

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

## ART AND TECHNOLOGY


ALFRED EINSTEIN

A FEW weeks ago I visited the hospitable library of the Royal College, near Albert Hall, in London, looking for a charming madrigal which was missing from my collection. Promptly at ten I was at the door, but the library did not open until eleven. So I walked into the nearby Science Museum, although I usually timidly avoid museums that demonstrate man's knowledge or its development. I understand nothing of all this; I am ignorant of statics and dynamics, electricity, the construction of machines, coal mining. A little acoustics, that is all. What could I do but flee from the forbidding upper stories, discouraging to my lay mind, to seek refuge in the Children's Corner of the basement, which would probably best measure down to my level of understanding. As a matter of fact, I was right. The things were obviously adapted to my childlike nature. I learned, once more, something of the conservation of energy through the working of the lever, and a score of other elementary facts, the laws of physics. Nearly everything was enlightening.

I was most impressed, however, by a series of dioramas which plastically and colorfully illustrated the development of commerce. There was the hunter, fifty thousand years ago, bearing his kill into the cave on his shoulders. Thirty thousand years ago he drags it on a bark hurdle. Ten thousand—and he pulls it in a wheeled cart, rows it in a boat. Then, three thousand years ago, come wagon and sail boat, and they remain for a long period. Toward the end of the eighteenth century the picture changes, the steamboat and the railroad appear, and toward the end of

the nineteenth century we have the automobile and the airship. The tempo becomes ever swifter, one after the other the records are broken. Then the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, the almost complete triumph over space, the almost complete conquest of distance. Tomorrow—at the latest the day after tomorrow—and we will have television.

These are, to be sure, superficial observations. And it would be no less superficial to state that we are hardly able to cope, in a technical sense, with all these conquests; that they mean little more to us than a precision watch in the hands of a Fiji Islander; that they have brought us a few comforts, but also much destruction and the threat of still greater destruction, even of annihilation. It is superficial also to point out that art has not kept pace with the development of technical progress. Yet it is absurd to reproach art for this: just as absurd as to reproach someone for walking when there are automobiles available, or for riding in automobiles when he could use airplanes. There is not the slightest relationship between art and technology. The spiritual creations of Beethoven or of Goethe underwent no change when they gave up their tinder boxes for matches. Bicycles and automobiles made no new epoch in the arts. Art is a field by itself. A photograph is not a substitute for a portrait drawn by an artist, it is fundamentally different. To be sure a portrait by an artist today is also something other than a portrait made from the Middle Ages on to the threshold of the Renaissance. Then it meant the magical immortalizing, the “conjuring-up” of the personality, today it is, at best, a spiritual immortalizing. An invention, a fugue by Bach, is changeless in its artistic value, which is also the value of craftsmanship; it is, at the same time, a spiritual mirror, in which we can still gaze and will be able to gaze a thousand years hence. But what Bach wanted to accomplish with the inventions, the creative stimulation of the performer, that is meaningless for us today, it is as dead as the historical set form of the fugue. Anyone composing fugues or inventions today à la Bach is archaizing.



But, to repeat, art and technology are independent fields, they have nothing to do with one another. Yet it has been observed

that up to the beginning of the nineteenth century the rate of their development was about the same. It was the speeding-up of the technological tempo that caused the break. Art as "Art" was first established in the nineteenth century. Only then did the past of art begin to be important. One could say that art in our modern sense, art as a special field of life, art which is not omnipresent, which is not "used," but which is "enjoyed," was invented in the nineteenth century. Let us not explore the previous centuries! Bach wrote no work that did not satisfy his practical purpose; not a single one was created as a "work of art;" even the *Inventions* and the *Well Tempered Clavichord* would not have been written had they not been legitimized for him by a pedagogic purpose. That all these have also turned out to be masterpieces, works of art, is a great miracle, but it is not essential to their nature. Neither Mozart nor Haydn produced a work that was not economically, socially prescribed. All their efforts were commissioned, were compulsory, not "free" art works. Neither of them would have dreamed of creating for the world, for an imaginary public.

They were there for their community, but their community was also prepared for them. A Bach *Cantata* or *Passion* had its own limited following, it did not travel beyond the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, but was intended for performance once, twice or three times on particular Sundays, and then set aside for ever. And it was not "prized" by the congregation of the Thomaskirche, it was not "enjoyed" but merely used. And that was enough for Bach. Can we believe that he fancied himself too great an artist for his community, his works too good for them, and he himself a not understood or a misunderstood genius who would be appreciated only by posterity? No, his cantatas were just as they should be, and they had to be good to be suitable for an important church like the Thomaskirche.

Art in this sense, as a part of life, a customary ornament or an ornamental custom, exists no longer because of the ever increasing rate with which technology has conquered the nineteenth century. To repeat, only during this period has art been established as "Art" namely as a corner of the soul, in which one can take refuge from the commonplace; art which is enjoyed in music

festivals and in concert halls. (What holds true of music also applies to the other arts, more or less, especially to the higher levels of poetry, and to painting or sculpture, which have become homeless; architecture is least affected). Technology, which has transformed our life has not changed art; it has affected the conditions, the state of mind on which it acts. Art is no longer a natural, if rare necessity of the spirit, but a "message." At the same time art has come to represent a false flight into the past. This escape is death to the living, death to those who would still keep art alive or revive it, who would again equalize the tempo of art and technology.



