

WHY NOT TRY THE AIR?

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WHEN we were children, they used to tell us that if a tree falls and no one hears it fall, it makes no sound. Well if music plays and no one hears it played, it makes no noise. Of course, a tree falls only once. But new music is played twice only if someone who heard it the first time liked it.

First performances of American music are comparatively rare, and repetitions are much rarer. How then can we have great composers? Greatness in music may be unimportant, and sincerity or individuality enough. But all musicians are fundamentally interested only in great music, or the greatness they can find in good music, or what goodness they can find in bad music. The demerits of a piece really interest only the writers. But however you may feel about criticism as a vocation or a pastime, you are interested in the prospect of great American music, and would like to hear some.

This age shows an unparalleled apathy toward new music of permanent aspirations. Cecil Gray (a thoroughgoing and respectably prejudiced historian) said recently that at no period of music history has the public cared so little about contemporary works and he could not give a reason for this unresponsiveness. I know a composer of unusual talent, vitality and perspective who says in his black moments that if everyone should stop composing tomorrow, and not start again for a hundred years, nobody would notice.

In September 1937, six well-informed Parisian musicians were talking about the French composers of the hour; at the end of their tepid enumeration, they burst into a gloria about the early songs of Gounod which were just being unearthed. There, it appeared, was something really worth performing. Look what a fuss has recently been made over the revelation of the "lost" Schumann *Violin Concerto*. Maybe the modern musician should aim

to become what Melville calls "a mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub Librarian."

Perhaps it would be best for an American of today to spend his time making Charles Ives' later scores more practical for performance. Ives received all too few performances of his music while he was writing it. He seldom got to try out what he had put on paper, and now he is too ill to write. It was not fantastic for him to contemplate a work for seven orchestras and a chorus of thousands, while nobody was taking the trouble to play his string quartets, which are quite easy.

Composers it seems, go right along composing, even though what they write may be unwanted. For whom are they doggedly preparing all these scores? For Carnegie Hall, which was politely bored when Barbirolli gave Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* the best performance we may ever hear of this piece in New York? For the critics who said it was "much ado about nothing," and remarked that it was easy to "whip such a thing into shape?"

This masterful piece was not even hissed. During the past four seasons, I have heard only one hiss in Carnegie Hall, that of a lone soul when Koussevitzky did Prokofieff's *Scythian Suite* last season. Everybody smiled. It was positively heartwarming.

The figure of the composer as a popular hero is temporarily extinct. The honest men who are writing for themselves alone admit they find it cheerless. Some still write only for their clique, but the clique is very tired of claquing.



In the face of such facts, the radio broadcasting networks play new music, commission new music and give prizes for new music. Why? Because the audience for new music is now the radio audience. I believe this because, in the line of duty, I have read at least seven thousand music fan letters during the past eleven months. Among the writers were violent objectors to modern music, and for these articulate partisans we should all be grateful. But the objectors were overwhelmingly in the minority, and often they were people who were primarily concert-goers, or disappointed performers. The great majority of persons who wrote these letters wanted to hear new music, and particularly

new American music. Since the radio stations are interested in giving the public what it wants, they are giving their public this new music.

During 1937, the Columbia Broadcasting System played the works written for the first Columbia Composers' Commission by Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, William Grant Still, Aaron Copland, Roy Harris and Louis Gruenberg. The National Broadcasting Company commissioned Gian-Carlo Menotti to write a radio opera. CBS announced the second Columbia Composers' Commission, with works ordered from Jerome Moross, Robert Russell Bennett, Leo Sowerby, Nathaniel Dett, Quincy Porter and Vittorio Giannini. NBC announced the winners of its Music Guild Award for chamber music (Mitya Stillman, Alois Reiser and Rudolf Forst). On the Columbia Workshop, a radio music-drama by Marc Blitzstein, *I've Got the Tune*, was commissioned and performed. Previous to 1937, NBC had engineered through Deems Taylor its Orchestral Awards (won by Philip James, Max Wald, Carl Eppert, Florence Galajikian and Nicolai Berezowsky). At various times, Bernard Herrmann has composed thirty dramatic scores to order for CBS; he has also written seven melodramas for full orchestra and speaking voice at the network's request, and supplied his *Nocturne* and *Scherzo* on order from Howard Barlow for the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Tom Bennett and Leith Stevens have written special scores for CBS dramatic broadcasts, and Tom Bennett, Wells Hively and Frank Black have done similar jobs for NBC. This list does not attempt to include world premieres of new works via radio, American premieres on the air, or first broadcasts of new pieces.

The radio audience listened to this music and asked for encores. It is impossible to quote the letters on various broadcasts at much length. However, on October 17th, 1937, CBS put on a two-hour broadcast of nothing but commissioned works in its series called *Everybody's Music*, and here are a few typical comments on the occasion:

Baltimore: "Vigorous and prolonged applause for the two-hour broadcast this afternoon. Add stomping of feet and even standing on the chair.

