

Ernst Krenek:

A COMPOSER TEACHING

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Whenever a composer is teaching at a liberal arts college, there is some apprehension likely to develop lest he may overemphasize the significance of creative endeavors and give the music department that famous conservatory slant which seems to many college people particularly distasteful. It is true, of course, that a composer in a teaching position will be especially keen in observing and stimulating creative abilities in his students, for it is there that he expects most immediate response and most satisfactory results. More than anybody else active in the field of music the composer is passionately interested in the perpetuation of the art, for only if the art of music is to survive as a powerful factor in the intellectual and emotional life of mankind, can he be reasonably safe in expecting from posterity that recognition which no composer of consequential music has earned from his contemporaries during several centuries. He will instinctively try to educate spiritual heirs to his ideas, pupils who will form the nucleus of larger groups which eventually will prepare the mind of the public at large for a better understanding of his message. While it does not mean that all his pupils have actually to write music, it is obvious that the teaching composer will turn his particular attention to those who do. It is his natural conviction that the life of the art is inseparably tied up with an unceasing flow of new creation. Through the peculiar mentality that developed in the 19th century, many people came to believe--although they may not have made it conscious to themselves--that we are so wonderfully blessed with masterpieces of earlier periods that we can practically dispense with new additions to the well-tested repertoire; and the greater portion of present day's musical life is obviously being managed according to this belief. This is a very dangerous fallacy, for, whether the average concert manager and concertgoer believe it or not, the art lives only as long as there are creative impulses at work. If no new music were written, the old one would soon petrify and become a mere curiosity, like Egyptian mummies, or some other product of a vanished civilization. There must be constantly people who believe firmly in the possibility of creating new forms of the art, for their faith alone keeps the glorious past alive, in spite of the philistine assumption that the new experiments tend to destroy the acknowledged beauty of olden times. In fact, it is just the other way around.

There is another contradiction which I have to mention at this point. Nobody is more aware than the composer of the fact that there is entirely too much composing going on, not so much for the trivial reason of competition, but above all because he experiences painfully the inferior quality of ninety nine percent of what is being written. And yet, he is the one who is boundlessly optimistic about the creative abilities of his fellowmen and feels like encouraging everybody to try his hand at writing music. Strangely enough, it is usually the unmusical people who don the pessimistic attitude of the perfectionist and would like to nip in the bud any impulse that does not promise a second Beethoven or Brahms. The composer has a different viewpoint, because he never gives up hope that he may discover talent which was not recognized or which had not recognized itself. And then, what is more important, he knows that the great genius is a unique phenomenon, sent to us by the grace of God, but he will grow only in a soil prepared for him by the loving labor of in-



numerable anonymous workers. The great masters of the past always appeared in a community soaked with musical thought and full of musical feeling. It needs the thankless enthusiasm of thousands and thousands of amateurs and would-be composers whose works are doomed to oblivion as they originate in order to pave the way for one Bach or Beethoven. And the better prepared these anonymous workers are, the higher the level of their--ultimately futile--efforts, the more likely the emergence of one genius of really momentous significance. The composer knows all that and therefore he attends to any exercise of each of his students with the same seriousness as if it were a masterpiece of ultimate import--because potentially it may be one. I think this should clarify sufficiently the attitude of the teaching composer. He is free from the childish desire of turning out hosts of genuises, of which some of his adversaries accuse him. But he has a deep-rooted respect for even the humblest attempt to create musical formations, and he feels a binding obligation for helping anybody to do the very best on the basis of his talent, no matter how small or how big it may be.

Let us now turn to the methods available to the teaching composer for carrying out his task. His main vehicle for conveying his ideas is known as teaching theory. Frequently the theoretical part of the musical curriculum is looked upon as something which has to be there for the sake of completeness, and theory courses as a sort of necessary evil of which the music student has to take a carefully chosen minimum. I think this is partly due to the unfortunate term "theory" which we still carry along from ages past. It sounds as if this branch of musical instruction would deal with certain esoteric aspects of the subject, which really should belong to the specialist. The composer is naturally of a different opinion. To him what goes on in the theory courses seems to be the most practical approach to music that can be imagined, for what could be more practical than the actual making of music?

