

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

AMERICAN MUSIC AND THE CRISIS

ROGER SESSIONS

TO the Editor -

The request that I write "an appeal to reason" invokes in me the feeling that I should, perhaps, offer something other than has been asked for. The question of musical nationalism is of course paramount; it constantly comes forward in a time of crisis and in many forms even as applied to music. But after all is it "reason" which is fundamentally involved? Reason is impossible without premises, and in most of the discussions which take place today it is our premises that are insufficiently considered. I am perhaps being very blunt, or very arrogant, in calling for an appeal not so much to reason as to reality, if you like, to facts. Nothing less however seems likely to lead to anything but wishful thinking and confusion.

Then again, I have a little the feeling that I am writing primarily not about music at all, but about National Defense. For inevitably any thoughts which one may have about American music, about the conditions which prevail in American musical life, and above all, of course, about the relation of both to American national feeling, must lead to the general question of the crisis in which we find ourselves, our inner preparation to meet this crisis, and the possible future of our country, once the crisis is past. To pretend, as some still do, that no serious crisis exists, is of course fantastic. But it seems to me equally fantastic to persuade ourselves that we are at the present time meeting it adequately, either in its external or its inner aspects. It is of course not for me to write here on Defense Production, Aid to England and China, or the grand strategy of American Defense. Music has nothing to do with these things, nor can a musician as such

contribute much to them except his voice as a citizen of a still democratic country.

But if anything should be obvious, it is the fact that the crisis is above all an inner one. It is a commonplace, of course, though as generally stated an inaccurate one, that the present struggle is a "world revolution." The inaccuracy derives from the fact that neither are the revolutionary issues often stated very clearly, nor is the challenge of "Fascism" (I insist that H. G. Wells is right in refusing to admit any such thing as a Fascist "ideology") even recognized, let alone squarely faced. In many quarters, to regard Fascism as a challenge is to find oneself immediately dubbed a Fascist.

Yet is it not plain that Fascism, far from being a doctrine or even a "movement" in the usual sense, is simply the uprush of the more ruthless and resentful elements into a void which has been created in modern society by the prevalence of nihilistic cynicism, by economic, intellectual, and moral disorder, and by a crassly competitive spirit in human relationships? To insist that Democracy and Freedom can prevail only if we rediscover and make effective our democratic convictions, our sense of social responsibility, and a greater spirit of cooperation, is neither Fascist nor defeatist – nor is it compatible with an unwillingness to resist Fascism also from without, in spite of Messrs. Thomas and Hutchins and others who like them seem to be doing their best, in their several roles, to repeat here the exact German pattern. Unfortunately we are obliged to fight on at least two fronts, and failure on either the one or the other means inevitable disaster.

What has all this, one may ask, to do with music? – especially with contemporary American "serious music?" For, while we admit that great art in the past has often helped to build a national spirit, American music has certainly not yet begun to play any such role.

Yet if my diagnosis of the Fascist challenge is correct, our musical problems are wholly relevant to all that I have said. For while I do not believe that building a national spirit is the main function of great art, it has certainly always been one of its by-products; and the failure of existing art to achieve that effect is almost certainly a symptom of the inner problems which the country faces.



In our case many of these problems are certainly due to the organization of our musical life. For the latter has become a vast and complex

profit-making structure, which has literally no relationship to the creative impulses of the composer. That this has happened is, of course, nobody's fault – not that of managers, critics, or musicians, or of that perennial scapegoat, the public. It is rather the result of forces in our society which lie entirely outside the artistic sphere, and can only be understood or dealt with in terms of those forces.

But it bears, certainly, all the ear-marks of an *impasse*. Consider only one of its implications, in the light of the present crisis. It is built largely around "stars" – that is, around personalities whose musical achievements may be very great but whose position rests certainly upon other factors as well. The glamor of the stars is enhanced by a tendency to what may be called an "economy of scarcity" in this connection. Manifestly, the fewer the stars, the brighter they shine; and, partly because of the need to attract as great a multitude as possible – partly also because the supply of potential stars is far greater than the number of available places in the galaxy – the distance between the stars and their nearest competitors tends to become ever greater. Hence an enormous waste of talent, and, above all, since stardom is based, except in the rarest cases, on established reputation, an ever-increasing diminution of opportunities for younger artists to penetrate the charmed circle, or even to survive. I often wonder where the conductor will be found who will be capable of leading the Philharmonic Orchestra in, say, 1960, and how, if the present trend should continue, artistic standards can possibly be maintained. The remedy, of course, can only come through far-reaching reorientations, in the direction, I should say, of decentralization and, if I may coin the word, deglamorization. But that, of course, is not my story here.

