

MODERN MUSIC

AN OPEN LETTER TO ROXY

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MY dear Mr. Rothafel:

I was standing on the L station at 50th Street a few days ago, looking at men and machines hoisting into place great stones, when my eye caught something more striking and more active: men walking up and down the *interior* of an electric sign; the sign bore the name by which you chose long ago to be known and which you have made famous: Roxy. I suppose that in accordance with the laws of business, a similar sign will come down from the theatre a few blocks away.

Yet no one believes that the change consists merely in taking one sign down and putting another, with the same name, up. You have changed in ten years, the habits of human beings have changed and their tastes have changed; and the opportunity which you won by your success, is a hundred times greater than any you have ever had. I am not making the mistake of assuming that Rockefeller Center is a charitable institution, sacrificing all for art and beauty; I know that with the best will in the world, you cannot put into the theatres under your direction a series of spectacles and entertainments which would give you empty houses six days a week; and as I have never believed deeply in the unpopular theatre, I see no reason why you should.

In the years since you began your career as a showman you have learned that there are at least two ways to attract crowds: by putting on cheap things in a cheap way and by putting on good things in a good way. There are exceptions to both. Yet the

general rule is a good one. Even if everyone in business did not have to advertise with variations of "bigger and better," the mere fact that you had experience one year would make your next year's work better; and the same is true for your audiences. And a special note about the audiences; they have been listening for years to the radio, haven't they? That means that they are by now more familiar with the popular semi-classics than most Americans were after thousands of "Pop" concerts, and have heard classical music and even occasional pieces of modern music more frequently than most subscribers to the Boston and the Philharmonic and the Philadelphia. You are no longer under compulsion to educate them; to interest them, you can go almost as far as you, and your modernist supporters, would like.

We know little of your plans; there is no reason why we should know more at the moment; but people who care for entertainment (from a good musical show to a production of *Les Noces*) are properly concerned with Rockefeller Center. What is done there will either energize or stultify entertainment in America for a generation. We know something of the feeling for the arts which inspires the Center as a whole: the choice of Donald Deskey to create an interior and the appearance in that interior of Georgia O'Keefe, Boardman Robinson, William Zorach, Ernest Fiene, Walt Kuhn, Max Weber, Varnum Poor and others, suggests that the red plush and frayed hangings and dim gold brocades of the Metropolitan-style are forever gone, blessed be the name of the Lord; the engagement of an artist of the high prestige and strong individuality of Gaston Lachaise shows an artistic intelligence of the first order; and the naming of Robert Edmond Jones to be your art director in the theatre places at a critical point a man who is not only a genius of the theatre, but the inexhaustible source of inspiration to others. You have such a list of American talent that I think you needn't be afraid of a few chauvinists; if Brangwyn and Rivera are wanted, let them come; the frontiers of art are not guarded except in wartime.

A long time ago a dull dramatist who was a good speaker, the late Henry Arthur Jones, was talking about the New Theatre—perhaps you remember that that enterprise was to revive the arts

of the stage in America—and he said that it was as logical as it would have been to found Christianity, two thousand years ago, by building St. Paul's Cathedral. There weren't in America playwrights, at the time, who needed a New Theatre; when they came they helped to build the Guild Theatre and to support a half dozen others. Your position is better. There are composers in America; and now that you have a magnificent home for them, what are you going to do with them?

Perhaps my question would be clearer if I explained that I have not wavered from an old loyalty: I still believe that Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin and George Gershwin make music which gives pleasure to every intelligent man not made tone-deaf by some theory of gentility; I think that if you get a *Show Boat* to produce you will be far luckier than if you find another *Madame Butterfly*; I do not think that American dancing must always be cast in the forms of the Russian Ballet and hope it will never be cast in the forms of Wigmanism. In short, it is not a question of artiness; nor is it a question of abandoning old music and new music written in old forms, in order to make a temple to Schönberg or even Stravinsky. The question is whether music is to be seen as a living whole which continues to our day, or as a strange function of humanity which died out in 1903. Is it something compartmentalized from which you must draw only the bits bearing certain labels (classic, ancient, correct) or can you take whatever is good, in whatever style?

