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MUSIC IN CRISIS

Some Notes on Recent Musical History

ROGER SESSIONS

THERE can no longer be any question that music, like every other manifestation of Western culture, stands under the sign of crisis. The situation has been developing for decades; nearly a century ago the most sensitive observers were already aware that some such crisis was approaching. But what has, until recently, been visible only to the most far-flung spirits has since the war become an increasingly obvious and menacing fact, with the most concrete and actual implications. The reactionary tendency observable in every country during the past two musical seasons is only the latest and one of the most superficial symptoms of an underlying condition; though its intrinsic importance must not be over-estimated, it is obviously the reaction of a public which for the first time in musical history feels itself increasingly out of touch, not with this or that contemporary composer, but with "modern music" itself.

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The active musical tendencies of the past ten years have all been, in their several ways, efforts in the direction of meeting this crisis. In speaking of them it should never be forgotten that the development of art is a living, organic process, not to be defined accurately in terms of "movements," "reactions," and "tendencies." Such definitions are for the most part approximations adopted, with a rather deadly concreteness, not by protagonists but by spectators; in order to understand what is really happen-

ing one must get behind the definitions to facts, which then must be viewed in perspective. Such formulas have their practical usefulness, no doubt; but they have also the fundamental falseness of all attempts to classify matter which is stubbornly alive and constantly developing.

One must exercise a certain caution, moreover, in regard to the utterances of composers themselves. The creative activity is essentially practical rather than theoretical, and like all practical natures the artist is necessarily absorbed in his own problems, even though occasionally, as in the case for instance of Wagner, he is capable of making vital generalizations as well. But impersonality represents, for the artist perhaps even more than for others, a great effort of will and understanding; he is generally unable to foresee clearly what his future development will be, and at the same time must believe with fanatical seriousness in what he is doing, even though he may have quite other preoccupations as soon as he has surmounted the problems in hand. "Do I contradict myself?" wrote Walt Whitman; "very well then, I contradict myself." The testimony of a composer has the authority and the vitality of intensely lived experience but his interpretations of that experience are constantly open to revision, even by himself. Too much weight, therefore should not be attached to his reported casual utterances, nor should too important conclusions be drawn from them.

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Perhaps the most obvious symptom of the present crisis is its "confusion of tongues"—the result of nearly a century of musical development before the Great War. What took place during this period was a gradual dissociation of the musical consciousness of Europe (rather, of the Occident) into a multitude of various components. This dissociative process, the last phase of which constituted the "modern music" of twenty years ago, represented for the non-German peoples first of all a breaking-away from the German domination of musical culture, and was the inevitable result of the then latest developments of German music which, as Nietzsche once so penetratingly wrote, had ceased to be "the voice of Europe's soul" and was instead degen-

erating into mere *Vaterländerei.* Bach and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert were German composers, to be sure, but not in any sense purely German in significance; Bruckner and Reger, even Strauss and Mahler—even, as Nietzsche points out, Schumann—in a far more restricted sense, were. The "voice of Europe's soul," however, has never yet been truly recovered; the *Vaterländerei* of which Nietzsche saw the fatal beginnings in Germany began to reproduce itself elsewhere in a franker and even more accentuated form, in a quantity of national "schools" of picturesquely local significance; the common cultural heritage began to be abandoned in favor of localisms, until by the end of the century a very definite cleavage was perceptible.

The earlier years of our century brought definite signs of an even smaller division; a tendency towards an increasing number of purely individualistic and esoteric musical cults. Artists began to arise who no longer represented even a single land or a local culture, but rather isolated and even rootless yearnings of various kinds. "Prophets crying in the wilderness," unrecognized geniuses, the only defect of whose messages was their fatal subjectivity, appeared by the dozen; smaller spiritual stepsons of Wagner who, from an isolation essentially far deeper than that of Wagner, shouted their message to a fundamentally indifferent even though sometimes not wholly inattentive world, and who often strained and cracked their voices in the attempt to make themselves seriously heard. This was the age of "new possibilities," new technical devices, new and often quasi-religious esthetic creeds, symptoms of a fundamental insecurity and a lack of any but a purely passive inner necessity. The artist, taken by and large, was no longer fulfilling a function as the voice of a real community of spirits; he had become rather a dealer in *articles de luxe* for a disabused aristocracy and a self-satisfied bourgeoisie. This type of music is well exemplified in the swollen and frenetically self-important works—not without a certain power—of a Scriabin; solitary orgies in which the once vital paroxysms of a Wagner are transported to a far thinner and more precious atmosphere. The more significant music of that time came to be representative of cities and of groups within cities, rather than of peoples. French music grew more

