

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

## NEW VISTAS IN MUSICAL EDUCATION

ROGER SESSIONS

IT is hardly necessary any longer to point out the unmistakable symptoms of unsureness which are becoming more and more characteristic of contemporary musical life. They may be seen in the already advanced confusion of critical standards: the tendency to replace standards based on a sound and self-confident musical instinct, with others culled almost at random from external sources, such as musical history, esthetic theory, up-to-the-minute fashion, nationalistic, racial, or sociological dogma. As far as composers are concerned, even if we leave out of consideration the extremely poor quality of so much contemporary music, we may observe the feverish attempts of certain ones to "explain" their works, the increase of cliques and self-protective, self-adulatory, or self-consoling groups, and the tendency to enroll under banners of various colors—often with the purpose of hiding their own half-suspected nakedness. One may even observe a certain tendency, especially in the United States, to formulate principles of criticism in advance of the works to which they are to be applied; one sees composers discussing "style" before any musical ideas have presented themselves, or elaborating external and often complicated formal patterns which have no essential relationship to the specific musical material which is forced into them.

All of these symptoms, along with others less obvious, betoken an unsureness of instinct which, no doubt, has its manifold causes. One of the principal causes, however, is undoubtedly a dishar-

mony in the relation of the composer to his materials—detachment of his musical consciousness from the facts, both “musical,” in the strictest material sense, and psychological, which form the basis of the musical impulse.

It should be the task of musical education to correct this disharmony; but when we look at the educational methods which have been evolved in the past two hundred years, we can see that they have in many respects contributed to its gradual emergence. It is already many years since Brahms made the remark that he had learned nothing essential from his early music studies, but was obliged to discover his guiding principles for himself; and since Brahms’ day the gulf between theory and practice has become even wider.

It is hardly necessary to point out the extent to which this gulf exists. The study of harmony has evolved, out of the science of thoroughbass, into what is fundamentally a set of rules for voice-leading, formulas of chord-connection, and modulatory schemes, in which the actual relationships, the structural implications, and the manifold musical embodiments (figuration, melody, musical texture and elaboration) are at best scarcely hinted at; that of counterpoint into a set of rules of ostensibly universal validity, rules which no composer has ever regarded in his actual composition and of which neither the psychological basis nor the pedagogical purpose is very often made clear—with the result that there is a hopeless diversity of principle, of method, and conception. “Fugue” is conceived as an abstract discipline instead of as a living musical form; and what passes for “form” is generally conceived as a set of abstract patterns into which the student is asked to fit his “ideas” as best he can.

There can be no doubt that the result is profoundly bewildering to the student, and more especially to the student who has something to say, and who only asks to be taught the essentials of living musical speech. When he finds that precisely this is not forthcoming, he is likely to turn away in disgust, and to seek substitutes for what he has failed to find, either in auto-didacticism—inevitably of a specious kind—or in an attitude of equally specious and sterile revolt. Since musical instruction has been presented to him in the form of abstract theory, he is as

likely as not, to try to formulate other theories, unlike the original models but having dogmatism, superficiality, and academic abstractness, even though of a "radical" kind, in common with them. That he remains completely uneducated in every real sense is demonstrated by the very fact of such theorizing, which is a familiar form of over-compensation in those whose contact with the realities involved has been imperfect and incomplete.



This is not the place to discuss the processes through which the above described conceptions have developed, nor the precise reasons why their effect has become so much more acute in our day. But the time is obviously more than ripe for a complete reexamination of educational principles in the whole field of so-called "musical theory," and the fact that this reexamination is taking place, in several centers, is one of the really hopeful signs of our times.

