

MODERN MUSIC

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AN ECONOMIC APPROACH TO MUSIC

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[The controversy in the world of art over the economic critique has now reached music. In the following provocative article MODERN MUSIC presents an exposition of the new theory by the Russian critic who is its most militant advocate.]

THE proletarian revolution of Russia not only dissolved the economic and social-political forms of the bourgeoisie, but necessitated a decisive revaluation of the so-called "spiritual" culture of the past. Today in the fields of science, philosophy and art, new structures of socialist character are rising up to parallel the growth of a re-organized industry and agriculture.

Music is in the forefront of this great movement of change. During the years of revolution it was driven home to the masses in Russia that, with the other arts, it could be a mighty factor in socialist construction. In Soviet Russia musical culture has acquired a universal character. New compositions attempt to give tonal expression to the ideals of proletarian struggle while at the same time the heritage of the past is critically appropriated.

Today the problems of musical science are approached in a new manner. The doctrines of Marx and Lenin have been adopted as the basis for a new methodology by the Soviet musicologists. With these as guiding stars all the problems of music-history are examined under a new scientific light.

It is no easy task to shift the tenets of musicology from the traditional formalistic and individualistic position. During the first years of the revolution there was considerable opposition to the attempts at a "Marxist" interpretation of the history of music. But the appearance of new forces, a growth of music

from the proletarian masses themselves has acted as a powerful stimulus and has fostered this new approach to the history of music. The greatest obstacles of course arise from the specific characteristics of musical art. Nevertheless, there is already sufficient assurance that a new science of music is growing up. Within the limits of a short magazine article it is impossible to cover the wide and complex range of problems in Marxist musicology. But we can attempt to throw some light on one corner of its interesting discipline, namely, the interpretation of the history of music.

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The feature that chiefly distinguishes this interpretation from the old historical method is that music is regarded in the new system as the product and expression of a definite class environment, not as the independent creation of individuals. Willing or not, conscious or unconscious, according to Marxian theory, every composer and in fact every artist follows the will of his social class, executing its order in art. Music seen in this light is a "superstructure" above an economic base. It disseminates the ideas and feelings of a definite class, it expresses the latter's ideological platform, it serves as an idealizing agent of the life of this class and, consequently, as an actual weapon of class struggle.

Another essential departure in the Marxist history of music is its shift of stress away from the formal factor in art and its rejection of the interpretation of the historical process solely as an evolution of musical forms. The Marxist method, on the contrary, emphasizes, as a factor determining form, the ideal content of the work of art, i.e. the definite complex of psychic acts comprehended therein, which has grown from the material interests of a definite class. It is thus that the Marxist transforms the history of music into the history of class struggle; tonal form is regarded as a derivative element dictated by the content of music.

Such an analysis of music must be made with great scientific accuracy or it may easily serve to vulgarize and even discredit the Marxist method. Examining musico-historical phenomena from the viewpoint of their dependence on the economic base,

it is necessary to pay particular attention to those intermediate links which seem to separate the base from the superstructure, but which in reality connect them all the more surely. Such links are the social class relations generated by the state of productive forces in a given period. To relate music to economics without analyzing these relations leads toward a crude simplification of the Marxist method, which not only distorts the very idea of a musico-historic process, but destroys the usefulness of the theory in an analysis of musical phenomena. Frederick Engels has remarked in this connection that "ideology still more lofty, i.e. still more removed from the economic base, acquires the form of philosophy and religion; here the connection of ideas with the material conditions of human life is more intricate and further obscured by the intermediate distances—yet it exists just the same." And Karl Marx has pointed out that no complete parallel can be established between the evolution of economics and that of artistic thought. They are sometimes even irreconcilably contradictory, and no light can be thrown on this seeming discrepancy without an analysis of the social relations which rest on any given stage of development of basic productive forces. In the introduction to his *Critique of Political Economy*, he says: "Accompanying any change in the economic foundation, the huge superstructure above it also suffers transformation, with greater or less rapidity. When observing such revolutions (Marx speaks of social revolutions), one must always bear in mind the difference between the material change within the conditions of production, a change which may be defined with natural scientific exactness, and the change in legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic, in a word, ideologic forms." And further on: "With regard to art, it is known that the definite periods of blooming cannot be made to coincide with the general development of society and, consequently, with the development in the material foundation of the latter." It will be seen that Marx applied the principles of his theory with utmost care to the problems of art. Such care is more than imperative when analyzing the "remote" superstructure of music. However, the necessity of applying this method to such a study is beyond dispute, for it is the only one that enables us to put

all the problems of musicology solidly on their "feet," rather than on their "head" as heretofore.



Let us take a few examples from the past. The Catholic music of the Middle Ages—in the light of Marxist science—expressed the tendencies of the higher orders of feudal society to rule the "souls," and, through the souls, the bodies and property of the working masses. The Church, together with the secular nobles, held the large estates on which the peasants lived subject to heavy taxation and other burdens. One method of imposing social obedience on the masses was the church propaganda of humility and patience in this world with expectation of a reward in the future, of the infallibility of Church authority, and the sanctity of the entire feudal hierarchy.

