MUSIC TABLE D'HOTE

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THERE are good music programs and there are bad music programs. About these extremes some argument usually arises, but the vast middle ground of everyday concerts fails even to set off the discussion it deserves. Most programs are simply not exciting enough. It is not that they are dull, for one familiar and loved, one provocative and new composition, one penetrating or revealing interpretation is enough to pierce the formal gloom that hangs over our concert halls. But the program to be remembered, the evening to be cherished as a whole is rare indeed. Programs seldom make a point and develop it; they do not even, unless by the sheer drive of potent personality in conductor or instrumentalist, create an atmosphere. Programs, like so many features of our daily lives, clothes and houses, are hampered by a vestigial design.

The idea of variety seems to dominate those who plan our musical evenings. Music programs are indeed – and the tattered expressions "musical feast," "solid musical fare," and so on bear out the premise – planned like a meal. A soup or appetizer (Bach, Scarlatti, Handel) introduces a hearty main dish (Beethoven), followed by a salad (Chopin, Debussy) and a dessert of Spanish cream (Albeniz, Falla, Granados) or Hungarian pastry (Kodaly, Dohnanyi). Passed around with the sustaining items, like bread or little cakes, are the new compositions. There is nothing wrong with the principle of contrast. But what should be only a warning guidepost has come, in the case of program building, to be regarded as a kind of structural law. Slow follows fast, light follows dark, gay follows somber with such unremitting regularity that the desired effect is lost in the anticipated pattern.

Historical precedent explains the character of most American programs, but it also makes them look as old-fashioned as an antimacassared sofa. Just as our early museums bore more resemblance to a Circus sideshow than anything else, so the early presentations of music could claim

a variety show as their nearest relative. In 1774 an "Harmonic Society" program went like this.* "Act I: A Grand Orchestry's Symphony; A French Ariette will be sung accompanied with the Guitar and Violin; Mr. Caze will play his own composed music, on the Violin with Mr. Zedtwitz; A Concert on the Flute; A Sonada on the Spanish Guitar; The First Act to end with a March. Act II: A Grand Orchestry's Symphony; A French Ariette accompany'd with the Mandolin and Violin; A Solo on the Violin; A Duo on Mandoline and Violin; A Sonada of the Salterio; and d'Exaudet's Minuet with echoes; The Concert to finish with a March of the Grand Orchestry. After the Concert there will be a ball." It is the sort of thing we would recognize in its surviving form, the "Ship's Concert," or the "Gala Evening" at a summer hotel.

A hundred years later the concept of what a musical program should be was somewhat more sophisticated. Large orchestras had been established, famous soloists from Europe made the round of the concert halls. Rather heavier in the meat course, like the meals of the time, still the programs were substantially what they are today. Paderewski, appearing with the New York Symphony under Leopold Damrosch in 1891, played the Beethoven E♭ concerto, the Schumann concerto, and wound up with the Liszt Hungarian Fantasy. The program opened with Tchaikovsky's *Coronation March,* and included also an orchestral transcription of the Scherzo from a Cherubini quartet.

The relation of concert to music and composer is very much (to disregard for the moment the factor involved in interpretation) the same as that of museum or gallery to art and artist. At the end of the nineteenth century a museum felt it had discharged its obligation when it made an annual purchase of paintings, hung them on every last available inch of wall space, and opened the doors to the public. Then catalogues were supplemented by booklets and monographs, lectures and gallery talks became routine. In the last decade the effect of the Museum of Modern Art's program has been felt, its careful attention to the physical details of installation, its belief in the informative label as opposed to the numbered listing of works in the catalogue. Now special museum exhibits are either devoted to the work of one man, or they carry through and develop an idea much in the manner of an essay. Artists themselves are not always enthusiastic about these methods. "The work should speak for itself." But they benefit from it nevertheless. *Art News,* in its survey this winter of the year's acquisitions by the nation's museums, remarked on the ac-

* Quoted from John Tasker Howard's *Our American Music.*

celeration in the purchase of contemporary American art, and on the fact that the greatest proportion of this was expressionist rather than representational in character.

Composers too might perhaps reply, to the suggestion that more pointed and exhilarating program planning would help their case, that their product is not soap or toothpaste, need not rely on packaging and advertising. Yet contemporary compositions do suffer from the present thoughtless methods of arranging programs. The stagnant air of the concert hall compares unfavorably with the brighter appeal of ballet and movies – to such an extent that it is a wonder composers continue to write "pure music" at all. "Festivals" have their place but are too rarely festive. New works need to be placed before the public in proper relation to each other, the composer's intent, his problems and his technics of solving them made clear. People really like to be educated; that is they like to learn something new provided it has a quality of excitement and can be linked to something already understood. A shaking up of the stiff conventions of our concert halls ought to please everybody.