The composer, however, is placed by this state of affairs in a serious dilemma. Either he will come to terms with it, or he will be obliged to find some kind of *modus vivendi* outside the system, and without regard to it. He will either accept its standards – those of "success" measured in terms of practical and immediate sales value – and try to conform to them; or else he will pursue a more independent course, one which does not bind him to the system in any way. Naturally I am over-simplifying. Each course of action which I have suggested contains many gradations of possibility, as may be readily seen in the careers of our various composers.

Both courses, however, have their dangers; and it is these that I think we should face clearly, in order to really appreciate the problems facing the composer today. I believe that any attempt on the part of the composer

to come to terms with present conditions is bound to prove, in the end, a losing fight, and for very simple reasons. First of all he is subjecting himself to standards which are by their very nature alien to him. It is all very well to preach the duty of the composer to write for a public; but this is successful only when one can assume a community of tastes between composer and public. It presupposes a state of culture and society, in other words, rather than a type of art – a culture that is both sure and conscious of its aspirations, which are shared generally among its members. In such a culture the creative artist is so to speak, at one with his public, and expresses its aspirations because it expresses his own. But in such a society creative activity flourishes to such an extent that the commercial exploitation of art becomes irrelevant, and the conditions of which I have spoken become inconceivable.

Under present conditions, however, the relation of the public to music becomes inevitably a trivial one, since what exists is something very much like a planned rationing of musical sensations, in the interests of maximum profits. In times of economic plenty, the public is given a considerable proportion of novel sensation, in the effort to attract it, while in lean years the effort is inevitably to prevent it from shrinking beyond the danger point, with the result that caution and eclecticism become the rule. Our own twenties and thirties form unsurpassable examples of both states of affairs. The result however is that the *grand monde* of music satisfies the real esthetic needs of no one, since its moving forces have little, fundamentally, to do with esthetic necessities, but are primarily concerned with selling goods, with all the devices that salesmanship uses for that purpose. Since the nature of the goods in question makes public consumption far more profitable than private consumption, it is inevitable that a high degree of standardization must be the result; and standardization thus becomes the contemporary substitute for the real community of spirit that existed between the eighteenth century Viennese composer, or, later, the nineteenth century Italian opera composer, and their respective publics – both smaller, by the way, than is often supposed.

The composer is thus faced by the impossibility of finding his public within himself, and any attempt to conform to the standard will therefore mean that he no longer demands the most of himself – already a literally insuperable obstacle in the way of worth-while achievement. To render his position the more hopeless, however, his work is inevitably compared with the greatest works of the past – works which had their origin not

in an effort at conformity, but in a vital creative impulse which still glows in them. The result is obvious. It is true that some of our conformists have achieved a certain abstract reputation; but the public remains politely unresponsive to the actual music. In this respect they fare certainly no better, and in others certainly less well, than their bolder colleagues.

III

Yet the alternative course is also dangerous. Its dangers are not, I believe, inevitable; otherwise the situation would be indeed hopeless and the outlook desperate – not only, indeed, for music, since the conditions which I have described are general and in no way limited to the musical world alone. The dangers are fairly obvious. They are those of what I may call individual isolationism on the one hand, and, on the other, of a quasi-political, back-door conformism which accepts all of the premises which motivate the *grand monde*, rejecting only its commercialism and its genuine, if falsely applied standards.

Of "individual isolationism" enough has been said, and the attitude is so comparatively rare by this time that it is hardly a danger now. The other attitude, however, is less rare and in fact quite popular in certain quarters; it is therefore worth analyzing a little, simply because it too is a blind alley. For it is based on the fallacy that "style," conceived in a purely materialistic sense, and external association, form the real content of music, and that musical expression apart from them hardly exists. At least, though this is seldom expressed so crudely, it is clearly implied in the basic assumptions of such music – assumptions which find still clearer expression in the writings of some of our exponents of a music – not yet existent – that shall "reflect the American scene," or embody an "American idiom" – not yet discovered, at least by "serious" composers.