There are three ways of dealing with music: the creative, the analytical and the reproductive way, and every musician should participate in all of them, with differences in emphasis and intensity, according to his individual talents. The creative way should naturally be considered the most vital approach. It deals with the writing of music and secures the future of the art in the most immediate manner, as I pointed out before. If ever the day should come when no new music is written, music would cease to be studied as well as to be performed. The analytical way involves the study of the history of music and the understanding of the musical process. If it seems to be less vital for the existence of the art, it is an absolute necessity for the artist, be he a composer or a performer of music, for without it he will remain a dull, unenlightened craftsman, relying on a few tricks picked up here and there, unable to give his work dignity and significance, which can result solely from his seeing himself in a proper historical perspective. The reproductive way is the field of the performer, or interpreter, which is so natural a correlative to the action of the composer that it needs no further elucidation. The term "applied music" usually bestowed upon these activities always strikes me as particularly silly, for it seems to imply that music, existing somewhere all by itself, is being "applied" by the performer to some extraneous purpose. I wish we could find a more consistent and more telling terminology for the academic classification of musical studies than we have now. I am sure it would remove many misconceptions now blurring the simple facts.

In regard to his own particular department of teaching, the theory course, as it is called now the composer is especially impressed by the



fact that he is practically the only one among his colleagues in the liberal arts college who has to be prepared for dealing to a great extent with illiterate students, as far as the field of music is concerned. For practically any other kind of studies the student is equipped with some sort of rudimentary knowledge, even if he should not have elected that particular subject in high school. If he has not studied Physics in high school, he probably has read some popular technical books and has examined car engines or taken apart a radio. If he has not studied mathematics, he knows the multiplication table. If he has not studied a foreign language, he has, at least to some degree, become acquainted with his own language. For almost any subject of his collegiate studies he has acquired a few, albeit very elementary tools. Only among music students we are likely to find a substantial number of those who have not even the faintest idea what has to happen before music can fill the local drugstore with questionable din -- in many cases the only musical experience in the pre-college life of our students.

The breaking-in process to which such students must be subjected goes on usually in something called "First Year Harmony" and makes of this course a sort of musical kindergarten far below any howsoever leniently defined college standards. I have great respect for anyone who teaches this course successfully, for it is not easy to instruct people approaching maturity in a subject matter intellectually within easy reach of nine or ten year old children, without making them feel silly. Naturally these ridiculously elementary affairs are more difficult to master for growing adolescents who are directed in other courses to approach the subject matter with a relatively advanced intellectual apparatus, than they are for children, and therefore Harmony is known among many students as a stiff course. I am afraid that college music will be of a really collegiate grade only when we succeed to make the elements of music an obligatory subject of the grade school.

Now since Harmony is such a "stiff" course, many people, including some teachers, believe it is about the maximum of what a normal music student should take in theory. For many reasons counterpoint is believed to be far too difficult a subject for average students, and I know of a number of schools, even such with acknowledged high standards, which make counterpoint a subject of graduate studies. One of the reasons is the general attitude towards theory which I already have tried to refute: namely the vague idea that music is one thing, whatever it may be, and theory another, which can be left to the specialist. I hope I have succeeded in showing that music without the creative approach embodied in the so-called theory courses is a dull trade, for the creative approach -- the first-hand experience in trying to do what a composer does -- can alone afford us a real understanding of the creative process, and no matter in what particular way we ultimately want to be active in music, we will not get anywhere without that understanding. Not emphasizing, but curtailing theory creates the unwanted conservatory atmosphere. Another reason for the gingerly attitude toward counterpoint is the idea that counterpoint is a mathematical curiosity left over from the Middle Ages and unnecessary, possibly even harmful to the modern composer. That idea seems to have become more articulate in the impressionistic period and has many followers today among the admirers of French and Russian music. I do not know how true it is for the impressionistic type of composition, but I do know that a great part of studies in harmony still being considered an indispensable necessity by most educators becomes impossible of being carried out properly if it is not supported by contrapuntal practice. That is the four-part chorale harmonization, pride and joy of any harmony teacher, and his main problem child at the same time. No wonder, since the chorale style of Bach is an extremely refined and highly advanced product of finished contrapuntal mastery combined with perfect harmonic technique. In spite of its being based on the modern concepts



of harmonic functions and tonality, the Bach chorale style is an outgrowth of the contrapuntally oriented modal polyphony of the 16th century, and therefore nobody who has not studied counterpoint will be able to write really elegant chorale harmonizations.

