation to his art, and in his highest development is at least as much a leader, in the deepest sense of the word, as is the political man. This is of course the reason why modern political men of the type of the Nazi leaders, whose power must ultimately rest on their ability artfully to stimulate and direct or even to manufacture popular passions, concern themselves inevitably with art and with culture in general. In its essence art reveals the inner nature of life and of men, and must thence be eternally opposed to those who are trying to force human impulses into purely interested channels. That art may sometimes be inspired by enthusiasm for a cause may be readily admitted, just as it may be inspired by any really profound feeling whatever. But when it remains on the level of an organ or reflection of popular prejudice, the artist has "made the great refusal" and abrogated his responsibility as a man and therefore as an artist as well.



Dr. Göbbels also insists that art be "combative in tendency" (*kämpferisch*), thus espousing the much mooted conception of art as propaganda. He also implies that what is "close to the people" (*volksnahe*) will also of necessity be "kämpferisch," as if the ultimate interests of any people lay in the theories and slogans which their leaders impose upon them.

It is true that art is the product of intense feeling; it is also true that art—bad as well as good art—reflects in large measure the personality, and therefore the multifold background of the personality that produces it. But the impulse to create has noth-

ing whatever to do with the impulse to proselytize: it is far more elementary and far more direct. The conception of art as propaganda appeals either to the type of artist who is so childlike as to be incapable of self-analysis, or to minds so academic, sterile, and tortuous as to be incapable of any but purely interested reactions. Propaganda is inevitably self-conscious, secondary—while art, if it is genuine, is from its very nature primary and spontaneous, and this will be found to be true even in the case of living works of art which have an apparently “propagandistic” coloring. It is the vivacity and completeness of the artist’s vision, and not his subject-matter, that give a work of art both its character and its significance.

It is true, of course, that the vision of the artist develops only through contact with the world and experience of its offerings. If *l’art pour l’art* means the isolation of the artist it is quite as sterile as Dr. Göbbels maintains. But propaganda does not offer the only, nor the principal, point of contact with his environment possible to the individual, nor the only—or the most essential or infectious—means of communication.



The strictures of both Herr Furtwängler and Dr. Göbbels on “experimentalism” should need no qualification, did not the actual performances of the present German régime give one cause to doubt either their sincerity or the clarity of the definitions behind them.

Without doubt, art is not produced in laboratories, and is not genuine except when it proceeds from a living impulse. The conscious effort to produce novelty as such, at all cost, is, as the years immediately preceding and following the war should have proven, a sterile one and one which has nothing to do with the demands of a living personality. It springs rather from impotence, disorientation, and fundamental embarrassment, as does indeed every purely self-conscious approach to art. The truly creative artist is guided only by the necessities of his inner vision and is really creating only when he feels himself possessed by it. When the artist ceases to feel these necessities and be guided by them, then art will have ceased to exist. It is hardly necessary to add that he is thus often inevitably led to means of expression

which are unfamiliar and which to the superficial observer may look like experimentalism; but it cannot be too often emphasized that here the impulse, the psychological process, is entirely different from a self-conscious effort to produce novelty for its own sake.

But just as experimentalism is never the ally of art, neither is it hostile to it. It belongs, purely and simply, in a different category, and is useless rather than harmful. It may for the time being confuse standards of judgment, as indeed it has done, but this danger can be met only by the production of living and healthy works of art, by opposing something positive and living to all that is dry and negative, and hence born dead.

If one cares for historical generalizations, one may perhaps legitimately feel that the wide prevalence of experimentalism is a sign of decadence. So is perhaps the prevalence of criticism, of *Kunstforschung*, and kindred approaches to art. Gibbon reflected this feeling when he wrote, in connection with third century Rome, "a crowd of critics, commentators, and compilers darkened the face of learning." But true productiveness is not to be legislated into—nor sterility out of—existence; and furthermore one cannot always be sure that those who emphasize a campaign against "experimentalism" will distinguish overnicely between what proceeds from a drily experimental attitude and that which springs from a truly creative one—especially since the latter is far more powerful and far more "dangerous." It is obvious that those now in power in Germany have not made the beginnings of such a distinction. And truly creative power, when it exists, never needs to be on the defensive, or to achieve success by means outside itself.

