

Ernst Krenek:

ON THE ENJOYMENT OF MUSIC

(Address given at Bridgman Hall, Hamline University, October 5, 1942)

When music, or any art for that matter is being discussed nowadays, you are bound to hear sooner or later someone impatiently throw in the phrase: Stop fiddling while Rome burns! In other words, stop playing around frivolously with unnecessary things when the world is afire. It is one of those similes which everybody uses without giving it much thought, and yet, it is in our case entirely out of place. As you know, the phrase has its origin in the story told about the Roman Emperor Nero who was standing on the terrace of his palace and playing the fiddle, or whatever instrument it was, while the city of Rome was burning, and the fact that he was attending such an unnecessary activity instead of calling the fire department and shouting orders is supposed to testify to his proverbial craziness. If we musicians are told to stop fiddling while Rome burns, it is clearly implied that we are just as crazy as Nero. However, there is one important detail left out, and that is that Nero is said to have set the fire himself to the city, because he expected some special thrill from the spectacle, and some extra inspiration for his fiddling. Now it is here that the simile stops. Nobody could accuse us artists that we have set the world afire in order to improve our mood for fiddling. On the contrary, nobody could appreciate a speedy extinction of the conflagration more heartily than we, since our interests and activities are most seriously endangered by the present calamity.

Now if we are not to be compared to the crazy Tyrant of Rome because of having caused the disaster, we might still be guilty of spending time and energy on a superfluous and flimsy matter, when the most momentous decisions are at stake. It seems to me that such objections can be raised only by someone who is not able to distinguish between entertainment and enjoyment. The term "entertainment" has in the last years taken on a significance which it does not deserve, particularly, as I think, under the influence of the motion picture industry, which is determined to advertise each one of its products, and all of them together, as "your best entertainment", in the belief that people will not buy tickets unless they are promised entertainment. This notion has been generalized to such an extent that practically any kind of artistic presentation goes under the heading of entertainment.

One may well ask the question whether so much entertainment is justified at a time when death and destruction are raging all over the world and human suffering is increasing every minute beyond any measure held tolerable only a short while ago. And yet, the providers of entertainment are hardly criticized in earnest, since they managed to make people believe that entertainment is necessary for the maintenance of morale. It is rather those engaged in serious artistic endeavors who are under fire, because their activities do not furnish enough entertainment. In terms of the story which I mentioned before, Nero is blamed not because of his fiddling, but because he does not play more merrily while the world goes under.

It may be true that someone who expects mere entertainment will be disappointed when listening to real music. He will not be able to enjoy it. Now how can we tell entertainment from enjoyment? I would venture that the former is the result of a predominantly passive attitude on the part of the subject, whereas the latter is due to a highly active one. We may well be entertained by



popular songs and dance music, because it follows simple conventional patterns and uses but a few primitive relationships between standardized elements. Its emotional content is likewise simple, as it covers only a few typical situations and reactions of the human soul, such as dreams coming true when the moon is blue, and the like. There is nothing wrong with that, and I like myself to hear once in a while some skilfully handled swing tune. In order to get hold of the essential values of such an offering, we don't need to pay much attention to it. We just sit back and let it happen.

It would, however, be a great mistake if we would approach any kind of music in this frame of mind. Entertainment music is but one district in the vast realm of the art, quantitatively one of the largest, to be sure, but by no means a very distinguished one. Now if we enter the region of more highly organized music, we will have to change our attitude from passive hearing to active listening, or else we will not get hold of the substance which is offered. If a swing record is played, I hear it without listening to it, and that may be enough in order to be entertained by it. If I hear a symphony, I must listen to it, or else I will not enjoy it.

It is obvious that the difference between hearing and listening is expressed in the amount of attention devoted to the phenomenon. Now what is it precisely to what we should pay attention in order to enjoy music? It is no more and no less than the musical process itself. Actually it should be easier to enjoy music than any other art, because music does not refer to anything but itself, while other arts usually involve extraneous subject matters. In point of fact most people are so used to thinking in terms of tangible subject matters that they have trouble in enjoying an art that is peculiarly free from such matters, like music.

And yet, the musical process, although apparently self-sustained and without tangible reference to outside affairs, is extremely significant of the highest aspirations of mankind. In short, the work of art which deserves the distinction of being called a masterpiece is a manifestation of breath-taking beauty as it holds the principles of freedom and order in perfect balance -- nay, even integrates those principles so that freedom appears as the most satisfactory form of order, and order as the truest guardian of freedom. What happier state could mankind ever reach on this earth short of inheriting the kingdom of heaven than such an integration of freedom and order? And does it not seem essential to comprehend the prophecies of this most desirable consummation as they are laid down in the works of the great artists?

