ON PROLETARIAN MUSIC

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THE modern concept of the proletariat dates, of course, from Marx and Engels, about a hundred years ago. It designates primarily the virtually propertyless members of modern industrial society, especially the workers in the basic industries of production and the agencies of communication, transportation and distribution. These form the essential *structure* of society. But secondarily it comprises many white-collar workers and intellectuals, including musicians and other artists. These form the *superstructure* of society. Marx and Engels, and after them, Lenin and a host of others, taught that human society in all its aspects, including music, evolves, though unevenly, still as a comprehensible whole in an ordered series of events and processes, the historical understanding of which leads us to predict that the backward (dehumanized) elements of society are becoming inevitably more conscious of their status and of their ability to improve it.

The question of proletarian music is an integral part of the question of social evolution as a whole. No predictions are made by sensible people regarding the length of time the transition period dominated by the proletariat will occupy. The humanizing of humanity is regarded as a thing that is happening simply because an increasing number of people cannot help striving to make it happen. Creative minds and abilities especially, tend to desire its happening "as soon as possible." They cannot resist the desire to work with all their might to facilitate the process. They constitute a "vanguard" whose self-appointed task is the acquainting of the proletariat with the facts of life. But, in the words of Lenin, the task does not consist in attempts to force the revolution. This cannot be done and to make the attempt is suicidal. Its task is, rather, the better preparing of

the proletariat for its historic task. Only the proletariat itself, the vast majority, can achieve its own liberation.

Music is one of the cultural forms through which the work of humanising and preparation operates. Thus it becomes "a weapon in the class struggle." Since it will be used in many different relations it will be of as many different kinds, three of which may be briefly discussed here.

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First, there is the question of music *for* the proletariat. Needless to say, the proletariat has not produced any music of its own *as such*. While it may, at certain periods, strive to be as unlike the bourgeoisie as possible and therefore eschew, among other things, bourgeois music, there are preliminary (and later) periods when it is proper for it to want to be as bourgeois as possible. Still, in America it wants to hear and to perform the great music of the bourgeoisie. A first period is drawing to a close. Ten years ago, the German singing societies began to fret at the endless singing of Handel and Mendelssohn and the imitators of them. Able musicians there, in the Soviet Union and in other European countries (as, for example, Eisler, Wolpe, Szabo, Shekhter, Davidenko, Biely, Shostakovitch, and others) have written hundreds of mass songs, choral and symphonic works for the class-conscious workers of the world. These are sung and heard by millions. Naturally, the musical styles are predominantly bourgeois. A new music cannot be made over night or out of whole cloth. As do other social functions, it shows an ordered development. The new grows out of the old, retaining what is strong and discarding what is weak.

So, a second period is being entered. The proletariat of advanced countries is beginning to be highly critical of what it takes from the bourgeoisie in the way of music. And well it may. For, as in the capitalist system as a whole, each department shows conflicting tendencies that work havoc with the old balance of form and content, skill and taste, technic and value. The bourgeois art of Western European upper-class music is in a parlous state today. No composer can use its technic as a comparatively balanced whole, so varied and multiform are the new

resources added in the last fifty years. Nor can any bourgeois composer be said to be able to express the grand and the sublime as artists of strong cultural periods have always been able to do. They cannot do this because grandeur and sublimity do not characterize the social system under which they and their art flourish. It is a decaying system. No one can prove that this is due to a lack of "great men" at the present time. Who can say that a Schönberg, a Stravinsky, an Ives or a Ruggles, born at a time when great art was in its flower, would not rival in their work the best masters of the past? The proletariat has every reason to look with suspicion upon much bourgeois music, not only of today but of yesterday. Much of the music of the Rococo period —manneristic fugal virtuosity—is out of place in proletarian ears, as are also many of the beribboned polyphonic pieces of the later Renaissance, and, of course, most of the pomposities of oratorio, opera and salon exhibitionism. These are without appreciable revolutionary content. The Beethoven Symphonies, on the other hand, especially the third, fifth, seventh and first two movements of the ninth, still stand as convenient definitions of what is meant by revolutionary content. But much of Schumann and Chopin, saving some of the fine tumultuous pieces, should be laid aside for a while. Of Wagner, too, there is much question. Indeed, the morbidity, the servile melancholy, the frenetic sexuality, the day-dreaming flight from reality that permeates much of the music of the nineteenth century cannot be regarded as fit for a class with a revolutionary task before it. Even in America the day has at last arrived when workers' choruses are beginning to object to certain trivial and sentimental types of music upon which they have been fed.

[This year, the whole program of the Lenin Memorial mass-meetings in New York, Brooklyn and Bronx, was, with one exception (Lenin's favorite song *Oh! Tortured and Broken in Prison*), composed by Americans, thoroughly contemporary in musical outlook, who are members of the Composers' Collective of the Pierre Degeyter Club of New York—an affiliate of the Workers' Music League. This league, now three years old, is a local federation of about eighteen or twenty workers' organizations in New York City—choruses, bands, orchestras, of va-

rious nationalities. There are branches in Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. The Degeyter Club, an organization of professional musicians having definite Leftist tendencies, has developed an orchestra, a chorus, study courses, lectures, concerts, etc. There are about twenty-four men and women who form a "Composers' Collective" representing every shade of musical opinion from the conservativism of Jacob Schaefer, veteran conductor of the Freiheit Gesang Farein, to the restless radicalism of Lahn Adohmyan.]