To develop our point further. Art as a communication, particularly in music, in opposition to the natural expression of art, represents the same metamorphosis that has taken place in reading. As a matter of fact, communication is a word that is too good, too honorable for this process. It would be better to use a more official, bureaucratic, and indifferent word, such as "information," "transmission," "reception" (from the standpoint of the hearer) of music. Does anyone "read" today? Read, as was once imperative, to penetrate into the innermost soul of another man, whether a contemporary or one who had lived thousands of years ago. The newspapers have broken us of the habit. We receive facts and opinions. They have weaned us of reading books that have to be "read" like Dante's *Divina Commedia*. It is well known that Goethe, when old, stopped reading newspapers on many occasions, not to save time, but because he realized the danger; yet he always came back to them. This is a symbol of the dilemma and the compulsion which began to rule man in the nineteenth century. Now, after all the musical mishaps of this century, the radio has finally brought to us the bare "communication" of music. It has dragged music from its last associations. We need not consider the inadequacies of the radio, its falsification of acoustic properties, its brutalization of the ear. It is perhaps a blessing that the apparatus has not yet been completely perfected. People who still want to hear are attracted back to the concert halls. The contradiction between

music and technical accomplishment only becomes obvious when (as was, and still is the case in Germany of blessed memory) every Sunday a Bach *Cantata* is broadcast from the Thomas-kirche into every home, as water is distributed from a reservoir to every household. The contradiction persists, even if the "unseen audience" of the radio becomes greater, even if the silent listener finds "salvation" through the strength of the soul of Bach. The radio is not broadcasting things that are suited to its nature, the things of the present.

This ease of communication, this power of technology has resulted in our being ever more overpowered by the past. Forty years ago an improvement in the processes of pictorial reproduction was discovered. This did much more to spread the knowledge of the old than of contemporary art, principally because it is easier to make unmistakable reproduction of the old than of the new. Our knowledge was increased but not our understanding. And the more our knowledge of the past is increased, the less becomes our understanding of the present. Paradoxical as it sounds, it is the truth and especially true of music. Knowing Bach did not make it easy to understand *Meistersinger*, but, on the contrary *Meistersinger* made it easier to understand Bach. Schubert is not the key to Hugo Wolf, but Hugo Wolf to Schubert. Only since there has been a modern, "linear" music have we discovered the Middle Ages. Folklore did not advance the "national" development of musical races, but vice versa, the "nationalist" movement inspired us toward folklore.

Neglect of the present, too much attention to the past, eventually kill the understanding of this very same past. The past, which is dead, must be constantly revived by the present, transformed, recognized anew, awakened to a new life. Technology should not busy itself with greater spreading of the past. Its job is not to use new resources to fill all the romantic nooks of the spirit again. It must not increase the terrible isolation of the artist, especially the modern musician. Future knowledge, future retrospect, will label the decade from 1925 to 1935 a period of regrettable reaction. For this the stupid nationalism from which the decade has suffered is as much to be blamed as the error of musicians who either practised a "national" music or



else an international Volapük of music, instead of following a personal or universal—they are the same—speech. Generally speaking we may ascribe it—and this is difficult and dangerous to say—to those who devoted themselves to music.



In this technical world, art as “art” no longer has a place. Anyone who still devotes himself to experimental music, must be aware that his composition is a private matter. Anyone writing symphonies for the Philharmonic or Queens Hall must be aware that he is importuning an audience which is entirely indifferent to his outpourings, despite the inevitable applause at the finale, and the columns of criticism in the next morning’s paper. Before the nineteenth century, it was natural to make music; whether it was good or bad was of secondary importance. Today music is cherished as an “art,” as the accomplishment of a personality, but it has become entirely immaterial whether music is made at all.

How can the balance be restored? How can technology and music again achieve the same “tempo?” Perhaps only through the disappearance of art as “art.” What applies to the label “work of art” in general, applies to the label “national” in particular. National emphasis draws definite boundary lines. I do not know that Bach, Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven ever emphasized the national . . . but how to escape it oneself? Nationalism will always be present, as a form of atavism. Whether a work bears a national stamp or not has nothing to do with its quality. A symphonic poem by Smetana because it has a Czech color is not necessarily of a higher standing than one by Liszt. If it should rank higher it is because of other factors. A piano piece by Chopin is not better than one by Schumann, because it is Polish, or one by Schumann better than Chopin’s because it is German. Not even for Poles or for Germans.

And a work of art must not be stressed as such. The Greek sculptors Phidias, Leukippos and Praxiteles, who would be getting Nobel prizes today, were craftsmen and laborers and received a daily wage. In the time of the Gothic arch, the builders and masons were anonymous. In the Renaissance, a “Prince of

Music," like Orlando di Lasso, a gifted master, had a place as a jester in the main city. Art will become art again and not "Art" when it is once more anonymous. Above all, when we stop talking so much about it . . . . .

Will we be successful? Who can tell. With an art like music, the youngest of all, why worry about the end of the world? Polyphonic music is barely a thousand years old, with milestones such as a motet by Perotinus, a piano concerto by Mozart, and *L'Histoire du Soldat* by Stravinsky. The function of music will change once again. Let us hope it will make a much more radical break with the past than all the political systems for mass-improvement which today rule Europe and part of Asia.