It may be added that the "experimental period" which Dr. Göbbels pictures as having injured the credit of German art abroad has been, on the contrary, precisely one in which the outside world has turned with deep interest to German achievements in many fields of art. Whatever one's opinions of many of these achievements may be, or whatever their ultimate value, it should be obvious to anyone that Germany's cultural prestige has been raised and not lowered by them. The same can hardly be said of the contemporary productions which have thus far

been given the stamp of official approval by the National Socialist government.

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Dr. Göbbel's strictures against "*volks-und rassenfremde Elementen*" are of course directed primarily against the Jews; taken in this sense it could be met with a list of names whose service to German culture is unquestionable, and was indeed unquestioned till a short time ago. It is hardly necessary to repeat them here. There is also, however, the oft-mooted question of foreign influence in art. A truly creative period worries little about such influences; for a relatively sterile one their danger lies not in the fact that they are foreign, but is rather that they are likely to remain superficial and half-digested.

Händel and Chopin were both profoundly influenced by Italian music, but no one would attempt to deny the German nature of Händel's art, while the Slavic nature of Chopin's is almost proverbial. These composers in other words succeeded in making the "foreign" traits present in their works entirely their own—so much so, in these cases, that they tower far above their models in a way to recall Emerson's saying, à propos of Shakespeare, "The greatest genius is the most indebted man."

An artificial shutting off of "foreign contacts" will not therefore necessarily deepen the indigenous ones, nor will it give roots to those who have not got them. If a healthy art cannot absorb "foreign elements" it will throw them off spontaneously, and without external and self-conscious pressure.

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It is hardly necessary to point out that Dr. Göbbel's letter contains other elements and raises other considerations than those of a purely musical nationalism. It is interesting, for instance, to note the cleverly graded crescendo of qualification applied to the term "true artist" in the last three paragraphs quoted. To the qualifications, taken literally as principles, it is difficult to take exception. That only good artists deserve encouragement most people would agree. It is also fairly generally admitted that a state has the right to protect itself. Nevertheless it is a rather striking fact that the highest cultures of the past have

been those in which the artist has enjoyed a very large measure of freedom of imagination and expression and the possibility of a rich and varied life, unhampered by the constant pressure of political or other dogma and theory. One thinks readily of the Athenian and Florentine republics, and if the musical florescence of eighteenth century Vienna may seem to be an exception, it is as well to remember that music was not in those days regarded as potentially dangerous to any national or political idea.

In critically examining any program which has to do with "cultural defense" it is necessary to raise first of all the question as to what culture it is that is being defended, secondly as to the forces against which it is defending itself. In the case of present-day Germany these questions hardly bear examination. The German musical tradition that is being so assiduously "defended" is apparently that of the middle and late nineteenth century; indeed, it seems at times as if it were, more specifically, precisely those elements of German music which seem most circumscribed by the limits of time and place that the directors of German cultural policy now desire to nurture and perpetuate. As a writer in a Königsberg paper explained a few months ago in discussing the importance of Hans Pfitzner for the "new" Germany, "The best part of German music is its Romantic period." It is Wagner, not Bach or Mozart, who is the spiritual father of the National Socialist musical ideal; only one of several Wagners, moreover, and that the most purely subjective, visionary, and barbaric one. Beethoven is conceived according to the Wagnerian tradition as the foreshadower of Wagner rather than as the heir of Mozart and Haydn. The Nazi movement, then, is, from a musical standpoint, the victory of a distorted Wagnerism; its spiritual "enemies" include whatever fresh impulses have been alive in the world since Wagner's time.

The above considerations do not, of course, apply to Germany alone; nor are the policies which are now being carried out there the exclusive property of the National Socialist party. They constitute, in fact the basis of polemics, slogans, and theories which are being everywhere increasingly resorted to by advo-

cates of one or another extremist solution of our contemporary distresses. It would be well for those who have adopted the view of art as a function of the political state, whatever form that state may assume, to reexamine their theoretical position in the light of the abuses attendant on its practical realization in Germany—abuses which are inherent in such a program and are not merely of a temporary and tangible nature, but in the deepest sense destructive of the integrity of the artist and of the art which he serves.