and more essentially Parisian, German music to a certain extent polarized itself in Berlin and Vienna, even in Leipzig and Munich. But unlike the local Italian schools of painting in the Renaissance, these separate schools did not embody locally rooted expressions of a common human aspiration, but rather on the contrary, regional (often perhaps rather fortuitously regional) offshoots from a common background, a dissociative rather than a constructive movement. Many other factors contributed to this process; a constantly more complete rift between "serious" and popular music, the growth of a type of virtuoso whose ideals are more those of the "prima donna" than of the genuinely interpretative artist—all of them, needless to say, factors by no means isolated, but part and parcel of the structure and the very essence of contemporary musical life.

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The characteristic music of the post-war years has represented a complete contrast to the tendencies above described, and to some extent, in a very real sense, a reaction against them. That is not to say that the earlier types did not continue to exist, or even to deny the possibility of important figures among them. J. S. Bach is not the only historical example of an artist who in a sense outlived his time and yet who has loomed in the eyes of posterity far larger than any of his "modern" contemporaries. But the general movement since the war has been in a quite opposite direction. The composer who is most truly of today, whatever his nationality or esthetic creed, is no longer seeking "new possibilities" in the individualistic sense of the pre-war composers, but rather, in so far as he has a conscious program at all, submitting himself to the new *necessities* of his time, and setting himself the new tasks which these necessities demand. The popular classification of "tendencies" of which mention has already been made has served to call attention to the fact of various differences of approach to these problems, even though it has not always thrown a very clear light on their deeper significance.

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It is idle to inquire when and by whom the somewhat sweeping and inexact term "neo-classicism" was first applied to certain

contemporary tendencies. It has been applied rather disconcertingly to such essentially different composers as Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Casella—composers in each of whom a certain more or less conscious traditionalism (not a new thing in art) is apparent, but who differ widely both in the traditions which they represent, and in the roles which tradition plays in the composition of their styles. There is also sometimes a still more primitive failure to discriminate between the traditionalism which springs from an essential impulse and is animated by a real inner tension, and another traditionalism, also to be found in recent music, which represents the exact contrary of this—a manner, a mode, nourished on *cliché* and fashionable propaganda—a traditionalism of followers and not of independent spirits. It is obviously not the latter that comes into consideration here.

Let us abandon, then, the term "neo-classicism" and consider rather certain features which this term is commonly taken to represent. Many of these features are not traditionalistic in any necessary sense, nor were they so in their origins. The composers in Russia and France who, during the latter half of the last century, made the original break with the specific latter-day German tradition, brought into the varied general current of music a mass of new and at first sometimes not wholly assimilated materials which were in contact with that tradition, or rather with those of its phases against which the break was directed. A more transparent texture, a pronounced emphasis on rhythm and movement, a less emphatic harmonic style, and an instrumentation consisting of sharply defined rather than mixed *timbres,* were characteristic features of this newer music. What it lacked was first of all depth; it was very often music of association, of mood, of color, with relatively little essential and organic inner life of its own. Taken by and large it represented a collection of various *manners* rather than a style; an exploitation of certain nuances of colour and sonority rather than a complete vision, a world in which all possible musical ingredients could find their place.

The true classical tradition of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the tradition which the Western

world held in common under the leadership first of Italian and later of German musicians, was such a vision; and it was in a general sense to this tradition that musicians inevitably turned when they felt the need of a less limited and less external musical language and at the same time of that necessary connecting link with the past, without which art can never be more than a poor homunculus, essentially unnourished and incapable of organic growth.

