

HOW NOT TO APPRECIATE MUSIC

Lecture

by

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In discussions concerning the position of music in contemporary life we frequently hear the question raised as to whether there are nowadays more or fewer people acquainted with music than, for instance, in the times of Bach or Beethoven; in other words whether the number of persons able and willing to appreciate music has increased or decreased. This question is not an easy one to answer for, on the one hand, we do not know very much about the status of music in general education 150 or 200 years ago; on the other hand, we do not know, as a rule, what we mean exactly by being acquainted with music or being able to appreciate music.

One thing is rather clear from the outset: many more people, especially since the advent of the radio, have been exposed to music than at any time before, relative to the number of the inhabitants of the civilized world--that is, that portion of the globe in which the mark of a civilized person is his radio set. Now, at a time when much fewer persons were reached by music, nobody seemed to be bothered by the problem ^{of} ~~as to~~ how those people reacted to their experiences. Obviously it was assumed that only such people listened to music who wanted to, and that those people knew why they wanted to listen to music, so that the contact between producer and consumer could be left to take care of itself. It seems that it was the increase of the number of people to whom music was made accessible that

~~has~~ created some uneasiness as to what these people are going to do with the new attraction.

Seen from a materialistic angle, the possibility of supplying a multitude of people with music was due in the Nineteenth century to the improvements of the methods of printing music, in our own century to the new devices of mass distribution such as radio and recording machines. Since these production methods make it possible to manufacture musical commodities on a grand scale, it becomes necessary to use them to capacity or else the investments made would not yield sufficient returns. Hence it is further necessary to produce not only great quantities of the commodity under consideration, but also great numbers of customers who will buy the product. The usual methods of advertising are as a rule not quite workable in the field of the arts. It is relatively easy to induce a person, through direct persuasion, to buy a certain breakfast food or shaving cream, for one may assume that he normally will know why he ought to eat breakfast food or use a shaving cream. One has only to concentrate on convincing him that the particular product is superior to other products of the same kind.

With music, it is much more difficult because the prospective customer has in the first place to be instructed about the general advantage of having music before one can make him prefer certain musical products to others. This mental preparation is the principal aim of a process commonly known as "music appreciation." The idea behind the concept of music appreciation is strangely ambiguous. On the one hand, it involves the commendably frank admission of the fact that a person who wants to enjoy an art ought to learn something about that art. On the other hand, it has an unspeakably comic component, as it seems

to make an experience that is constantly being praised for its wonderful immediacy and spontaneity contingent upon some intellectual adjustment. Nobody has ever heard of college courses in food appreciation, for instance, and the idea of such an educational venture seems to be singularly ludicrous. It ought to be equally ridiculous to teach people how to become overwhelmed by the beauties of music.

However, on second thought, seeing what kind of food people at times are expected to cram down their throats, it might not appear so useless to develop and refine their tastes so that they may become a little more critical about what they swallow. Apply this to music, and the idea of music appreciation at once makes sense. If people would be enabled to tell good music from bad, one would have accomplished something really worthwhile. The process of music appreciation prevailing at present does not accomplish that, ^{in the first place} for it has no such purpose, and its methods are not conducive to constructive discrimination.

In his amusing book, "The State of Music," Virgil Thomson, composer and music critic of the New York Herald Tribune, devotes a chapter to what he calls the "Appreciation Racket." As I once wrote in a letter to Virgil Thomson, I much prefer to disagree with him than to agree with one of his egregious colleagues in the New York press, for even when he produces some astounding nonsense, he usually knows what he is talking about, and does so in an entertainingly roguish way. Fortunately, Virgil gives me much more frequently the pleasure of disagreeing with him than his illustrious confrère annoys me by saying something with which I have to agree, and so my relations to the New York press are nearly perfect, as you can see.

