

MUSIC AS A LIBERAL ART

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MUSIC, considered less as a practice than as an art with whose nature, history and present state every educated man should be familiar, has suffered a decline.

On the university campus today the Victorian Gothic library, the Greek revival laboratories, the academic halls, present an imposing bulk behind which, in some out-of-the-way corner, the reticent little music building seeks shelter. Music departments are too often staffed by professionals with little capacity to see their subject in a broader light than the teaching of special technics demand, who tend to be less articulate than their academic colleagues. The thoughtful student who is no virtuoso finds little to his taste in a department that teaches skill without an appeal to reason, that attempts to demonstrate many styles but fails to take up the basic question of style itself, of philosophic and historic meaning. The purely practical approach is largely responsible for the low estate to which music, as a vital part of our intellectual equipment, has fallen.

In less exalted settings, music as a subject develops growing importance. Wartime propaganda devotes much effort to exploitation of the art. A nation's use of music is offered to prove its advance from barbarism, its degree of culture, refinement, civilization. By way of radio, discussions about music now reach the masses and make a claim on their consideration before the higher academies have done much to raise the subject from its present depressed level.

Historically, of course, music is no poor relation of the arts and sciences. In the golden age of Greece it occupied a post of honor. The Platonic dialogues show music to be never very far from the thoughts of Socrates and his fellow Athenians. Besides offering witty, elegant and often profound comment on the subject, the dialogues give music an important philosophical role. In the *Timaeus*, Plato tells a "likely story" of a creator who imposed on originally irreconcilable elements the mathematical pattern of the ratios of a musical scale, in order to fashion the

soul of the universe. Elsewhere Plato finds that music imposes order on the motions of the body and the soul, teaching gracious and harmonious conduct and giving the young student a knowledge of good and evil. Three years, says Plato, should be devoted to learning how to play the lyre and to kindred musical subjects. Philosophical discussions must be included so that the student will never be deceived by "appearances" and forget the true music of which this earthly music is only a shadow. For a music lover only interested in sounds, the kind that conservatories then as now produced, Plato had contempt. They are "the last persons who would come to anything like a philosophical discussion, if they could help, while they run about at Dionysiac festivals as if they had let out their ears to hear every chorus; in town or country – it makes no difference – they are there."

The moral benefits to be derived from the study as Plato saw it, gave music great importance in the Academy in Athens, where its relation to geometry and astronomy was endlessly discussed. This early association of subjects later played an important part in the plan of the medieval university. Here music, one of the "seven liberal arts", now systematized as a discipline, became a branch of mathematics. As the art of measurement, it was an object of major study for several centuries. Under this alliance with what we today call mathematical physics, our aural art, though occupying a lesser position, was widely cultivated. And in the renaissance, so long as medieval thinking continued to dominate education, no education, according to Thomas Morley, was complete without some actual musical training in playing or singing.

That the practice of musicians was deeply influenced by the liberal arts discipline is written on the pages of every treatise of the period. In turn, the practice of music itself influenced thinking in many different fields, as witness the treatises on architecture by Palladio, on astronomy by Kepler. Kepler in the early seventeenth century drew extended analogies between Copernican heliocentric theory and the art of polyphony of his day, contrasting it to Ptolemy's analogy between Greek music and the geocentric theory. His method enabled him to describe the orbit of the planet Mars, a mathematical mystery before his time.

Aristotle in his *Politics* has another approach to music. He lists it under three headings: education, amusement and intellectual enjoyment. "Amusement is for the sake of relaxation, and relaxation is of necessity sweet, for it is the remedy of pain caused by toil . . . In addition to this

common pleasure, felt and shared by all . . . may it (music) not also have some influence over the character and soul? . . . Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affections as we know from our own experience." After describing in detail the effects of various kinds of music and pointing out which are desirable, Aristotle concludes "Music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young." Together with the discussion of imitation in the *Poetics*, this and similar passages exerted a powerful influence on the philosophy of music and education even as late as the eighteenth century.

However, music in order to assume its classical position in the hierarchy of studies and bear an intelligible relation to them does not require a particular system of philosophy. From the fourth century B.C. through the seventeenth of our era, there were many changes in philosophy, while music's traditional place remained fairly constant. Most of the great music of the past that we admire, and much of the literature, has some relation to this tradition of the liberal arts. Its terminology still is used in our discussions of esthetics even though meanings have become vague, and its example is a challenge for us all to think more deeply.