Music was one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of church propaganda. It occupied a significant position not only in the divine services but also in the whole system of medieval education (sharing honors with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy). Tremendous energy was spent in clerical schools on the preparation of choristers to secure first-rate performances of complicated church compositions. The church theologians themselves frankly admit the propaganda aspect of the choir-service: "To the divine doctrines"—says Basil the Great—"the Holy Ghost adds the sweetness of singing in order that, together with what is harmonious to the ear, we should involuntarily accept what is useful in a word." Or, as the blessed Augustine describes his experience: "While these sweet voices captivated my ear, truth, like a pure stream, permeated my heart." On these ideals the church music grounded its entire tonal structure—the uniform, solemn flowingness of melodic line, alien to the live melodies of folk-song (naturally disdained by the Church, since they expressed forbidden grievances over those earthly burdens from which the church-culture endeavored, by every means, to divert the eyes of the masses); then the long-drawn-out and protracted rhythm of the *cantus firmus*, ordained once and for all time, to avoid the danger of free thought and creation in the art of the church composer; also the intricate regulations of polyphony, provoked by the same considerations; all

emphasizing the severe restrictions binding the creative activity of the musician.



An entirely different artistic style was brought to life in the bourgeois music of the new Europe. The humanitarian ideal of a free man and of scientific and artistic liberty, growing out of the economic interests of the expanding bourgeoisie in its struggle with the feudal groups, imposed its own very definite stamp on the whole art of the Renaissance, particularly on music. The need for a free and enterprising individual, who could successfully build up a new economy and a new way of life, was strikingly manifest in the new style of art.

In the plastic art of this period, a powerful man-creator, with his material and spiritual abilities highly developed, supplants the pallid, macerated saint of the Dark Ages. In music, the free homophonic style with a well defined and sanguine melodic line, a sonorous harmony and a manifold rhythm, replaces the dry polyphony of scholasticism.

The period of musical renaissance, however, was somewhat delayed. It bloomed with particular power only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period music expressed the heroic aspirations of the bourgeoisie striving against the old order, its broad social optimism inspired by confident belief in its victory. The music of Handel, Gluck, Haydn and Mozart was nourished on this ideal. Hence the specific characteristics of their art, the monumental forms (symphony, oratorio, opera), whose structures are marked by logic of proportion, the live melodic design often close to folklore style, the lucid harmony and the distinct rhythm. All these distinctions of the classical music of the eighteenth century are, in turn, an inevitable indication of the ideological content of that music. They represent the expression in art of the social psyche of the advanced class fighting for power.

The best expression of this psyche is the music of Beethoven. Even the traditional musical history has not denied a certain connection between Beethoven's art and the ideas of the great French Revolution. However, it interprets this in rather superficial terms. A Marxist reading of history puts the problem

differently. It sees a deep relation between Beethoven's musical style and his whole mental make-up which in turn represents a concentration of the best aspirations of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Following this line of analysis further into the "sociological structure," the ideas of the bourgeoisie of that time are of course construed as a form of propaganda for its class interests, which in turn, are the result of the economic role that it performed in spurring up the forces of production at this particular stage of development.



A very telling sociological contrast to this classic period is revealed in the epoch of musical romanticism which flourished during the Restoration. The disappointment and crushed hope of the German bourgeoisie in the ultimate results of the French revolution paved the way for romanticism. The rationalism of classical music, the broadness of its social aims and the heroic attitude toward life are replaced in the reactionary period by morbid sensualism, by a cult of individual emotion in music, by the elegiac mood and the outcry of distress. Hence too the characteristic forms of romanticism—the abandon of monumental classic structures for smaller forms, the departure from a logically proportioned architecture and the decline into amorphousness and deliquescence.

One could go on with other examples to demonstrate how the ideology of any ruling class, generated by its economic conditions, determines the content and the forms of art. But the requirements of space compel us to rest our case here for the time being.



The music being written in Russia now offers a present-day confirmation of the accuracy of Marxian-Leninist theory as applied to musicology. The proletariat entering the broad arena of economic and cultural activity, still struggling with the remnants of the capitalistic order, uses art as a powerful weapon of propaganda, as a means of class struggle. It is by no chance that music permeates the whole life of the Soviet masses, that it is so important in all revolutionary festivals. Until recently

the proletariat relied chiefly on the old music, adapting what was most suitable to its class problems. The creation of original music was mostly in the field of revolutionary songs for the masses. For a long period there was no proletarian music written in the larger forms which could be ranked according to artistic standards with that of the past. Sociologically, this is natural and comprehensible. As Marx has indicated, the higher superstructures rise and fall with a certain delay in relation to the economic base. Music is perhaps one of the most "delayed" of these superstructures. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, for example, the most typical expression of the ideas of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, appeared thirty-five years after the initial thunders of the French Revolution. The victorious class builds the economic basis of its new life first, expending its energies in other constructive fields later on. Above all, the larger forms in art require the passage of a certain period of time to permit the growth of the creative organism. The old body which represents the artistic aspiration of the conquered class, is often inadequate to express and to engender, in art, the spirit of the victor.

However, the tempo of modern life is faster than that of the past. Already at the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution Soviet music could point to a considerable product not only in the field of mass songs, but also in the creation of works in the larger forms which have extensively developed the ideas of proletarian struggle and construction.

The Marxian-Leninist science of music, particularly its historical branch contributes a solid theoretical basis on which Soviet composers may lean in their creative practice. The new musicology is not divorced from creative life. Moreover, it serves as a guide for action. Lenin said "It is necessary to take the entire culture left to us by capitalism and to build socialism from this material; it is necessary to make use of all science and knowledge, of technic and art." The new historico-musical science supplies the key to a correct appropriation of the musical heritage of capitalism and thereby aids in developing the music for a society, whose aim, according to Lenin's slogan, is to organize the emotions, the thought and the will of the working masses, for the great task of struggle for socialism.