Anyway, the "appreciation racket" according to Thomson con-

sists in a sort of conspiracy created by the commercial distributors of music with the aim of restricting the circulation of music to a definite number of items, so that these items may become the objects of highly profitable mass production. If the big orchestras play always the same pieces, the purchasers of records will never think of asking for other compositions; and, obviously, the expenses for making recordings will be kept down to a minimum if the orchestras can play for records practically without extra rehearsals, and if a limited number of pieces can be sold in enormous quantities. If the knowledge that piano teachers possess of the piano literature can be confined to a reasonable minimum of compositions, there will be no danger of their students ever knowing more than those few pieces, and the publishers can go on peacefully printing edition after edition of the same stuff. Now, the vehicle by which these restrictions and limitations are carried out is the business of music appreciation. It is designed to create a general frame of mind among that more erudite part of the population that is supposed to call the tune for the public at large, so that the restrictive tendency appears as the free expression of the wishes of its victims. If you complain about the state of affairs to some manager, publisher or other distributor of music, he will shrug his shoulders and say "But that's what the public wants-- I am only faithfully serving the demands of my customers." He will not admit, and more often than not, he will not even know, that he is responsible in the first place for the state of mind of his customers.

Those who are still less in the know are the appreciation teachers who become involuntary accessories to the crime, and yet its most efficient perpetrators. Since the advent of the recording machine, the art of reading music from a score at the piano has decayed rapidly.

When I studied music at the Imperial Academy in Vienna, which is not so terribly long ago, there was no record player in evidence anywhere, and when we had to study a quartet by Beethoven or even a symphony by Mahler, we had to hear it in a live performance or to piece it together from the score at the piano. Nowadays, it is more or less taken for granted that nobody can read scores, and music that is not recorded simply does not exist for more than ninety per cent of students and teachers as well. You may compare this with the situation that a person interested in literature was unable to read himself, and had to depend on works which were read by some specialist onto phonograph records. That seems to be outrageous, but in music it is the normal case. Thus the appreciation teacher depends entirely on what the recording industry has cared to put on discs, and that is a very small fraction of the music that is worthy of being heard. And of course, only a very small selection of that small fraction is available to the average teacher.

That limited material is the counterpart of what is known as the "repertoire." The repertoire is that solid mass of compositions that are being repeated over and over again in public performances by orchestras and soloists. Undoubtedly, the repertoire contains some of the most important masterworks that should be heard frequently, but it does not contain by any means ^{all} of them, and it does contain a great deal of inferior stuff. At any rate, the opinion prevails that a composition that has not become a part of the repertoire is a second-rate work, cast out from the hallowed precincts of immortality. Few people realize that the repertoire is a fairly recent phenomenon, its origin hardly antedating one hundred years. Looking over the programs of the famous Gewandhaus concerts in Leipzig which Robert Schumann

reviewed from 1834 to 1844 in his Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, we are not only amazed at the perfectly gargantuan receptive capacity of audiences that could stow away at one sitting something like three symphonies, a couple of piano concertos, several operatic excerpts and overtures and perhaps a medium sized cantata thrown in for good measure. What is more important, the great majority of those pieces was new music, many of them first performances. The classics had not yet become classics, that is, stony monuments of past glory. They were no further remote from the period under consideration than Mahler and Debussy are from ours. The magazine "Listen" which is edited in New York and devoted to critical commentation on the recording business has in a recent issue published a comparison of the first concert of the 1842 season of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra with a program of April 1945 of that same organization. In 1842 the program presented six composers, of whom two were contemporaries, Rossini and Kalliwoda. One, Hummel, had died five years earlier. The other three, Beethoven, Weber and Mozart, had been dead for fifteen, sixteen, and fifty-one years respectively. The 1945 program shows three composers, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Tchaikowsky, dead for onehundred and eighteen, ninety-eight and fifty-two years respectively, and no contemporaries at all. This is but one example, but it is typical of a state of affairs in which the petrified repertoire, growing older with every year that goes by, increasingly crowds out anything that does not "belong." A remedy is hard to suggest, because the appreciation business that is supposed to introduce people to music refers almost exclusively to that same repertoire, so that it eventually accomplishes perpetuation and ^{gl}portification of the general ignorance.