Chattanooga, Tennessee: "It was a rare treat. The music was full of variety, interest and color, and gave the vast audience a splendid idea of what our American composers are able to do."

Alton, Illinois: "Permit me to express my gratitude for the privilege of attending the premieres of six new American compositions written especially for radio. You are bringing to residents of the most remote villages the exciting experience of hearing a first performance of a symphonic work, an opportunity formerly possible only to the big-city-dweller. There must be many other listeners like me who hope to hear them again on the radio, every one of them. A great day for the radio audience!"

Spokane, Washington: "Thank you for another of the most enjoyable programs on the air. I welcomed the opportunity to hear the music of Aaron Copland and Roy Harris. The entire program is making the *best* music everybody's music."

Columbus, Ohio: "Let anybody have a fine orchestra playing old accepted masterpieces. By demonstrating that music is a living, vital force, and that we have composers of note in this country, you are rendering a far greater service to the cause of music."

Milwaukee: "We who are ordinary citizens are grateful that American composers are at last having an opportunity to present their works to the nation at large through the medium of radio."

Charleston, West Virginia: "It was a pleasure to hear history made in the field of music."

In the United States we have seen a whole nation which was musically informed in only a few centers develop an appetite for music in the space of less than two decades. Out in the former Miserere Belt, where hearing records of the *Peer Gynt* suite used to constitute the event of many a sensitive listener's season, auditors have become accustomed to Brahms and Stravinsky, via radio, and they know what to think of these gentlemen. For most of this audience, the question of whether a piece is new or old is no more important than whether it was written in the morning or at night. Musical appetites are jaded only in the centres which are surfeited with sensation. Despite all commentators, radio audiences form their own method of approach to composers. There is a demand for new music on the air, and the demand has just begun.

Since composers need a public, why should they prefer to address a sated minority instead of an avid majority? Radio has shown its willingness to produce new works which are adapted to the medium. Yet the scores which come to radio stations every week are generally written with no knowledge of studio conditions, no regard for the instrumentation of studio orchestras, and no consideration of the microphone whatever. Even when they are possible for network production, they are impossible for the hundreds of stations which have more limited orchestral apparatus. Why should a concert performance mean more to a composer than a radio performance?



When a piece of music is broadcast, millions of people learn to reckon with the composer as an artist, whether they like him or not. These same people would probably remain unaware of his very existence if his works were played only in the concert hall. I should like therefore to point out to composers a few ways in which the radio audience differs from the audience to which they are accustomed to address themselves.

It is an ungregarious audience. It consists of single isolated individuals, or of isolated small groups. It does not respond as elements of a mass. It generally listens under quiet, friendly, homelike circumstances.

It is a blind audience. It cannot care whether the conductor beats one-in-a-bar by a rotary or a piston motion. It doesn't notice whether the players are wearing tails or shorts. It will not see you when you bow.

It is an intimate audience. Nothing except the transmission mechanism comes between you and it. And the same mechanism comes between it and Berlioz, so you and he start even.

It is an impatient audience. If you do not captivate it, off you go with the simplest twist of the wrist. No amount of ballyhoo will make it love you if you treat it hatefully.

It is unprejudiced. Many of its number are not certain whether you are living or dead, and few of them consider it bad taste for you to be the former.

It is unanalytical. It wants to be moved, amused, lulled, diverted, touched, shaken, delighted, transported, sobered, re-

assured. But it does not want to pick you to pieces.

It is simultaneously immense. Whereas millions used to be able to hear a piece during the course of a century, now millions can hear it within the space of an hour. A whole nation can form an opinion on a Presidential move overnight, and that same nation can form an opinion on a piece of music overnight.

How much attention should the composer pay to such an audience? Well, he must decide how much attention he will pay to any audience, and this is a point few artists ever decide to their own satisfaction. It is considered moral among musicians to say that one should write solely what he hears with his inner ear, and pay no attention to the multitude. However, it is impossible for a composer who writes for radio to be unconscious of his audience. He can take one of two courses with regard to it: he can try to please, or he can despise it. It is perfectly respectable to take either. Yet I wonder whether any composer who really despised his public ever succeeded in pleasing it.

At one stage in radio, Hindemith had the greatest power of any composer to infuriate listeners. No matter what his theories might have been, broadcasts of his music brought in unanimously vituperative letters. Then suddenly one Spring morning in 1937, the Columbia Broadcasting System carried an hour and three-quarters of Hindemith's music from Washington, with the composer participating as violist. The letters which came were not numerous, but they were all friendly. That night, I had dinner with a charming old lady from Iowa who had heard and liked the broadcast. She had become conscious of music only through radio. I asked her what piece she liked best, and she said, "The piece he played on the violin." It was the sonata for viola alone which was the bitterest and most uncompromising work of that stringent one hundred and five minutes.

One thing is certain: the composers who neither know nor care what the public thinks are living in a dream-world all their own. They can never really know what the public thinks if they decline to write for the medium which reaches it most efficiently today. The great American composers will write for radio, and they will write much. Air carries sound, but no sound travels in a vacuum.