

## UNCONVENTIONAL CASE HISTORY

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**T**HERE are many reasons why the present public is without aggressive and intelligent interest in the music it so apathetically absorbs. One of these, perhaps outstanding, is an obvious deficiency in the quality of its education. Increasingly clear is our need to understand the points at which this education fails. But it is even more important that we examine carefully and with open mind any fresh approach in music education for the new generation. So long as the public lacks curiosity about what is untried, the contemporary composer of vision will be ignored, and so long as that public is educated through a system which imposes rigid formulae of esthetic norms unrelated in any vital way to the experience of the individuals that make up its collective entity, the growth of a healthy curiosity will be thwarted.

Education in music, as in other branches of learning, must aim at the mature development of each man or woman to the fullest extent of his innate capacities. Obviously no one method previously determined can serve everyone with equal effectiveness. With such an approach to education one rules out from the start the kind of indoctrination by which traditional and formalistic procedures nourish smug acquiescence.

Let us therefore turn our attention to work done at an experimental college for women where all the teaching materials and methods are evolved to meet a student's specific need for them at a specific time. This puts the major responsibility of education on the student, where it belongs.

At Sarah Lawrence College the arts play a very important role. They exist on an equal footing with the so-called academic studies. Over half the students spend a third of their time in the study of music. They engage both in creative and re-creative work. Some of the re-creative activity takes place in classes

where they are trained in the technic of penetrative listening; in others they study voice, piano, conducting, or an orchestral instrument. Theoretical subjects are not taught in the abstract. They are pursued because the materials present problems which require investigation. Students who are learning how to play an instrument will meet in groups, or be given individual conferences, to study the broader aspects of the art.

It is impossible here to present with any reasonable detail all these aspects of the work done with music. However, an excellent idea of the general point of view may be obtained from the following resumé of how one student came to compose music. It is not set forth as a hard and fast way to teach composition, which *a priori* rule would in itself be a negation of our educational beliefs. Instead it is offered as an illustration of a development procedure adapted for a particular student at a particular time in her career.

Joan then, was a member of a freshman exploratory class in the arts. For this course the subject matter was drawn largely from the theatres, concert halls and art galleries of New York City, and it was planned for students with a general, rather than a specialized interest in art. The emphasis was on experience to be obtained by active participation. Each student should develop her own standards and tastes by means of training to see, hear, and interpret.

Early in this course Joan made a confession to her instructor, which she hoped he would not consider silly. She often had ideas, she said, about writing music, and she made up tunes but never told people for fear they wouldn't understand. At this first conference, it was agreed that she would bring something of her own to the next meeting. The subject of composition had been raised by a general discussion on the comparative textures of art works in relation to their period. Searching for materials that would interest her, it became clear that her preference was for twentieth century sounds. In order to hear these sounds, she wanted to improvise at the piano, although she could barely play.

This awakened interest in sounds led her to devote most of the time of the second conference to picking out the kinds employed by various orchestrators. It was plain at once that she

was interested in orchestral sounds and had a memory for tonal combinations. During the next weeks her sense of orchestral color was revealed as extremely acute. She did not, however, refer to her first talks about composition, nor did the instructor raise the issue.

But on October 16 she burst into the conference room and said "Here it is. Let's get the worst over." The instructor took what she was holding out to him. In place of manuscript paper he found an ordinary notebook sheet with curious wavy lines of dots and dashes. This, Joan explained, was her own system of notation. Having had a little piano instruction as a young child she was vaguely familiar with the normal system, but this she said, seemed easier. At night she often felt the desire to compose and so she would get out of bed, take a piece of paper and in that way help herself to visualize the ups and downs of the melody. As a system it was extremely crude. The contour of the line represented the approximate melodic rise and fall; the dashes were inserted for longer note values. She sang the melody in three different ways, and then said "Now I suppose you'll make me get a harmony book and learn how you're supposed to do it."

She was reassured by being told to develop her own system if she felt the need. The classic method, it was pointed out, was far from perfect; it also had passed through a long stage of development and change. However the point was made that her system must be taken as purely approximate, not as precise, even for her. But since a few compositions did exist which ask the performer to play loud or soft, slow or fast, according to his mood, she had a certain precedent behind her. If her own work needed so much or even more freedom, that was a matter for her to decide. She was quick to say that she wanted the melody to be precise and it should be sung one way, but that she was not able to recall it.

The instructor thereupon showed her how a melody could be heard in relation to a fundamental pulse; that this pulse might vary at the composer's will, but that note values and rhythmic patterns had quality as they were heard in relationship. Still working with her own system, she began to add little checks above her wavy lines to indicate the number of rhythmic units

in the dash. The principle of pulse was a difficult one to get across. Instead of beating a fundamental pulse, Joan would beat the rhythmic divisions. To show the same principle in another way syncopation was demonstrated to be felt as such only by contrast with the stated norm.

