

## JOY TO BE SHARED

by DONALD BESWICK

‘Earth had attained to heaven: there was no more near nor far.’

(‘Abt Vogler’ —Robert Browning).

‘But why should my child have to learn Music, when it’s going to be no use to him?’ I suppose that most music teachers in schools have had this question shot at them at some time or other in their lives, and it seems to me that there are several answers—some proximate, that is, related directly to music; others less directly related but having a far wider implication. I think these latter are more important.

Almost every child at some stage of its development has had a liking for music of one kind or another; and it is reasonably true to say that when children are young their taste is almost invariably good. Some preserve this good taste when they arrive at the Senior School stage, usually because they have had opportunities for hearing the best music. After all, no-one who has been brought up on chicken and champagne will voluntarily change to a diet of bread and jam and cocoa! But many other children, alas, fall from their previous good taste and can endure nothing more meaty than the latest ‘Pop’ singer, heaving up his heart and soul on the newest of the ‘Top Twenty’. Somewhere or other something has gone wrong, and I say ‘wrong’ advisedly, because, when anyone sets a lower standard than he or she has had previously, it is clearly not *right*.

You may very well ask by what authority I claim my standards to be better than those of the acolyte of the Top Twenty: I can answer that. You may then go on to ask if it is really important: I can answer that too. But first I want to make one thing quite clear. I do not think it matters whether a person likes classical music (a term I hate, but it is the only convenient one) or ‘pop’ music: what *is* important is that they should realise *why* they like

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it, and whether it is *good* or *bad*. There is no harm in liking music of poor quality so long as you realise that the quality *is* poor. What does make one angry is the person who says, in effect, ‘I like this, therefore it is good’. The value of a work is not, finally, a subjective matter; most art forms are bad or good in themselves, regardless of the response they evoke in individuals. It is perfectly reasonable to look at a picture by Picasso or listen to a piece of electronic music and say, ‘I don’t like that: I don’t understand it’. But it is not reasonable to say, ‘I don’t like it: I don’t understand it: therefore it is no good’.

What is there in classical music which sets it above the Top Twenty? This is not an easy question to answer in an article, but I will try to set out a few thoughts on the subject.

In the first place, classical music has an enduring quality which the ‘pops’ have not. Most of the music played in our concert halls today is that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the great symphonists, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn and Brahms. Some music is earlier than that: the Roman Catholic Church uses Gregorian Chant, which dates from any time

between the fifth and eleventh centuries and has its roots in Jewish music of the time of Christ and earlier. Now if you buy two pairs of shoes, a cheap pair and an expensive pair and then lose the price labels so that you don't know which is which, you will easily be able to tell which *was* which after a few months, because one pair will have begun to fall to pieces while the other is pretty well as good as new. Why? Because the pair which lasts longer was of better *quality*; the shoes were made of good material and were well constructed.

The music which survives other music, then, is of better quality. What does that imply? It implies in the first place that it conforms to the basic canons of what music ought to be, canons based mainly on what music was in the days of the great composers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. In the second place, music is great if it is the outcome of inspiration. Inspiration is difficult to define, but I think that anyone with any perception at all will be able to appreciate that works such as the B Minor Mass of Bach or the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven have a nobility which rises above the everyday world. Perhaps I may be forgiven a personal reminiscence. Some years ago, when I was new to London and its musical life, I went to a concert given by the Oriana Madrigal Society. At that time I knew nothing of its fame amongst musicians nor of its reputation as one of the world's finest choirs. I cannot at this date even remember what they sang: all I know is that I was taken completely out of myself by their performance. It was a terrible let-down to come out into a dreary and rather damp Wigmore Street, and I remember that I was on the verge of tears at returning to the everyday world after having been transported to

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such heights. This is the effect that all good music should have on us, at least occasionally; and this is surely how the greatest composers have felt when they experienced the first stirrings of a new musical foetus within themselves. 'I did think I saw all Heaven before me', said Handel whilst writing the Hallelujah Chorus from 'Messiah'. These men were mystics: they had the 'vision glorious', and attempted to translate it into sounds for the rest of us to share.

I think it is not without significance that all the greatest music is religious music in some sense or another. Bach entered completely into the spirit of the Passion. Elgar had his vision too in 'The Dream of Gerontius' when, in my opinion, the most moving moment is when Gerontius has asked his angel that he be allowed a glimpse of God before he goes to Purgatory. He is warned that he will be 'consumed, yet quickened by the glance of God'; there is an eleven bar interlude whilst he is led into God's presence, the orchestra playing slow chords in a crescendo of increasing intensity, which leads up to a tremendous crash of sound, followed by a moment's silence, which, in the concert hall, can be positively felt. Then there is another crash of sound and the cry of Gerontius, 'Take me away, and in the lowest deep there let me be'.

At the head of this article, I have put the quotation from Browning, 'Earth had attained to heaven: there was no more near nor far'. I think this is the summing-up of what music can do for us. It takes us out of ourselves and raises us above the things of earth. It is a glimpse of the great Vision, seen in a glass darkly. Whatever their differing creeds, all men feel the sense of being incomplete in themselves. Music helps us to soar towards that which makes us complete. Menuhin, in a television interview some years ago, was asked what his attitude to music was.

He replied that when one played great music, one's attitude was one of worship, as it is in church. There, I think, one has the heart of the matter: great music brings one into the presence of Someone greater than oneself.