The position of the American composer has not been a happy one. It costs a great deal to produce a ballet or an opera in America; the Metropolitan could afford to commission a few, and philanthropic institutions could create some others. But the gamble was great. It was easier to go abroad, where production costs are lower, and to look at and listen to works already on the stage, importing them for our delight. (There were great names in Europe and still are; but some of them arrived at greatness because their works were played and they could learn; what do you imagine their position would be now if they hadn't had a chance to see and hear their own work for the past fifteen years?) I think that the situation may have grown worse because in our financial depression, everyone wants to play safe.

Theatrical producers want to feel that they have a ten-to-one shot, they tell me, before they go into rehearsal; and it has been suggested to even our most advanced conductors that they fall back on conventional music for their concerts this year—to encourage the patrons. It begins to look as if you, and you alone, could encourage the composers.

Your difficulty is, of course, that the young men are radical, often harsh to the ear accustomed to Bach and Beethoven and Brahms; they require singing or dancing which is as novel as their music. Can you get audiences to come to these productions? You'll never know unless you try.

The editor of this magazine has supplied me with a list of American composers who have written or are writing for the stage. It isn't shameful to confess that I haven't heard all of their works; I haven't even heard of some of their names. None of these men have had frequent and recurrent productions; if you miss one night, you may miss a composition for five years. You get no chance to become acquainted with the tone of their voices and the manner of their utterance. It is as if one painting by Picasso were shown for one day and then no more Picassos were seen for a year. What could you know of a painter in these circumstances? Note how slowly people got used to the individual styles of such different men as Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway; would they have their enormous followings now if all one knew of them was a few pages, read in an obscure magazine in a dentist's waiting room every six months?

The history of musical appreciation does not prove that every radical innovator becomes the Great Composer of the next era; but it proves that people's ears grow accustomed to sounds they call horrible when they first hear them. I recall a charming epitome of the whole quarrel between moderns and ancients in a program led in New York by Leopold Stokowski. He played those five tiny pieces of Schönberg and people hissed and stamped out of Carnegie Hall and behaved badly all around. There was a handful of energetic applause from a few admirers of Schönberg and from a few admirers of artistic freedom and experimentation. Then Mr. Stokowski stepped again to the podium and began to lead a Wagner overture, chosen with

malice aforethought. The audience recognizing good old music, applauded. Mr. Stokowski bowed without turning to face the audience; he knew that that very piece had been hissed in Paris a few generations ago. If you will picture a man bowing to you, although he is not facing you, you will see why I call this episode illuminating.

My point is that if you choose wisely and mount well, you can give the American people a chance to hear American music many times in succession, so that they will no longer be persuaded by propaganda that they must not like anything later than Wagner or anything harder than Puccini. Give them a ballet to watch and they will hardly be conscious of discords; give them an opera with action and intelligence on the stage, and they will presently praise you for the new music in the pit.

It seems to me that American composers turn naturally to the stage. You have among the established men John Alden Carpenter and Deems Taylor; Robert Edmond Jones did a magnificent setting for Carpenter's *Birthday of the Infanta* and Adolf Bolm brought to a small stage the enchanting *Krazy Kat* ballet—precisely the kind of thing which would win you golden opinions and a big box office sale. Taylor now has the accolade of the Metropolitan, but you may choose to remember that his first work was a musical show. Louis Gruenberg also has been knighted—but it is well to remember that his *Emperor Jones* was not commissioned, it was accepted by the Metropolitan after Gruenberg had worked on it without any assurance of production. These men and Emerson Whithorne are in their late forties, so I am not beginning by recommending beginners to you; nor are they violent innovators.

