

THE COLLEGE, THE COMPOSER, AND MUSIC

ROY D. WELCH

THE president of one of the universities of the Atlantic seaboard recently observed that, so far as he could discover, the methods and aims of teaching music in American academic institutions were a half century behind those developed in the other arts.

This statement was not made for publication nor was it documented by a competent analysis of the educational apparatus set up in the several fields of art. It was, however, the result of a deliberate and searching inquiry by an administrative mind not unused to assembling and weighing evidence in other subjects than that of its own branch of scholarship. Whether he had read Randall Thompson's exposé of the seamy side of College Music, or had chanced upon Carl Engel's scathing arraignment of college teachers and their ideals was not revealed. One may be certain that, even in casual conversation, he would not have made this observation about other academic studies without sufficient evidence. Considering its source, it is a remark not lightly to be ignored.

College teachers of music will incline to react with some vehemence to this charge. Their rejoinders are to be scrutinized carefully, for they are naturally on the defensive. Like others who are "*parti pris*" they tend to forget that assertion is to be distinguished from argument and good intentions from competence. But if, for the moment, we may consider the best in this field of college music—rather than the worst, which is so frequently the main concern of those who write or speak about it—it must be granted that to make provision for a first rate academic curriculum in music is a far more complex and diverse problem than that faced in other fields of art. College faculties may, at least this once, be applauded for their effort to see the problem whole

if not steadily, and some of them deserve admiration for a very respectable failure.

If, however, one tests this indictment by turning first to the treatment by the colleges and universities of the contemporary composer and his works, the criticism seems unduly severe. Do the schools give less attention to the contemporary composer than to "moderns" in other arts? Statistics might in part answer this interesting question. But in another sense statistical data would be irrelevant; much that it is important to know would depend upon the quality, not the bulk, of the teaching and exhibition of modern art. Even without carefully compiled and exhaustive statistics, an opinion may safely be ventured.

In no other art than music is more academic time spent on contemporary movements, are there more distinguished faculties representative of these movements, or is more liberal effort made to put the documents, the works themselves, before an intelligent public.



There are, for the first instance, substantial academic courses being given in colleges which deal with the literature, the movements and the problems of contemporary music. In the main, they are in competent hands. Such courses are to be found at New York University, Harvard University, Smith College, Mt. Holyoke College, the University of California and elsewhere.

Before me is a syllabus of one such course. Its students are presumed to have had at least three years training in harmony and counterpoint and one year in the general history of music. The beginning is made in the works of Strauss and Debussy, with liberal references to "modernism" throughout the whole history of music. An impressive number of compositions are studied in their entirety with the aid of phonograph records, the piano and scores and with liberal use of analytical and critical books and essays. More than a speaking acquaintance with these works is required; the students must analyze, compare, trace influences in and remember the thematic content of a large amount of this music. Unless academic methods of study, by and large, are doomed to sterility, it must be granted that contemporary music in such a course has a fair chance of being understood in its own

terms and that an intelligent attitude is likely to be encouraged. Certainly this is no less capable nor serious treatment than is given to the study of the classics.



Audiences for contemporary music are also being created in many college and university communities both by public lectures and concerts. It would be an exaggeration to say that these communities are especially receptive to all that is new in music, for the contrary attitude appears more prevalent; which is only saying that university audiences are not substantially different from other general concert-goers. But I do find an inquiring, informed point of view in many such places, quite in contrast to the disposition of subscribers to orchestral concerts and the opera in conspicuous cities.

The willingness to listen to and to understand the unfamiliar is, I believe due, in large measure to the fact that contemporary music in college communities is made by resident faculty members who command the sympathy and respect of their public and are known for their performances of the familiar classics. I cannot too strongly emphasize the point that contemporary music heard under such conditions becomes far more quickly a normal part of concert experience than when it is to be heard only on special occasions and from visiting performers, however famous.

