

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## ON THE AMERICAN FUTURE

ROGER SESSIONS

TO the Editor:-

The piece for which you have asked this time takes me back to the letter which I addressed to you a year ago last spring, when Hitler marched into Vienna. It takes shape as a sort of companion piece, since its subject is so nearly related. Since that time the totalitarian flood has gathered momentum and is now far more widespread, more powerful, and infinitely more threatening. In spite of the wars which are being waged against Germany, Russia, and Japan, it seems likely if not certain to spread still further before it is finally crushed. For all of us, and for our children, life has suddenly become problematical – even in the United States. The luxury which we could at that time allow ourselves, of genuine optimism regarding the survival, at least in this country, of the values which totalitarianism aims to destroy, has dwindled to a somewhat grim hope – not a forlorn hope, certainly, but one which can be maintained and realized only at the price of intense and ceaseless struggle. It has become fairly evident too that if these values are to prevail – and prevalence means always constant, creative renewal, not merely conservation which is bound to fail – then initiative and leadership must come largely from this part of the world. Europe's agony is but one phase of a much vaster situation in which we too are involved, and in which ours may very easily be the last word. In any event the final responsibility will in all probability be presented to America, to accept or reject: whether or not the basic human liberties, envisaged by the men who created America, shall become securely established in the world. This is the real issue at stake today; around it

all the economic and political problems, however urgent, group themselves with reasonably clear logic.

Unhappily, this issue has not yet been thoroughly faced. Totalitarianism has won its victories, and still continues to win them, as a result of the cowardice, the short-sighted greed, and above all the mental and moral confusion of its enemies. Under the stress of war and possible danger, this confusion seems greater, at times, than ever. We see and feel every day, the temptation to grasp at dubious straws, to contract strange and dangerous alliances, and above all to risk refuge from sheer fatigue and lack of staying-power in the delusions of isolationism, together with the many convenient fictions which enable us to forget, for a little while longer, the real but not yet inexorable demands of the situation. Very often this takes the form of a reconditioning of older escapist attitudes; it brings with it the real danger of fixing more firmly attitudes and complexes which should normally be outgrown.

It is for this reason that I feel genuinely concerned over the present trend towards nationalism and cultural isolationism among American musicians. This tendency is nothing new; I used to be aware of it twenty-five years ago when, as the extremely youthful editor of a short-lived Harvard undergraduate publication, I occasionally tilted with it. Today, however, it is becoming a very real problem. A certain number of our musicians, together with a not negligible part of our musical press, is demanding with a voice quite reminiscent of various totalitarian phrases which we have heard, that music which shall "express the national feeling," "reflect the American scene," "establish an American style" — as if these were in any sense measurable or specific quantities, or as if they were in any sense criteria or even basic ingredients of musical quality. We hear frequent statements to the effect that "European music is played out," that "American composers are doing in every way better work than their European contemporaries." I was asked recently at a Forum-Laboratory "question period" if I did not think that American music is in an improved "strategic position" as a result of the war — as if American music were in some sense embattled against "European music" and as if the present situation in Europe represented in some way a victory for the American cause. Why, one might well ask, drag in Europe at all? What has the state of music in Europe to do with the achievements of American composers? One sees, finally, a none too clearly expressed, but none the less unmistakable hostility to the "foreign" musicians who have settled here during

the last few years – as if (and here I hope I may be forgiven for speaking with the authority of one whose American ancestry has been “uncorrupted” by “immigrant” blood since the early seventeenth century) the very essence of Americanism were not the coming together, on our soil, of a thousand different elements, united by the single bond of a common love of liberty, so often the result of exile from lands where life had for some reason become intolerable. One of our recently acquired compatriots has defined an American as a man who was himself unhappy, or who possessed forebears who were unhappy in their native land.

The tendencies which I have enumerated are of course quasi-fascist attitudes – “*Blut und Boden!*” – but they are dangerous for other reasons as well. First of all because they reveal and tend to perpetuate through cultivation, a lack of inner security on the part of American musicians which is the greatest possible obstacle to healthy creation. The demand for “national” art is fundamentally a defensive attitude, the reflex action of a pervasive inferiority complex. If American composers tend to think of musical life in terms of competition, it is not merely a quite false analogy taken over from the business world, but a sign of their own self-consciousness which may make them think of musical development in egocentric terms rather than in terms of music itself. If they are self-conscious and hypersensitive with respect to “European” music it is only to a very small extent because of real or fancied slights which have been dealt them in the name of European tradition; for these would prove largely quite illusory and in any case quite negligible if they had really found themselves and were primarily absorbed in their own creative impulses. But just as the valetudinarian frequently becomes, through excessive preoccupation with his health, the victim of his own hypochondria, the artist who is excessively afraid of “influences” or insistent on the purity of his origins tends to wither from lack of nourishment. A consciously “national” style, in any field, inevitably becomes a picturesque mannerism, a kind of trade-mark, devoid of significant human content irremediably outmoded the moment its novelty has gone. Of the Russian “Five” how much music remains in the vital repertory? And in the music of Moussorgsky himself is it not precisely what is most specifically “Russian” which has aged most quickly? How much remains of the French “school” which thrived with such apparent luxuriance as a spiritual result of the disaster of 1870, in seeming unawareness that Chopin and Berlioz and Bizet were also Frenchmen though quite unpreoccupied with the idea of a “national” style?

