

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

ARTISTS AND THIS WAR

A Letter to an Imaginary Colleague

ROGER SESSIONS

Dear———:

Yes, it is true that I am forty-five years old, that I have two small children, and that I am, as far as we can now see, unlikely to be fighting in the front lines. It is also true that at the beginning of the last war I was a pacifist, and remained so until Mr. Wilson "talked me around." Let me say that I have since remained firmly convinced that Mr. Wilson was right. Having decided that I really cared about the outcome of the war, and after having been rejected for all forms of service by my local draft board, I took real, though vain, steps toward obtaining a passport to the one allied country whose army would have admitted eyes as defective as mine.

I mention this simply to remind you that although, as you have hinted, we two are not in identical situations today, your problem is not entirely unfamiliar to me. Exactly as is the case today, we in 1918 had been shown during three and one-half years what war was like; and though the experiences which we faced were different from those of this war, they were certainly intrinsically no more inviting. No man of imagination was precisely amused by the prospect of standing in muddy trenches, devoured by lice, waiting for weeks and months at a time, or even occasionally going over the top to face what the newspapers described as "a solid wall of steel" from machine gun bullets.

When I made up my mind, therefore, that I must get into the fighting, if possible, I did so with the most unheroic feelings imaginable. What impelled me to do so was simply the sense that I would have been unable to live at peace with the self that had willingly allowed others to leave me behind in offering their lives in a cause in which I was vitally interested.

Well, the story of my relation to the last war is a trivial one with a decidedly weak ending, and has no interest whatever except to show that I have some basis for understanding your present situation. Let me go farther and point out the obvious fact that you are now far more than the aspiring but thoroughly untried sub-beginner that I was in 1918. You have already large works to your credit, and have earned a following, both professional and lay. Above all, you have learned to know, basically at least, what you want, both as musician and as a human being.

So I am sincerely honored and touched that you should care for my opinion of artists in war time, especially since, the policy of our Government being decided beyond your power or mine to change it, any such discussion is bound to be purely academic.

But let me point out another difference, more apparent than real, but still desperately apparent, between my position of 1918 and yours of 1942. We agree fully that this war is only the most urgent and, let us hope, the most tragic, phase of a much larger crisis of civilization. While this also was true in 1918, only the wisest and most far-sighted of men realized it. Otherwise we would be in a far different position today. This time it is evident to all of us.

That, in fact, is the basis of your questioning. Since it is civilization itself, you seem to ask, that is in danger, is it not the duty of artists and all who possess creative potentialities to give their energies exclusively to their art, forswearing other service in order that life and culture may survive?

In giving you my own answer to this question I do not mean to imply that mine is the only one. I must confess, too, that my thoughts about our situation have undergone a considerable evolution since, in Berlin in 1933, I first began to realize that a world-showdown might be in the making.

And first of all, I am afraid that I do not feel that any of us are very good guardians of culture. For after all culture is not an objet d'art, or a set of books, or a manufactured product made to order by specialists, rather it is the total spiritual product of any given time and place. The terrible but inescapable fact remains that the culture of which you and I are a part, which we have helped to maintain, and for the preservation of which a few of our colleagues would like to be excused from military service, is the fertile soil from which Fascism and all that it implies has sprung. For you, if you have followed attentively the development, or observed attentively the nature, of Fascism, must have seen written on every page of every comprehensive view of recent history, that this "Fascism" is not