I am thinking of Smith College where members of the music faculty, among them well-known contemporary composers, give frequent concerts of new works to audiences inclined to listen long and hard largely because audience and performers are good friends. By other means also a familiarity with new music is promoted under similar circumstances. In some colleges groups of students and residents of the community are invited to hear phonograph reproductions of works that are being performed in metropolitan centers or are the subject of wide discussion. These performances are accompanied by talks. Groups of students at Princeton University are now asking for such opportunities entirely without reference to class work. Here and elsewhere are to be found respectable libraries of scores of new music and of books dealing with the contemporary musical situ-

ation. Last year in Princeton Constant Lambert's *Music Ho* was widely circulated among the undergraduates; this year Stravinsky's *Autobiography* is in demand.



Possibly the most striking evidence of the colleges' attitude toward contemporary music is to be found in the circumstance that many notable American composers, representative of the new music, are members of the teaching staff of the departments of music. It is, of course, not without precedent that composers should be found on faculty lists. Horatio Parker, J. K. Paine, Albert M. Stanley, Edward McDowell spent part of their lives in academic circles. Their effectiveness as teachers has been seriously questioned. The two of these men whom I knew had little or no gift for teaching and gave unmistakable evidence of having less interest in it. In the selection of a creative artist for an academic position which involves the training of undergraduates there is an inevitable risk that either the man or his students will suffer. For few creative minds are aware of the elementary problems which the acquisition of a technic or the demands of scholarship present to the uninitiated. Put such a man down with a group of trained and comprehending students and the results are apt to be splendid. Ask him to teach elementary theory and to follow the routine of class exercises and examinations, and there are many hazards to effective intercourse.

The present generation of composer-teachers occupies academic positions primarily, I believe, because of an interest in teaching. They have been elected to their positions to teach rather than to compose. This may seem a dubious advantage for the composer and the colleges which employ them may invite, by such appointments, the reproach of those who wish to believe that all academic life is inimical to creative activity. I recall a distinguished American music critic who ironically observed that academic standards in this country would have excluded Palestrina and Beethoven from professorships. The irrelevance of this remark is matched only by its rancor. Why, after all, should Palestrina or Beethoven want places in university life? And, why should universities abandon their main business, which is teaching and scholarship?

It is striking that many of the young composers who are teaching in American schools have been educated in such institutions. It is of course possible that they are less able composers on that account. Some earnest persons argue to that effect. But they are without any doubt more effective as teachers of American youth for that reason. They know the problems at first hand, problems which we feel do not exist in the same terms in Europe.



At the present moment administrators of college music departments feel, as do the heads of other academic divisions, a strong urge to take advantage of certain unhappy aspects of European life by calling to their faculties distinguished musicians and scholars who are in real or virtual exile. Fine as this opportunity is to pick some of the best minds of Europe and much as we need the best Europe has to give us, the well-trained, productive American teacher or scholar has, I believe, the first claim on us, not necessarily as an American but because he will be more effective in the American scheme of things. However, there is the opposite point of view that the place at the top can best be filled by the really distinguished European.

Even a partial list of the representatives of contemporary music who are teacher-composers in American colleges makes the desirability of such appointments obvious. Walter Piston at Harvard, Roger Sessions at Princeton, Quincy Porter at Vassar, Louis Gruenberg at Chicago, Otto Luening at Bennington, Werner Josten, Ross Lee Finney, Jr. and John Duke at Smith, Marion Bauer at N. Y. U., Douglas Moore at Columbia, Howard Hanson at Rochester, Richard Donovan at Yale—these are a conspicuous few of the teacher-composers in American academic positions. Like many others who must be added if the list were to be even reasonably complete, these professor-composers confirm the wisdom of the grounds on which they were selected. Indeed I am not sure that they have not themselves created these grounds, and that we have here valuable evidence that American colleges have found a fortunate solution to one of the chief problems in musical education.

The effect of academic routine on the composers they themselves alone can reveal. But the effect on students working with

such teachers, to whom the theory of art is a language in which they are continuously expressing themselves, is I am certain altogether stimulating, even if sometimes bewildering. The influence of this teaching and of these personalities on the creative potentialities of their students, and so on the course of music itself, the influence on the collective academic mind of exposure to unconservative art, are not predictable. Nor is there any solid, relevant information at hand to permit a reasonable estimate. What can be confidently asserted is that many colleges and universities recognize their responsibilities to the "new" in music and are setting it before their students and communities through the agencies of men and women, artists and scholars, who must command respect. If all this is half a century behind the methods and provisions made for the other arts, we need to hear what is being done in these other fields.