Harmony is indeed difficult, if it comes before counterpoint. Actually counterpoint is pedagogically much easier to handle, for it can be put more completely, in fact almost in its entirety, into unmistakable rules. The treatment of harmonic materials requires artistic judgment at a comparatively early stage, when the student is hardly prepared to use such judgment, whereas the training in counterpoint develops the power of artistic discrimination almost without the student's noticing it. There are already a few enlightened educators, such as for instance Carl Bricken at the University of Wisconsin, who begin their theory course with counterpoint instead of elementary harmony. The chief obstacle against wider adoption of this plan seems to be that most college curricula allow the music student to get away with two years of theory, or even less, and if he would start with counterpoint he may not get far enough in order to take in romantic harmony, which is so cherished by many teachers because it supposedly deals with the material with which the student is most familiar. Of course it should not be possible in the first place to elect music as a major field and spend two years or less on theory. Secondly it is not necessary to dwell for more than one year on modal counterpoint. I have devised a one year's course which includes thorough training in two, three and four-part counterpoint, with all the more advanced features of double counterpoint and canon, and the writing of motets using all these devices. This course has been taken by sophomores and even freshmen with enthusiasm and complete success. It follows in general the methods outlined in two excellent books published in recent years, one by the Danish musicologist, Knud Jeppesen, the other by the Harvard man, Arthur Merritt. Mr. Merritt has levelled some severe criticism against the Jeppesen method, as those of you who attended the theory meeting at the MTNA convention last Christmas in these rooms will remember. I do not think it necessary to go into the details of that controversy, since for practical purposes a combination of the view points involved in both methods has proved very satisfactory. Both are based on a thorough analysis of the 16th century style, particularly that of Palestrina, and aim at a complete command of that style on the part of the student. It has been objected against this scheme that the musical language of the 16th century is as dead as Latin or Greek, that it has been completely superseded by the tonal idiom of subsequent centuries and that there is no point in training students in a revival of such an obsolete language. In my opinion the obsolescence of this style is the very reason why it should be chosen as a preferred training ground. It is precisely because that style belongs definitely to the past, that we can describe its technical features in unequivocal rules, something that cannot be done with any more recent style since there are too many links with present problems involving decisions of conscience, taste and artistic judgment. On the other hand, the rules governing this approach to counterpoint are derived entirely from the analysis of living music of the first magnitude, and therefore the 16th century modal counterpoint is far superior to the method known as "strict" counterpoint, which actually is based on no music at all and consists of a purely arbitrary corpus of rules that every 19th century writer on counterpoint felt entitled to modify and to adjust to whatever private preferences



and biases he had. If there is a point to be made, I would say that I am not in favor of limiting the study of modal counterpoint to the period of Palestrina, because his is a very special, highly refined and almost mannerized style. His extreme restraint in the treatment of dissonances makes his style a nonplus ultra of elegance and poise and recommends its study for the sake of technical discipline, but the inclusion of the great masters of the 15th century--Dufay, Okeghem, Depres--who had more boldness and imagination and fewer inhibitions in regard to dissonance and rhythm, might make those studies still more rewarding than they are as things stand now. One reason why this cannot be done at once is that these earlier styles have not yet been analyzed for practical purposes as thoroughly as the 16th century idiom. There is a field open for extensive research, which has to be carried out by composers.

The third reason to be advanced for assigning a broader space to counterpoint early in the theory curriculum is that many young people nowadays have a more immediate sense for counterpoint than they have for harmony. This is nothing to be wondered at by the teaching composer, for he knows that the truly modern idiom of our own times is again permeated by a fundamentally polyphonic conception of music, just as the idiom of the Middle Ages had been. We live in a period in which the predominantly harmonic way of musical thinking of the last three and a half centuries has come chiefly to an end, and the most talented of our students tend quite naturally towards counterpoint and polyphony. It is no longer true that the late romantic idiom is most familiar with the students, and that their theoretical training had therefore to select that idiom as a point of departure. It is familiar to everybody in a purely quantitative sense, because most of the music which we hear in concerts and over the radio belongs to that style. However, creative music--which, as everybody knows, has a very negligible place in those institutions--has taken a different trend, and this trend is naturally living in most of the talented young musicians even without their knowing it. If you teach counterpoint, you would be surprised to notice how easily this trend can be activated.

A well-rounded theory course needs to be supplemented by proper historical information. The teaching of history should of course include more than a boring accumulation of figures and names and the vain demonstration of constant progress, working irresistably from the barbaric depths of the Dark Ages up to the proud heights of Grieg and Tchaikowsky. What the student should learn from history is the loving understanding of how the musicians of each period strove for the fullest expression of thought accessible to them on the grounds of their own assumptions. Only then he will be prepared to look upon the mutations of the musical idiom in our own time, which he witnesses and of which his own evolution is a part, with sympathy instead of supercilious and unfounded criticism, as he is apt to do when he is led to believe that everything past was just an imperfect, preliminary effort in order to reach the peak of 19th century perfection.