This of course raises the basic question as to what *is* genuinely American music – or, how can music be achieved which really represents us, as Americans? I am not satisfied with this manner of stating the question; and yet I think the true answer will nevertheless express the essential nature of my reservations. The question is not a peculiarly American one, and yet the answer is clearer, stated in terms of America, than it would be in the case of any other people.

For, after all, we are Americans not through a purely geographical accident, but through a profound faith in certain human principles which were affirmed as the basis on which our nation was founded; a faith which we have sometimes allowed to slacken grievously, but to which we always

refer in times of stress. It is this faith above all which constitutes Americanism, and which has thus far made us stronger, not weaker, than other peoples. If we have at times tended to confuse equality with lack of discrimination, justice with unwillingness to face the facts of real evil, and freedom of conscience with competitive disorder, we have, to be sure, imperilled our democracy, but we have done so within a characteristically American pattern. We can avert that peril only if we are willing to re-discover once more the true meaning of those principles, and to build a social order that shall more adequately embody them. I believe we will do this, and do it successfully, if we will only become aware of the real threats which face us.

For, once more, these principles are the core of our national being. The Polish farmers who have revitalized the soil of my Connecticut Valley have learned to love that soil, just as I and my ancestors have done. But like my ancestors, and those of all of us, they were Americans already before this conversion had taken place, through their basic American faith.

This is one specific reason why I refuse to conceive of Americanism, in music or otherwise, in purely materialistic terms. It is not an American "idiom" that composers should seek, nor even a definitely American "content." For neither idiom nor content, in any genuine and significant sense, are achieved by any external means. They are not measurable quantities nor are they embodied in formulae of expression or in "subject matter." They become so only in the spurious sense, in what is essentially "applied art" — art which is no longer genuine expression but rather the imitation of expression, for purposes which have nothing to do with expression as such. Basically this implies a denial of expression — a denial that it is relevant to the purpose in hand. And if all art be relegated to this status, it is a denial of the human spirit itself which is involved.

Here is where the question of National Defense crops up again. For the kind of implicit pessimism which I have described is obviously inconsistent with the vision of an American future. It is true that the prevalence here of such conceptions of art is due not entirely to pessimism regarding the future creative potentialities of America, but in large part to a lack of education, especially among "educated" people, which leads them to think of all music as a kind of applied art which possesses what significance it has through sheer association. That is, of course, as fallacious as anything could be. It is not the forests of Finland which give the music of Sibelius any significance it may have, but rather the accents and gestures of Sibelius,

the man, speaking on whatever subject happens to stir his imagination.

These are the reasons why I believe so profoundly that the problems of American music can and will be solved only by the simplest of attitudes on the part of American composers. First of all, they must abjure "success" as a goal and strive rather to be significant individuals instead. Do you remember the story of Alexander the Great who, after conquering Darius of Persia, ordered his followers to elect him a god? All, I believe, complied with his wishes except the Spartans, who stated the crux of the matter in saying "When Alexander wishes to be a god, let him be a god!"

Secondly, they must become significant musicians instead of mere "talents." Of course you know I do not mean to imply that there are as yet no significant musicians among us already. It is only that we still tend, a little, to be over-impressed with "talent" in the raw, and to confuse mastery with academicism. As a matter of fact, what I mean by mastery is the very reverse of academicism which is not mastery but slavishness, and essentially one of the commoner forms which incomplete development – or amateurishness – may take. But the composer needs, and if he is a mature composer will achieve, the resourceful command of musical materials which will enable his imagination to identify itself with these materials and to express itself fully through them.

Finally, they must learn to write music which is a genuine expression – music in which they are fully themselves, music which has been a real, important, and primary experience to them. Music so produced will vary in quality, as individuals vary; it will vary in style and form, with the immense variety of America itself. But it will embody the authentic accents and gestures of American individuals. And what other Americanism do we want, or can we demand, in our music?