

MUSIC.

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There has always been a great freemasonry amongst lovers of music, but it is only recently that interest in music can be said to have become at all general. Popular music has always existed, but the more complex variety, to which we listen at concerts, is only of recent growth, and finds its origin in the Court orchestras and opera houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is only within the last hundred years that the general public has had either the opportunity or the inclination to make its acquaintance. The circle of appreciation is ever widening, and of recent years the astonishing popularity of the gramophone and of wireless broadcasting has materially contributed to the propagation of good music. No more trustworthy index of public taste for music exists than the catalogues of the gramophone companies. Within a few years, it has been a commercial proposition to make available large portions of the Wagner operas, Beethoven symphonies in their entirety, and the best chamber music; the manufacturers have learnt by experience that the demand for the best music is constant and ever increasing, whereas the demand for the popular music is ephemeral and uncertain. Side by side with this awakening of popular taste for the best is a renaissance in composition which has put this country at the head of all others, a position it has not occupied since the sixteenth century. How is this great wave of popular interest in music to be directed into the right channels? If left to itself, it will not achieve anything constructive and permanent. Music is the greatest social leveller—it is tastes and amusements which divide the classes, not occupations and wealth. We must endeavour to make this desire for music all embracing and all prevailing. It lies within the reach of all except a tiny fraction of physically defective persons unable to distinguish one sound from another; the incidence of this malady is said to be smaller than that of colour blindness, so we may leave it out of account.

But, like all good things, taste and appreciation for music can only come after instruction and study, and it is at this point that we come up against two divergent schools of thought. One school believes in a nation of performers who will make their own music, and looks forward to a return of the golden age when everybody could take his part in a madrigal as

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efficiently as he could in a Shakespear [sic] reading. To the apostles of this school we owe the musical festivals and the little village choirs which compete at them.

These festivals are not to be confused with the monster competition festivals with money prizes at which music takes a back seat. I am thinking rather of the Leith Hill Festival and the biennial Westmorland Festival at Kendal, founded by Mary Wakefield some forty years ago. No one could assess the value of these festivals or the influence which they exert on the musical life of the nation. They are not, however, all sufficient and, in the nature of things, must leave a large body of potential musical enthusiasts untouched.

The other school caters for these—its object is to create a nation of intelligent listeners, and it is to this school that I would more particularly direct your attention.

Music in the past has suffered much from those who performed it. The popular idols of

the day were the great singers, the famous violinists, rarely the great composers. Music was for long considered to be merely a vehicle for the display of technical virtuosity, or, at best, the means whereby an artist could show his powers of interpretation. It is only of recent years that it has gradually dawned upon us that music has an independent existence and can be known and loved for itself. If we are to rely only upon the performance of music, how little music can we get to know? Those whose profession it is to sing and play to us are only human—their repertoires are bounded by physical limitations—they cannot be for ever learning new music and are naturally prone to play over and over again the handful of well-known pieces which they know are certain to appeal. It needs courage and a long purse to introduce new music to a public which is not at present thirsting after musical knowledge.

The whole attitude of the public towards music needs revolutionising: we want much less discussion of the respective merits of A and B as performers, and far more regarding those of C and D as composers. We must discourage the pernicious idea that music exists merely to give pleasure; it is true, of course, that many people derive the greatest pleasure from listening to certain pieces of music—I do myself, but this is only an incidental function of music and the pursuit of pleasure is mere self-indulgence in music as in other matters. It is the critical faculty which requires stimulation, allied with

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a lively curiosity, manifesting itself in a desire to know all about each individual composer and the interaction of one composer on another.