Now what should we do in order to comprehend the message of music? There may be some among you who are able to grasp it immediately, without any further preparation. We call such persons instinctively musical. They feel themselves from the outset attracted to music and live in its medium almost without knowing it. But there are infinitely many more who are able to avail themselves of exactly the same spiritual enjoyment, provided they make a little effort to that effect. The effort consists in no more than acquiring some knowledge and experience of the inner workings of the musical process. You should become able to see the principle of freedom at work in the tremendous wealth and variety of musical ideas of all shapes and descriptions lavishly spread over the music of many centuries, and you should become able to evaluate the action of the principle of order which organizes those ideas in an amazing network of innumerable relationships and welds them into a logically coherent whole.



Think of music as if you were watching a game. Nobody would deny that the real satisfaction in looking at a game derives from your knowing the rules. If I watch a football game without knowing the rules, I can still be pleased by the exhibition of physical power and skill. I may be entertained by the jumps and runs of the players, but probably not for long, and you will be quick in pointing out to me that I missed the essential point. It is the same with music. If you can't follow the complexity of the musical process, you may be agreeably touched by some detail here and there, a little phrase of the melody which reminds you of something familiar, a few nice chords, an interesting instrumental combination, and the like. But you will soon get tired of such disconnected stimuli, and your neighbor who knows better will pity you because you can't partake of his thrilling experience of the whole work.

I know that some people will be inclined to follow me so far and say: all right, we are ready to invest that much effort in the acknowledged masterpieces, since we are sure of what we get into the bargain, but please let us alone with this so-called new music which is either downright ugly, or else so complicated that it does not pay to try to get it. In many cases this attitude towards contemporary music is not only insulting, but incomprehensible. Everybody wants to see new movies, to read new books, to watch new plays in the theatre, and he would feel frustrated if nothing new in these fields were offered. Only with music it is quite the opposite. A new composition is introduced in the concert programs only very rarely and with extreme caution, and the manager stands by in fear and trembling, figuring out how many customers his daring action may turn away from the box office. I suppose it will happen every now and then that in reading a book of more than entertainment character you will hit upon a passage the meaning of which may not be at once entirely clear. I don't think that in such a case you will throw away the book and resolve to read from now on only those books which you have read and understood as a child. You will neither decide that you don't understand English, nor that the book is not written in English. Yet, this is precisely what most people do when they fail to grasp the meaning of a new musical work. They either say that they are not musical and that they don't understand music -- these are the modest and reasonable people who can easily be brought to adopt a less defeatist attitude. Or they say that what they heard was no music, and that they would from now on listen only to what they had heard a hundred times before. These are the hopeless and malignant cases. Why is it that music is rarely given another chance? If you don't understand a passage in a book, you probably read it a second time, maybe you turn back a few pages in order to get more clarity from the context of the whole, you look up unfamiliar terms in a dictionary, in short you make some effort in order to discover the meaning of the passage. Why do you expect only music to go down into your system like a coca cola? I assure you there is nothing like the difference between the first and the second hearing of a new piece of music. The first hearing may frequently leave you disappointed and restless, because the newness of the sounds prevents you from realizing the context. Each detail is surprising, even baffling, and they seem to follow each other without logical connection, because they don't obey a predictable pattern. The second time you are already prepared to expect such and such things to happen at certain places, and your attention turns automatically to what goes on between these expected landmarks. You discover the connecting lines, you begin to realize that things happen according to plan and with necessity; in other words, you experience the logic of the process, and that is where your enjoyment begins.



Do not think that the classical music which many people like to hold against the new one as a perfect example of unquestionable beauty has been different in this respect from our music at the time when the classical masters were contemporary, or modern composers. For the enlightenment of reluctant and skeptical souls and for the entertainment of the better disposed ones, I like to read you a little gem from my files, concerning the Eroica Symphony by Beethoven, nowadays one of the acknowledged masterpieces of all times and the mainstay of all symphony concerts. Even those of you who don't know the work will probably have heard that Beethoven is considered one of the greatest masters of the art and keeps an unassailable place in the hall of fame. And yet, only one hundred-forty years ago, when his Eroica was performed for the first time, the leading musical magazine in Germany published a review, which called the work "a daring wild fantasia, of inordinate length and extreme difficulty of execution. The work seems often to lose itself in utter confusion". Well, the gentleman did not seem to enjoy the music, and it is easy for us to laugh him off because we know that his own pitiful ignorance prompted his remarks. But how many could dare to cast the first stone if they scrutinize their own attitudes towards new music? At the Prague Conservatory, the Eroica was banished as "a dangerously immoral composition". And when the conductor Habeneck wanted to introduce this masterpiece to the public of Paris, he thought it wise first to wine and dine the prominent members of the orchestra and to play the score for them, after the treat would have mitigated their critical spirits. Thus prepared, these illuminated experts decided that the symphony "contained some tolerable passages, and that notwithstanding length, incoherence and want of connection, it was not unlikely to be effective." Which proves that not everybody who knows how to blow in a horn is able to enjoy music.