Is all this important? I think it is. I am very fond of the children I teach, but I am afraid most of them are smug and self-satisfied, and concerned only with their material comforts. They look after their bodily needs and are content to neglect the spiritual. As a teacher, I feel it is my job to awaken them, to call their attention to the higher and nobler side of their nature. Nor do I confine my attention only to music: painting and poetry and all the other arts are grist to the mill, for these reflect man's higher nature and his struggle to see beyond the end of his nose.

Do the children respond? In many cases, yes. Many of them do see what I am aiming at, and it affects their behaviour and their whole attitude towards life. I have seen a class of children aged thirteen to fourteen entranced by Wagner's 'Siegfried Idyll' (not [p 104] an easy piece of music), captivated by its absolute serenity and peace, its gentle rippling rhythm. That is what I want to accomplish. Anyone can impress a class of children with the finale of the 'Tannhäuser Overture' or Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, and I am not saying that this is not a good thing. But what I want to get across to my pupils also is the conception of *quiet* beauty. The world is becoming increasingly noisy, so that we are in danger of hearing nothing unless it is even noisier than the background racket. It is in the quiet beauty of music that we find peace. It was not in the earthquake that God spoke to Elijah: it was not in the storm or the fire: it was after the fire that God spoke in 'a still, small voice'. And it is in the quiet music that man can communicate with his higher self. I am not decrying the more tumultuous music of, say, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: that is glory absolutely. I am only pointing out that the slow movement of Bach's Double Violin Concerto is pure beauty and poetry and peace.

I suppose most children like the Top Twenty, and yet what does it hold for them? A 'beat', a rhythm to which they can tap their feet and sometimes get 'sent'—a hypnotic state and, surely, a dangerous one. Are they any better for having heard a rhythm which is here today and gone tomorrow? Of course not: they are no more influenced by the tune than a snake is influenced by the wailing of the charmer's pipe. They enjoy it at a merely earthy level; in other words, at the lowest level. Yet many children, when I first meet them, say that this is the sort of music they like (therefore it is good!) and classical music means nothing to them. But when they begin to hear classical music (and, more important, when they begin to *listen* to it), they change their minds. It is always the more intelligent children who are the easier to convert because they have a finer perception of the worth-while things of life.

Who is to blame if the children's palates for good music are spoiled? The blame, dear parents, must rest with you. I remember a mother once thanking me for taking her son to the Hallé concerts. She had forced him to go to the first, but after that he had been so enthralled that he could not be kept away. 'That's fine', I said, 'but there are other concerts to which I cannot always manage to take the children. Why don't you and your husband take your son?'

The reply was that these parents wanted the boy to enjoy good music, but weren't all that enthusiastic for it themselves and did not feel like turning out in the evenings. Here was a typical example of the kind of parent who wants to leave everything to the teacher. But it is the parents who ought to introduce their children to concerts. It is the parents who ought to be ready to switch off the T.V. (one thing which the teachers *cannot* do, alas!) and say, 'There's an interesting concert on the Home Service. Let's listen to part of it'. It is not the slightest use for the teacher

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to remind the children that there is a performance of 'Messiah' on the radio, if the parents are going to insist on watching '77, Sunset Strip'. Many of my own pupils would gladly listen to a concert on the radio, given the chance and the encouragement, but the parents' T.V.-watching comes first. Would it be too much to ask parents to give up an hour of T.V. in order to encourage their children to develop good taste in music?

Surely it is a good thing for parents and children to enjoy things together? Watching T.V. together cannot really be said to come into this category, because there is so rarely any informed discussion about what has been shown on the screen. I get unfailing pleasure from the children's comments after a concert, 'Weren't those trumpets smashing!' or 'How lovely the 'cellos were in "Jupiter"!', because these prove that the children are developing some awareness of what is going on. Parents do not seem to realise what they are missing by not taking their children to concerts. There is a rich world waiting to be explored, and there is no need for anyone to plead ignorance, because there are plenty of good books available for those who wish to know more about music, whether they are adults or children. I can think of no better book for stimulating interest than the *Oxford Junior Companion to Music*: it is a mine of information on all musical topics, and it has the added attraction that, as soon as one begins to look up one subject, say, 'Percussion', another catches one's eye, and one finds oneself absorbed in an article on 'Patronage'. Another book which will fascinate both parents and children is the *History of Music*, by Benjamin Britten and Imogen Holst. It is beautifully produced and holds the attention from start to finish.

Here it is, then, the whole world of music at your feet. Why not give the teachers a helping hand (heaven knows they need it!), instead of complaining of your child's time being wasted. Encourage the children to have an intelligent occupation for their leisure hours: let their minds be lifted to nobler themes than the banalities on the 'telly'. Of course it is a good thing for us all to relax at times; but we can only relax if we have something to relax *from*, and most children are only too willing to live at only half or quarter pressure. Give your child the opportunity to develop his taste: encourage him to see that there is more to this life than merely making money; help him to open his eyes to the beauty around him. Music leads to all these things, and it will become for him—and you—a source of ever-increasing enjoyment. It will also have a refining effect on character and personality. Lead your child on to understand what Browning meant when he spoke of 'earth attaining to heaven', so that, when the concert is over, the radio or the record-player switched off, he will feel that he has come down from a height and will actually complain of the return to 'the C major of this life' (Browning again!).