

THE late "Fats" Waller, jazz pianist of no mean accomplishment, was once asked by a highbrow listener for his definition of "swing."

"Lady," he replied, "if you gotter ask, you ain't got it."

Good taste is similar to swing in this respect. If you have to ask what it is, you don't possess it.

It's a negative thing, taste, apparent only when absent. Good taste is so inconspicuous as to pass without comment, bad taste draws the wrath of the highbrows so inevitably that destructive criticism has become an accepted form of self-expression. What a welcome relief it would be if critics wrote a little more about what they like, and why, instead of what they execrate, and how!

There are different meanings attached to the word "taste." There's Good Taste versus Bad Taste, of which I shall speak later, confining my remarks to the field of music because that's my pet subject; but my remarks hereon could apply with equal vigour to any of the kindred arts from sculpture to interior decoration.

Then there's "taste" meaning "preference." In the end, all criticism boils down to this—you like one thing, I like another. It's simply a matter of taste.

In that case, why the fuss and bother? Why discuss the matter at all? Why not be tolerant, and let the other man retain his preference, as you do yours?

### "All for Intolerance"

It sounds easy, but seemingly a love of good music and an aptitude for toleration are qualities seldom found together in one musician, and never in one critic. When it's a matter of Good Taste v. Bad Taste in music, toleration of the other man's viewpoint is, in my opinion, neither possible nor desirable. I'm all for intolerance in this respect. I suggest that the apostles of good taste arm themselves with pen and poison, and sally forth to do battle by any means at their command, insidious or straightforward. That the apostles of bad taste will be trying at the same time to flood the world with their own particular cloying or raucous product, of course goes without saying. They are not tolerant; why should we be? (I take it, reader, that you are on my side in this battle, or you wouldn't have bothered to read thus far.)

I'm speaking rather as though the possessors of bad taste knew that they



"It's simply a matter of taste"

# HOW GOOD IS YOUR TASTE?

## An Article For People Who Aren't Highbrows



Written for "The Listener"  
by DOROTHY SCOTT

possessed it and were proud of the fact. If this were so they couldn't do much harm. Those who do most harm are the misguided people who think they know good music from bad, when in reality they know only one sort of music, the completely valueless. Let loose in a position where he can make his values known, even one such person may do a great deal of unwitting damage to receptive but uneducated ears.

### Two Hundred Years Behind

Can that damage be undone? Do the people want to listen to the apostle of good taste?

The trouble about mass education is that it's such a long job. The majority of people lag behind the leading intelligences of their day by a time-lag of a couple of hundred years, on the average. In art, while the people who actually put brush to canvas have just about finished experimenting with Surrealism, the masses have just about got to the stage where they can understand Rembrandt. In literature, while modern poets perform their intellectual gymnastics, the average man is still thinking Dickens is pretty good. In music I'm afraid the majority of listeners aren't even as up-to-date as that. They're still at the level of the jungle savage, whose frenzied thumping of his drum and mournful caterwauling represent the acme of musical expression, being the outpouring of his soul about the basic emotions of hunger, fear, and love. Till the majority appreciate Delius, how long, how long?

As I said, it wouldn't matter in the least if we all kept our preferences to ourselves, and regarded it merely as a matter of taste. However, the average man's reaction to anything he doesn't

understand is the reaction of the savage. Confronted with music, art, or literature which is new, unfamiliar, and stimulating, he cries "Down with it!" and proceeds with the demolishing in a barbaric frenzy. He slashes canvas, burns books, paints sculpture blue, throws tomatoes at the stage. In the face of this childish petulance, are we grown-ups to act with tolerant amusement, or are we to try a spot of quiet education? I vote for the latter, even if it doesn't succeed.

### Epstein Said It

In regard to this matter of taste or preference, Epstein in his Autobiography says a very profound thing. While the artistic world fights tooth and claw over his latest piece of sculpture, Epstein remains calm, but hurt and somewhat bewildered. Why are they arguing, he wants to know, and remarks that there are only four possible reactions to a new work of art.

- (1) I like it, but I don't understand it.
- (2) I understand it, but I don't like it.
- (3) I don't understand it and I don't like it.
- (4) I understand it and I like it.

When you've decided which of these statements best expresses your reaction, you've said all there is to say, intrinsically, about any work of art. But, you notice, it's not enough to say that you like a work. Until you also know it, you can't say that it's good. To acquire a knowledge of good and bad, you have to make the effort to understand what the artist, sculptor, author, or composer was trying to say to you. There is no place here for the woolly-minded yearner who tells you with an air of immense self-satisfaction, "Of course I don't understand anything about music, but I do know what I like!" If he doesn't know why he likes it, it is time his bogus attitude was exposed.

### Sugar-coating the Pill

Does the average man want to develop an ability to appreciate, say, the best sort of music? Will he make the necessary effort? Can good taste be cultivated?

It can, yes, if the will is there. I believe that in his heart the average man does want to know good music from bad. I expect he can't help wondering, sometimes, just what it is that makes the devotees of good music into a set of willing slaves. Is there any way of letting him in on the secret?

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"... The acme of musical expression"