My ideal listener will want to know all about the failures as well as the successes of a composer however much the former may bore him as music. He will not feel that he can estimate the value of a composer's work until he knows him from every side and has seen him working in every medium. He will demand opportunities of assessing Schumann's success as a song writer, as a composer of chamber music, and as a writer of symphonies. Those who seek musical knowledge have at present few opportunities of obtaining an all-round acquaintance with the music of the great composers, still less with the music of contemporary composers whose reputations are still in process of manufacture. The only remedy for such is a course in score reading, an accomplishment which is up to a point not difficult to acquire, but beyond that point almost unattainable by the average man. To be able to read the score of a Beethoven quartet or a Haydn symphony is merely a matter of practice, but to be able to disentangle the enormous score of a Strauss or Scriabin tone poem and to imagine the exact tone quality of strange instruments like the heckelphone is beyond the reach of most.

Our aim then should be to produce a nation of good listeners; if the majority can also perform music for their own delectation, so much the better. How are we to achieve this ideal? Before a man can become a good listener, he must learn how to listen—few people without special training can hear more than one tune at a time. A preliminary course in ear training is, therefore, essential. Coupled with this would go a course of instruction in musical history, and the different forms in which music is cast; also a smattering of orchestration is perhaps desirable—harmony and counterpoint may be disregarded altogether. It should no longer be possible for men of education and learning to boast publicly that they neither know nor care anything about music. Music will become an ordinary form subject, taught mainly by means of the gramophone, the instruction being imparted by an ordinary teacher, not necessarily a specialist, and certainly not by professors of singing and playing. The Universities will have

proper courses in music, not in the composition of it, as is now the case, based upon the existing schools of history and literature. Students

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in such schools will study Bach and Beethoven in the way that those in the schools of literature study Goethe and Schiller. They may come away unable to write double fugues or motets in eight real parts, but none the worse for that.

But we have a long way to go before we can achieve this and mountains of prejudice and ignorance to break down.

Meanwhile, it is incumbent upon all who really care for what is good and beautiful and true to see that those less fortunate are not for ever the victims of ballad mongers and the debasing commercialism of transatlantic jazz fiends. There is a great deal in atmosphere, and the atmosphere in this country, though vastly improved, is still hardly conducive to right thinking in music. Take the churches: how few recognise their responsibilities. What must be the feelings of those who go to concerts on Saturday afternoons and are subjected to the insipid insincerities of ordinary church music the next day, aptly termed by a parson of my acquaintance "saccherine whiffle." The other channels through which democracy automatically acquires a taste for music are the bands in the parks, etc., and the restaurant and theatre orchestras—all show an upward tendency, which argues an improvement in the taste of their clientele; indeed, in some of the theatres the music is obviously better in quality than the audience. I have never witnessed more reckless casting of pearls before swine than that which took place during the performances of "Hassan" at His Majesty's a year or two ago. Frederick Delius, one of the greatest composers England has produced, though more honoured elsewhere than in his own country, had expended his great talents on producing the incidental music for this play, as Beethoven did for "Egmont." Many of us looked forward to the music as eagerly as we did to the play itself: the inane chatter of the audience, which is the traditional accompaniment of all theatre music, made it almost impossible to hear the long and important musical interludes. It was interesting to observe that the human voice alone was accorded a small measure of attention. If any of you should ever write incidental music for a play, remember to insist that the theatre should be in total darkness and that the curtain must be raised while it is being played; only with these precautions can you hope for any attention from audiences composed of people who are not used to listening to music. In mitigation it must be admitted that theatre audiences are

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often treated to the most paltry rubbish for which it would be an insult to demand silence. I should like to conclude by pointing out that our greatest difficulty in forming the taste of democracy is the old difficulty of showing why one thing is better than another, why one thing is good and another paltry. It is so easy for people to turn round and reply "De gustibus non disputandum"—"I don't know anything about music, but I know what I like." I have tried to show that liking is only an incidental in the appreciation of music. You can get a parallel from the sphere of conduct and morals. We do not tell lies merely because we like to tell the truth, but because it would revolt our moral sense. There is something of the same kind in questions of taste. You can predicate as much about people from their tastes as from their actions. The sloppy minded will like sloppy music. I am convinced that there is as much an ultimate value attaching to music as there is to morals; it is notoriously dangerous to dogmatize about the

value of a new work—musical history is littered with the most glaring errors of judgment: there are always two factions, one to shower indiscriminate praise on novelty, the other to decry. It is best on the whole to reserve judgment, merely pointing out obvious virtues or shortcomings. The one test which we can infallibly apply is that of sincerity: if a man is insincere, if he has any ulterior motive in composing, his work is almost certain to be without value. It is a harsh saying but nevertheless a true one that no man can earn a fortune from his writing and immortality as well. Some composers have had a keen eye to the main chance—Beethoven's life is full of sordid transactions. No one can blame a man if he drives a hard bargain when his work is done, but woe to him if he thinks of the price while it is in progress, and writes to suit his market.

