

## NO MORE BUSINESS-AS-USUAL

ROGER SESSIONS

**B**Y the time that these lines are written, most of us will have become fully aware of the fact that the United States is engaged in a desperate and prolonged struggle which involves the ultimate conditions of our existence. It is not true, certainly – or at least it is no longer true – that the American people is “complacent,” or unaware either, of the magnitude of the task ahead of the nation, or of the fundamental issues involved. Rather we are adjusting ourselves, not without many difficulties and even some inner resistance, to the necessities, psychological and otherwise, of total war. This adjustment is being made with extraordinary speed; and those of us who, like this writer, have been apprehensive lest the war should not be fully enough understood, or who have been profoundly alarmed by the behavior of some of our public men, must nevertheless take much heart at many signs, which they may see on every hand, that the national will is firm, and that the American people is not going to be misled for long either by the traitors, the profiteers, or the cowards among us.

The above refers, of course, to the conditions of the present moment; and the above-mentioned process of adjustment is that which the present very grave military situation demands. It is, in other words, in a certain sense a preliminary adjustment – an adjustment of mind and will. It is basically a recognition of concrete and urgent perils and tasks, and a gradually focusing determination to clear the way for the larger task of complete and effective victory.

One may well ask at this point what such considerations have to do specifically with music. Why in fact, does one discuss music at all, at such a moment?

Like every one of his colleagues the present writer has asked himself these and similar questions, and he must confess candidly that he has found the usual answers quite unsatisfactory. He does not, for instance, regard the activities of serious musicians today as having any very important connection with “morale,” and he in fact has a strong objection to the word

"morale" as belonging to a purely defensive and hence dangerous war psychology, and as being at the same time a profoundly undemocratic conception. Wars are won, not by "morale," but by people, possessed of guts and imagination.

It is also in his opinion childish, if not worse, to speak of "keeping alive the flame of culture" or any similarly disguised plea for artistic "business as usual." Culture, in so far as such an abstraction exists at all, is not "kept alive;" it either lives or dies. And if it survives this upheaval, in any form whatever, it will do so as a direct consequence of the spirit in which the war is waged and, above all, of the transformations which the effective conduct of the war demands and achieves.

Only on this level, it seems to me, should the question of musical activity in war-time be discussed, if it is to be discussed at all. For more than any other war of at least the last three hundred years – perhaps more than any in all history – the present conflict, total in extent as well as in depth, is basically a conflict in the human spirit. Its inception and its course have been determined not nearly so much by international or even ideological tensions as by basic weaknesses (or, if you like, conditions) in modern society and eventually in the structure of the modern individual spirit. Its winning, as the experience of the Russians, the Chinese, the Dutch, and the British has clearly shown, depends primarily on the total mobilization of the spiritual resources of the people – of their insight into the nature of the conflict, of their will to resist and to destroy and to produce, of their powers of endurance. In the absence of this, as recent events in particular have shown, even the "unlimited material resources" of which we and our allies boast are in serious danger of crumbling gradually but surely away under the blows of an intensively prepared enemy. For nothing is so obvious – it is, or should be, practically a truism by this time – as the fact that the most vulnerable points for the United Nations have been precisely those at which they have felt themselves most complacently secure.

If the serious artist, then, is to have a valid place in the urgent necessities of the present, he must find that place not as an entertainer, a professional propagandist, or a mere curator; but rather as one who, along with the millions of his fellow-countrymen, helps to achieve the transformation which these necessities demand, and, in his more specialized function as an artist, to make this transformation articulate and manifest.

For there is no doubt that transformations are required. A healthy will to victory demands, in every sphere of our life – spiritual as well as

material – a resolute abandonment of “business as usual” and the cheerful adoption, whenever necessity demands it, of a pitiless “scorched earth” policy. Even many of those among us who have been most ardent in their hatred of tyranny and their support of anti-Fascist causes, have not completely understood this; and it is possible that each one of us has to struggle to some extent – consciously or otherwise – against the desire to preserve at all cost his own pet corner of a status quo – which, however, the very existence of the present crisis has proved to be not only rotten and corrupt but, still more accurately stated, *false* in so many of its basic premises.

