

# MODERN MUSIC

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MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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VIENNA — VALE, AVE

A Letter From  
ROGER SESSIONS

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TO the Editor:

One evening last month I heard, for the first time in nearly ten years, *Die Zauberflöte*. My feelings, as I listened, were inevitably colored by the world events of the preceding week, and took on an almost intolerable poignancy from my awareness of all that these events mean, both as concrete facts and as symptoms for the present and the future of music. Not unnaturally, my first thoughts were connected with the incomparable music to which I was listening. The performance was an amateur one, for which its participants would be the last to claim more than a relative adequacy. I had heard, to be sure, performances before which, though far more pretentious, were perhaps less satisfactory. This one, at all events, brought back to my mind so many unforgettable experiences in the city where *Die Zauberflöte* was born, where the music of Mozart, like that of few others, even among the "Viennese" composers, seemed so much a part of the air one breathed, so completely an embodiment of all that Vienna gave, or aspired to give to the world. I asked myself if this work should ever again be truly understood; I found myself dwelling with perhaps pardonable exaggeration on the, so to speak, accidental and circumscribed by-products of an art which in its deepest essentials is limited only by the limitations of humanity itself, and growing perhaps unduly wistful over certain aspects of the tragedy, which is at the same time both far more

intimate and more appalling in its immediate aspects, and far less irrevocable in its more distant and profound ones, than that which my fantasies of that evening chose to envisage and to contemplate.

Yet the latter, too, is not without its reality and its pertinence. Awareness of the intimate tragedy of Vienna is accessible to us all through the reports of the newspapers, through eye-witnesses, and through the many individual cases of which we happen to have direct knowledge. Though it has been more terrifying, in its suddenness, in its violence, and in the value of all that has been destroyed, it is only in detail and degree different from that of many another city in Europe, in Asia, and even, here and there, nearer home. It has, however, an obvious and inescapable significance for the musician; in spite of the fact that the masterpieces of music, unlike those of painting and sculpture and architecture, are not localized in space, it is still true that for at least one hundred and fifty years Vienna was, for us musicians, a symbolic counterpart of all that Florence or Athens represented in other fields of culture.

First of all, it was here that during those years the greatest masters lived and worked, and that their memories, intimately associated with a thousand backgrounds, remained vivid and intense. From Mozart and Haydn through Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, to (let us for once ignore petty qualifications and admit a juxtaposition, the limitations of which we perfectly well know) Schönberg, Webern and Berg; when one thinks of these and the many other names which I have omitted, one wonders not only at how few of the truly great names are absent, but perhaps above all at the variety, the vastness, and the depth of invention and expression which it includes. Here the greatest composers grew and were nourished by the richest blend of European spiritual streams; not only north and south, but many elements also from the east, met in Vienna and combined to form a musical tradition which was genuinely European and therefore genuinely human.

It is of course the earlier composers that I have in mind as I write this. The art of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and their contemporaries, speaks, with an unflinching voice, for the whole

Western world, and covers this world completely. It is true also that later in the century, music, like European culture in general, tended gradually to disperse itself. Music became, as we all know, more and more local and in the deepest sense provincial—no longer European, but German and French and Italian, and even Bohemian and Hungarian and Russian—even Finnish and Roumanian and Jugo-Slavian. Nietzsche pointed out some fifty odd years ago that Schumann, already, and first among the great German composers, was no longer a European but purely a German event.

In contemplating the tragedy of Vienna, therefore, we are forced to ask ourselves, what, in such a world, Vienna had become. You asked me for an article on the "Götterdämmerung;" and perhaps it might even seem a little inopportune to question what, with the "gods" or their successors scattered here and there over the European landscape, actually remains in Valhalla. Was the music of latter day Vienna not, after all, simply one among many provincialisms, and even the least fresh and attractive among these? Is it not true that twentieth century Viennese music—and I mean not only musical production but the whole of Viennese musical activity—was more than that of any other place haunted and overawed, to the point of paralysis, by the stubbornly exacting ghosts of its own great past, of which the consciousness seems never absent, least of all even in the work of those who sought to rebel against it?