The main problem, then, is to reestablish, first of all, a coordination between the teaching of music and its actual practice, and, on a still profounder level, the primordial feeling of the composer for his materials and the sense of their ineradicable nature. Education is, in any real sense, nothing more nor less than experience, and teaching, purely and simply the directing of experience with the object of saving the student from as many waste motions and as many blind alleys as possible. The teacher of music, therefore, has the unique function, not of retailing abstractions, but of *bringing the student into contact with facts*—facts of a demonstrable and fundamentally inexorable nature. First of all, the elemental sonorous and rhythmic facts on which music is based, and to which it is subject. Such a fact is the overtone series, of which the properties are inevitably at the basis of our whole perception of musical tone, and from which the human ear has deduced a whole hierarchy of relationships between tones—relations which are in Nature itself and hence quite independent of human will or convention. Similar facts are the principles of rhythmic expression, which have their psychological basis in the most profound and vital movements of the human organism. The composer must learn to think in

terms of these facts as inevitably as the architect must learn to think in terms of the fundamental laws of balance and symmetry, otherwise his sonorous and rhythmic structure will crumble as completely as would the material structure of a rickety building.

Such elementary facts as these are the subject-matter at the basis of harmony and of counterpoint, the "rules" of which are purely devices for limiting the student, for pedagogical purposes, to the simplest modes of procedure and teaching him to make sharp distinctions of a type which would become necessarily modified by the use of more complex material. Needless to say, the purpose and the scope of such studies must never for a moment be lost sight of by either the teacher or the pupil, and the "rules" adopted must be only such as contribute to this purpose. And the student will gain his mastery, as in all branches of art, through constant and manifold practice, not by the mere achievement of correct writing.

The study of "form" in music is not, in any profound sense, a study of abstract patterns, but of living materials—of psychological entities which have their anatomy and physiology in as true a sense as any physical organism. The Fugue, the Sonata, the Variation forms arose because the ideas of composers inevitably took certain shapes, and not because of any abstract or conventional pattern which the composer concocted independently of his musical ideas. In other words, these forms, so far as they really exist as such, are general terms used conventionally to classify the inevitable results of certain types of development or of contrast; they are infinitely varied in musical content and can be truly studied only in relation to living musical matter. A Fugue or a Sonata is not an abstraction but a living organism, and must be studied as such, in relation to the *musical content* which it embodies and not to any abstract scheme. It will be found that the Fugues of Bach, all quite different in form, are dependent for their form on the nature of their themes, as are the Sonatas, Quartets, and Symphonies of Beethoven.

The student of musical "form" must, then, learn above all, to hear and to grasp the inner relationships and necessities which form the basis of a living musical organism or train of thought; first of all the organization of the musical idea itself, and then

the chain of acoustic and psychological necessities to which it gives rise. Eventually, through this means, he will learn to appreciate in a completely new way the indissoluble connection between form and expression, and gain a new insight into the so often misconceived problems of technic and style.



For technic, in any really profound sense, is the ability to sustain and develop an organic musical train of thought. To-day it is too often confused with *métier*, which is the acquired knack of manipulating formulas. The former is the attribute of an active and creatively sensitized ear, the latter that of mere practice and knowledge.

Style, on the other hand, is the individual inflection which an individual, a nation, or an epoch, spontaneously and unconsciously gives to its music, and has, fundamentally, nothing to do with the conscious and carefully circumscribed choice of materials. A real style will include and find a place for the simplest means as well as the most complex. But style in our day is too often confused with mannerism, a product of ultra-refinement and fundamental lack of creative force; and there is the very wide-spread tendency, as a result, to resort to "stylization," or conscious mannerism, in the search for a personal, national, or, let us say, "modern" idiom. The demand is even sometimes made that musical education should concern itself with such things.

Such a conception is manifestly false, since it would substitute formulas and devices for the living substance of musical thought. The only way American music—or any other music—can arise is through composers writing *music* first of all. That is to say, by writing what is natural and spontaneous to them; or, in other words, seeking truth of expression, which means keeping faith with themselves and with the materials through which they are working. Let us by all means seek truth (or, if you prefer, reality) in our own way; but let it be above all truth, and not some facile or vague abstraction or idiom, which we are seeking.

Composers cannot, certainly, be taught to keep faith with

themselves. The impulse must be there, the courage, and even the intelligence. But they can be helped by teaching to understand their materials and to come to real terms with them. Musical education must make this, above all, its objective, basing itself first on the acoustic fact, of exactly what we hear; secondly, on the psychological fact, how and why we hear as we do, and exactly what effect such and such a musical procedure really produces.

In other words the primary task of the teacher is to help his pupil to *hear* straight, and then, as a consequence, to *think* straight and *feel* straight, in musical terms.