This traditionalism, however, can in no real sense be called a "return to the past." Rather should it be considered in the light of a *reprise de contact;* and, in spite of its prophets, essentially nothing more than a point of departure. It was significant chiefly in that it marked the beginning of an instinctive effort to rediscover certain essential qualities of the older music with a view to applying them to the purposes of the new, an experiencing anew of certain laws which are inherent in the nature of music itself, but which had been lost from view in an increasing subjectivism and tendency to lean, even in "pure" music, more and more on association, sensation, and *Stimmung.*

This traditionalism, then, was essentially a part of a new attitude towards music—new at least for its time. Music began above all to be conceived in a more direct, more impersonal, and more positive fashion; there was a new emphasis on the dynamic, constructive, monumental elements of music, and, so to speak, a revaluation of musical materials. This revaluation has shown itself by no means only in actual compositions, but is perceptible among interpreters also. The function of the interpreter, in fact, has been to some extent reconsidered, and a far greater emphasis is today laid on fidelity to the composer's musical thought than was the case twenty years ago.

It would be inaccurate to define this current, as has been so often done, as an emphasis on "form" at the expense of "content;" it marks rather a change of attitude towards form and content both, which we might describe as a transference of the sphere of consciousness in the creative process. Whereas the earlier tendency was to be more and more conscious in regard to a "meaning behind the notes" and to construct the music according to principles derived from this indirect and not strictly

musical source, the composers of the newer music proceeded directly from their musical impulses, seeking to embody these impulses in musical ideas which should have an independent existence of their own, and to develop these ideas according to the impetus inherent in them as musical entities. In other words, with the latter the *musical idea* is the point of departure, whereas with the former extra-musical considerations consciously determine the choice of the idea. The new attitude brought inevitably in its train a new and often laconic form of utterance which was sometimes interpreted as an abandonment of "expression." It was in reality, of course, a new manner of expression, a new sobriety and at its best, as in the finest pages of Stravinsky, a new inwardness. The grandiloquent and neurotic self-importance which characterized so much of the music of the years preceding the war has, in fact, practically disappeared and is only to be found in a few provincial survivals. The contemporary composer, when he wishes to achieve grandeur of utterance, does so by more subtle, monumental means.

It is assuredly false to conceive of music as having in any real sense moved away from "humanity." If it has in specific cases seemed to do so it is the result not of a false esthetic but of a defect of temperament in the composer. Music—pure music—has, naturally, everything to do with humanity, with the deepest human emotions and experiences. But the nature of this connection has sometimes been apprehended only in the the vaguest manner; it is in any case not always so literal or so flat-footed a connection as certain literary gentlemen like to imagine. Images and associations are certainly often aroused by music, especially in those who are unaccustomed or insufficiently gifted musically to enter completely into an inner world where tones are sufficient. To say this is not to deny the value or even the interest of such experiences, but only to insist on their purely subjective nature. The inner experience of the thoroughbred musician who writes "program music" is, of course, an entirely contrary one, being in fact the instinctive translation of non-musical experience into tones, instead of a translation from tones into concrete conceptual terms. The very power of musical emotion lies precisely in the fact that it attaches itself *directly,* without any

associational medium, to the most intimate experiences of the hearer; here lies also its universality, since, once a musical idiom is clearly grasped, it is accessible to everyone who lives and feels.

Needless to say, however, a new attitude towards what is technically called musical "form" does not necessarily mean that form in the truest sense has always been achieved. Form in this sense is above all the full experience, to the point of complete fusion, of musical elements, and of the inner experiences behind them. It is present in a phrase, a rhythm, an instrumental trait, as surely as in a whole composition. In much contemporary music the inner experience is indeed there. The music is often *felt* and *heard,* by the composer; but how seldom is it felt and heard through to the limit! The experience behind it is too often explosive and spasmodic; it lacks the "great line" and the sharpness of contour which are the distinguishing—though not always immediately distinguishable—signs of a completely lived musical experience.

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While by far the greater part of the more significant contemporary music composed outside of Central Europe, and very much of that composed in Germany as well, may be said to belong in a rough sense to the tendency above described, a large group of composers in the countries once included in the Austrian Empire, together with a perceptible number of Germans, have been following quite other lines. This so-called "Central European" tendency is chiefly embodied in the works of Arnold Schönberg and his followers, though not strictly confined to them. Like the tendencies already described, it is an extremely complex phenomenon, composed of various contributing elements; while many of its features are of a strictly technical nature, too involved in their implications to be adequately discussed here. Nor must the qualification "Central European" be taken to imply an essentially local or geographical emphasis in the creed itself. Though in our belief it could, for historical reasons, have arisen nowhere else but in Vienna, and represents in fact an inevitable end-stage in Viennese musical culture, it claims for itself a universal validity, a more or less general

monopoly, in fact, of what is significant in contemporary music. Far more than any other contemporary tendency it is dominated by a single personality, and its development is closely coincident with that of its leader.

