

# MODERN MUSIC

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## HONEST ANTAGONISM

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"HONEST antagonism," wrote the late E. H. Krehbiel in the New York Tribune in 1920, "is beneficial and necessary to sound progress. It provides the necessary flywheel without which the engine would go racing to destruction." And certainly the late "Dean" should know, for no other critic in this country ever contributed more such "necessary flywheels" to progress. In 1917, for instance, he characterizes Sergei Prokofieff, then a newcomer here, as a writer of "filthy music,"—the orchestral compositions being "contributions not to the art of music, but to national pathology and pharmacopoeia", while the piano solos are "simply perverse and die the death of abortions." Again, in 1919, this dean of New York critics says of the prize winning composition of the Berkshire Festival that year, "Mr. Bloch's *Suite* has occupied more time in our music rooms and space in the journals than we think it is entitled to . . . We wish that the prize money had been awarded to Mr. Aldrich for voting against Mr. Bloch's *Suite*." Whether or not these statements were the saving brakes referred to by Mr. Krehbiel can only be surmised. But in his main contention he was right,—they did no permanent damage. Only last year there was a two column eulogy of Ernest Bloch, *Suite* and all, by Mr. Aldrich's successor on the New York Times; while this winter a fashionable Boston Symphony audience enthusiastically acclaimed the *March*—now famous, one might add—from Prokofieff's *Love of Three Oranges*,—an opera which Mr. Krehbiel also damned most heartily.

But Mr. Krehbiel was no revolutionist when he defended "honest antagonism." Rather, he was an evolutionist, for it seems to be the health food on which most long-lived composers have been raised. Nor does one have to search hard for it. Glance only casually through some criticisms of Mr. Krehbiel's predecessors—say in the N. Y. Herald of 1875—and you read of a current Philharmonic concert: "On a second hearing the introduction to *Tristan and Isolde* proved dull and monotonous,"—the really bright spot of the evening, you learn, being a new symphony by Raff. Or, again, you find that on a similar occasion a young American pianist of German name and Leipzig training has introduced a work of "colossal difficulty, polyphonically and technically,"—said work being no other than the Schumann concerto. "But then," as the critic consoles us, "this Leipzig school is all technic anyway!"

One scans these judgments with equanimity plus, perhaps, a smile, for one knows that time has since reversed them. One can do it without any special qualms even if one is an American, remembering how Wagner and Schumann suffered at the hands, or rather pens of their own countrymen. Indeed, in such matters Europe is apt to use both. When Schoenberg, for example, contemplated making a tour of the States with his ensemble, he asked anxiously, "What do they do there when they don't like music? Do they hiss? Because over here," he explained with a worried look, "they can be quite dangerous." "Well," was the reply, "we may perhaps hiss a little, or laugh, or even walk out. But at the worst we simply don't come again."

The answer seemed to reassure him, but it left his American interviewer wondering whether we were not even more dangerous to the cause of music because we did do nothing. We seemed perfectly content just before the war to hear no modern music but that of Germany, and equally content during the war to hear all except that of Germany. Only certain elderly critics raged, as before noted; and, occasionally, elderly ladies and gentlemen—old subscribers, one gathered—would walk indignantly out of a hall during a symphony concert. Otherwise, except for scattered letters of protest to the newspapers, the transition was made without any undue emotion. And when

the war ended and we welcomed back the music we had banished, the while we relegated that erstwhile feature to the doubtful realm of "novelties", we did it with the same lack of excitement. The fact that American music also suffered from these changes of venue, passing from oblivion to a quasi-patriotic recognition and back again to comparative obscurity disturbed us apparently not in the least. Even in that tense period just before the close of the war one of our foreign-born symphonic conductors openly declared in an interview that, in his opinion, "all modern music except that of Debussy and Bloch was pretentious. *Especially all American music.*" At the same time another foreign-born conductor, also in an interview, "Of course I am interested in American music; but I haven't time to look through all the scores that are sent me. There ought to be a committee of prominent musicians to examine such manuscripts, and select what is worth considering . . . . As it is, I must use the summer to make my programs for the following year. And, besides, I have to have a few months vacation."

In what other country, even before the war, would any musician, native or foreign-born, have dared to speak out so frankly? Both of these men were getting their living as well as their shelter here. One had just had a symphony orchestra raised for him in a city that needed none. The other was receiving the highest salary then paid to conductors in America. Each, moreover, was a specialist in another field, and was getting his symphonic experience at our expense. And yet neither had the slightest compunction apparently in either harboring or expressing such opinions. And this in the summer of 1918, when our national consciousness was supposed to be at white heat!

One can not, however, blame others for this attitude when we ourselves passively encourage by condoning it. This, too, in its essence is antagonism, and antagonism of the worst sort. For where the open attacks of the critic stir up interest and even protest, this apathy on the part of the public secretly undermines all defense.

How dangerous this is to our musicians Leopold Auer pointed out only a few years ago in his book of reminiscences when he stated that although we have as great talent as any country in

the world it can not be fully developed until this attitude of the public towards the "tonal art" changes.