For Fascism itself is only the logical conclusion, as it is certainly the result, of what one might all too easily regard as the dominating tendencies of our time. Its ultimate horror is not the fact that it is cruel beyond all conception but the fact that from beginning to end it is *phoney*. It is an almost inevitable product of a culture which contains so much that is phoney as does that of pre-war Europe and America. This fact – the core of the present situation – is the primary key to the understanding of the war; it is the key also to the contradictions and the embarrassments of American and of so much of allied policy, which have led us directly to our present painful situation. In the United States, for example, one of our most serious inner problems is that created by those divided minds who wish certainly to defeat Hitler and the Japanese but who would like to include if possible in the defeat some of our allies as well – the Russians, the British, “Labor,” or Roosevelt, or any others whom they are determined to dislike.

But such confusion is an inevitable result of many phases of the contemporary spirit: for example, a spirit in public life which has identified values with the “business boom” and thus encouraged the belief that nothing is fundamentally serious except the type of material comfort furnished by the latest automobile model or the latest headache remedy; of a spirit in education that under the pretext of objectivity has aimed at strictly neutral *classification* and often quite irrelevant factual knowledge, while regarding with suspicion or even scorn the far more exacting problems of insight and discrimination; of a spirit in human relationships that regards “success” as the one worthwhile goal and which has even developed a prevalent and ubiquitous technic of success, based on a scientifically calculated art of misrepresentation and systematic obfuscation.

It is not simply that Fascism has, as has so often been pointed out, “used” these and other phases of modern life; rather a large part of its

essence lies in the complete acceptance of all their implications and the logical and ruthless exclusion of all premises which still challenge them. In this sense, Fascism is something quite other, and even more sinister than the vehicle of sheer reaction which some people on both sides imagine it to be; and it is certainly quite other than the new economic and social principle which its adherents and even the more naïve of its opponents imagine. Rather it is the final enthronement, by terror and blood, of all that is spurious in contemporary life, and the attempt to make of spuriousness itself the basic principle of the future. Its essence is the principle of the *hoax*. It is in every respect a move away from Nature, not towards it.

For these reasons it is urgently necessary that everyone – the artist no more and no less than everyone else – examine candidly the shortcomings of the present state of society, as a preliminary step towards the achievement of a more honest and more human future. Let us leave aside for the moment the question of whether the United States is to ‘lead the world’ – in culture or in anything else. At this moment the Russians, the Dutch, the Chinese, and the Filipinos are fighting superbly – as the British on occasion have also certainly done – and are carrying the main brunt of Allied war effort. The British and ourselves have made costly mistakes and even been guilty of spectacular cases of almost criminal neglect. No doubt we too will, long before the war ends, be “all out” in our efforts and our sacrifices; but until that time it is not only futile but ungallant to talk of world leadership – on the other hand we will not yet be even winning.

Nevertheless, we have our responsibilities, which we must fulfill, or perish; responsibilities which go with our immense power, but which ever since the end of the last war we have tried to dodge and to postpone. It is quite impossible however for us to live as a nation any longer, in the vague world of future potentialities. Our hour is at hand, and either we must begin to live seriously as heirs of a great civilization, or we must, in refusing this role, face destruction.

### III

I have said that we must face our shortcomings. What does this mean in terms applicable to musical life?

American musical life is convention-ridden as has been that of no other modern nation. Having received our musical education largely during the seventies and the eighties of the last century, it is natural that the prevalent values should be still, even among many “advanced” musicians, to a very large extent those of the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian heyday.

This does not of course imply that our composers all write in the "style" of Wagner's followers – that question is not even particularly important. The prevalent attitude towards music, however, is that of the late nineteenth century. Our standards are very largely external ones. We demand music that, whether "programmatic" or not, is evocative rather than inwardly expressive; or profess a "nationalism" which we conceive in terms of association or recurrent mannerisms rather than of the traditions created by mature and significant works. We still worship "instrumentation," "thematic material," "technic," and all the other conceptions proper to a time when music was conceived chiefly in terms of material splendor or subtlety or strangeness, and comparatively little account was taken of the spirit that animated the composer's materials and gave them whatever significance they possessed.

Musical life today is theory-ridden and musicology-ridden. The radio and the publishing houses swarm with well-intentioned *words* about music, and the attitude of the *music-lover* is more and more replaced in our musical life by that of the musical *student*. Everything possible is done to deter the layman from listening to Bach's work spontaneously as the glorious and timeless music that it is; instead, he is never allowed to forget Bach's exact historical position, the number of his wives and children, the structure of "the Fugue" (as formulated a good half-century after Bach's death), his place in the society of his time, or a thousand interesting but – as far as the essential impact of his music is concerned – irrelevant and even disturbing particulars. Worse than this, even our contemporaries are carefully docketed, assigned "tendencies," and provided with dossiers; they even sometimes provide dossiers and classifications of their own. Very rarely indeed are they regarded as human beings writing music for the joy of it, to be heard for whatever direct and clear message their music may be able to convey in its own right. In very many cases they perhaps do not even expect to be so regarded; and in such cases the result can be only confusion both of musical feeling and of musical utterance.