A curious parallel with the beginnings of so-called "neo-classicism" may be seen in the definite formulation by Schönberg of the constructive principles of his school—the well-known "twelve-tone system." The need for a fresh formal principle in contemporary music was felt, in other words, at very much the same moment by the leading spirits in the musical world and by composers of widely different feeling and background. The age of experiment was clearly over. New resources were at hand in profusion, many of them having been discovered by the very men who now felt the imperative need of absorbing them, organizing them, and wielding them into a new musical language.

The music of Schönberg and his pupils is still very inadequately known, even to musicians, and at least as much on account of its extreme material complexity as of its emotional content, it will probably for some time continue to be so. It is par excellence music for the "initiated" and it is difficult to see how it can ever reach a "great public."

The "twelve-tone system" has often been decried as a purely cerebral construction; and there is no question that some of its features are extremely dogmatic. It can not be too much stressed, however, that a system of this kind has no real existence apart from the works which embody it; it is the works of Schönberg and his followers that constitute what is vital in their contribution to contemporary music, not the system under which they are written.

It is necessary, then, to distinguish between Schönberg, Berg, and Webern, the composers, and Schönberg the musical theorist —perhaps again between these and Schönberg the teacher, in personal contact with his pupils. It is to the enormous credit of the latter that his pupils show a wide divergence of styles, and that their work—naturally in the cases of those who have real creative talent and background—bears witness to a profound artistic discipline.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the art of Schönberg has vital connections with the past. Close acquaintance shows how deeply it is rooted in the chromaticism of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*. This music may in fact be regarded as pre-eminently a logical development of that chromaticism, and the "twelve-tone system" as, in great part, a bold effort to formulate directive laws for its further development. "Atonality" if its real and not its superficial meaning be understood is merely another name for that chromaticism and not, as the term would seem to imply, a negation of the necessity for fundamental acoustic unity, based on laws which are the inevitable consequence both of natural phenomena of sound, and of the millenial culture of the Occidental ear. "Tonality" in the old, cadential sense, scarcely exists in any music of the present day, and where it can be said to exist in essense its nature has been so widened and modified as to render it unrecognizable to a composer of the last century. But the ultimate foundations on which the older tonal system was built, since they are inherent in the physical phenomena of resonance, remain unchanged; they can be enormously extended but scarcely modified.

All that is ambiguous and profoundly problematical in the music of Schönberg is to be traced to its definitely esoteric character. A contemporary German musician whose pronouncements in such matters are as authoritative as they are brilliant and profound, has compared certain musical tendencies in present day Germany to the decadent Greek art of Alexandria, remarking that, "There is an Alexandrianism of profundity and an Alexandrianism of superficiality." "Alexandrianism of profundity," indeed, well defines the music of the Central European group in certain respects—its tortured and feverish moods, its overwhelming emphasis on detail, its lack of genuine movement, all signs of a decaying musical culture, without fresh human impulses to keep it alive. The technic of this music, too, is of a curiously ambiguous nature, and often represents an extraordinary lack of coherence between the music *heard* and, so to speak, its theoretical structure—another sign of an art that is rapidly approaching exhaustion. An orchestral movement, for instance, which is constructed according to the most rigid con-

trapuntal mathematics will turn out to be, in its acoustic realization, a succession of interesting sonorities without audible contrapuntal implications—an impression not be be dispelled by the most conscientious and sympathetic study of the score, the most complete familiarity with both its intellectual and its sonorous content. An opera whose remarkable feature when heard is its fidelity to the text, its responsiveness to every changing psychological nuance, proves on examination to be constructed in its various scenes on the external models of classic forms, without, however, the steady and consistent movement that gives these forms their purpose and their character. Such esoteric and discarded devices as the *cancrizans* variation of a theme, a technical curiosity which is admittedly inaccessible to the most attentive ear and which was used with the utmost rarity by the classic composers, becomes a regular and essential technical procedure. All of this goes to indicate the presence of a merely speculative element, tending to be completely dissociated from the impression actually received by the ear and the other faculties which contribute to the direct reception of a musical impression, and to produce what is either a fundamentally inessential *jeu d'esprit* of sometimes amazing proportions, or a kind of scaffolding erected as an external substitute for a living and breathing musical line.

