I. THE MUSICAL IMPULSE

How shall we explain the power that men and women of all times have recognized in music, or account for the enormous importance they have ascribed to it? Why did primitive peoples endow it with supernatural force and create legends, persisting into times and places far from primitive, in which musicians of surpassing ability were able to tame wild beasts, to move stones, and to soften the hard hearts of gods, demons, and even human tyrants? Why have serious and gifted men—in imaginative force and intellectual mastery the equals of any that ever lived—why have such men at all periods devoted their lives to music and found in it a supremely satisfying medium of expression?

Music, of all the arts, seems to be the most remote from the ordinary concerns and preoccupations of people; of all things created by man, its utility, as that word is generally understood, is least easy to demonstrate. Yet it is considered among the really important manifestations of our western culture, and possibly the one manifestation in which our western contribution has been unique. Those who have created its lasting values are honored as among the truly great. We defend our convictions concerning it with the utmost intensity; and at least in some parts of the world (3)
we bitterly exorcise those whose convictions differ, or seem to differ, from our own. We regard music as important, as vitally connected with ourselves and our fate as human beings. But what is the nature of our vital connection with it? What has impelled men to create music? What, in other words, are the sources of the musical impulse? I would like to explore here some approaches to an answer to this question.

Our way will be easier, I think, if we ask ourselves first: is music a matter of tones sung or played, or should we consider it rather from the standpoint of the listener? A close examination of this question leads to some rather surprising conclusions. We find that listening to music, as we understand it, is a relatively late, a relatively sophisticated, and even a rather artificial means of access to it, and that even until fairly recent times composers presumably did not think of their music primarily as being listened to, but rather as being played and sung, or at most as being heard incidentally as a part of an occasion, of which the center of attention for those who heard it lay elsewhere than in the qualities of the music as such.

In fact, composer, performer, and listener can, without undue exaggeration, be regarded not only as three types or degrees of relationship to music, but also as three successive stages of specialization. In the beginning, no doubt, the three were one. Music was vocal or instrumental improvisation; and while there were those who did not perform, and who therefore heard music, they were not listeners in our modern sense of the word. They heard the sounds as part of a ritual, a drama, or an epic narrative, and accepted it in its purely incidental or symbolic function, subordinate to the occasion of which it was a part. Music, in and for

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itself can hardly be said to have existed, and whatever individual character it may have had was essentially irrelevant.

Later, however, as certain patterns became fixed or traditional, the functions of composer and performer began to be differentiated. The composer existed precisely because he had introduced into the raw material of sound and rhythm patterns that became recognizable and therefore capable of repetition—which is only another way of saying that composers began to exist when music began to take shape. The composer began to emerge as a differentiated type exactly at the moment that a bit of musical material took on a form that its producer felt impelled to repeat.

The same event produced the performer in his separate function; the first performer was, in the strictest sense, the first musician who played or sang something that had been played or sung before. His type became more pronounced in the individual who first played or sang music composed by someone other than himself. At both of these points the performer's problems began to emerge, and whether or not he was aware of the fact, his problems and his characteristic solutions and points of view began to appear at the same time. These will be discussed in detail later on. Here it is important only to envisage clearly that the differentiation of composer and performer represents already a second stage in the development of musical sophistication. The high degree of differentiation reached in the course of the development of music should not obscure the fact that in the last analysis composer and performer are not only collaborators in a common enterprise but participants in an essentially single experience.

I am not, of course, talking in terms of musical history.
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The developments I have cited are not in any precise sense historical, and I have not presented them even as hypothetically so. It would certainly be in accordance with historical fact, however, to think of them as a long, somewhat involved, gradual development, of which I have given a condensed and symbolical account. And this very qualification underlines better the point I am making: namely, that the performer, as distinct from the composer, is the product of already advanced musical refinement. While the relationship of the composer to music is a simple, direct, and primary one, that of the performer is already complex and even problematical. To be sure, the composer as an individual may be the most complex of creatures and the performer the simplest—I have personally known examples of both such types! But while the act of composition, of production, is a primary act, that of performance—that is, re-production—is already removed by one step. The music passes through the medium of a second personality, and necessarily undergoes something of what we call interpretation. I am not raising here the much discussed question of what interpretation is, or what it may or should be; whether it should be “personal” or “objective,” whether it can be or should be historically accurate, and so forth. I am simply pointing to it as an inevitable aspect of the performer’s activity, of which the other aspect is, of course, projection. The performer, in other words, not only interprets or reconceives the work, but, so to speak, processes it in terms of a specific occasion: he projects it as part of a recitation or a concert, as the embodiment of a dramatic moment or situation, as part of a ritual, or finally and perhaps most simply as a piece performed solely for his own delectation. Whether or not he is aware of the fact, the nature of his performance is conditioned by the circumstances under which it takes place.