Our musical life is propaganda-ridden. This is of course partly an inevitable result of the situation which has made "American music," as such, a *cause* to be promoted. The result has been to a very large extent to place emphasis on "personalities," "tendencies," a "movement," rather than on music itself, which seems at times almost to be relegated to the status of a by-product. More than one esteemed colleague has on occasion confessed to this writer that, in spite of his professed admiration for this

or that younger colleague, he had not received genuine musical pleasure from a single bar of the latter's work. Whence, then, the "talent?" Yet such cases are far from uncommon; and one frequent result is an intense though futile factionalism. And while the spectacle of jealousy and partisanship among musicians is always disagreeable, it becomes ridiculous among "serious" composers in the United States, none of whom has achieved so large a following as to seriously interfere with the prestige or success of any other.

We are in fact prone, in our musical life, to a kind of fetish-worship which is at best a provincial mannerism and at worst a provider of alibis. We are a "young country," so we say, without any place in European tradition — therefore our most "vital" composers are expected to write music which, artistically or otherwise, is something less than mature. (They do not, of course, always oblige.) Or we dig into the unpretentious music of the American past, recent or otherwise, hailing all crudities and gauche-ries as signs of originality and of the emergence of an "authentic" American style. Of our living composers, however, we consistently demand something less than their best, both damning and excusing them on the ground that no "tradition" has yet developed on American soil — as if "tradition" were something abstract and mysterious and localized, instead of, purely and simply, successive generations of musicians engaged always in doing their best.

### III

I have said little, obviously, of the all-important question of the economics of our musical life. It might easily be shown that it is this, above all, which has been responsible for most of the evils which I have mentioned, and given our musical culture such a large admixture of "phoney" elements. It bears moreover, many of the symptoms of an "impasse;" it is characterized by a lack of foresight, an expenditure of existing resources, and a failure to build up reserves, which remind one of other phases of our economic life, at its worst. How the "star system" with all of its by-products can long survive the collapse of Europe, even under the most favorable future conditions, is difficult to see. But its disintegration will solve no problems unless new and sounder values are found, to replace those which it embodied; and the establishment, through vital musical production, of these sounder values is precisely the task — both at short and at long range — of the American musician as such.

This task is, to be sure, scarcely definable in more concrete terms.

Valid works of art are produced, not because the composer should or may produce them, but because he *must*. If he produces because he *should*, the result is almost sure to be weak and lacking in conviction; if because he may, it belongs certainly in the category of unnecessary luxuries. Were American music to be based on no deeper necessities than those, there could be but one answer to the basic question posed at the beginning of this article. Music would have ceased to be relevant either during the war as in the following peace. At the very least it would have degenerated spontaneously to the status which the Nazi plan has prescribed for it; it would have become mere propaganda, mere innocuous and uncharacteristic entertainment, or an academic reminder of a once living culture.

Our composers will, of course, be serving the country in ways immediately relevant to the conduct of the war. The situation is too immediate and too urgent for any thought of "business as usual" even for the most gifted, for the American composer any more than, for instance, Shostakovich in the siege of Leningrad. But in doing their share for the common cause they will not cease to produce. According to talent and inclination they will be moved, as many have been already, by the tragic events which we are living through; many of them, certainly, will re-examine, even more or less consciously, the premises on which they have based their works; and some at least will learn to eliminate whatever is inessential or irrelevant. They may learn, too, to be even more completely aware of what is essential – of what their real inner necessities are. It is this result, I believe, for which composers should strive.

If they can succeed they will have performed the greatest possible service. For, once more, our survival itself depends on a total mobilization of human resources, both during the war and after. And the artist does not so much reflect the spiritual climate of his age as help to create it, in proportion to the vitality and real inwardness of his product. Even the size of his public is irrelevant; the greatest art has, in fact, always been, and perhaps always will be, accessible to the comparative few.

The task of the American musician is, then, now as always, to *create*; to help build a really new and better inner world.