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The proletariat has a clear realization of the content it wishes to have in the music it hears and in the music it will make for itself. It is a content expressing, and contributing to the success of, its struggle—a revolutionary content. But it has lacked, so far, a musical technic for the expression of this content. It has relied upon and found some use for trite and debased echoes of the existing bourgeois idiom.

Bourgeois art music, on the other hand, has achieved much in the twentieth century that is definitely revolutionary in character —not revolutionary as to the class struggle but as to the technic of music. Old formulas have been destroyed or weakened, and many constructive efforts of replacement have been made, though they are as yet uncoordinated. Partly caused by and partly causing a preoccupation with technical detail, content has been lost sight of. This indicates as well a weakness in the basic (structural) system of society as a lack of contact between the basic trends and the ideological trends (superstructure). In the subjectivism of Schönberg, for instance, as in the objectivism of Stravinsky and Hindemith, there is almost equal lack or weakness of content.

Proletarian content, then, is seen as a rising, progressive factor: that of contemporary bourgeois art music, a declining, regressive one. The technic hitherto characteristic of proletarian usage has proven hopeless; but the technic of bourgeois contemporary music, though uncoordinated, is full of promise. These are not separate and disconnected entities. They are part and parcel of the present-day situation as a whole. The obvious

thing to do is to connect the two vital trends—proletarian content and the forward looking technic of contemporary art music. It can be done and is being done. And surprisingly enough, the workers of Europe and America, who have enormous appetites for new music, like it (quite contrary to their bourgeois contemporaries). Clearly, in the beginning, the bulk of the fabric of new compositions for the proletariat must be in idioms not unfamilar to it. Into this can be introduced more and more of the newer technical resources. The slogan is "National in form: revolutionary in content." Some interesting examples can be seen in the *New Song Book* of the Workers' Music League. For instance, in one of the three-part rounds by L. E. Swift, one of the leading members of the Composers' Collective, there is, in a brisk tempo, alternation of four-four and five-eight meter that would cause difficulty for most bourgeois choruses. But workers' choruses that have tried it do not have any trouble. Roughly speaking, if something unusual is done in one department it is wise to risk little in others at that time. This speaks of the music that workers will sing. They will listen to anything But their criticism is sharp. Not hypnotized by the possession of supposed esoteric technical learning or ashamed of not possessing it, they see straight to the question of basic content (which, it must be remembered, is largely non-technical and even non-or extra-musical). If that quick insight does not yield the proper result, they are adamant in their adverse judgment. This holds of the mass, not, of course, of isolated individuals who have taken a few music lessons (often as not, pretty bad ones) and so succumbed to debased criteria of bourgeois commodity-music.

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We are moving already to a realization of the third stage in this evolutionary process—the time when there will be music *of* the proletariat. That the criteria of bourgeois criticism will be reversed is clear. The order: content first, technic second, accords historically with the usual evolution of musical styles. It was conspicuously the case with the Plainsong, the *nuove musiche* and early romanticism. If, as seems probable, proletarian music constitutes a new style comparable to the grand

styles of Plainsong, the Gothic, Renaissance, Rococo and Romantic periods, it is to be expected that its first stages will show the usual phenomena of technical crudity. Those proficient in the old style may, as usual, look at it with well-bred scorn. Whether it will spring quickly to its full growth as did Romantic art, or slowly, as did the Rococo through its long seventeenth century childhood, cannot now be predicted. There is more evidence of the latter than of the former type of growth. Present notions of musical content, therefore, may still undergo some changes. For technic and content are not two separate things, but rather two different aspects or ways of looking at one and the same thing. They are distinguished here for a special reason. Content can exist apart from its musical-technical expression. It is a characteristic of the *structure* of society, whereas musical technic is of the *superstructure*. Revolutionary content can, for instance, be seen in the other arts and in the daily life of action. But as soon as this general content becomes associated with a new technic, that technic develops in a new way and in turn throws a new light on the generalized notions of content. This new light—musical revolutionary content—reacts again upon the general content. In this two-way relationship, technic and content become identified and then we have art-products of the highest type. While these may sometimes anticipate and sometimes echo the basic trend, they evince in general a one-to-one concurrence with it.

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Art, then, is always and inevitably a social function. It has social significance. It is a social force. It is propaganda: explicit, positive; implied, negative. The better the art, the better propaganda it makes: the better the propaganda, the better art it is. The propaganda element in recent bourgeois music has been ignored. It has ceased to have positive social value. The liberal composer who has sat in his ivory tower and said, "whether or not there is a class struggle, music has nothing to do with it," is broadcasting negative propaganda (tacit approval) for the social system that gives him a tower and allows him to sit in it. On the other hand, the art element in the proletariat's propa-

ganda for a better life has been slighted. Too servile acceptance of a debased bourgeois musical idiom has constituted a negative approval in music of the social system against which it must revolt.

Composers have three possible paths ahead of them: fascism, which means positive propaganda for the older order; isolation, which means negative propaganda for it; and proletarianism, which means propaganda for the new order. Whether composers know it, admit it or not, the fact remains—they most of them belong to the proletariat. Let them withhold themselves from it and they will live lives of equivocation, opportunism and frustration. Let them join it openly and their talent will be strengthened, their technic purified, a content given to it and they will have a wider hearing—not of sophisticated individualists who half disdainfully tolerate them, but of the great masses who welcome them with hungry ears—not an audience of hundreds, but of millions.