The next week Joan produced several dot-dash melodies which could still be played in a variety of ways, but which now proceeded on the basis of a set rhythmic unit. During a discussion of musical works that she was hearing, she said "I can understand melodies and sound and can conceive of writing them, but I have no idea of what comes next—how the whole composition proceeds." A comparison was made between structure in play-writing and music, and then the psychology of composition was taken up. Was it possible for a successful composer to be a poor psychologist? This led to a discussion of devices in composition, which seemed to be patterned on life but were translated in music as deliberate effects. Silence in music, for example, might be indicated by the roll of a drum or trills on the violins playing high; whereas actual silence would be used only sparingly and for a climax so tremendous that sound could not achieve the desired result. The analogy to drama was considered further by a study of Beethoven's symphonic style; here was a composer who understood the element of dramatic give-and-take to a fine degree. We thus entered on an intensive study of form without mentioning that word.

During the next few weeks the melodies Joan brought in were often strange, marked by a peculiar blundering and lack of organization. But the instructor was eager not to stifle the natural flow of feeling, and for the most part she was not asked to change her melodies. Her standards and tastes were soon inevitably influenced by the great variety of music she was hearing and studying. And already she had begun to record her melodies and rhythms in traditional fashion, for as her dot-dash system proved daily more inadequate, she was tutored by an advanced student in the use of the standard system. This development she had accomplished by herself, and it was a fine job.

While making her own researches in notation she had come upon a textbook and discovered that she "knew lots of things

in the back of the book, but wasn't clear on much of the material in the early chapters." We proceeded therefore to investigate these harmonic materials, not through the text, but by a study of the chorales of J. S. Bach, upon whose technic the text was in a large degree based. Her work on chorales in this style was exceedingly well done, showing the genuine value for her of this analysis. There was nothing theoretical about the procedure, she actually needed to know how the sounds were produced. Rather than analyze through the rules of harmony she listened to the sounds and found her own way of cataloging them.

Excellent progress both in melodic and harmonic writing was shown in the next month. The melodies were highly syncopated, but had fewer characteristics of the popular song which had been so apparent earlier. There were already signs of influence from the various national and modal scales that she had heard. A detailed analysis of Beethoven's *First Symphony* was also completed.

Now a new note was emphasized at the conference discussions. Joan challenged the instructor on his methods of teaching. Wasn't he too progressive? Why wasn't she using a text book with day to day steps of increasing complexity? Was she getting at the fundamentals? One hour was taken up with a minute description of the training in the conventional conservatory and college. It was made plain also that another member of the music department here might work with her in an entirely different way; what was important was not to have an iron-clad procedure. The air was cleared by this open and frank discussion concerning method. She understood now that the situation was definitely experimental, that the method would entail some blundering as well as exciting progress. With a flexible point of view traditional academic procedures could be included if they seemed wise. Thereafter teaching proceeded on a conscious basis of mutual consent. She was in the future to be absolutely frank in her criticism.

From this point on her progress was remarkable. After a few months' study she wrote a piece for violin and piano which was performed before an audience, and actually succeeded in holding its interest. During the summer holiday she continued to work at fugue writing. And now, still developing her composi-



tion, she is completing the final movement of a string quartet which is to be performed with other student pieces at the Composers' Forum Laboratory in New York on June 1. Last Fall the interest in orchestral composition took her into a class in orchestration, and she now has a practical working knowledge of instrumental possibilities upon which to build a strong technic.

The study of composition is by nature a highly integrated one. Here the procedures followed were in exact opposition to the conventional set-up, where one takes up first theory, then harmony, counterpoint, orchestration and finally composition. This development proceeded on all fronts as the need for the material arose. The study in orchestration for example came about in a very natural way. The question—"How do you write for the violin? I would like to, but I have no idea what to do," was answered first by a trip downstairs to the studio where a violin was demonstrated, then by the purchase of a reference text on orchestration, and finally by a study of orchestral scores. A similar procedure met the same question about the woodwind instruments. It is important to stress in this record that all these possibilities are available at the same time, and are called into play as the precise need is felt. Hence, orchestration is viewed as an organic part of composition, and not as salt and pepper to be added later.

The result of such a complete, integrated picture of composition is a clear understanding of the possibilities which the art holds for the individual student. The language of music no longer remains a mystery; it can be mastered like any other. What she may eventually say in this medium will be determined by the quality of her whole personality.

Moreover just such an educational experience is the kind of preparation that develops individuals to play their collective role as a thinking public. Of course, it must be admitted that we have here the ideal working conditions of an experimental college. However the underlying philosophy could be extended to mass education by men who believe in it and have the imagination to work out methods for applying it on a necessarily grand scale. When education succeeds in evoking an honest reaction toward the arts, the kind of response that can only come from deep personal conviction, then and then only will our audiences come awake with a start.