at all a localized symptom, but only the localized accumulation of all the symptoms of the diseases from which a sick civilization was already grievously suffering: diseases against which all the most far-sighted men of the past century and a half have constantly warned us, but against which we – not only Neville Chamberlain and his like, but you and I and all the rest of us – failed to react strongly or promptly enough. Not even those of us who knew of the menace of imperialist Japan, of Nazi and Fascist Germany and Italy, or who saw and understood similar threats within each nation including our own, summoned ourselves quickly or energetically enough to realize the total revolution in our own lives that the decisive victory must ultimately involve. Most of us are far from realizing it yet. Instead, we have each in his own way complacently accepted the lazy self-deception, the frigid professionalism, the cynical misrepresentation, the competitive savagery, and the carefully nurtured and pervasive triviality which have characterized not German or English or French or American life, but modern life as such – which “Fascism” has simply carried to logical and conscious conclusions, and with the aid of which so many of our compatriots seem still to think that victory may be won.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am, first of all, not pleading for a return to any state of society, of mind, or of culture, that has ever existed in the past, or anything remotely resembling this. You know I have been sometimes taxed with this and other such attitudes, but I believe you know how and why I have, in respect to certain published estimates of my work and my attitude, preferred always “to let nature take its course” rather than to complicate matters still further by trying to correct obvious misapprehensions. But in the present connection it seems to me so clear that, as modern men, we have passed the buck pretty generally and consistently in regard to the real problems of our society. We have never had the courage to face basic human questions in terms of the actual conditions of existence, but instead have lived on unearned wealth, both inner and outer, provided by the past, by technic, by stereotyped and often outworn ideology and by the subtle uses of publicity which suffuses our commonest activities and to such a large extent even our most intimate thoughts. If other times and other places have a preponderant advantage over our own, it is entirely because they have been, in matters of the spirit, self-supporting where we have so often been asked to be paid in advance without the obligation of delivering the goods.

Secondly, I am not referring, by any means, to only the slowest witted

among us when I say that nearly all of us are still hugging some cherished status quo. That this is true in a very obvious sense of certain large political, social and economic groups hardly needs mentioning. But in a subtler sense many of us, too, are cherishing our own ideological or spiritual status quo and trying desperately to squeeze some kind of aggressive juice out of it. We are afraid, above all, of abandoning doctrines which once may have seemed richly promising, but which may very well stand in the way of the real necessities of the present and future. So musicians, too, behave as if the esthetic attitudes of the last twenty years were still valid, as if an agonized world could possibly remain patient with what have been on the one hand essentially private attempts to find some kind of private solution to problems which can only be solved in terms of general validity, or on the other hand, the specious universality of generalized matter and form devoid of any real content whatever.

I hope this will leave in your mind no doubt of my conviction as to the supreme task which artists of today must face, or of the supreme importance of that task. It is, in fact, a vital part of that conviction that artists are not merely, as a decadent esthetic would have it, reflectors of a time and place; instead it seems so clear that they help very powerfully to create eras and localities by giving concrete form to their visions. Certainly this has always been true in the past. As for the present, never have we artists had so clear a vocation. For if our successors are to find the world a tolerable world to live in, it is a new world which we have to create — there is unlimited space to be filled. It can be filled only by the most complete implementation of human constructive imagination; a task so difficult that, were it less than utterly necessary for human survival, one might well dismiss it as beyond conceivable possibility. It may require the full energies of several generations, and the achievements of creative artists will certainly be largely interdependent with what other human beings achieve. What you and I and our contemporaries can contribute may well be, when viewed in later perspective, of value chiefly as a preparation, even a mere slight change of direction. Who can tell? But it has to be done and requires, in categorical terms, the best energies of which we are capable.

Meanwhile, however, we have an immediate and immensely threatening crisis to meet. In view of this, can any of us, without becoming ridiculous and pitiable in our egocentric irrelevance, do less than try to fulfill with credit and without complaint whatever task is assigned us? Are you

and I really, as individuals, so indispensable that we can with any possible justification ask for exceptional treatment? With all possible sincerity, I think not. I feel passionately that, should any of us do so, we would be advertising ourselves and our art as a mere commodity capable of possible minor utilization in the war effort, or as a curiosity to be kept going as part of a kind of fluid "time capsule"—one of the articles of no intrinsic value to be preserved for posterity as a curious survival of a superseded civilization.

On the contrary, let us be, frankly, men, and accept our destiny as other men are doing, and fight without respite the enemies who have to be fought. The survival of culture seems to me to depend to a far greater extent upon the ability of artists to do this than on their physical survival as individuals.

This is, for better or worse, the best wisdom I have to offer. Were the world other than it is, my solution might be a more ideal one. You know that as well as I. Meanwhile, all my affectionate thoughts and my brotherly wishes go out to you.

Roger Sessions