For vital music is characterized far less by the somewhat academic purity than by the range and depth of its expression; great composers have been so by virtue of influences absorbed and transcended, not through scrupulous avoidance of contagion or through self-conscious direction of their impulses into channels "national" or otherwise. They have expressed themselves, in other words, as men, and have not scrupled to draw their nourishment from all promising sources, since it would never have occurred to them to question their own digestive capacities.

My second cause for concern is that the nationalistic attitude tends to remove composers, through the artificial isolation which they thereby assume, from the realities of their art, since it is indeed to a considerable extent a pretext for escape from those realities. Especially in a country like ours, in which development has been inevitably so rapid, there is always the danger of superficiality; and the establishment of specialized criteria leads all too easily to a neglect of the fundamental requirements of the art. Hence in asking that music be American we almost inevitably neglect to demand that it be music — that it spring from a genuine and mature impulse on the part of the composer and be more than simply a more or less promising attempt. I am not speaking here of technical inadequacy but of the half-baked quality, the undefinitiveness, which we so often tend to mistake for vitality. No amount of "technical" proficiency can compensate for a lack of the basic spiritual discipline which alone can produce a mature artist. Composers, to be sure, are born, not made. But once born, they must grow; and far more composers are born than ever come to real fruition. "Talent" and "promise" are exceedingly common, and one need not be unduly impressed by them when they so often remain at that primitive stage. They can never get past that stage unless artists demand of themselves something more than provincialism.

For nationalistic criteria are in the last analysis quite unreal. I do not really believe that our advocates of "American" music would be seriously content with a picturesque folklore or with the musical reproduction, either specific or general, of American scenes or landscapes — we are quite adequately supplied with these in our popular music and various other manifestations. A nation is something far greater than that — it is rather the sum of a great many efforts towards goals which are essentially human and not parochial. It gains much of its character, no doubt, from the conditions of time and space under which those efforts are made. But it is the efforts and the goals which are really essential. So how on earth

can we demand in advance, qualities which can reveal themselves only gradually, in works, the products of clear artistic vision? It is such works which, if and when they come into existence, will reveal America to us, not as the mirror of things already discovered, but as a constantly renewed and fresh experience of the realities which music alone can reveal. It seems to me so clear that this was the real achievement of the great music of the past. Bach and Mozart and Beethoven did not *reflect* Germany, they helped to create it; they brought in each instance new and unexpected, but essential materials to its construction. And only after the picture had really begun to take clear shape, through the influence of their finished work, was it possible to point with some certainty to specifically German characteristics in their art. It is not, moreover, as "German" composers that we value them, but rather we value Germany because of them, as creators of immortal music. What is "German" in their works and that of their lesser colleagues is purely incidental, an inevitable but unimportant by-product of music that is real and complete. So what we most ask of our composers is not "American music," but something much more exacting and at the same time essentially simpler—*music* in the only real sense of the word—music, that is, which is deeply and completely conceived, the product of a mature vision of life.

I have said nothing about my recently acquired colleagues or of the "problems" which some American musicians feel they have brought to our shores. You will understand, I am sure, why I have not done so; it would be inconsistent with my whole mode of thought were I to regard them as anything but welcome collaborators. It would seem to me, in fact, inconsistent with everything which I have been taught to regard as American, besides involving subtle distinctions of priority for which I have certainly no taste. I believe we need them and the contributions which they have for us in the crisis which we are now, I hope, gradually learning to face. Any other attitude would be not only repulsive but unthinkable; and I believe that the truly representative musicians of America will eventually feel as I do, if indeed they do not do so already.

Certainly we, too, will create a "tradition" if civilization is saved, and if we really wholeheartedly desire it. It will come, not through cultural isolationism or consciously nurtured "Americanism" but through men who, having listened to the music which sings within them, are willing to let themselves be guided by it, wherever it may lead them. Such music, and only such music, will be truly and profoundly American.