Such reflections, however, are necessarily but approximative and by no means dispose of this music and the problems which it raises. A work of art is a positive reality and must be so considered, quite apart from the principles which are to be found within it. Thus one may reject many of Schönberg's ideas and modes of procedure while acknowledging not only his historical position as the initiator of even more in contemporary music than is usually accredited to him, but also his work, and that of some of his followers, as in itself an important and fundamentally unassailable element in the music of this time.

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Less strictly musical in significance than either of the general currents discussed above, but highly characteristic of our time and therefore worthy of some discussion, is the deliberate movement on the part of musicians, especially in Germany but also

to a certain extent elsewhere, to seek a new relationship with the public and to form a great variety of new and direct contacts with it. The past ten years have witnessed the production of a vast quantity of music definitely written for purposes of practical "consumption," and though many of those purposes do not offer a precisely new field for musical production, new, on the other hand, is the scale and extent of the interest which musicians are taking in them.

As has been pointed out, the movement is to a large extent economic in character, and the necessities to which it responds are outer rather than inner necessities; but in several respects it is symptomatic and must command the attention of everyone who is interested in the way music may go in the future. For it represents a direct attempt to meet the crisis not only in its material but in several of its spiritual aspects as well.

The movement is therefore only in a partial sense an artistic one. It originated no doubt during the economic chaos in Germany just after the war, in the period of "inflation," when the economic breakdown of the German bourgeoisie led to a profound modification of the musical life of Germany, partly by reducing considerably the public able to attend concerts and operatic performances, and partly by taking the attention of the new generation away from cultural interests—a situation later made more acute by the political, intellectual, and moral unrest which followed. It was under the pressure of such realities that many musicians were forced to take stock of the whole place of music in present-day society and to seek new channels for their activity. They found these new channels in the constructive movements of the time, to which they sought to contribute the energies which music could give. Emphasis was laid above all on the practical purposes of the music thus produced; music was above all to cease to be an article of luxury or a primarily individual self-expression; to serve rather the ends of education, and especially of political and social propaganda. The same idea, far more drastically applied, will be readily recognized as that underlying the attitude of Soviet Russia towards art.

On perhaps a higher plane, the movement was undoubtedly in part the beginning of a renewed search for a fresh and more

actively participating public. Composers busied themselves with the formation of a genuinely popular style, with rendering their music more accessible through a simplification of technic, with applying themselves seriously to the new problems offered by the radio, the cinema and mechanical means of reproduction. New ideals began to appear in the opera; younger composers began to produce works designed definitely for momentary consumption, works which were above all striking and "actual," designed to fulfill a momentary purpose and to be scrapped as soon as that purpose was fulfilled. They recognized, as did Wagner in a wholly different sense before them, the importance and the possibilities of opera in the creation of a public capable of the kind of participation which truly binds the composer to his world and his time.

The movement deserves close attention, as has already been said, not for its inherent artistic importance, but rather because of the questions it raises. Various ones among its enthusiastic promoters have deserted the ranks, and the movement itself seems to have settled down to its place as a more or less subordinate element in the musical activity of Germany. It nevertheless still exerts a strong influence, especially in the direction of opera, where it has undoubtedly influenced the character and quality of new productions by enlisting the services of the *avant-garde* of modern stage production.

Its chief interest, however, lies in the fact that by the very act of facing them, it has drawn attention to certain modern problems and dilemmas which may at any time become acute in other countries than Germany. A continuance and deepening of the present economic crisis cannot help but bring profound changes in the cultural life of every country; the universally reactionary movement in the musical life of the present season might easily be a mere foretaste of a greater tendency towards apathy and stagnation—a tendency which would be far more serious in any other country than in Germany with her incomparably more highly organized and ubiquitous musical activity. The composer will then be forced to conquer an entirely different public, potential or actual, than the one which is now prepared sooner or later to understand him. Under the circum-

stances the least that he can do is to examine carefully the moving principles of his relation to his art, and the relation of his art to the world, and to face both with a seriousness worthy of the occasion.

