

THE NOISE-MAKERS

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EVER since Wagner so conspicuously set a fashion in speculation with his *Music of the Future*, musicians and their critics (agreeing at least in this) every decade or so have made a more or less wall-eyed guess about what the next decade would bring forth. Just now we are all of us at it again and seething with gusto to boot.

It is of course not difficult to know why. For apparently more queer things are being done in music nowadays than ever before. Apparently and not really, perhaps; for anyone familiar with the byways of musical history has discovered long since that every age and every period has been given to the invention of strange things.

The new is always queer. Only now, at least to the temporarily distraught soul, practically everything since Brahms seems queer. And some of us who do not believe that everything queer is necessarily quite daft, harbor the notion that music in its latest phases has struck out along more tangents from the main stream of progress, or continuance, than ever before.

The very names one can give the innovators are in themselves a fascinating by-product of speculation. There are the horizontalists, the Schönbergers; there are the atonalists and the polytonalists per se; there are the ancientrists, committed to ancients, those who feel convinced that resurrection is life—the new Stravinsky and the new Casella and the new Malipiero; there are the fractured-tone-smiths, the champions of divided tones, from the late Ferruccio Busoni to the fearfully latent Julian Carillo; there are the rhythmists, following the Stravinsky of *Le Sacre du Printemps*; and, certainly not finally, there are the hurlyburlists, the noisemakers.

Some of all these "ists" have produced both distinctive music and music of distinction; many of them have produced much that it merely abstruse. Of them all, possibly the most stimulating are the noisemakers. We hasten to say that this is not because there is anything abstruse about them or even, as you might suppose, because they are the newest of the lot; but simply since they, unconsciously perhaps, are doing something which may be more valid than any of us think, may indeed be the beginning of what the music of the future will actually turn out to be. By the noisemakers we of course mean chiefly the imperturbably perseverant Varese and the cannily yeasty young Antheil.

To anyone living in a modern city, whose architectural and other growing pains are an ineffable combination of Gargantuan shriek and clanking agony, an inescapable rage of metal that becomes a daily continuity of battering sound, it may occur that the music of the future is likely to be conditioned by the ears of the future.

We may well ask what the ears of the future will be capable of hearing—or, more pertinently, not hearing—twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years from now if the noise of daily life goes on getting louder and louder at the present rate of increase. For in a relatively short time, the sense of hearing in the human animal must become thickened and muffled and in a half century or so he will be literally pig-eared, if not altogether as deaf as a moderately deaf post.

Useless then to write anything that perhaps not more than a few hundreds of specially gifted relics will be able to hear. Further speculation in the matter becomes at once absorbingly pleasurable. Single instruments, from the flute to the piano, will no longer claim any composer's attention. All the concerti will have to go. All the piano recitals and the violin recitals, the 'cello recitals and the harpsichord salons intimes will slip into desuetude. Mr. George Barrère's great-great-grandchildren, if any, will probably be siren players on hook-and-ladder trucks. And the song recital, too, will be no more. Happy the music critic in those days—perhaps and perhaps not.

Since inventive device must keep pace with the necessitous demand of living conditions, one can imagine the pig-eared

future inventing for itself not so much an orchestra of noise machines as of little amplifying devils, minute in size but huge in magnifying sound; little inventions that, placed for example within the belly of a single violin, will give forth the tone of a thousand fiddles. And ditto for the viola and the 'cello and the contrabass, for each of the brasses and the woodwinds as well. The orchestra of today will have evolved into a gigantic, an incalculable tonemaker.



First, however, evolution, according to its inexorable law, will doubtless seek the easiest way; and the need for enough sound to be heard will create its earlier phase of the use of the prevailing noisemaking machine, the addition to the present orchestra of every known din producer, existent and to come, from the triple rattle of New Year's Eve to something like a battery of sirens.

And that, perhaps, is why the Messrs. Varese and Antheil are already farthest along the main way, much as one—this one, at any rate—should like to deny that what they have written is music at all. It may, in fact if not in present effect, be the first manifestation of what is to be the actual music of the future; and the speculations of otherwise astute and sound persons (such, in instance, as Mr. E. J. Dent in *Terpander, or Music and the Future*) may be and not improbably are, all wrong.

