

Contemporary Music: A Neglected Art

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Our Troubled America

Specific Topic: Contemporary Music: A Neglected Art

Topic Sentence; The general music-loving public exhibits an appalling lack of interest in the music of our contemporary composers.

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Contemporary Music: A Neglected Art

The general music-loving public exhibits an appalling lack of interest in the music of our contemporary composers. A situation that might not be tolerated in either of the sister arts, literature and art, this problem is discouraging the vast wealth of musical talent in America from expressing itself through serious music. This situation, if allowed to go unchecked, could finally lead to musical stagnancy in our country.

Music is unique among the arts in that its adherents cling to the past and do not seem to want to admit that modern music has as much value as that of earlier eras. Modern painting and sculpture are displayed widely; books by Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Frost become best-sellers; and yet there are amazingly few people who have even come in contact with twentieth-century music, much less become interested in it.

The lack of interest in modern music can be greatly contrasted with the interest in, for example, modern literature if one considers the most famous Pulitzer Prize winners in each art (see chart). In music, these include Aaron Copland, Charles Ives, William Schuman, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Norman Dello Joio.¹ Compare the fame of these composers with that of Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Mitchell, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Has not a larger percentage of the populace read Gone with the Wind than has heard Ives' Third Symphony? Add to this the fact that the Pulitzer Prize for literature was first awarded in 1918, the first for music, in 1943.² Yet in those twenty-five years, some of America's greatest musical works were written. Why was the public not interested?

Lovers of literature have reverence for the past and interest in the present; those of music glorify the past and often condemn the present.³ The great mass of music lovers is obsessed with the works of the old masters: Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, and often as recent a composer as Wagner; but it refuses to become excited about more recent music. This is a great limitation to its range of musical enjoyment.⁴

According to Aaron Copland, it is the same people who find it quite normal for literature and art to be so revolutionary and so changed from the old forms who only want to relax when they come to music.⁵ This situation is extremely illogical; and unless something is done about it, a "pall of conventionalism" will hang more and more heavily over the world of music to the point of stifling our national creativity.⁶

Not only does apathy abound in this area, but there is a great deal of antipathy. (This, however, is not necessarily harmful, as in the first part of this century modern music aroused much more interest merely because it was extremely controversial.⁷) Books such as *The Agony of Modern Music* by ; Henry Pleasants contribute extensively to this antipathy.⁸

There is more antipathy, though, in Europe, which causes more controversy and more interest. In 1913, Stravinsky's wildly rhythmical "Le Sacre du Printemps" caused a riot in Paris.⁹ This work is now a part of the conventional concert repertoire; but for that time, it was too radical a work for public assimilation. There are still people who think that great music died with the arrival of Stravinsky.¹⁰

A more recent example of antipathy is the Schoenberg-Mendelssohn controversy in Israel. Unlike that of many German composers, Schoenberg's

music can be played in Israel because he was a Jew. In February of 1971, however, the playing of his Violin Concerto in an Israel Philharmonic Concert caused a great uproar simply because it was too modern. The contempt of the ticket-holders immediately caused the famous and lyrical Violin Concerto of Mendelssohn to be placed in the program instead of the Schoenberg. As a result, a heated controversy developed in which music critics and the more intellectual music-lovers took the side of Schoenberg and the rest took the side of Mendelssohn. The Philharmonic finally decided to give a free concert of the Schoenberg.¹¹

The problem of rejection of modern music is far from a recently-developed one. In fact, Boethius said in the beginning of the sixth century that

Music was chaste and modest so long as it was played on simpler instruments, but since it has come to be played in a variety of manners and confusedly, it has lost the mode of gravity and virtue and fallen almost to baseness.¹²

Jacob of Liege and G. M. Artusi said, in effect, the same thing of modern music in 1425 and in 1600, respectively.¹³

Beethoven also was a victim of the hatred of changing music. In 1806, August von Kotzebue wrote a review of the beautiful overture to Beethoven's opera Fidelio, saying that "all impartial musicians and music lovers were in complete agreement that never was anything written in music so incoherent, shrill, muddled, and utterly shocking to the ear."¹⁴

As unfounded as all this antipathy was, it is still much more illogical that this situation still exists. Radio broadcasting of serious music, sophisticated scores for films, the massive growth of the recording industry, and opera and ballet shows on television have made serious music

available for everyone, and should have dissipated a quantity of misunderstanding regarding modern music; but apparently all these advances have merely made the listener think of serious music as something with which to relax and as something to relieve tension.¹⁵ We live in a technological age in which the words "sonic," "supersonic," "frequencies," and "decibels" are heard quite often; and yet people still cling to the old sounds and distrust new ones.¹⁶ When people have so many opportunities to become familiar with modern music and still reject it, this cannot help but have a depressive effect on our great wealth of composers today.¹⁷

