

PAUL ROSENFELD*

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MY relationship to the subject of this article has a history which is at once personal and typical. . . . When I was twenty I happened on a book that had just appeared: *Musical Portraits* by a man previously unknown to me named Paul Rosenfeld. I found the book peculiarly exciting because it dealt with music in a manner that gave it a sharp contemporaneous relevance.

At that time (1921) I went abroad to study at the Sorbonne, and in Paris I became a friend of Aaron Copland who was then completing his musical education with Nadia Boulanger. Among the things we agreed on was Paul Rosenfeld's importance as a writer. I remember that when Copland became enthusiastically aware of Gabriel Fauré, he wrote Rosenfeld, whom he did not know, asking him to bring Fauré's work to the attention of the musical cognoscenti in America.

On our return to New York (in 1924) Copland's compositions were played by various symphony orchestras. He met Rosenfeld, and so did I. We were delighted and impressed by him. But about 1928, I began to find myself differing with certain aspects of Rosenfeld's work, though at first there seemed to be no more to my reservations than an uneasiness about his prose. On one occasion, we had a friendly dispute that began with a disagreement over the value of Gertrude Stein's writing. The discussion ranged so far afield that, at one point, I found myself arguing that architecture had its origins in the need for housing, while Rosenfeld maintained that before that man must have found some sensuous satisfaction in playing with materials or as I scornfully put it "mudpies!" . . .

In 1930, just before I began to organize the Group Theatre, I met Rosenfeld in Lake George at Alfred Stieglitz's summer home. Again I found myself disapproving violently of Rosenfeld's point of view which, I thought, overemphasized the significance of the individual genius in the development of culture, while my conviction made me stress the role of the formative collective group from which the individual artist emerges.

* This article was written several weeks before Mr. Rosenfeld died on July 20, 1946.

... I decided then and there that Rosenfeld and I represented two different generations, and that his generation thenceforth had very little to offer mine. During the thirties I read Rosenfeld sporadically and always with a resistance that derived from this decision.

A year or two ago I picked up a stray volume of Rosenfeld's miscellaneous criticism – on literature, painting, music – and I realized with some shock that, in the intervening time, I had read very little criticism – particularly music criticism – as suggestive and rich as this. After that I went through all of Rosenfeld's music criticism.

What was most of the music criticism I had read elsewhere? It could be roughly divided into two classes. The bulk of it might be compared to the issuing of report cards. Papa and mama – the readers – are instructed that baby (the composer or interpreter) merited A for effort, B for deportment and C for accomplishment. Such criticism – if you allow the term – can only interest nervous professionals.

The second type of music criticism is a form of entertainment. Its practitioners employ their *taste* as if it were an ancient instrument on which they play attractive tunes for the delectation of a select clientele. These gentlemen are skeptical *petits-mâtres* who resort to criticism as a charming refinement designed to shut out the noise of a vulgar world.

In brief, our music criticism is largely trade paper stuff or salon coquetry – in either case chitchat for the idle. We get from it very little sense of music as part of the context of society. But music is an expression of life, which is not to be understood except through knowledge of people molded by the concrete circumstances of the various groups which give them birth or sustenance. Music is therefore personal and social. It is reflection of and response to specific worlds of men: it is play, it is speech, it is unconscious result and conscious statement all at the same time. Music criticism constitutes a way of apprehending reality. It can have value only in fulfilling this function.

Paul Rosenfeld's virtue as a critic of music stems from the fact that his work actually conveys the material which is its subject. The first and essential step in criticism is truly made: the critic really experiences the music and makes us "see" it as well. When you think back on most music criticism you have read, you will find that you may remember the critic's opinion, you may be able to quote the bright or learned quips with which the critic delivered his verdict, but you will have difficulty in recalling any clear definition of the work which the critic heard in the first place.

Paul Rosenfeld's senses are extensive and sharp. That is his first wisdom, and for the critic it is the crucial wisdom. He really hears, and what he hears he is able to body forth in a description which gives evidence of

the amazing mirror that is his sensibility. The reflection we behold is the composer's work in a transformation miraculous for its vividness, verisimilitude and clarity. With all this there is the engrossing mystery by which the mirror has added something of its own in the process of transfer, something that informs the image with a peculiar quality of awe and reverence, something very close to either a passionate devotion or to an equally emotional negation.

Because of his remarkable capacity to concentrate his senses and to communicate their findings immediately, Rosenfeld is enabled to disclose the true nature of what he confronts much more readily than those who have to bring repeated study to the objects at hand before they are able to make any reliable report. Thus Rosenfeld's review of the French composers of the Group of Six (Milhaud, Auric, Poulenc, *et al*) at their very first American performances is virtually definitive. His sensory attentiveness and receptivity are so great that very difficult new works by composers like Stravinsky or Hindemith are brilliantly registered at practically the first hearing so that very few corrections are needed in the ensuing years to complete his first reactions. It is not only that Rosenfeld is gifted with wonderful assimilative powers but his entire organism is so endowed that he can order the data of his impressions and measure their final worth even as he seems to be in the simple act of recording them. This lends his work not only the merit of efficiency, but gives it a gratifying aliveness, a vibrancy derived from the sources both of the music and the man who has heard it.

