

FROM A COMPOSER'S NOTEBOOK

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“INSPIRE par la Muse de Tchaikovsky.” This phrase, to be found on the title page of Stravinsky’s latest score, will surely cause havoc among the musical “elite.” Automatically these few words do away with the well-known theory which explains the newest manner of Stravinsky as a neo-classic revival brought on by a return to the ideals of Bach’s day. But obviously one can’t go back to Bach and to Tchaikovsky at the same time. This was first suspected when Stravinsky “returned,” as they say, to Handel and Bellini in *Oedipus Rex*, and to Gluck and Johann Strauss in *Apollo*. The “Back to Bach” phrase had caught on, however, and nothing—not even Bellini and Strauss—seemed able to stop it. But I feel sure Tchaikovsky will.

No one has yet put forward an adequate explanation which covers all the works written by Stravinsky from the *Octuor* to *Le Baiser de la Fée*. Moreover, it is just because it is so difficult to penetrate the inner meaning of these new works that they are so rich in possibilities for the future.

Let me point out here three significant, though fairly obvious facts:

1. The one factor common to all the new works is Stravinsky’s attitude towards the material he uses.
2. That attitude is an objective one, though not necessarily classically objective as was formerly believed.
3. The material he chooses to work with is not of great importance; it can be anything, banal or borrowed, from the sixteenth or from the nineteenth centuries; the only thing that counts is what he does with it. This has engendered an extreme elegance of style owing nothing to mere brilliance or cleverness.

My own guess is that these new works, far from being a throw-back to any former period, tend towards a synthesis of the classic

and romantic periods that will result in a new style for which a new name will have to be found.

THE AMERICAN COMPOSER AGAIN

The weakness of American music, according to George Jean Nathan, "lies in the circumstance that its hopeful composers are in the aggregate trivial men. Two or three of them are pretty sound artists in a technical direction but as men, that is, as human beings, the bulk of them are psychically, mentally and—this in particular—emotionally commonplace." No doubt the bulk of our composers are trivial men, but so are the bulk of painters, poets, novelists and critics. Mr. Nathan must agree that it is entirely within the bounds of probability that nature has endowed at least a *few* of our composers with heart, intellect and depth of emotion. It is the failure of these few, not the commonplaceness of the many, which accounts for the weakness of American music.

Furthermore, it cannot be mere chance that the few exceptional men have thus far always failed. As I see it, the only adequate explanation is the nature of the environment in which they were placed. To take an extreme instance: at a time when America produced creators like Emerson, Poe, Melville, Whitman, there must have been one man of equal stature who was gifted along musical lines. But such a man, if he existed, was doomed. The environment killed him. Without the possibility of acquiring a technique, without orchestras, interpreters, publishers, listeners, in short without an organized musical life, it is impossible to develop composers. Mr. Nathan will tell you that we have had these things for the past fifty years. We have, but even today one cannot say that they are really at the disposal of the American composer.

The truth of the matter is that, musically speaking, America is very young, ridiculously young. It may take no one knows how long to grow up. Mr. Nathan must curb his impatience.

THE MAHLER QUESTION

Those who most violently object to Mahler imagine they do so because he is trite, bombastic, long-winded. Why are they so sensitive to Mahler's faults? Is it because they are close to him and

feel ashamed of his weakness, as if he were a spiritual half-brother? But Mahler is no relative of mine! To me it does not matter that he sometimes plagiarizes, sometimes lacks taste. I am willing to overlook his shortcomings for the sake of those real qualities which are also his: an apocalyptic grandeur, with its concomitant, a child-like naiveté greater than that of any other composer before him; an amazing contrapuntal mastery; an original orchestration thirty years in advance of his time. These things are not to be brushed aside. . . .