One should consider the reasons that create the gap between the public and the modern composer. The first reason that presents itself is, obviously, the misunderstanding of modern music on the part of the public. Many people protest that music now has too much dissonance, cacophony, and noise, and too little melody.¹⁸ The only reason that this statement is made is because these people have not listened to it enough.¹⁹ If they had, they might in time realize that twentieth-century music has opened up new vistas in music to replace the old forms which have been almost worn out; modern music has brought forth new rhythms that earlier composers never dreamed of; it has added a whole new dimension to harmony; and it has given music a completely new texture as a result of new combinations of new timbres never before conceived.²⁰

Actually, all these protestors are asking one basic question: "What has happened to beauty?"²¹ To answer this question, the public needs to realize a whole new definition of beauty. As the great Charles Ives said, "Beauty in music is too often confused with something that

lets the ears lie back in an easy chair."²² Too often the criterion for beauty in music is based solely on the type of beauty revealed in the music of Mozart and Tschaikowsky. What the public does not realize is that the ultimate goal of today's composers is the same as that of past ones — the creation of beauty. Modern composers are merely extending their musical heritage, the one passed down to them by every composer from Bach to Wagner.²³ This musical heritage cannot be extended on the same course as in the past, as it was stretched to the limits in this direction; still, modern composers are extending the scope of an inherited musical tradition.²⁴

Another problem extending the gap between the composers and the public is the difficulties of selling classical music. In this business, a record store must have a wide variety of music, for one cannot expect the same audience that loves Shostakovitch, for example, to be appealed to by Ives' philosophical music. Whereas dealers in popular music can make a large profit on a few different records, selling a large number of each, a dealer in serious music must try to have as large a variety of music as possible and hope to sell a very few of each selection. (This is the reason that so many more popular music advertisements are seen than serious music ones.) As this is not always profitable, the record dealers, rashly assuming that the public wants popular music more than serious, removes the Ives records and tries to sell more of the Shostakovitch.²⁵

Why does the problem of apathy toward modern music in our country need to be solved? If the problem is not solved, it can engender sterility in our national music, a very undesirable situation. As a highly advanced nation, there is a need to prove ourselves in the field of music. Many

Europeans consider America unable to create any lasting contribution to the musical world, and it is imperative that we dispel this myth.²⁶ Other people feel that because we have such great scientific and industrial power, we cannot have musical power as well. These accomplishments, however, cannot alone justify a civilization. Indeed, it has been said that "the creation of a vital American music is inseparable from the continuance of civilization."²⁷ Unless the situation is reversed, our musicians will become just "mummified guardians of a musical museum."²⁸

There are many steps that can be and have been taken to allay the problem at hand. An often-suggested and controversial one is bureaucratic control of the arts. This means government financing of our composers, authors, and artists. Although this has been tried very little in the United States, Europe and Latin America have both used it to an extent, particularly the latter; and the people there are amazed at our "laissez-aller" policy in regard to the arts.²⁹ Many people here are sure that bureaucratic control of the arts can work in a democratic government.

One argument against bureaucratic control, however, is the failure of government funding of artists in Russia. This failure is undoubtedly due to the totalitarian government of that country. The government uses its power to control the course of Russian music. For example, on February 10, 1948, Shostakovitch,³⁰ Prokofiev, Khatchaturian, Miaskovsky, Shebalin, Muradeli, Polov, and a few other Russian composers were denounced by the Russian government for writing what it called "decadent formalism," or "cerebralism," and accused of being influenced by western

music. Most composers apologized immediately, as it was the only way that they could stay within the favor of the Russian government and public.³¹ In this instance great creative minds were forced to cheapen their music, to stifle their creativity, and to express someone besides themselves in their music. This happened because in a dictatorship, the government has too much control over the press, which often determines the success of the music. Finally, in 1957, Khatchaturian wrote an article in Soviet Music condemning the Central Committee of the Communist Party for its stand on music, saying, "A creative problem cannot be solved by bureaucratic means." As a result, the committee passed a resolution in 1958 to give composers more freedom in using modern techniques.³²

The big controversy about bureaucratic control of the arts centers around the possibility of the government's using its aid for artists to control their creativity. This author agrees with Aaron Copland that this situation will not develop in a democratic country.³³ The latter goes on to say that the U.S. State Department has set up over 150 cultural centers all over the world, with the intent of distributing American music, literature and art; therefore, the government must feel that the end product is worthwhile and necessary and should stimulate the creation of art in America,³⁴ for free-lance patronage is becoming inadequate.³⁵

Government subsidies, however, cannot bring the American public to have an interest in a composer's music; they merely help the composer himself. To achieve the former goal, one possible solution is the setting up of organizations for composers that can have their music played.

