

Music and Its Future

(1929)

To give the various instrumental parts of the orchestra in their intended relations is, at times, as conductors and players know, more difficult than it may seem to the casual listener. After a certain point it is a matter which seems to pass beyond the control of any conductor or player into the field of acoustics. In this connection, a distribution of instruments or group of instruments or an arrangement of them at varying distances from the audience is a matter of some interest; as is also the consideration as to the extent it may be advisable and practicable to devise plans in any combination of over two players so that the distance sounds shall travel from the sounding body to the listener's ear may be a favorable element in interpretation. It is difficult to reproduce the sounds and feeling that distance gives to sound wholly by reducing or increasing the number of instruments or by varying their intensities. A brass band playing *pianissimo* across the street is a different-sounding thing from the same band, playing the same piece *forte*, a block or so away. Experiments, even on a limited scale, as when a conductor separates a chorus from the orchestra or places a choir off the stage or in a remote part of the hall, seem to indicate that there are possibilities in this matter that may benefit the presentation of music, not only from the standpoint of clarifying the harmonic, rhythmic, thematic material, etc., but of bringing the inner content to a deeper realization (assuming, for argument's sake, that there is an inner content). Thoreau found a deeper import even in the symphonies of the Concord church bell when its sounds were rarefied through the distant air. "A melody, as it were, imported into the wilderness . . . at a distance over the woods the sound acquires a

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tain vibratory hum as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. . . . a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to the eye by the azure tint it imparts."

A horn over a lake gives a quality of sound and feeling that it is hard to produce in any other way. It has been asked if the radio might not help in this matter. But it functions in a different way. It has little of the ethereal quality. It is but a photographing process which seems only to hand over the foreground or parts of it in a clump.

The writer remembers hearing, when a boy, the music of a band in which the players were arranged in two or three groups around the town square. The main group in the bandstand at the center usually played the main themes, while the others, from the neighboring roofs and verandas, played the variations, refrains, and so forth. The piece remembered was a kind of paraphrase of "Jerusalem the Golden," a rather elaborate tone-poem for those days. The bandmaster told of a man who, living nearer the variations, insisted that they were the real music and it was more beautiful to hear the hymn come sifting through them than the other way around. Others, walking around the square, were surprised at the different and interesting effects they got as they changed position. It was said also that many thought the music lost in effect when the piece was played by the band all together, though, I think, the town vote was about even. The writer remembers, as a deep impression, the echo parts from the roofs played by a chorus of violins and voices.

Somewhat similar effects may be obtained indoors by partially inclosing the sounding body. For instance, in a piece of music which is based, on its rhythmic side, principally on a primary and wider rhythmic phrase and a secondary one of shorter span, played mostly simultaneously—the first by a grand piano in a larger room which opens into a smaller one in which there is an upright piano playing the secondary part—if the listener stands in the larger room about equidistant from both pianos but not in a direct line between them (the door between the rooms being partially closed), the contrasting rhythms will be more readily felt by the listener than if the pianos are in the same room. The foregoing suggests something in the way of listening that may have a bearing on the interpretation of certain kinds of music.

In the illustration described above, the listener may choose which of these two rhythms he wishes to hold in his mind as primal. If it is the shorter-spaced one and it is played after the longer has had prominence, and the listener stands in the room with the piano playing this, the music may react in a different way, not enough to change its character, but enough to show possibilities in this way of listening. As the eye, in looking at a view, may focus on the sky, clouds, or distant outlines, yet sense the color and form of the foreground, and then, by observing the foreground, may sense the distant outlines and color, so, in some similar way, the listener can choose to arrange in his mind the relation of the rhythmic, harmonic, and other material. In other words, in

music the ear may play a rôle similar to the eye in the foregoing instance.

Some method similar to that of the inclosed parts of a pipe organ played by the choir or swell manuals might be adopted in some way for an orchestra. That similar plans, as suggested, have been tried by conductors and musicians is quite certain, but the writer knows only of the ways mentioned in the instances above.

When one tries to use an analogy between the arts as an illustration, especially of some technical matter, he is liable to get it wrong. But the general aim of the plans under discussion is to bring various parts of the music to the ear in their relation to each other, as the perspective of a picture brings each object to the eye. The distant hills, in a landscape, range upon range, merge at length into the horizon; and there may be something corresponding to this in the presentation of music. Music seems too often all foreground, even if played by a master of dynamics.