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There is talk, nowadays, of a "return to expression"—talk the vagueness of which is slightly discouraging, it never being made quite clear what kind of expression is meant. Furthermore a certain crudity of understanding is evident in the implication that expression in any essential sense has been forsworn.

No doubt it was necessary—intimately and imperatively necessary—at a given moment for composers to rid their systems of certain poisons: of a rhetoric which had lost its vitality and degenerated into mere attitudinizing. No doubt it was necessary for them to become once more aware of music in its direct and sensuous aspects, to re-experience the simplest musical facts, in and for themselves, with a new freshness of sensation and perception. No doubt, too, this necessity no longer exists; many composers have gained through the experiences of the past ten years a fresh suppleness of style and of movement, a fresh sense of musical values, which they are able to apply with constantly greater freedom. The currents above described are all to a large extent characterized by a certain tenseness and lack of free movement which is inseparable at first from any far-reaching spiritual revolution or readjustment. But nothing could be farther from the truth than the idea that any art worthy of the name can be self-consciously guided in one direction or another, or that it consists in a series of short term "movements," "tendencies," and the like. Viewed in perspective the past fifteen years will appear as short and at least as inconclusive as any other fifteen years, and its fruits will be judged not by the fluctuation of the present fashions, but by living accomplishments, many and possibly even the most characteristic of which cannot yet have had time to become mature or in any sense definitive.

Thus far, then, a "return to expression" or any other new "tendency" has yet to become clearly defined—that is, it has not as yet incorporated itself in a vigorous new personality which shows clear and striking signs of having surmounted the inner

conflicts necessary to fruition, and of having begun the apparently equally inevitable outer conflicts and struggles for recognition which every freshly authentic personality must face. This is not at all to say that no such personality will arise. There are still interesting and fresh beginnings from which much can be hoped and expected, and it must be remembered that a tortured and restless period like these post-war years—unquestionably, and for America as well as Europe the severest trial through which Western civilization has passed—is not one which favors the easy emergence of really commanding personalities, in art any more than in other fields. Yet it is obviously only through the emergence of such personalities that collapse can be avoided, or the crisis, even in its purely temporary aspects, be resolved. When it ceases to be a spiritual and moral crisis, it will cease to be in any but a very momentary sense a material one.

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The above reflections are not precisely encouraging, perhaps; but the facts behind them are rather inescapable. To ignore these facts is to ignore fundamental realities of the present-day musical world, a sign of weakness or provincialism, and of a fundamental lack of contact with life. Awareness of them in some aspect or other is indeed the one common ground possible to contemporary composers. The various currents briefly sketched above have represented efforts, dictated by instinctive necessity, to meet these facts with positive achievements—perhaps they may eventually prove to be preliminary contributions to something like a common effort.

In the opinion of the writer of these reflections, such efforts have hitherto been incomplete, because based on an insufficiently profound and daring spiritual experience. It would seem to be obvious that a real community of spirits cannot be created in the realm of music alone, nor can it arise in music without a simultaneous or even previous stirring towards a new human solidarity.

Art is of course governed by necessities; it goes the way it must go. The artist needs all his faculties, then, in becoming constantly more fully aware of these necessities; of listening at-

tentively to their stirrings in himself, and meeting them with all of the forces at his disposal. He cannot make even the smallest vital contribution to the art which he serves unless he has the courage to remain unceasingly aware of the fundamental impulses within himself, and, from his own unshakable point of vantage, to participate freely in the vital impulses of the world of which he is a part. He must discipline himself to be content only with realities, in the deepest sense, since only on realities can a true culture, a true basis for human development and felicity, be built.

It may well be that the energies of the present day will, for some time to come, prove capable only of achievements of an intrinsically incomplete nature. But an age of confusion may be also an age of the greatest hope, and discussions as to the ultimate specific value of contemporary art are irrelevant and in the deepest sense amateurish. The truly mature artist does not ask himself such questions, since he knows that a life lived in an uncompromisingly creative spirit, or even the creation of a single genuine bar or phrase is a more exhilarating and essential experience than an infinite amount of "success," contemporary or posthumous. It is, however, hardly a matter of choice; in the absence of vital inner necessities, worthy the attention of a fully adult human being, music, or any other form of art, is scarcely worth bothering about.