Many such groups were organized in the 1920s, when there was a large amount of controversy about modern music.³⁶

In 1921, the International Composers' Guild was founded by Edgar Varese. This organization stressed individualism in a composer's music. Later, the very influential League of Composers sprang up to aim toward the "propagation of modern musical tendencies in America."³⁷ The International Society for Contemporary Music and the Pan American Association (again founded by the inexhaustible Varese) were two other organizations to come to the aid of contemporary music.³⁸

Several composer-oriented institutions have been started and financed by individual dilettantes. The most famous of these is the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, financed with \$3,500,000 by George Eastman in 1919 and currently directed by Howard Hanson. In the same year, Frederick A. Julliard donated \$20,000,000 to found the famous Julliard Musical Foundation; later a school of music, a graduate school, and an institute of the same name were added.³⁹

An organization of the same type was once set up by the American government. The Federal Music Project of Works Progress Administration was intended to put to work as large a number of musicians as it could without competing with other musicians already gainfully employed.⁴⁰

The third, and probably the most important type of help that a composer receives is that from some of the great artists themselves, men who make invaluable contributions to the field of music through their conducting, publishing, and other musical activities. These men, because of their amazing dedication to music, work independently and often do a tremendous amount of good single-handedly for the young American

composer.

One of the most dynamic of these figures was the late conductor Serge Koussevitsky, who founded the Koussevitsky Music Foundation, which has commissioned many composers to write new works for symphony and chamber orchestras. In addition to this, his work as a conductor has brought about performances of many contemporary works that might otherwise have gone unnoticed for years. Koussevitsky realized as much as anybody else of his time that our young composers spent too much time trying to make a living, time that could have been spent composing; and he did his utmost to remedy the situation during his lifetime.⁴¹

Two American composers who are continually trying to uplift the position of their less well-established comrades are Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. The former has written very many articles about some of the very youngest composers (one in particular, less than eighteen) both here and in Latin America.⁴² Bernstein is well known for his conducting of many performances of works by lesser-known composers in the older set, including William Schuman and Roy Harris.

Pierre Boulez, an extremely modern French composer, will make an extensive attempt to bring modern serious music to the young people of New York in the Fall of 1971 when he assumes the conductorship of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He is planning to schedule four programs of avant-garde music to be played in Greenwich Village and to be called "Prospective Encounters: 7 - 12." From seven o'clock until midnight for four nights, young people in that area will "encounter" not only some ultra-modern music, but the composers themselves. Boulez hopes that these concerts will be a major step in bringing the public

to an understanding of modern music.⁴³

Above are listed only a few of the many attempts to incite appreciation in the public for contemporary music. So far they have had success only with the minority; whether or not they will finally win over the great mass of the public to modern music is a question still very much undecided. Ives was apparently sure that the music will be triumphant and avant-garde composers will be proved to have been right all along, for he writes in his Essays Before a Sonata of a time "in some century to come, when the school children will whistle popular tunes in quarter-tones — when the distonic scale will be as obsolete as the pentatonic is now — ..."⁴⁴ At any rate, the contemporary composer must now persevere and hope for a change in the public taste; and if and when it finally comes, it will be a tremendous blessing for both the public and the composer.

Footnotes

- ¹"Pulitzer Prizes," World Book Encyclopedia (ed. 1960), vol. 14, p. 77.
- ²Ibid., p. 77.
- ³Aaron Copland, Copland on Music (New York, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1960), p. 42.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 42
- ⁵Ibid., p. 44
- ⁶Ibid., p. 68
- ⁷Ibid., p. 253.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 253.
- ⁹David Ewen, The World of Twentieth Century Music (New York, Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 789.
- ¹⁰"Schoenberg," Time, vol. 97, No. 3 (Jan. 18, 1971), p. 45.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 45.
- ¹²Joseph Machlis, Introduction to Contemporary Music (New York, W. W. Norton and Co., 1962), Foreword.
- ¹³Ibid., Foreword.
- ¹⁴Ibid., Foreword.
- ¹⁵Copland, p. 68.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 44.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 70.
- ¹⁸Leonard Bernstein, The Joy of Music (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 182.
- ¹⁹Copland, p. 255.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 255.
- ²¹Bernstein, p. 183.
- ²²Charles Ives, Essays Before a Sonata (New York, W. W. Norton and Co., 1962), p. 142.

²³Bernstein, p. 183.

²⁴Ibid., p. 183.

²⁵Copland, p. 257.

²⁶Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷Ibid., p. 55.

²⁸Ibid., p. 57.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 58-59.

³⁰Ewen, p. 722.

³¹Ibid., p. 578.

³²Ibid., p. 579.

³³Copland, p. 59.

³⁴Ibid., p. 58.

³⁵Ibid., p. 57.

