ARE WE TOO LATE?

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VARIETIES OF MUSICAL EXPERIENCE

BY VERNON LEE

"All art," wrote Pater, summarizing Hegel, "tends to the nature of music". This saying had long haunted me; and with it the suspicion that knowledge of the nature of music would afford the best clue to the aesthetics of other arts less simple in their tasks and less seemingly intimate in their processes. Now what is the nature of music? To one who deals with aesthetics not as part of a priori philosophy, but as a branch of empirical psychology, the nature of music, like the nature of anything else we can discuss with any profit, is merely another way of saying its actions and reactions as they can be discerned and foretold by us. From this point of view the nature of music would be most profitably studied not so much by analyzing and comparing various works of art, since that would acquaint us only with the evolution of various styles and the influence of individual masters, as by examining the effects of music in general on its hearers. Since, from the psychologist's point of view, an art is not the material agglomeration of objectively existing pictures, statues, poems or musical compositions, but the summing up of a set of spiritual processes taking place in the mind of the artist and in the mind of him who receives his gifts; or rather the work of art is the junction between the activities of the artist and those of the beholder or hearer. Indeed, musical aesthetics ought to be the clue to the study of all other branches of art, first and foremost because the evanescence of music's material makes it more evident that the work of art really is the special group of responses which it is susceptible of awakening in the mind of the hearer, including the composer himself, who mentally hears his own work in the process of building it up and taking stock of its whole and its parts.

The enquiry into what music is, therefore becomes, for those thinking like myself, an enquiry into what music does
in the mind of the hearer, or, more correctly, of what the mind of the hearer does in response to the music which he hears. But the "mind of the hearer" is not an individual entity; it is only a convenient average of the phenomena common to all or most minds of all hearers under examination. And the first result of such examination is to reveal that these hearers' minds, although similar in one or two main points which oblige us to classify them as hearers of music, are in other respects dissimilar, indeed so dissimilar that we are obliged to consider them as belonging to opposed classes. Therefore, before being able to say how music acts upon mankind as a whole, we have to enquire how music acts upon different categories of human beings, which, as already remarked, is another way of saying how the minds of various categories or types of hearers act in response to the music they hear. Ever since Galton and Charcot, empirical psychology has dealt more or less scientifically with certain types whose names at least, the visual, the auditory, the motor, the verbal type and their cross breeds, have become familiar to most readers. But it is not this classification we have applied to our subject. For although it becomes apparent that the visualizing and the verbal endowment may produce special responses to music; and although we may suspect that the motor type, that enigma and deus ex machina of experimental psychology, may be at the bottom of other kinds of responses, yet the phenomena we are studying are of a far less elementary nature than those determining such classifications, and the method of tackling them is not that of the artificially simplified experiments of the psychological laboratory, but, on the contrary, a method starting from the extremely complex data furnished by every-day experience and thence working its way by comparison and analysis to the simpler, more intelligible facts underlying these first-hand, and often puzzling, facts of experience.

Starting from such everyday experience, we are immediately obliged to notice that there are persons in whose life music means a great deal, others in whose life it means less, and others in whose life it means nothing worth reckoning. These last-named people we will, for the moment, leave out of our enquiry, although subsequent sifting of this rejected material may lead, even in these musical nullities, to discoveries shedding light on the modes of being of persons in whose life music means something.
This convenient, though slovenly, form of words affords a short-cut into our field of study; and more particularly into the method, whose technical details would demand a separate essay, by which I have endeavored to deal with it, assisted by my invaluable fellow-analyst, Miss Irene Cooper Willis. For in the successive questionnaires, written and verbal interrogations, by means of which I have tapped the musical experiences of nearly two hundred subjects, there has recurred a query which has always received two apparently irreconcilable sets of answers. This query, altered as has been its actual wording (in English, French and German, besides successive versions) and implied though cunningly inexplicit, in many other questions presented to my subjects, can be summarized as follows: When music interests you at all, has it got for you a meaning which seems beyond itself, a message; or does it remain just music? And here before dealing with these conflicting answers, I must explain that such enquiries have to steer between opposite dangers: they can avoid the Scylla of suggesting an answer, in so far worthless, which the interrogated subject would not have otherwise come by, only by running into the Charybdis of being answered by a person who does not really understand what you are asking. And of all the whirlpools of cross purposes, over whose darkness the present enquirers have strained their psychological eye-sight, none is so baffling as the one of which meaning is itself the obscure, the perpetually shifting centre. However, by dint of indefatigable watching round that maelstrom, fishing for any broken items found whirling in its obscurity, my eyes and those of my fellow-investigator have been able to discern the cause of its baffling but (as afterward became apparent) quite regular eddies. I have remarked that the word meaning is one whose own meaning is apt to vary. And it was by following up its two chief meanings in the present connection that we were able to make our first working classification of the persons who had been good enough to answer my questionnaires. One of those two meanings of meaning is embodied in my previous sentence: "persons in whose life music means a great deal," which is only another way of saying "persons in whose life music occupies much attention"; for meaning is here used as a measure of importance, and importance, when we are dealing with mental life, means importance for the attention, or as we call it, interest. I would beg my readers to bear in mind this connec-
tion between meaning as here employed and attention; for musical attention is going to be one of the chief items of our inquiry.