Saying, like the old gentleman in Mr. Dent's book after he had had his first taste of Debussy years ago, "Well, if that is the music of the future, I'm very glad I shan't live to hear it," is of course quite dodderingly beside the point. Who cares, or will care, about any of us old gentlemen, from Monteverdi's time to our own? The truth of the matter really is that the old gentleman who hated Debussy so hadn't perception enough to know how beautiful a time he would have had if *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* was to be the music of the future instead of, even while it was being written, music of the past. For Debussy was, after all, merely an interlude, just as is Richard Strauss, really his contemporary although still nominally alive; and, in the same

way, the Schönbergers, the ancientrists, the polytonalists and the atonalists per se, and the champions of divided tones may likewise be.



We have purposefully omitted the rhythmists in this lump of historical interlude, for it seems not unlikely that along with noise, a prime desideratum of the pig-eared future will be rhythm, rhythm and more rhythm. There is a throbbing hint of it in the air already. And it would logically accompany noise. No one, not even the pig-eared, could listen to an unrelieved stream of mere noise for any length of time. It must have a pattern; and if melody and harmony be largely denied to it except rudimentarily, then its remaining recourse for pattern must be rhythm.

One needs but to listen to any three playful brawny men, equipped with riveting machines and clacking out an improvised rhythmic counterpoint on a new piece of steel construction to conjure up some notion of the racking terror the future probably holds for its chosen own. The blunt-eared future, however, will be accustomed to it, will cry for it and absorb it as we do a symphony of Brahms.

For some so-called musical inkling of this rhythmic future we shall probably not have to wait long. One feels quite certain that the next dispensation to startle us will be one of rhythm. And like the noise-making we are already beginning to get a bit used to, it will not improbably be an advance copy, somewhat in miniature, of the kind of music we have been imagining for our great-great-grandchildren, if we are callous enough to have arranged matters so that we may have them.

The possibilities of rhythm have scarcely been more than touched in our music. Stravinsky has done what seemed remarkable, especially in the *Sacre du Printemps*. Even more remarkable things have been done by several of the jazzists (but not the high-hat gentry). Some of the complications of the adroit Zez Confrey, a name not known to the concert halls, are, for instance, a bit of an index of what may be expected.

However the source itself of rhythmic possibility has not even been tapped. And it lies not in jazz, not among the excitements of the Afro-American, but in the African, the pure-blood or nearly pure-blood of Africa itself. Those who have listened to the music of the Basutos, of the Swazis and of the Bequanas, in East Africa, and have written about it, fragmentarily it is true, have disclosed that rhythm as we know it is primitive indeed compared to the astounding development it has reached with the Africans. Their music in fact consists of little else than rhythm. We ourselves tossed rhythm aside early in the fabrication of our music, for we had other things to think about. We have now stopped thinking, apparently, and rhythm is therefore destined at last to bound out of its African hiding-place.



As a fact, even the valid aspect of what our own noise-makers are trying to do—valid in the sense that it may be the forerunner of what the future holds—has been sought after before their time, rhythm and all. Magnitude of sound, like so many other things, goes back to the French Revolution; for even the grandiloquence of Berlioz with his stageful of instruments and voices, was bettered by Méhul who had a scheme for a chorus of three hundred thousand voices. These were divided into four armies and were to sing the first, third, fifth and octave of a tonic chord in *The Fête of the Supreme Being*. The finale was a vast rolling of two hundred drums, capped by the discharge of all the batteries of artillery available.

Méhul, upwards of a century ago, was dreaming, it seems, of what the actual music of the future was to be like. Nevertheless we are doubtless farther on the way to the actuality now than then; and whatever we may or may not think about Varese and Antheil, it is not a bad guess perhaps that, unconsciously in the grip of the *Zeitgeist*, they are battering out something faced forward toward an inevitable if still passionately undesired future.