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In America today, the objectives of education are being redefined, the plan of studies reworked in an attempt to give men a broader and more understanding view of the world. To expand their knowledge of music a few suggestions might be taken from those periods when the art was an integral part of education and of life.

Several methods have already been tried. One of the most familiar is the historical approach, in which music joins hands with other arts and is studied century by century. Its chronology is synchronized with important historical events, the development of court life, the effect of wars, the influence of one school on another. This is unquestionably useful and in the right direction, but as a method it places too little emphasis on the very ideas which have most deeply shaped the artistic works under consideration.

In at least two centers, the University of Chicago and St. John's College in Annapolis, where drastic reforms of the whole educational

system have been put into effect, the relation of music to various philosophies is now stressed. At St. John's music has actually been taken out of the music building. It is no longer the special study of the specialist, of the budding professional. Instead it is examined in the class-rooms, seminars and laboratories, in an effort to give it a working relationship with all other knowledge. Since the St. John's plan is the most familiar to me, I would like to present it as an illustration of how music can be brought back into the general life of a university.

At St. John's all students read a certain number of works, from Homer to Freud, that have been influential in forming our total Western civilization. Some are read in translation, others form the basis for laboratory experiments, still others provide texts for mathematics and language courses; all are discussed in seminars. Included in this study during my stay at St. John's, were several works of music – a Gregorian mass, a mass of Palestrina, a work by Bach such as the *Goldberg Variations*; and scheduled for the future were an opera of Mozart, a symphony of Beethoven and music by Stravinsky and Debussy. These were coordinated chronologically with the rest of the reading. However, the college is not concerned primarily in giving a serial picture of various stages of Western civilization, but in having the student know the problems that have confronted us and learn to evaluate the efforts at solution. So musical works were chosen that not only represent their periods but are still being heard today.

The fundamentals of music were demonstrated in such a way as to clarify the intellectual traditions of the subject. The frequent mention of music in the works of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine was thus made vivid and understandable. Music was examined first in the physics laboratory, so that students learned to distinguish intervals, to recognize for instance, the fifth whose effect Galileo says "is to produce a tickling of the ear-drum such that its softness is modified by its sprightliness, giving at the same moment the impression of a gentle kiss and of a bite." Here also simple notation was taught as well as the formation of modes and scales, key relationships and chord structure. The students tuned sonometers according to all kinds of systems. In a class on the measurement of time, they found out about rhythm and meter, in another they studied the construction of musical instruments and acoustics. One class held each month was a concert, another a lecture dealing with music in its formal aspects.

The main emphasis was on preparation for the hearing and understanding of actual works. Scores and recordings were made available and, whenever possible, the music studied was performed at concerts. Each work was then discussed on two successive evenings for about two hours, often more because the talk became so lively. One of the most recurrent topics was, naturally, the meaning of music. Did it, like language, refer to something other than itself and if so, what? Or was a work of music an ordered pattern of sounds that awakened feelings and thoughts in us as a by-product of our enjoyment of its beauties? Is listening to music simply a pleasant pastime or is it more? What does music bring to the meaning of the words in Gregorian chant? What relation has notation to what the composer imagines and to what the performer does? And so on through all those profound questions that naturally arise in students' minds but are so lightly, so carelessly, brushed by in most music courses. Here arguments developed, sides were taken, controversy was important. Music became a matter of interest, whether it was approached by the scientific, the literary, or the artistic and it gave one type of student an understanding of the other.

The introduction of music into such a plan of study, indeed into any general plan, has far-reaching results. It stimulates a consideration of the esthetic problems bound to come up in a course on literature or the other fine arts; it can endow laboratory experiments with a quality of imagination often lacking in the more elementary subjects. When the student sees the interconnection of all these things, his understanding grows in richness. And since today no widely accepted esthetic doctrine unifies our thought on the various aspects of music, such a plan at least conjures up the past to assist us; it helps to raise the various philosophical questions involved. In one way or another these questions must be considered for it is not enough to devote all our efforts to acquiring the technical skills essential to instrumentalists, composers and even listeners. There must be good thinking and good talking about music to preserve its noble rank as a fine art for all of us, and the college is one of the logical places for this more considered attitude to be cultivated.