Music is the only art of which those who profess to be interested in it are ignorant to an astounding degree. People who turn

their attention to painting may see in practically every art gallery specimens from at least nine centuries of pictorial efforts, beginning with the so-called primitives of the various mediaeval schools. Literature and architecture offer an even wider range of phenomenon as far as time is concerned. Every library presents a wealth of literary expression from Homer to "Forever Amber," and pictures of buildings from the pyramids to the Willow Run plant. But if somebody wants to know how music sounded before 1700, he will have to search laboriously for a few recordings that are very hard to obtain, and even of these few the majority is of doubtful value. But who wants to know how that music sounded anyway? It is not at all exaggerated to say that most people don't even know that there was any music at all before Bach, and I am not by any means speaking of the man in the street who perhaps believes that music began with Gershwin. The repertoire certainly does not include any music older than Bach, and the usual appreciation course touches upon pre-Bach music only very briefly, and as a rule in the manner inherited from Nineteenth-century musicology according to which everything before Bach was a crude and imperfect effort of the Dark Ages when some geniuses dimly saw the light on the far horizon, but people in general were much too ignorant and barbarian to accomplish anything worthwhile. The historical map of music as seen from the angle of the average music lover looks very much like those maps making fun of the geographical notions entertained by the native of New York City about the United States. Everything around New York appears elaborate and over-sized, while west of the Hudson River there is a shrunk and empty wilderness. Historical proportions are equally distorted in the mind of the music lover who has undergone the appreciation process. Everything happens in the

Nineteenth century and a little bit in the Eighteenth, while the preceding thousand and more years of Western music shrink to a short but very dark night; and the Twentieth century is, of course, out of bounds anyway, for that is populated with living composers, and with those dangerous fellows nobody would have any traffic.

The reason for these shameful conditions is a strange paradox. Of the perceptive organs of man, the ear seems to be the slowest and most reluctant to adapt itself to changes of the subject matter that it is supposed to perceive. At the same time, music, which is designed to be perceived by that ear, has been changing in its brief history more rapidly and radically than any other art. A person whose experience in looking at pictorial representations of the outside world is limited to Life magazine or Terry and the Pirates will have no particular difficulties in identifying the objects in a painting by Giotto though he may not like the style of the latter as well as that of his favorite cartoonist. And he who prefers the way in which Margaret Mitchell writes about Rhett Butler's horse to Homer's treatment of the corresponding subject matter will still know what the old fellow is talking about when he says "horse." But to the addict of Brahms, Tschaikowsky and Chopin, music by Machaut will sound like Chinese, or like Arnold Schoenberg, not only because the convenient crutches of extraneous subject matter are missing, but also because the styles in which the materials are treated are utterly different from each other. And here is an entirely incidental illustration of the situation: I did not think I had to explain who Giotto and Homer were, but I feel it might be a good idea to mention that Machaut was one of the leading French composers of the Fourteenth century, and a poet of whom Chaucer thought a great deal. By the way, Arnold Schoenberg is one of the

leading composers of the Twentieth century. I think that a great deal of the resistance against new music is due to the fact that people know so little old music. If they were accustomed to the idea that there already has been an immense quantity of music that sounded different from Nineteenth-century stuff, they might perhaps be a little less frightened by the thought that Twentieth-century music again sounds somewhat different.

While the aims of the appreciation process are of very doubtful value, its methods are as a rule by no means conducive to a true understanding or enjoyment of even that limited subject matter that is handled in the process. When I say "understanding or enjoyment", the alternative is not meant to be mutually exclusive, but should rather indicate that the two terms are interchangeable and explanatory of each other. I maintain that the way in which people are usually taught how to appreciate music hardly ever teaches them how to enjoy it, which would seem a goal at least worthy of being striven for. What the average students of music appreciation ^{are} ~~is~~ mainly directed to contemplate is the meaning of music in other than musical terms. In other words, their attention and interest is mainly occupied with literary matter--that is words, paraphrasing the ideas which are supposedly expressed by the music, instead of with the music itself. There is more talk about what the composers did, thought, said, and how they lived than about the music they wrote. From authentic as well as notoriously spurious anecdotes, the expressive significance of the music is derived. We hear that Palestrina was a God-fearing man who saved music from destruction at the hands of ignorant and narrow-minded cardinals, when he wrote his famous Missa Papae Marcelli, and that is what makes his music great. Actually the cardinals were not so ignorant