Those gentlemen probably were quite respectable practitioners of their trade. They probably had taken all the required courses in the conservatory, they had made the required social contacts in order to get comfortably settled, and they were performing the services required by their contracts. And yet they managed to be remembered by posterity as outstanding dunces, for in order to partake of the essential values of our civilization and so to contribute to their maintenance and growth, it is not sufficient to do the required work, it is necessary to put in some extra effort. It is easy to understand that only such extra efforts have made our civilization into something to be proud of and worthy of being defended against destruction. If nobody had done more than that which was immediately necessary and indispensable, we would intellectually never have risen above the level of the caveman. It was required of Johann Sebastian Bach who had a church job in Leipzig not much different from such positions as some of you are, or will be, holding, to write a new cantata for every Sunday in the calendar. This certainly was large enough a fare for anybody, and if Bach had not left anything but his cantatas, we would still be lost in admiration. But he did not think it was enough to do the required work. In addition to his tremendous duties, he wrote innumerable compositions of all sorts which nobody required of him but he himself. He did not mind writing them for his own satisfaction, for many of them did not bring him any monetary reward. It is precisely those pieces -- The Well Tempered Clavichord, The Art of the Fugue, and many others -- to which we turn time and again for inspiration in solving our own artistic problems. Naturally not everybody is supposed to experience the creative urge which animates the great artist, but everybody who is really interested in cultural values will have to make some special effort based on his own assumptions, or else he will remain deaf to the message of the arts. He will have to learn to identify himself with the subject to a far greater extent than many people



nowadays are ready to do. He will have to stop considering art as an embellishment of life, something which you can take or leave; in short, he will have to stop expecting entertainment; he will have to work for enjoyment.

This attitude requires enthusiasm, and enthusiasm has come into disrepute during these last years. The enthusiastic person is believed to be an easy prey for demagogues who know how to play on the keyboard of quickly aroused emotions. Of course if we consider the goose-stepping victims of the dictators as being driven into their heart-rending foolishness by enthusiasm, we would rightly have none of it. But believe me, who have seen these youngsters in the process of becoming enchanted by the Pied Piper, that they fell for him precisely because they were enthusiastic about nothing. Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Art, Music -- nothing meant enough to them to give their lives a center of gravity which would withstand the attrition of temporal vicissitudes. It was not enthusiasm which made them march to the poisonous tune, but despair caused by the lack of enthusiasm, and camouflaged afterwards to look like enthusiasm. Only one who does not identify himself with any cause will eventually lend his ear to the godless and fake promise of a Paradise on Earth. Time and again I felt as if some of the young people whom I met were afraid of becoming too deeply involved in the subject in which they seemed to be really interested. I don't see how anyone can ever be too deeply interested in something in which he is interested at all. Certainly, a wide horizon and a general understanding of the whole of our civilization are fine things, but I have yet to see the person who did not pay for treating his field of special interest with lukewarm feelings by remaining deplorably ignorant of all the rest.

I know it is neither original nor promising to plead nowadays for special efforts. We are daily overwhelmed with the most urgent requests to put in extra work at every corner. As far as music is concerned, we have at least not to ponder very long about where the extra effort starts, because the whole thing is a very special exertion of the human mind, and has always been one, even in times of peace. However, it is a comforting though paradoxical thought that only those things which are unnecessary for the maintenance of physical life make the maintenance of physical life worthwhile. Thus we shall not stop fiddling while Rome burns, for the very fact that someone went on fiddling in spite of the voracious conflagration around him makes it necessary to fight the fire and to rescue the city menaced by destruction.

The work of these fire fighters is certainly most necessary, and we shall hold them in very high esteem for their courage, self-denial and determination. And yet, as time goes by, it is bound to fade away, and the great deeds of the field-m Marshals which seem so all-important at the time of their performance become a matter of laborious historical research. The tremendous achievements of Alexander the Great, his enormous accomplishments in moving huge masses of men across thousands of miles of unexplored desert, are long obliterated by a thousand other accomplishments of the same kind. In order to appreciate what he did we have to dig into archives and mountains of documents, and we will get but a faint picture of what once was most exciting reality. On the other hand, the word of the philosopher is fresh and vivid as it was on the day when he wrote it down. We have only to open the text of Aristotle, and we are in immediate contact with the immortal spirit, without any intermediate information.



How much do we know, in terms of immediate experience, of the works of Napoleon who seemed to shake the foundations of the century not unlike a certain contemporary of ours? Some time ago, before the war started, there was one of the popular polls going on at Princeton University, the students being asked to nominate the most important man of our century. As it was to be expected, the overwhelming majority nominated Hitler. When the result was published, a professor of history made a remark in his class challenging the choice of the students. A student who wanted to defend the majority vote asked him: Well, who would you think was the most important man between 1800 and 1820? obviously expecting the answer: Napoleon. But the professor had the admirable presence of mind to answer: Why of course: Beethoven! It is our task to make sure that one hundred years from now a similar answer on such a question may be possible.