But meaning can also be taken as roughly implying a message, as in my query: "Does music seem to you to have a message, a meaning beyond itself?" And half of the subjects interrogated did precisely answer that undoubtedly music had a meaning beyond itself, many adding that if it had not it would constitute only sensual enjoyment, and be unworthy of their consideration, some of them moreover indignantly taking in this sense my words about music remaining just music. That for these persons music did not remain just music, but became the bearer of messages, was further made certain by pages and pages, often of unexpectedly explicit or eloquent writing which attempted to describe the nature of that message, to describe the things it dealt with and the more or less transcendental spheres whence that message of music seemed to come.

So far for one-half of the answers. The other either explicitly denied or disregarded the existence of such a message; insisted that music had not necessarily any meaning beyond itself, and far from taking the words "remains just music" as derogatory to the art or to themselves, they answered either in the selfsame words or by some paraphrase, that when they cared for music it remained just music. And, in the same way that the believers in meaning as message often gave details about the contents of that message, so, on the other hand, the subjects denying the existence of a message frequently made it quite clear that for them the meaning of music was in the music itself, adding that when really interested in music they could think of nothing but the music.

Now this latter answer, repeated as it was in every form of words, suggests a possibility if not of reconciling two diametrically opposed views concerning the nature of music, at all events of understanding what such an opposition implies and depends on. For distributed throughout the questionnaire in such a manner as to prevent their being interpreted into a theory which might vitiate the spontaneity of the answers, was a whole set of questions bearing upon the nature of that alleged message, of that meaning beyond itself, which music might assume for its hearers: In listening or remembering music, especially music accompanied by words or sug-
gestive title,\(^1\) did the answerers see anything, landscapes, people, moving pictures or dramatic scenes, in their mind’s eye? Did music strike them as expressing the emotions or life-history of the composer or performer, or their own? Or else was such emotional expression merely recognized as existing in the music without being referred to any particular persons? The affirmative answers, often covering many pages, showed that according to individual cases the “message” was principally of one of these kinds, visual or emotional, abstract or personal, but with many alterations and overlappings. But fragmentary, fluctuating, and elusive as it was oftenest described as being, and only in rare cases defining itself as a coherent series of pictures, a dramatic sequence or intelligible story, the message was nevertheless always a message, inasmuch as it appeared to be an addition made to the hearer’s previous thoughts by the hearing of that music; and an addition due to that music and ceasing with its cessation. Now comes an important point: while half of the interrogated subjects declared that such a meaning or message constituted a large part of music’s attraction, some persons actually admitting that they went to hear music for the sake of the images, emotions, trains of thought with which it enriched them, the other half of the answers by no means denied the existence of a meaning in music, often indeed remarking that without such a meaning it would be mere sound; but they furthermore claimed that such meaning resided inseparably in the music itself; and added that whenever they found music completely satisfying, any other meaning, anything like visual images or emotional suggestions, was excluded or reduced to utter unimportance. Indeed this class answered by a great majority that so far as emotion was concerned, music awakened in them an emotion sui generis, occasionally shot with human joy or sadness, but on the whole analogous to the exaltation and tenderness and sense of sublimity awakened by the beautiful in other arts or in nature, but not to be compared with the feelings resulting from the vicissitudes of real life.