I have already referred to a period in which I found myself regarding Rosenfeld a stranger to the tendencies that were impelling many of my age. For reasons that shall appear in the end, I do not wish to dwell too insistently on these differences. But since my experience with Rosenfeld's work is representative, I believe it necessary to indicate what the nub of our "quarrel" was.

I might sum it up in a kind of slogan: sensibility alone is not enough. Rosenfeld's work appeared to me to lay an unwholesome stress on the subjective. "The outer world has become quiet and far in this room," Rosenfeld says of one composer, and I might have said the same of him. From this he was apt to proceed to such conclusions as "The artist is ever a man who walks alone . . . all the anti-social virtues, they are what give him his value. The more he is the tramp, unrespectable, resident to a world proper to himself, the more he serves." In the thirties, a credo such as this made me howl in distress and denial. I do not accept it today – not at least in this formulation – but I can place it in a context in which it may be useful.

But then Rosenfeld spoke of groups as a danger. "They make it too

easy for the member to avoid becoming his own justification, substituting the law of the herd, always inferior, for the law of the individual." The artists always went "their own solitary ways." So in Rosenfeld's work it was as he says of a composer, "The entire world has become miraculously subject. . . . It was in his heart and not outside, as it seemed, that all things took place." In like wise, it seemed to me, Rosenfeld had transformed the entire objective world into sensation – his sensation – which he made into soulful decorations to protect himself from the harsh facts of reality. He seemed to arrive too consciously and therefore artificially at the translation of what he perceived outside himself – including art – into a private solace. This might be noted in the too constant ecstasy of his prose.

His work sometimes became artistically sentimental, with less valid material than he had actually assimilated from his contact with music. This, in my opinion, was an esthetic defect deriving from a personal deficiency which in turn resulted from a specific social phenomenon: America's basic disregard and indifference to sensitivity. He was so painfully aware of the songs of "the inward agonists" indeed that he was often exaggeratedly impressed and therefore a little naive about the painters of outer chaos: Ornstein, Varese *et al.*

His stylistic blunders were caused not only by a fear of banality and by the false notion his prose had to imitate the very body of what it described – leading to blotched color rather than to purple passages – but more than anything by an uncertainty about whom he was addressing. Because of our social situation, he unconsciously felt cut off so that, in a sense, there was no audience at all, only a troubled dialogue between the art object and himself, in which metaphors are accepted as matters of fact.

This is the worst of it. More often Rosenfeld writes admirably and, in his work, as he said of certain music "The sensation comes freighted with an abstract dimension." There is far more in his writing than just an echo of moods and the play of a spectrum. There is the substance of sound judgment – which must be the final step in a critic's contribution.

Rosenfeld's judgments are based on no calculated system of thought, but they are nevertheless far more solid than the mere impressionism that we at first suspected. What is perhaps even more to the point is that Rosenfeld's integrity and his whole-hearted loyalty to his task make him not a passive connoisseur but a discoverer of talent, an unmasker of frauds, a fighter in behalf of the courageous, the profound, and the fine. Even his mistakes were honorable, and he made very few.

Thus, at the very outset of his career, he seemed to be summoning the emergence of a vital school of American music. When it came he saw from the first day that the birth was good. His appreciation of people like

Sessions, Harris, Copland was not only enthusiastic but keen. This at a time when it required daring to speak at all. The gingerly tentativeness which critics often hide beneath a thick layer of qualificative verbiage was wholly absent in his work. He saw through the shoddy of "big names" in the concert field. He castigated the complacency and timorousness of prize committees, opera boards and orchestral conductors.

He exposed the rot of American commercialism when it appeared to be at its height in the twenties. He denounced the blight of rugged individualism in a striking contrast with the essence of Bach. In brief, he suggested the core and principle of our universal problem: to make man act on his responsibility to man, so that he might be conjoined through love to work and create with his fellow man, rather than isolate himself to destroy through power. . . . This is certainly what the men of the thirties were after, and if Rosenfeld was not explicit about it, his work might still be said to contain the seeds of this knowledge. He was moreover a pioneer in arriving at such knowledge through an understanding of music, and in seeing the role that music might play in its dissemination.

The besetting sin of our culture is its lack of a sense of continuity. We forget our past — we do not derive benefit or inspiration from the deposited riches we possess. Like barbarians we discard our accumulated experience. The literate and sophisticated do it as commonly as the others. This article is written to help repair an injustice and a neglect which the contemporary music world has committed and for which it may suffer. Paul Rosenfeld is by far the most authentically creative critic of music we have had in the past twenty-five years.

All who knew Rosenfeld's sweetness and impetuous chivalry will mourn his death today. But the men he celebrated in these pages and elsewhere must share a very special grief. There could never be enough artists in his life, never enough of his energy poured out in their interest. . . . That public recognition of talent still under cover for almost everyone else, which made him famous, was as much a profession of faith as an act of judgment. He was a crusader, not a cool secluded critic, and his life had a certain air of violence about it. But now that it is over and we have the record of his time before us, we see how deep his insight has been.

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