as all that, and the mass was written about twenty years after they had decided on a reorganization of ecclesiastical music. We hear that Bach was another God-fearing man who had sixteen or more children, and that is what makes his music great. We also hear that Beethoven was a nature-lover and a democrat who tore up the title page of the Eroica Symphony in order to destroy the dedication to Napoleon when he heard that his hero was undemocratic enough to make himself emperor of France, and that, of course, makes Beethoven's music greater than anything else. This story is so dear and uplifting that it is handed down from generation to generation of program annotators and appreciation teachers, although the evidence to the contrary is under everybody's nose. Nicolas Slonimsky, the Boston musicologist, called to my attention the fact that the famous torn-up title page still exists, firmly connected with the manuscript, reproduced as a facsimile in many editions of the symphony, and everybody can plainly see that the dedication to Napoleon is still there, scratched out with a pen, but fully legible. For the rest, Napoleon had been a bit of a dictator even before he appointed himself emperor, and there is still more internal and external evidence to the effect that the story is a figment of the imagination of a friend of Beethoven's who put it down in his memoirs some thirty years after it supposedly had happened.

All that talk about what music means and what the composers wanted to express is trimmed with a few bits of superficial and mainly incorrect technical information in order to give the whole thing a slightly learned and scientific touch. The students learn from the book how a fugue or a sonata has to appear, and thereafter they believe that they are experts and can lord it over the poor fellow who just likes music. Of course, if the study went a little further, they would discover to their

dismay that hardly a single fugue of the forty-eight of the Well-Tempered Clavichord by Bach corresponds to what they have been handed out as the standard form of a fugue; ~~and~~ that no two sonatas by Beethoven are alike, and that most of them again defy the formula. Whenever a hint at these sad conditions can not be avoided, we hear that we have to deal with exceptions such as the great masters could afford. This may be true enough, but since the music that has followed the rules set up by the academicians is prevailingly pedestrian and has fallen into oblivion, while it is only the exceptions that have proven their vitality, it does not seem to make much sense to study the rule that has not yielded any truly significant results and to dispose of the work of the genius with a few gingerly and almost apologetic words. One of the most detrimental results of the common appreciation course is that it creates prejudice rather than understanding, narrow-mindedness instead of discrimination. The frame of mind of a successful appreciation student confronted with a new and unusual phenomenon is approximately this: "I am an expert, I have learned the rules, nobody can fool me." When you say, timidly: "But, what about Beethoven?" he will answer: "Oh yes, Beethoven--he sometimes made exceptions, but he was a genius." Thus the mind of the accomplished music appreciator is closed to the essential and vital, geared as it is to the commonplace and trite, and the last state of that man is worse than the first, ~~according to the gospel~~. For this reason music has hardly a more pernicious enemy than the average music teacher, who is about the most reactionary animal on this earth.

I have already mentioned how dangerous the appreciation method by phonograph is in regard to the quantity of the material. There is another aspect to this, no less ominous, and that is the over-emphasis on performance at the expense of the work performed. A person who is

used to hearing music only in more or less excellent renditions on records will eventually become snobbish and scornful of any live performance that is short of the polished elegance of the recorded interpretation. He will also become disproportionately aware of the shadings of differences between various recordings of the same composition, a tendency that works again toward the perpetuation of the repertoire. Glancing through the recording catalogues, you will observe that the industry constantly re-issues a number of popular standard works, and the reviewers of discs usually compare carefully each new recording of such a work with the quality of the earlier ones. Many people are much more interested in buying five or six recordings of the same quartet by Mozart and in comparing the details of the renditions than in getting acquainted with five different quartets. They go to a concert in order to hear Horowitz play, no matter what he plays--perhaps because they are sure enough it will be the same thing as the last time anyway--and they would not dream of spending sixty-five cents in order to hear a less-known pianist play an unknown work, a piano sonata by Haydn, for instance. Of course, this provocative indolence toward music has many reasons, but one of them certainly is the habit of listening to records.

The beautiful and noble thoughts connected with music, the slightly but not too tedious scientific background, and the luxurious elegance of first-rate performance surround music in the world of appreciation with an atmosphere of spiritual uplift which is dear to some and hideous to others. The English critic, Cecil Gray, has some bitter words to say on the subject in a recent article. He believes that for every one person that is enlisted for the cause of music through appreciation there are at least two who are alienated from it

for good because of the flavor of morality involved in the business. He thinks that appreciation works successfully only on people who are inclined to enjoy boredom when they attend a concert. He believes that most British concert-goers are so inclined and ascribes to that fact the popularity of Brahms in England. His advice is that people, in order to be educated to enjoy music, should be made to understand that it is a rather dangerous vice, so that, instead of sitting in solemn silence in Queen's Hall and waiting for the spiritual uplift to be conveyed to them through agreeably boring sounds, they should sneak in surreptitiously, as in a pub, to have a quick one before closing time.

