

Neville Cardus on Music Appreciation



NEVILLE CARDUS
Remember Dr. Johnson

NEVILLE CARDUS complains that correspondents are persistently writing to him for advice about books on music; the demand is for a "quick way" to get to know "all about it." Apparently, he writes in the *ABC Weekly*, nobody wants a textbook. The notion seems to be that a book exists somewhere that will reveal everything—an abracadabra to the world of the masterpieces.

The general fear of things "technical" is easy to understand. Music has been badly served by those who write about it, or teach it. There should be a law to prohibit the programme annotation which goes like this: "The introduction is transformed to a fortissimo on a D major chord with the F sharp in the bass. This turns to the minor in the twelfth bar, and so to B flat."

This is jargon—and useless. To the musician it conveys information he can find for himself; to the layman it is unintelligible. As well might we reduce poetry to nouns, and verbs, and tenses, and moods and the rest of it, with the gerundial infinitive thrown in.

"I Know What I Like"

"Technique," declared Wagner, "is for the composers to discuss; the public should never hear of it." This saying goes too far. Let us consider the matter from another point of view. Australians are great cricketers from the cradle onwards. Suppose a foreigner were to visit a Test Match, and show signs of enthusiasm and partisanship, and also express downright critical opinions.

Suppose, also, he admitted that he didn't know a single rule of the game, and was hazy in his mind upon the difference between a leg-break and an off-drive; but he argued a right to criticise because, although he didn't know anything about cricket, he liked the look of

it. Such a point of view would receive short shrift at the hands of the Hill at Sydney—or at the mouth thereof.

But this opinion would be equivalent to that of the layman in music who so often dogmatically affirms: "I don't know music, and don't want to go into such academic matters as sonata-form and keys; but I respond to the sound of music, and I know what I like."

Learn as a Child Learns

Of course, the ideal way is to learn music as a child learns his language, that is, by hearing it day by day from the earliest glimmers of consciousness. It is only after the child has come to some slight understanding of the sound and meaning of words that he is taught the dull rules of grammar. The first step in music appreciation is (or should be) the training of the ear. But listening must be active, not passive, from the beginning. A guiding principle is essential from the outset. For example, hundreds of people who are to-day thronging our concert halls and listening to the radio seem likely to go through life unaware of the important distinction between metre and rhythm. These people are convinced that swing is very rhythmical. On the contrary, it is merely metrical. And necessarily so. Dance music must be regular in its accents, else the dance would soon become disorderly. Weak accents coming where strong ones were expected would involve a reading of the Riot Act in any dance "palace."

Dr. Johnson's Warning

The seventh symphony of Beethoven is rhythmical—not metrical. Imagine a crowd dancing to the first movement! (Yet it is on record that Liszt danced to this music when Wagner first played it to him on the piano; fortunately, it was a *pas de seul*!)

An ear accustomed too early in life to the metres of popular dance music is almost certain to go astray if ever it comes to attend to real music. Delius will sound monotonous to this type of listener; he will say that Delius has no "rhythm."

Part of the popularity in recent years of Sibelius can be accounted for by the comparative obviousness of his metres. I emphasise this matter of rhythm, because if rhythm is wrongly conceived in the beginning of the listener's first adventures with music, the chances are that he will go astray permanently.

As an introduction to music I can do no better than recommend a little book in the Pelican Library, called *You and Music*, by Christian Darnton. It has been written primarily for those who like music sufficiently to go to listen to it occasionally. The author leads the novice very tactfully through the "technicalities." The way he illumines the distinction we have just been discussing—between rhythm and metre—is brilliant.

But—to quote Dr. Johnson, whom we neglect at our peril: "I can lead you, sir, to knowledge; but only God can give you understanding."

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