A COMMON-SENSE CRITIC

A well-known Italian composer once told me that he thought the critical articles of Ernest Newman would retard the acceptance of modern music by fifty years. This is exaggerated, of course; but it is nevertheless true that because Mr. Newman is widely read and is published in "smart" magazines (and particularly because he never departs from good English horse-sense), he has had a more pernicious influence on public opinion than other critics of his generation. His process of reasoning is something like this:

A number of people managed to persuade themselves about the time the war broke out, that we needed a new heaven and a new earth in music. From 1913 to 1923 new geniuses were being discovered every month. Of Malipiero, for instance, in 1918, one enthusiastic gentleman wrote that here was a man who was certain to produce "works of the first order." Here we are in 1929 and where is Malipiero now? And where are Ornstein and all the other geniuses, in this country and that, who were hailed as heralds of the new dawn? Personally, I am becoming exceedingly tired of the game; there are more profitable ways of spending one's energy than to trouble about what comes from the printing press of the "new music" etc. . . .

Mr. Newman is so plausible that I should be inclined to believe him myself, if I knew as little about new music as his readers.

MUSIC AND WORDS

Virgil Thomson can teach us all how to set English to music.

If you insist on combining words and music you must be prepared to sacrifice one or the other. There is no such thing as equality of words and music, the few exceptions to this rule are special cases. To Thomson, words come first; so, in the manner of Satie's *Socrate*, he merely draws a frame of music around the words. In his setting of texts by Gertrude Stein—in the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, in *Capital, Capitals*, in his numerous songs—he has caught the rhythms and inflections which make the English language different from any other. Without the complexities of the English madrigalists, he manages to superimpose over an elementary accompaniment an amazing variety of rhythms merely because he allows the words to have the naturalness of speech. It would be impossible to translate these compositions into any other language; what better test of their fitness could be asked?

MODERN MUSIC MADE EASY

Annually one of our symphony orchestras plays a new composition which leads the public and critics to think that at last they are beginning to get something out of modern music. As a rule such a work must be clear in form, brilliant in character, without obvious borrowings from Stravinsky or Schönberg, yet with plenty of dissonances (so that no mistake can be made as to its modernity). The success of this kind of work is assured; public and critics enjoy the sensation of adventuring in new tonal fields without losing their sense of direction, for in spite of all the strange foliage, they subconsciously recognize the land of old, familiar "heart-music." In some curious fashion, these compositions, though worthless in themselves, pave the way for a better appreciation of the real thing when it comes along.

Perhaps I had better add that this year's thrill was provided by Ernest Toch's *Piano Concerto*.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

I quote from a letter recently received from Europe, written by a young American composer who is generally counted among the "radicals." "I can't say our season here has been thrilling, though I have had interesting impressions. First of all, Bloch's

Quintet moved me in a way which was a real and great surprise Secondly, *Tristan*, fairly well given at the opera, I found *great* and, in a curious way, disturbing, in spite of the fact that I have lived over every note in the score many times. Disturbing, I mean, because I am certainly no Wagnerian, am on the contrary aware of faults, weaknesses, etc.—and yet, when all this is said over and over again, where is the single work written since this that can be compared with it for a moment, in real force, in essential significance, in necessity, in importance, not to musicians, but to life as a whole? I must admit that in spite of *Pelléas*, in spite of *Les Noces* and *Oedipus*, it makes *la musique moderne* seem like *bien peu de chose*; and this not by virtue of what it (Wagner's music) pretends to be, but by virtue of what it really is. Not that one should be depressed; this has nothing to do with any movement or esthetic theory. It is, rather, because modern composers have not been big enough, not perhaps as musicians, but as human beings. And one cannot blame anyone for not having more personal force, more depth and strength and grandeur of vision than God gives him. I come more and more to believe that this is the essential thing, though I have always believed it to a pretty thorough extent."

If one of the second-line critics had written this, it would mean very little. Coming from the source it does, it is distinctly a sign of the changing times. . . . I cannot help adding that in a sense it is unfair to compare a work like *Tristan* with *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *Pierrot Lunaire*. *Tristan* is the crowning masterpiece of one hundred years of German romantic music while these later works are the masterpieces of a period of change, of experiment. Our *Tristan*, that is, the definitive work of our new musical era, has yet to be written. . . .