This advice might go a little too far, as it over-stresses the entertainment value of music, which again is counteracting the true enjoyment of it. It seems to me that the average listener does not develop a proper attitude toward music because he is educated to expect either entertainment or moral uplift. He is prepared to have either fun or that kind of boredom which you experience when you are encouraged to swallow some insipid food by being told "Eat it--it's good for you. You haven't yet got your quota of vitamins for today." At the place where I used to spend my vacations for the past six years, I had managed for five years to conceal the fact that I was able to handle the keyboard, in a manner of speaking. This year they caught up with me, and, after a few weeks of procrastination, I was forced into playing a few piano pieces by Chopin and other accredited masters for the community of summer guests. Afterwards, a young lady told me, "You see, that's what I like about this place. You get here such a variety of things. Yesterday we had a wild wiener-roast and today such a fine morale-builder." The young lady, incidentally, was very

attractive, and I am sure I would have at any time preferred attending a wild wiener-roast with her to having my morale built up by a routine performance of a couple of Chopin Preludes.

Our friend, Eric Bentley, has furnished an excellent definition of entertainment which I take the liberty to borrow with his permission, since I don't know a better one. "Entertainment means the redemption of leisure time by a pleasing titillation of the senses and that small part of the brain which the simplest jokes call into play... In its modern form it presupposes an audience that is already tired, inclined to be bored, probably not educated and certainly not cultured, yet not totally illiterate, but acquainted with that segment of knowledge and sensibility provided by the radio and the press." Now there is nothing wrong with entertainment, since once in a while a person is tired and inclined to be tickled at those lower portions of his brain. However, it is not necessary that this sort of titillation be provided in a symphony concert, for symphony concerts are few and far between, and occasions for titillation are plentiful and ubiquitous. "When Johnny comes marching home" is a very engaging little song and quite adaptable to jazzification, but it does not seem to be indicated to play such arrangements after a Beethoven symphony, even if they are supplied by Roy Harris.

On the other hand, there is no law that prescribes that serious music has to be boring. It happened last season in Minneapolis that my great friend, Dimitri Metropoulos, conducted Brahms' First Symphony. I don't wish by any means to express any doubts as to Brahms' being a very fine composer of eminent merit, but having listened faithfully to the more respectable week-end broadcasts in this

country, I had had my fill of Brahms whose only rival on those occasions is the unavoidable "All-Russian" program. Thus I expected to be rather unpleasantly bored by the rendition of a symphony that I had heard during that season many more times that I had wanted to. To my great surprise, I woke up from my dozing practically after the first two bars, and I listened with keen interest throughout the whole performance, so marvelously alive and alert it appeared to me. A few days later, I had to attend a meeting of professionals both shaped by and engaged in the appreciation business, and, to my amazement, I heard everybody wag his, or especially her tongue, ranting at the criminal dismemberment of Brahms' masterpiece at the hands of Mitropoulos. It was too loud, too fast, it was too much of everything. And I, poor ignorant that I was, had thought it was a splendid performance! This experience was very revealing of the frame of mind of those people: when a piece by Morton Gould is on the program, they expect to be entertained by the streamlined razzle-dazzle of the orchestra, the antics of the Xylophone and the quaking of the muted trumpets. When a piece by Schoenberg is scheduled, they resign, with gnashing of teeth, to twenty minutes of an ordeal about which they surely will write an indignant letter to the manager the first thing in the morning. But when a symphony by Beethoven or Brahms is announced, they expect to have peace and quiet, and no fancy stuff please, and when they walk out, after having dozed away for half an hour or so, they think that they have got their morale built up for the day.