³⁶John Tasker Howard, Our Contemporary Composers (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1941), p. 326.

³⁷Ibid., p. 326.

³⁸Ibid., p. 328.

³⁹Ibid., p. 324.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 330.

⁴¹Copland, p. 81.

⁴²Ibid., p. 143.

⁴³"Fold and Rap," Time, vol. 97, No. 8 (February 22, 1971), p. 78.

⁴⁴Ives, p. 141.

PULITZER PRIZES

Music:

- 1943 William Schuman, Secular Cantata No. 2, A Free Song.
- 1944 Howard Hanson, Symphony No. 4, Opus 34.
- 1945 Aaron Copland, Appalachian Spring.
- 1946 Leo Sowerby, The Canticle of the Sun.
- 1947 Charles Ives, Symphony No. 3.
- 1948 Walter Piston, Symphony No. 3.
- 1949 Virgil Thomson, Louisiana Story.
- 1950 Gian-Carlo Menotti, The Consul.
- 1951 Douglas Moore, Giants in the Earth.
- 1952 Gail Kubick, Symphony Concertante.
- 1953 No Award.
- 1954 Quincy Porter, Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra.
- 1955 Gian-Carlo Menotti, The Saint of Bleecker Street.
- 1956 Ernst Toch, Symphony No. 3.
- 1957 Norman Dello Joio, Meditations on Ecclesiastes.
- 1958 Samuel Barber, Vanessa.
- 1959 John La Montaine, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra
- 1960 Elliot Carter, String Quartet No. 2.
- 1961 Walter Piston, Symphony No. 7.
- 1962 Robert Ward, The Crucible
- 1963 Samuel Barber, Piano Concerto No. 1.
- 1964 No Award.
- 1965 No Award.
- 1966 Leslie Basset, Variations for Orchestra.
- 1967 Leon Kirchner, String Quartet No. 3.
- 1968 George Crumb, Echoes of Time and the River.
- 1969 Karel Husa, String Quartet No. 3.
- 1970 Charles Wuorinen, Times Enconium.

Literature (Fiction):

- 1918 Ernest Poole, His Family.
- 1919 Booth Tarkington, The Magnificent Ambersons.
- 1920 No Award.
- 1921 Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence.
- 1922 Booth Tarkington, Alice Adams.
- 1923 Willa Cather, One of Ours.
- 1924 Margaret Wilson, The Able McLaughlins.
- 1925 Edna Ferber, So Big.
- 1926 Sinclair Lewis, Arrowsmith.
- 1927 Louis Bromfield, Early Autumn.
- 1928 Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey.
- 1929 Julia M. Peterkin, Scarlet Sister Mary.
- 1930 Oliver H. P. LaFarge, Laughing Boy.
- 1931 Margaret A. Barnes, Years of Grace.
- 1932 Pearl S. Buck, The Good Earth.
- 1933 T. S. Stribling, The Store.

Literature (Fiction) Continued:

- 1934 Caroline Miller, *Lamb in His Bosom.*
- 1935 Josephine W. Johnson, *Now in November.*
- 1936 Harold L. Davis, *Honey in the Horn.*
- 1937 Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind.*
- 1938 John P. Marquand, *The Late George Apley.*
- 1939 Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Yearling.*
- 1940 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath.*
- 1941 No Award.
- 1942 Ellen Glasgow, *In This Our Life.*
- 1943 Upton Sinclair, *Dragon's Teeth.*
- 1944 Martin Flavin, *Journey in the Dark*
- 1945 John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano.*
- 1946 No Award.
- 1947 Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men.*
- 1948 James A. Michener, *Tales of the South Pacific.*
- 1949 James G. Cozzens, *Guard of Honor.*
- 1950 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Way West.*
- 1951 Conrad Richter, *The Town.*
- 1952 Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny.*
- 1953 Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea.*
- 1954 No Award.
- 1955 William Faulkner, *A Fable.*
- 1956 MacKinlay Kantor, *Andersonville.*
- 1957 No Award.
- 1958 James Agee, *A Death in the Family.*
- 1959 Robert Lewis Taylor, *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters.*
- 1960 Allen Drury, *Advise and Consent.*
- 1961 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
- 1962 Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness.*
- 1963 William Faulkner, *The Reivers.*
- 1964 No Award.
- 1965 Shirley Ann Grau, *The Keepers of the House.*
- 1966 Katherine Ann Porter, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Ann Porter.*
- 1967 Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer.*
- 1968 William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner.*
- 1969 N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn.*
- 1970 Jean Stafford, *Collected Stories.*

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Reference Book:

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Periodicals:

"Fold and Rap," Time, vol. 97, No. 8, February 22, 1971.

"Schoenberg for Others," Time, vol. 97, No. 3, January 18, 1971.