Historical studies of this kind require inspection of first hand source material. It is well-nigh impossible to get a halfway adequate picture of medieval and Renaissance music if you know it only in the very few specimens which are floating around in modern, so-called practical arrangements, isolated from their context, transposed, adapted to romantic conventions by arbitrary handling of alterations, and rhythmically completely distorted. Imagine that art students would know the paintings of Rembrandt



and Michelangelo only in versions manufactured by some of our more talented cartoonists in order to fit the requirements of newsprint. And yet, musicians go on being satisfied with such images of the glorious past of their art.

The same is true with the history of theory of music. We are by far too much relying on books written about other books written about more books, instead of trying to take a look at the original books themselves. I for instance have written a small book on the theory of the Twelve-Tone Technique, and I should hate to have it known five hundred years hence only from sixth to seventh hand interpretations. I do hope that anybody who then might be interested in 20th century theory will take the trouble to consult my own text. Should we not grant the same privilege to the 13th and 14th century theorists? I have made my own excerpts and annotations from some of the old texts, and comparing my own conclusions with some of those set forth for instance in the Oxford History of Music, I find that they differ in various important points. From this fact I don't derive any criticism against the authors of this excellent and most valuable monument of scholarship. But as a composer of today I am quite naturally looking for things different from those that interested the musicologist forty years ago and I am applying different viewpoints and criteria. I think we have not only the right but also the duty of interpreting the sources according to our own lights and culling from them whatever wisdom we seem to need, provided only that we are really dealing with first hand evidence. Predigested food may be easy to swallow, but it is neither nourishing nor tasty.

The problem is how to get hold of the sources. As far as music is concerned, the great monumental editions of old music are few and far between. Unfortunately not many libraries cared to buy them, as long as the buying was good, and now they cannot be had for love nor money and no one knows whether they will be available again at all, and when. However, the device of microfilms comes in as a really heavensent help. You can get microfilms of almost any of the important editions of medieval and Renaissance music from some of the big libraries that own them, at a negligible price. All you need to have is a projection machine that will throw the pictures on a screen, and any number of people, according to the size of the screen, can study the music as well as if they had the book in their hands.

As to the literature, we have to hope that some publisher will soon undertake an inexpensive reprint of the two standard collections of medieval treatises, Gerbert and Coussemaker, which at present are as little available as the music to which I referred. The publisher will be found as soon as the demand for those texts becomes imperative. It will become so as soon as our students will have a reading knowledge of Latin. Not very much is needed, since medieval Latin has a rather limited vocabulary and not too sophisticated a syntax. I do not wish to go here into the whole issue of classical languages in college education. As a fervent believer in the inestimable value of humanistic training I am of the opinion that every college student should be able to read Latin, if not Greek, no matter what his special field may be. Aside from that, every student of music should have a reading knowledge of either French or German, because many of the important books on music written in these languages have not yet been translated.

At this point I feel that many of you are becoming a little impatient not only because I have spoken long enough, but also because they



think that all I have said may be well and good but that these are rather fantastic and unrealistic pipe dreams, typical of a newcomer from some high brow Eastern college, in view of the fact that most of our music students are working for nothing more than a teacher's certificate, and for this purpose they don't need all that advanced stuff. I wish to assure you that I have spoken all the time with exactly this fact in my mind, and it is my conviction that anybody who works for nothing more than a teacher's certificate is not worthy of getting one. He should indeed put all his pride into saying "I am working for nothing less than the legitimation of being a teacher." The very best should be just good enough for that profession, or else we will be forever frustrated in our attempts to maintain a real musical culture throughout the nation. He is a very poor teacher who thinks he needs to know no more than what he is supposed to hand out to his pupils. Only if he knows ten times as much, will he be able to select with sovereignty and responsibility the proper material for his teaching. But even the amount of factual knowledge is not the really decisive element. The main thing is the spirit by which his teaching is animated, and the right spirit cannot be acquired unless the whole field is diligently penetrated from beginning to end, unless the candidate has learned to oversee it from an exalted vantage point which allows him a complete and unbiased view and enables him to draw his own conclusions from an immediate experience of first hand evidence. If the idea should prevail that a person who is supposed to give elementary instruction does not need more than elementary equipment, this very minimum of information is inexorably bound to dwindle, as time goes by, and to vanish into nothing sooner than we think. It is precisely the teacher who should have at least the same amount of education as any other musician, or rather more of it, or else it will be true that only second-rate musicians become teachers. We have every reason indeed to contradict the scornful saying that those who can, do, and those who can't teach. It is our business to see to it that those who teach can also do, and that only such who can do are admitted to teach. I pointed out in the beginning why hardly any musician is as passionately interested in the problems of teaching music as the composer, and therefore he considers it a special privilege to raise his voice whenever the cause of music education is at stake.