For radical men there are three names upon which you can count for sensations in the press, which are only harmful when they prevent people from listening to music because they want to show that they can be spectacular themselves. They are Edgar Varese, George Antheil, and Aaron Copland. Varese hasn't lacked backing here, critically from Paul Rosenfeld, practically from Stokowski. He is living in Paris. Antheil also spends much time abroad, one reason, I suppose, being that the State Opera in Frankfort did what no opera in America found time

to do: it commissioned an opera from him. He has written a ballet for marionettes—I am sure that you could get Remo Bufano to build the figures for you and manipulate them with all his uncanny skill. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin has given many performances to his *Fighting the Waves*. John Erskine, a popular writer and a musician himself, collaborated with Antheil on an opera called *Helen Retires*.

Let me interrupt the catalogue a moment. I have noted that people abroad have listened to Antheil, apparently with some pleasure. Here if you mention his name people recall the uproar of his *Ballet Mécanique* and laugh. I heard that performance; I have hardly any memory of it; until I hear it again I shan't know, actually, what I think of it. But remember that the Antheil ballet was put on as a special occasion, with the newspapers virtually inciting people to riot. Now it is in your power to deflate all the false arty glamor of music (the dreadful dullness of symphony concerts, where people have forgotten that music has its humors, too, and will not smile for fear Mr. Stokowski will rap their knuckles) and at the same time the feeling that it is something special and mysterious and "not for the likes of us." Music, I grant you, is the most profound and the most abstract expression of the human soul; but the soul must remain human. Put on Antheil's ballet between two other numbers; let people hear it as an item in a large program; put it on between two Hollywood movies for all I care. And see what happens.

To resume. Copland is a man born for the stage. He and Roger Sessions and several other composers are preparing their works for production by chamber ensembles because that is the only way open to them; the nature of the work requires the stage. Have you a small stage you can throw open to them? Or three-quarters of an hour between other numbers? Or will you create a stage presentation suitable to Copland's *Music for the Theatre*—it is extraordinarily interesting music, I assure you.

Rivera will be on the walls. Is there room for Chavez on the stage? Could you afford now to do the *Four Suns* you wanted to do with Covarrubias? You will have a place for movies somewhere; can you use Marc Blitzstein's music for movies? Are you secretly commissioning Leo Ornstein, who frightened everybody about fifteen years ago with his prodigious music and who

has written pantomimes? Have you heard any recent work of Henry Cowell about whom we were all told to laugh because he struck tone clusters with his elbow on the piano and plucked the strings furiously while he hit the keys? There is Negro music which is neither spiritual nor jazz; William Grant Still is writing some of it. Perhaps you liked Werner Janssen's *New Year's Eve* in New York better than I did; perhaps in Rochester or in Washington or at other festivals, music is played which can be of service to you. There are dozens of other names: Barlow and Beach and Cole and Dubensky and Eichheim and Elwell and Farwell and Hammond—and so down the alphabet to Rudhyar, Saminsky, and Virgil Thomson. It isn't likely that every one of these is a genius: so many geniuses do not sprout in one decade. There may not be a single Stravinsky among them. That isn't the point. The point is that unless we get the work of composers produced, the composers will be muted and will die off. A few, eccentric enough to fight on, may give us great music; but man is usually an animal that grows and develops; and just now we are not allowing our musical-man to grow at all.

You and I aren't going to try to fool one another. We both know that the Russian Ballet was an endowed institution in one way or another and that the great Diaghilev went about unscrupulously tearing big money out of rich men's pockets because he had to keep his ballet alive. We know also that it was a popular institution. (Not in New York. I am not suggesting that your theatres should be popular in Moscow. Find a counterpart for the Russian Ballet which will be American, and wealth and honor are yours.) Its ballets were enormously entertaining; they were funny or grotesque or tragic; they changed men's taste in three arts, music and painting and dancing. And they were lavish with opportunities for dozens of artists. There's your chance.

It is a great chance because yours is the heaviest artistic responsibility in America today. Let me say it again, not as a warning, but to give you pride in what you have to accomplish: what you do in Rockefeller Center in the coming few years will either raise up or press down music in America. Your tradition has been to make what is good, popular; you have no need to divert from your path. All you need is to find the correct way to expose, steadily and with confidence, what is good.