\(^1\)The author, in framing her questionnaire, seems not to have given sufficient emphasis to this very vital qualification. It is obvious that a listener’s reaction to music which is offered to him accompanied by words, motto, or suggestive title (“programme-music”, as it is technically called) will necessarily be different from his reaction to “absolute” music—that is, music unassociated with any explicit poetic, pictorial, or dramatic subject-matter. It makes all the difference in the world whether the hearer’s reaction is produced, for example, by Strauss’ Don Quixote or Brahms’ C-minor symphony. It seems to us that the author’s questionnaire should have clearly established this distinction, as of capital importance.—Ennor.
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It was nearly always persons answering in this sense who explicitly acquiesced in the fact that music could remain, in no derogatory sense but quite the reverse, just music.

I must here interrupt our comparison of these two main classes of answers, those which affirmed music to have a message, and those which acquiesced in its remaining just music, and explain that a large part of our questionnaires consisted in queries attempting to classify the answerers themselves. To what extent were they musical? This question, like all the main ones of our enquiry, was not left to the direct decision of the subjects interrogated, most of whom would have been incapable and perhaps unwilling to write themselves down as more or less musical than an average mankind about whose endowment they would probably feel ignorant. Conformably therefore to the rest of my method, the questionnaire contained sets of queries which, taken together, constituted an objective criterion of the degree of musical endowment and cultivation: queries dealing principally with memory for musical sequences (melody) and especially for musical combinations (harmony and orchestral timbre) along with the capacity and habit of taking stock (analysis) of the tone-relations constituting the music they were hearing; finally, the capacity for finding accompaniments and for extemporizing, these being the proof either of special musical endowment or of special musical cultivation. By this means it became possible to ascertain how far the conflicting answers about music having a message or remaining just music correspond with the musical status, if I may be allowed this expression, of the individuals by whom they were furnished.

Two other sets of queries dealt respectively with memory of and interest in visible objects; with interest in the drama and especially with such tenacity of emotional memory as enable painful past associations to spoil opportunities of present happiness; all of which queries were intended to obtain some insight into the imaginative and emotional disposition of each answerer. For my whole enquiry had started with the working hypothesis that the tendency to attribute to music an emotional message (i.e., the expression of the emotional vicissitudes either of the answerer or of the composer or of some third person) might be due to the greater predominance of emotional interest in the answerer's usual inner life. This hypothesis speedily broke down: some people were obviously very emotional who yet persisted in answering that music had
no message for them; others utterly rejected the just music alternative without revealing any particular emotional bias, or, for that matter, any particular development of visual imagination either. Still less was it possible to connect musical endowment and cultivation with the presence or the lack of any specially emotional disposition. But while this first, and insufficiently complex, view of the problem utterly broke down, the sifting of the evidence which led to its rejection left us quite unexpectedly with what has, I think, proved a real clue to the matter.

For although there seemed no direct relation between the degree of emotional disposition and the question whether music had or had not a message, a meaning beyond itself, this question showed itself in an obvious relation to what I have called the musical status of the answerers. The more musical answerers were also those who repudiated the message, who insisted that music had a meaning in itself, in fact, that it remained for them "mere music." A certain number of highly musical subjects not only declared this to be the case with themselves, but foretold that we should find it so with every sufficiently musical hearer. Their own experience was that the maximum interest and maximum pleasure connected with music can leave no room for anything else. And this answer led to the framing of queries bearing upon musical attention; queries which elicited some very unexpected information. For the distinctly musical answerers proved to be those who admitted without hesitation that their musical attention was liable to fluctuations and lapses. They were continually catching themselves thinking of something else while hearing music. They complained of their own inattention and divagation. But—and this is the important point in the evidence—these lapses were regarded by them as irrelevancies and interruptions: the music was going on, but their attention was not following it. The less musical answerers, those also who found in music a meaning beyond itself, seemed comparatively unaware of such lapses or interruptions. From some of their answers one might have gathered that rather unmusical people could sit through two hours of a concert with unflagging enjoyment. But further sets of queries revealed that although unbroken by boredom, restlessness or the conscious intrusion of irrelevant matters, that enjoyment was not confined to the music. When asked whether the music suggested anything, they abounded in accounts of inner visions,
trains of thought and all manner of emotional dramas, often
most detailed and extensive, which filled their minds while,
as they averred, they were listening to the music; indeed
some of which, they did not hesitate to admit, constituted
the chief attraction of music.