It hardly need be pointed out that the relation to music of the listener is even more complex than that of the performer. As I have pointed out, the listener, as we think of him today, came fairly recently on the musical scene. Listening to music, as distinct from reproducing it, is the product of a very late stage in musical sophistication, and it might with reason be maintained that the listener has existed as such only for about three hundred and fifty years. The composers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance composed their music for church services and for secular occasions, where it was accepted as part of the general background, in much the same manner as were the frescoes decorating the church walls or the sculptures adorning the public buildings. Or else they composed it for amateurs, who had received musical training as a part of general education, and whose relationship with it was that of the performer responding to it through active participation in its production. Even well into the nineteenth century the musical public consisted largely of people whose primary contact with music was through playing or singing in the privacy of their own homes. For them concerts were in a certain sense occasional rituals which they attended as adepts, and they were the better equipped as listeners because of their experience in participating, however humbly and however inadequately, in the actual process of musical production. By the “listener,” I do not mean the person who simply hears music—who is present when it is performed and who, in a general way, may either enjoy or dislike it, but who is in no sense a real participant in it. To listen implies rather a real participation, a real
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response, a real sharing in the work of the composer and of the performer, and a greater or less degree of awareness of the individual and specific sense of the music performed. For the listener, in this sense, music is no longer an incident or an adjunct but an independent and self-sufficient medium of expression. His ideal aim is to apprehend to the fullest and most complete possible extent the musical utterance of the composer as the performer delivers it to him.

And how, through what means, does he do this? Let us think for a moment of a similar instance of artistic experience, which is however not quite so complex in structure. The reader of a poem does not generally receive the poem through the medium of an interpreter, nor does he, generally, actually “perform,” i.e. read aloud, the poem himself. Yet the rhymes and the meters, as well as the sense of the words, are as vivid to him as they would be if the poem were actually read to or by him. What he does in fact is to “perform” it in imagination, imaginatively to re-create and re-experience it. The “listener” to music does fundamentally the same thing. In “following” a performance, he recreates it and makes it his own. He really listens precisely to the degree that he does this, and really hears to precisely the extent that he does it successfully.

I have discussed this question in some detail here not in order either to belittle the listener or to minimize the validity or the intensity of his relationship to music. What I do wish to point out is that if we are to get at the sources of the musical impulse, we must start with the impulse to make music; it is not a question of why music appeals to us, but why men and women in every generation have been impelled to create it. I have tried to show as clearly as possible that composer, performer, and listener each fulfill one of
I have said that music, especially today, fulfills a variety of functions and exercises a variety of appeals. I do not mean to imply that this has not always been the case. It seems to me, however, that it must be much more so today than ever before. Not only do we have music written for the church and music for secular occasions; we also have music written for educational purposes; we have “popular” music for all sorts of purposes, and so-called “classical” music of all types. We have music written for symphony orchestras and music written for amateurs, music written frankly for its own sake and music written with an eye to “audience appeal” of a very particular kind. Note that I have not spoken of the various “tendencies” to which the sophisticates like to refer, but rather to functions and, by implication, basic purposes of composers. I wish the above facts were more clearly understood, or at least that conclusions were more clearly drawn from them.