Among the physical difficulties to be encountered are those of retarded sounds that may affect the rhythmic plan unfavorably and of sounds that are canceled as far as some of the players are concerned, though the audience in general may better hear the various groups in their intended relationships. Another difficulty, probably less serious, is suggested by the occasional impression, in hearing sounds from a distance, that the pitch is changed to some extent. That pitch is not changed by the distance a sound travels unless the sounding body is moving at a high velocity is an axiom of acoustics; that is, the number of the vibrations of the fundamental is constant; but the effect does not always sound so—at least to the writer—perhaps because, as the overtones become less acute, the pitch seems to sag a little. There are also difficulties transcending those of acoustics. The cost of trial rehearsals, of duplicate players, and of locations or halls suitably arranged and acoustically favorable is very high nowadays.

The matter of placement is only one of the many things which, if properly examined, might strengthen the means and functions of interpretation, and so forth. The means to examine seem more lacking than the will to examine. Money may travel faster than sound in some directions, but not in the direction of musical experimentation or extension. If only one one-hundredth part of the funds that are expended in this country for the elaborate production of opera, spectacular or otherwise, or of the money invested in soft-headed movies with their music resultants, or in the manufacture of artless substitutes for the soul of man, putting many a true artist in straitened circumstances—if only a small part of these funds could be directed to more of the unsensational but important fields of musical activity, music in general would be the gainer.

Most of the research and other work of extending and distributing new premises, either by the presentation of new works or by other means, has been done by societies and individuals against trying obstacles. Organizations like the Pro-Musica Society, with its chapters throughout this and foreign countries, the League of Composers, the Friends of Music (in its work of uncovering

neglected premises of the past), and similar societies in the cities of this and other countries, are working with little or no aid from the larger institutions and foundations which could well afford to help them in their cause. The same may be said of individual workers—writers, lecturers, and artists who take upon themselves unremunerative subjects and unremunerative programs for the cause, or, at least, for one of the causes they believe in; the pianist and teacher who, failing to interest any of the larger piano companies in building a quarter-tone piano for the sake of further study in that field, after a hard day's work in the conservatory; takes off his coat and builds the piano with his own hands; the self-effacing singing teacher who, by her genius, character, and unconscious influence, puts a new note of radiance into the life of a shop-girl; the open-minded editor of musical literature and the courageous and unselfish editor of new music quarterlies who choose their subject-matter with the commercial eye closed.

Individual creative work is probably more harmed than helped by artificial stimulants, such as contests, prizes, commissions, and subsidies; but some material aid in better organizing the medium through which the work is done and through which it is interpreted will be of some benefit to music as a whole.

In closing, and to go still farther afield, it may be suggested that in any music based to some extent on more than one or two rhythmic, melodic, harmonic schemes, the hearer has a rather active part to play. Conductors, players, and composers (as a rule or at least some) do the best they can and for that reason get more out of music and, incidentally, more out of life, though, perhaps, not more in their pockets. Many hearers do the same. But there is a type of auditor who will not meet the performers halfway by projecting himself, as it were, into the premises as best he can, and who will furnish nothing more than a ticket and a receptive inertia which may be induced by predilections or static ear habits, a condition perhaps accounting for the fact that some who consider themselves unmusical will get the "gist of" and sometimes get "all set up" by many modern pieces, which those who call themselves musical (this is not saying they're not)—probably because of long acquaintance solely with certain consonances, single tonalities, monorhythms, formal progressions, and structure—do not like. Some hearers of the latter type seem to require pretty constantly something, desirable at times, which may be called a kind of ear-easing, and under a limited prescription; if they get it, they put the music down as beautiful; if they don't get it, they put it down and out—to them it is bad, ugly, or "awful from beginning to end." It may or may not be all of this; but whatever its shortcomings, they are not those given by the man who does not listen to what he hears.

"Nature cannot be so easily disposed of," says Emerson. "All of the virtues are not final"—neither are the vices.

The hope of all music—of the future, of the past, to say nothing of the present—will not lie with the partialist who raves about an ultra-modern opera (if there is such a thing) but despises Schubert, or with the party man who

viciously maintains the opposite assumption. Nor will it lie in any cult or any idiom or in any artist or any composer. "All things in their variety are of one essence and are limited only by themselves."

The future of music may not lie entirely with music itself, but rather in the way it encourages and extends, rather than limits, the aspirations and ideals of the people, in the way it makes itself a part with the finer things that humanity does and dreams of. Or to put it the other way around, what music is and is to be may lie somewhere in the belief of an unknown philosopher of half a century ago who said: "How can there be any bad music? All music is from heaven. If there is anything bad in it, I put it there—by my implications and limitations. Nature builds the mountains and meadows and man puts in the fences and labels." He may have been nearer right than we think.