Putting their statement opposite that of the musical an-
swerers,—namely, that musical appreciation left room for
nothing else, and although musical attention could and did
frequently lapse, it could never be simultaneously divided
between the heard music and anything else,—the conclusion
became obvious that there existed two different modes of
responding to music, each of which was claimed to be the
only one by those in whom it was habitual. One may be called
listening to music; the other hearing, with lapses into merely
over-hearing it. Listening implied the most active attention
moving along every detail of composition and performance,
taking in all the relations, of sequences and combinations of
sounds as regards pitch, intervals, modulations, rhythms and
intensities, holding them in the memory and coordinating
them in a series of complex wholes, similar (this was an oc-
casional illustration) to that constituted by all the parts,
large and small, of a piece of architecture; and these archi-
cturally coordinated groups of sound-relations, i. e., these
audible shapes made up of intervals, rhythms, harmonies and
accents, themselves constitute the meaning of music to this
class of listeners; the meaning in the sense not of a message
different from whatever conveyed it, but in the sense of an
interest, an importance, residing in the music and inseparable
from it.

This is what we gather about what I have called listening
to music. Hearing music as it is revealed by our answerers
is not simply a lesser degree of the same mental activity, but
one whose comparative poverty from the musical side is eked
out and compensated by other elements. The answers to our
questionnaires show that even the least attentive hearers have
moments, whose frequency and duration depend both on gen-
eral musical habits and on the familiarity of the particular
piece or style of music, of active listening; for they constantly
allude to their ability to follow or grasp, as they express it,
the whole or only part of what they happen to hear. But
instead of constituting the whole bulk of their musical expe-
rience (in such a way that any other thought is recognized as
irrelevant) these moments of concentrated and active atten-
tion to the musical shapes are like islands continually washed over by a shallow tide of other thoughts; memories, associations, suggestions, visual images and emotional states, ebbing and flowing round the more or less clearly emergent musical perceptions, in such a way that each participates of the quality of the other, till they coalesce into a homogeneous and special contemplative condition, into whose observation and blend of musical and non-musical thoughts there enters nothing which the hearer can recognize as inattention, as the concentrated musical listener recognizes the lapses and divagations of which he complains. Moreover, in this kind of hearing of music there really are fewer intrusions from everyday life. Musical phrases, non-musical images and emotions are all welded into the same musical day dream, and the trains of thought are necessarily harmonious with the music, for if they were conflicting, the music (which is heard though not listened to) would either drive them away or (as in the lapse of the more musically attentive) cease to play any part. For these intermittently and imperfectly perceived sequences and combinations of sounds do play a very important part in these day dreams. By their constancy, regularity and difference from anything else, they make and enclose a kind of inner ambiance in which these reveries live their segregated and harmonious life. It must be remembered that while the eye (to which psychology adds the motor sense) is unceasingly building up a spatial world which is the scene of our everyday existence, the usual dealings of the ear are with intermittent and heterogeneous impressions, so that only music can surround us with a continuous and homogeneous world of sound, a world foreign to what we call real life, and therefore excluding from its magic enclosure all real life's concerns, save when they have been stripped of all reality, accidents and urgencies, and been transfigured by a bath if not of oblivion, at least of harmonious contemplation.

The above summing up of the evidence of those answerers who admitted that they did not always follow or grasp, i.e., actively listen, to the music they were hearing, and who alleged that for them music had a message—a meaning beyond itself—has taken us much further into the question of the nature of music than is warranted by the limits of the present article. A future examination of the answers to my questionnaires must follow up these first indications, and deal with the other category of answerers, those whose attention is engrossed by
the music, and who allege that for them music remains just music.

But at the bottom of these varieties of musical experience, and of the many subdivisions and crosses thereof, lies the question of musical attention. And the first fruits of my questionnaires have therefore been the establishment of a distinction between listening to music and merely hearing it; between a response to music such as implies intellectual and aesthetic activity of a very intense, bracing and elevating kind, and a response to music consisting very largely in emotional and imaginative day dreams, purified from personal and practical preoccupations and full of refreshing visions and salutary sentimental satisfactions. These are the two ways of impersonal, contemplative happiness in which music can benefit mankind. And they explain the two kinds of meaning which are ascribed to music and which music can have in our lives.

Further study of the data elicited by my questionnaires may some day enable us to show how these two main modes of responding to music overlap and enrich one another; it may even suggest how the desire for music as something to be listened to has gradually evolved out of a primitive need for music as something to stir inert, or release pent up, emotions, and to induce such day dreams as restore and quicken the soul.

Vernon Lee.