It seems to me however that this is a very shallow, or at least an impossibly incomplete view of what Vienna was, and of what we now feel may have been irrevocably lost. For whatever the eventual judgment may be of the last phase of pre-Hitlerian Vienna, it is certain that its influence was an inestimable and quite irreplaceable one. For long after Vienna ceased to be the external center of musical activity, she kept her character in a very true sense as the most intense spiritual center of the musical world. Her musicians through their spiritual aristocracy, their seriousness, their integrity and their disdain for any but the highest conceptions of art, set a standard which was true to the example and tradition of their great predecessors, and one which must easily put to shame any similar group in any other land. They supported

the rôle of a kind of conscience of the contemporary composer, even a kind of touchstone by which he might judge himself, not so much as a creative force but as a fully mature, completely integrated personality. For these musicians probed more deeply—even though one utterly disagreed with the method and the result of their probing—into the problems and dilemmas of the contemporary musical soul than any other group. Even their tragedy, if one choose to regard it as such, is not that of having probed unsuccessfully so much as of having been so placed, in time and space, that such probing was inevitable and therefore necessary for them. For my part I cannot consider it as a tragedy, even though I have often expressed myself as being of a quite different mind from theirs. At the very least it is a vital and inescapable part of the leavening process out of which music must and will continue to be born. Possibly it is more than that.

So it is Vienna as the center of all this that belongs now so definitively to the past—not because of the personalities that have been thrust out, since after all the exodus began long before this last March, so much as because the whole aim of the totalitarian state is to destroy the integrity of the individual and the spirit of truth and of disinterested effort on which integrity depends. This, infinitely more than anti-Semitism, imperialism, or reaction, is the real menace of Fascism—its implacable hostility to everything towards which Western civilized man, pagan or Christian, has striven in the last three thousand years. It is this spirit to which the living artist, even more than other men, must remain mortally hostile, since, whether he be aware of it or not, it strikes at the foundations on which all spiritual activity rests, and which have never before been seriously threatened. Unfortunately the menace is by no means confined to Germany or even to adherents, national or otherwise, of the totalitarian creed. It is rather a malignant and ubiquitous infection to which the whole contemporary world is dangerously exposed.

You will see that what I have tried to outline has none of the tempting Wagnerian contours of a "Götterdämmerung." I have not a moment's doubt that the destruction of musical life and tradition in Vienna is final and complete; my experiences and observations in Germany during the first half of 1933 showed me

how speedily and how effectively the wreckers do their job. And let us never forget that in Vienna it did not begin only this year. But what is lost to Vienna is not necessarily lost to the world. As far as I know, the outstanding figures in Viennese music are all of them still living and presumably will still be able to function. But unless their tradition—so important to music's future—is to die a completely barren death with them, it must find organic and revitalizing growth elsewhere.

That this will take place is perhaps far from certain; but I believe it is quite clear that if music is to have a future, it lies in the United States. Most European musicians, I believe, are coming to realize this, and many of them are coming to join us in a spirit of genuine collaboration and constructive action in building gradually a real and profound musical tradition on our side. Europe's loss is therefore America's gain, and, I may add, America's responsibility. Let us not forget the numberless instances in the past where such an infusion has taken place, and a tradition been, as it were, transferred from one locality to another.

As far as I am concerned I welcome it from the bottom of my heart. The American musician will rapidly cease to be an isolated figure, both forced, as it were, and enabled, to retire behind a wall of protective isolation; he will meet his European colleagues on equal ground, standing or falling by virtue of his achievements alone. I am sure you hope, as I do, that we will prove equal to our opportunities, though I have my moments of feeling that it is almost too much to hope. At all events profound changes will have to take place. The American composer above all, must learn to take a more mature and serious attitude towards his art and abandon the postures which, as we all secretly know, have offered such convenient havens of refuge up to this time. You realize, of course, that I am not speaking of a few outstanding and ripened personalities, but of a bewildered and groping "rank and file." The postures of which I speak are familiar enough—they take the form of feebly conceived artificial and quasi-academic standards, before the fact and beside the point, of the pseudo-provincial dilettantism of the "typically American style," of self-conscious conceptions both of form and content, quite unnecessary to enumerate. Above all American composers



will have to abandon resolutely chimerical hopes of success in a world dominated overwhelmingly by "stars," by mechanized popular music, and by the box-office standard, and set themselves to discovering what they truly have to say, and to saying it in the manner of the adult artist delivering his message to those who have ears to hear it. All else is childishness and futility—and unquestionably the moment has arrived when a real choice cannot be postponed much longer. It is our opportunity, and our responsibility, to carry on.