So far as music then is concerned, I think we have first to create a better general atmosphere towards music and a greater responsibility amongst those who lead us and teach us.

Secondly, we must ensure that as many children as possible receive as much rudimentary instruction in music as they do in literature, so that they may at least know as much about Bach as they do about Shakespear [sic]. Thirdly, we must attempt to change the attitude of democracy towards music, so that it may no longer consider music merely as a pleasant ear tickling accompaniment to its less serious amusements, and may learn [p 250]

to regard the pleasure which its individual members derive from music as immaterial to the ultimate value and importance of the music itself. Music will then assume its true and rightful function in the world: it will appear as the most accessible medium for the apprehension of eternal beauty, as a stimulating and vital force fulfilling a far higher and more important rôle than mere pleasure giving, as one of the most ennobling and spiritualising forces which we possess and a bond of absorbing interest between man and man.

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The Chairman raised some interesting points. It had struck him, in listening to Mr. Glover's paper, that possibly there was at present too great a tendency to teach children to become critics of the arts rather than votaries. As regards Nature Study, he found there was often a difficulty in interesting country children in Nature. He hoped that Mr. Household would give his experience on this point.

Miss Pennethorne, the Organising Secretary of the P.N.E.U., agreed with the Chairman that analysis of the arts might be pushed too far; she instanced the reading of Shakespeare with many notes. This sort of thing tended to injure a child's innate powers of perception.

Mr. H. W. Household, Director of Education for the County of Gloucestershire, felt that the question was not so much How to interest children in Nature Study, but How to interest them in all the subjects of the curriculum. If one was to follow the Parents' Union School programme with success, one must realise that underlying them there was a complete philosophy of education; one could not dissociate one subject from another, all were closely inter-related. One sometimes heard a criticism that in geography, for instance, only the human side was dealt with to the exclusion of the scientific side. The critic had plainly noted only those books set under Geography—if he had studied the programme as a whole he would have realised that the subject was carried further in the books set under Science, Ancient History,

Books of Travel, etc.

Touching on the question of Nature Study, Mr. Household said he often found that teachers, especially those who had just begun, thought that the work was more than they could get through, and Nature Study—a subject about which they

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themselves knew little—was crowded out. When this was not so, the teacher did not always give the child an opportunity of enjoying the book set and of using his eyes.

Mr. Household warned those who had lately started the work that their first year would be a very hard one and full of disappointments. He urged them to have faith in the children, and not to “explain.” The more they did this, the less opportunity the child would have of doing something for himself. A teacher starting with elder children not brought up on the methods, might find them slow to narrate and doing it badly. If he had not faith, he would shorten the passages until perhaps the child was never narrating a complete whole—merely a few words for which a slight effort of memory was all that was required. One did not want memory in this connection but concentration—a making of the passage one’s own, and with patience and faith this could be achieved.

Miss Wright (Ash C. of E. School, Kent), spoke of the good effect the methods had had on the two very different types of children in her school—children of hop and fruit-pickers and those of agricultural labourers.

Mr. Cowan (Director of Education, County of Southampton), spoke of the influence of Miss Mason’s ideals in his schools. Speaking of aesthetics in school, he thought that there was a danger of the teacher coming between the child and beauty, as he sometimes did between the child and the book. He knew of children who disliked Nature entirely through the way they had been shown how to love Nature. He hoped that the day would come when children would be turned out from school with material for building up fine standards and values in after life.