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A GUIDE TO MODERN MUSIC

Virgil Thomson Reassures The Bewildered

SOME of the main National stations are at present broadcasting music by contemporary composers selected from the concert recordings supplied by the U.S. Office of War Information, and our readers will remember that we have already introduced this series with a page of photographs of some of the composers featured. One of the men who appeared on that page was Virgil Thomson, who is regarded as one of America's most important composers, but who is also a well-known writer on music. He is music critic to the New York "Herald Tribune," and in a recent special article, called "A Guide to Contemporary Music," he tried to give some help to the listener who is willing to grapple with these moderns, but a bit bewildered most of the time. His article has been sent to us by the O.W.I. among a selection from American publications. So we print it here for listeners who find the records puzzling.

THE grandeurs and the abominations of modern music have long been a source of lively comment. And the dispute about them still goes on. It is like those 19th-century theological arguments about free will versus predestination, and the economic ones about protectionism versus laissez-faire. It can break up families, but it cannot be settled.

Its perennial fecundity is due, I think, to the fact that no two people mean the same thing by the word *modern*. *Modern* is what the semantics people call a weighted word. Which means that it bears an emotional or feeling content far out of proportion to its specific meaning. It explodes in the calm air of discussion like a blockbuster, causing people to run for cover, to commit heroic actions of rescue or to rush right off and enlist in the armies of the *status quo*.

A Desirable Thing

Modernism in housing, sanitation, medicine, manners, and prose literature is considered by most Americans to be a desirable thing, an improvement over the past. Modernism in painting has been tolerated widely ever since it was found to be a good financial investment by collectors and museums, though modernism in poetry is still resisted by the majority of poetry readers. Modernism in music has long been accepted by music consumers, in the sense that they listen to and enjoy a great deal of contemporary music—even what might be termed "modernistic" music. But the argument still goes on as to whether the "modernistic" styles are not perhaps a work of the devil. Either that or the opposite, a cause that is bound up with all the progress and all the enlightenment of our age.

And yet we know that every age is entitled to write music in its own way. What makes an argument out of this simple truism is our genuine love for our century, which leads us to wish to accept right off every part of it and to regret deeply our inability, wherever this crops up, to come to terms with the whole of it. In our eagerness to simplify this problem, we are prone to lump under the term "modern" everything we like or, as the case may be, everything that we don't like or don't quite understand. Actually this over-simplified procedure, this attempt to apply the methods of block-booking to a domain where only individual selection is valid,

complicates the problem of contemporaneity to a point where no solution is possible until the problem shall have been restated.

No Surprises Now

In scrapping, for this discussion, the word *modern*, I find I have been obliged to use *contemporary* in its place and to refer to different kinds of contemporary music as "modernistic." What contemporary music is, nobody need dispute. It is all the music written in our time, nothing less. The partitioning of this into that which is "modernistic" in style and that which is conservative is more difficult than it used to be. Thirty-five years ago unexpected rhythmic textures or unfamiliar harmonic ones, as in Debussy or Schonberg or even Scriabin, were sufficient to class a work as revolutionary, at least in intention. To-day no harmonic texture is unfamiliar, and no rhythm capable of giving surprise. What everybody looks for in music is comprehensibility. If a piece makes sense to us we accept it. We may not approve the sense that it makes, but we do not object to the means employed. We are seriously bothered only if we cannot find the sense.

Schonberg, Bartok, Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Prokofieff are resisted when they seem obscure, swallowed like milk and honey when their expressive intention is clear. Shostakovich, who is essentially a conservative composer, can make sounds that conservatives of an earlier generation would have classified unhesitatingly as "unpleasant," just as they classified similarly some of the more picturesque passages of Strauss' "Salome" and "Elektra"—and millions of radio and concert listeners find them perfectly natural because they depict convincingly the approach of a motorised army. Our public and our century have long since grown beyond the stage where any method of composition is considered to be a virtue or a crime. Clear and plain expressivity is what we are looking for, and we don't care how it is achieved.

Quality and Style

A great deal of contemporary music writing is lacking in plain expressivity. It is lacking not because there is any wilful cult of obscurity among composers, as there is among poets, or because any of the standard contemporary techniques (not even the so-called "atonal" or twelve-tone syntax) is ill adapted to the communication of feeling, but simply because the music of any

(continued on next page)

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