Unfortunately, we have to some extent acquired a wholly artificial set of standards, which confuses functions with values—a really serious confusion, leading to many misunderstandings. It would be such a good thing if we would take more note of the fact that, for instance, a good piece of popular music has a far better chance for what we call
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"immortality" than a bad symphony; that the two belong to different categories which make quite different demands, and fulfill quite different functions, each having its inevitable and presumably legitimate place in our cultural life. Each category contains its own particular types of good and bad music. The good music demands in each case the complete participation of those whose talents and inclinations place them in that particular category; and it seems fairly clear that composers only fail if they try to meet the demands of basic categories other than the ones to which they properly belong. This is so because under such circumstances the composer can give only a part of himself to his work; or, let us say, because he has to lay an essential part of himself aside for a moment. It is, of course, impossible to make rules in this regard; only the results are decisive. But past and present music alike furnish many an example of striking failure when a composer has temporarily stepped out of his chosen category—when a "popular" composer has tried his hand at "serious" music, when an essentially dramatic composer has tried to write orchestral or chamber music, or when a composer of symphonies has tried to write operettas.

This question of categories is important because I want to consider here the composer as such. I am not speaking primarily of any one category of music or of the standards or demands peculiar to it. I am not speaking of "serious" music, or "popular" music, or "instrumental" music, or "vocal" music, but of music and of the factors which go into its creation; of musical ideas and musical imagination; of "technique," "craftsmanship," and "style;" of "intelligence" and "instinct;" of the relation of the composer to his particular medium, and to his listeners. It is my firm belief that there is little difference in this respect either between composers who belong to different categories or between composers of different periods. There are great differences, certainly, in materials; there are differences in attitudes, as we all know. But these are historical or personal differences of style or character. In the course of many years during which I have met and talked with many composers, young and old, "serious" and "popular," good, bad, and indifferent, I have never noticed any appreciable difference between either their methods or their aims; and I believe that basically the aims of all composers have always been very much the same, however different the results. In any case, it is the similarities and not the differences which concern me here, and indeed these seem to me most important. Each composer has striven to bring to reality the music which is most truly music for him. The task of every composer is to give coherent shape to his musical ideas; or, as Artur Schnabel has so finely put it: "The process of artistic creation is always the same—from inwardness to lucidity."

What, then, is a musical idea? The term has acquired a somewhat stereotyped meaning, and curiously enough not because of over-precise usage but because of an unduly vague and loose one. True, one sometimes hears it used in a quasi-technical sense, as, for example, the "first idea" or the "second idea" of a sonata or a symphony. What is meant in this case: a motif, a phrase, or the whole group, often very complex, that forms one of the main contrasting elements in what we call the "sonata form"? Is it the equivalent of any of these terms, and if so, why is not the more precise term used? Is this word "idea" rather a term loosely adopted to indicate the small-scale changes in
musical character or texture which may go into the making of a more complex rhythmic unit? If so, what is the criterion; what determines an "idea" as such, and where does it begin or end? I ask these questions because, in all simplicity, I do not know the answers to them.

On another level, we frequently read in a certain type of criticism that in this or that piece of music "the development is superior to the intrinsic worth of the idea," or something of the sort. But what on earth, we may ask, can such a statement mean? Is it not precisely through their development, actual or envisaged, that ideas reveal their worth, whether the ideas are of a musical or of some other type? How can development be in any real sense superior to the ideas developed? Or are we perhaps confronted simply with another of those quasi-plausible, important-sounding phrases which cloak more or less effectively either a basic lack of basic understanding or an inability to define exactly what bothers the critic?

I would say that a musical idea is simply that fragment of music which forms the composer's point of departure, either for a whole composition or for an episode or even a single aspect of a composition. I say "fragment" knowing full well that it can get me into difficulties. For in my experience, in which I include observation and analysis as well as composition, a "musical idea"—the starting point of a vital musical "train of thought"—can be virtually anything which strikes a composer's imagination. It may, certainly, be a motif, a small but rhythmically self-sufficient fragment of melody or of harmony; but I am fairly certain that by no means all motifs can be called "musical ideas." On the other hand, I could cite many examples where the most essential musical ideas, the elements that give the music its real character, consist not in motifs at all, but in chords, in sonorities, in rhythmic figures, or even in single notes of a particularly striking context. Sometimes—and this occurs, I think, more often though not always in works of composers of great maturity, in "late works," as we call them—one of the most important musical ideas, in a fundamental and motivating sense, may be not even a thematic fragment at all but some feature of the large design, such as a recurring relationship between two harmonies or keys, or even a linear relationship embodied in different aspects of the music at different moments.