The enjoyment which I recommend is superior to entertainment without excluding it, when entertainment is suggested by the composer,

and more rewarding than the passive attitude of hedonistic boredom, because it provides a more thorough participation of the listener in the process unfolding before his ears. Obviously there are various levels on which a person may be affected by an artistic phenomenon. We may look at a painting and say, "This represents a house," and let it go at that. Certainly we have perceived some of the message confided by the artist to the art object, but everybody will agree that we have got hold only of an infinitesimal part of what the artist wanted^{us}/to perceive. We may go a step further and observe some details of the house depicted, determine the style of its architecture, its size, condition of maintenance, and other facts of purely informational character. Still, we would not have partaken of any of the artistic values of the painting, for we can hardly assume that a painter would have gone to the trouble of making a painting for no other purpose than to demonstrate his ability to draw the picture of a house. Only when we start studying the position of the house in the surrounding space, the distribution of colors, of light and shade, the design and the composition of the whole, the expressive qualities of all these factors, will we have penetrated the artistic intentions of the painter. ^{Only then} ~~and~~ will the fact that it was a dilapidated house of Victorian style in a narrow street which prompted the artist to express himself in that particular way recede into the background as of rather incidental significance. Our last experience with the painting obviously has affected us in many more and deeper layers than the bare identification of the subject matter. Undoubtedly it was also a much more interesting experience, because it was unique, while the statement, "This is a house" could be made about untold numbers of paintings. However, in order to have that interesting experience,

we had to make a certain effort and to spend a certain amount of time.

The same is true of musical experience. Only if the listener develops an active attitude towards the musical phenomenon will he enjoy the full measure of artistic values that are present in it. He will have to follow the process in its entirety instead of merely pricking up his ears once in a while when a familiar tune pops up. He will have to realize relationships among the manifold elements that make up the piece of music, observe modifications, similarities, contrasts, combinations, follow the exciting entanglements in which themes and motives are thrown together, and watch how they are separated again to take on new identities and meanings, and to enter into new and different contexts. Many people are afraid of this kind of approach to music because they think it is purely intellectual and obliterates the emotional immediacy of musical expression. The opposite is true. The experience. "This music sounds melancholy" corresponds to the statement "This represents a house" in front of the painting. When we brought ourselves to a deeper understanding of the artistic meaning of the painting, the fact that it represented a house was by no means obliterated. It only was assigned its proper place among the many factors of diverse importance that entered the artistic process. The same is true when we progress from the general impression that the music sounds melancholy to a more complete perception of what goes on in that melancholy piece of music. We will by no means forget the mood which it expresses; on the contrary, our experience will be richer and more profound when we are able to evaluate through what operations within the musical material that mood was created.

The music appreciation methods prevailing at present are not

conducive to aiding people in enjoying music, since they are chiefly designed to educate people to buy recordings. There is no reason to believe that persons who enjoy music would be less interested in having records than present-day music lovers. As a matter of fact, the recording machine is a marvelous achievement and could be of great help in spreading true musical culture. The only trouble is that people who have learned to enjoy music may become much more critical and discriminating than they are now, and that might spoil the business for the industry. They might even begin to enjoy contemporary music, and that would completely upset the apple-cart.

The same magazine, "Listen", which I quoted previously published the answers of fifteen composers to a questionnaire as to how their income from royalties was related to their living expenses. Only three of those fifteen answered that they were able to live on the revenues which they received from performances of their works. Walter Piston, recognized as one of the leading American composers, writes: "Not only would it be out of the question to attempt to live on income from compositions, but such income is not sufficient to cover costs of copying and other expenses connected with making music available for performance. Recording companies are among the most unwilling to recognize any right of the composer to compensation for his work, rating him lower, as financial investment, than the elevator man, or the stenographer." And Edgar Varèse writes: "I haven't made enough money from my compositions even to pay for my funeral." Well, a funeral is a pretty expensive affair, and I am afraid that my friend Varèse was a little extravagant on that. He might have better said that he did not make enough money to pay for a month's supply of cigarettes. Of course, there

are famous examples for that: When Schubert died and they turned his trousers' pockets inside out, they did not find enough money for his funeral, and Mozart is still buried in a pauper's grave in Vienna, which even the Russian Gestapo will not be able to identify. But the barbarians of those bygone days had at least the excuse that they had not been exposed to the science of music appreciation. The living composer derives, of course, great satisfaction from, and feels himself amply compensated by the joyful thought that he is a member of a society that has made that science into a thriving business.