And how disastrous this same attitude is to our music may be gauged by the following article, written as late as 1924 by Mr. Krehbiel's successor, Lawrence Gilman: "Probably the worst thing that can happen to an American composer is to be exploited because he is a good American rather than because he is a good composer . . . . But it is possible to err in the other direction: there is good American music which is ignored for no better reason, apparently, than because it is American. For example, take the case of the late Charles T. Griffes, widely recognized before his premature death as one of the most gifted composers born in America. . . . We know of at least two eminent foreign-born conductors of American orchestras who have never given a single performance of a work by Griffes, despite the fact that his most consequential score, *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, has been available in published form for four years, and that other works of his have been known and available in manuscript for longer than that. The conductors we have in mind have chosen to ignore this admirable music as completely as though it did not exist, though they have not hesitated to put on their programs mediocre works by European composers which have been contemptuously assigned to Hades by the audiences and reviewers. . . . This work was completed in 1916. The score was published in 1920. Yet we are unable to find any performance of it by a New York orchestra," though "Griffes lived and worked in the neighborhood of New York for many years. . . . He died on April 8 in his thirty-sixth year; and in the latest biographical dictionary of American music—an American publication—you will find no mention of his name."

Such indifference to our native music and musicians only reflects, of course, our larger indifference to music in general. We like to think that this is because we are an Anglo-Saxon nation, and, as such, unmusical. Unfortunately, history does not bear witness to either the cause or the excuse. Waiving the question as to whether the Anglo-Saxon is as unmusical as he has been painted we can no longer claim to be an Anglo-Saxon nation, except in language. And going back to the time when

we were, we find that we showed, in proportion to our resources, much more musical activity then than we did just before the world war, for instance, when immigration had brought us a predominance of the so-called musical races of the globe. Even as far back as colonial days, when this country was practically a wilderness, a symphony orchestra started in Charleston in 1760; and while Sweden, which boasts of its old culture, was having its first opera in 1790, Maryland, that same year, was hearing *La Serva Padrona* and, as early as 1752, *The Beggar's Opera*. Going over the century line we hear of a music publishing house in Baltimore with as many as twenty thousand plates and in 1859 of a conservatory with a symphony orchestra that gave twelve regular concerts a season, besides an after-series of five "pops"; in Puritan Boston in 1815 we see a Handel and Haydn Society; and in 1835 a Harvard Musical Association. New York in the 'sixties has a great orchestra, the Philharmonic and in the 'seventies the New York Symphony.

And yet these activities seemed to decline as our material resources and musical population increased. By 1910 there was no longer a symphony orchestra in either Charleston or Baltimore; and when the Philadelphia Orchestra tried to raise in the Maryland city a guarantee of \$1500 for its annual visits, it failed. Boston, it is true, had a great symphony orchestra, but the crusading purpose of the Harvard Musical Association, —namely, to cultivate a love of good music and prepare the way for a professor of music—a purpose that led the Association to give seventeen series of concerts of from six to ten in a series, was not agitating Harvard or any other college at that period. As for New York, although it had been enlightened by both Oscar Hammerstein and the Russian Ballet of Diaghileff as to certain creative movements going on in France and Russia, in 1914 French opera was still represented at the Metropolitan by *Faust*, *Carmen*, *Samson and Delilah* and *Manon*, Russian symphonic music by Tschaikovsky, with Debussy and Ravel still more or less nebulous figures, and Scriabin, Stravinsky and Schoenberg practically unknown.

Such was our inferiority complex besides, that we would not listen to or study with an American who had not studied abroad,



or even then accept our own critical praise unless it were backed by that of Europe; while as late as 1923 our composers were still imitating European composers without realizing that the latter in turn were imitating us. For just as a foreign singer, Julia Culp, had to show us the musical value of the Negro Spiritual, by putting *Deep River* on her concert program, so Jazz itself had to be recognized by the European before we discovered that it was our national expression. Even so, it was Europe which first appreciated Roland Hayes.

The fact that in spite of this passive attitude we can still bring forth great talent seems to disprove the claim that we are unmusical. And the added fact that this attitude developed not during our struggles to become a nation but during our years of expansion seems to point to its root as economic rather than inherently racial. During those years we had acquired a viewpoint of life as utilitarian and music did not fit into its scheme. Women might cultivate it as a parlor accomplishment, but certainly no manly men would pursue it seriously as a career—and few did. Like religion, it was left to the “weaker sex” to uphold, with the result that to this day one sees more American women than men at a concert. This attitude was naturally reflected in our educational methods. Not only has music never been credited in our colleges and schools as a subject to be considered for a career, but it took enlightened public school music teachers years to convince school boards generally that the so-called “hearty singing” then popular in the schools was ruining the vocal chords of our youth.

Only the American Negro, excluded from our educational and economic scheme during those years of expansion, dared to make music an integral part of his daily life. Unashamedly he expressed his sorrows in the Spirituals and Blues, and his joys in syncopation. And equally unashamedly—because of European approval—we have taken from him. Nevertheless, while our belated recognition of this race has resulted in the comedy of Jazz, there is also the tragedy of a Griffes to warn us. To warn us that music can survive the honest antagonism of critics but not the dishonest opposition of public indifference.