

You Can't Fool the Orchestra All of the Time

PAUL HENRY LANG, the author of the following article (which we reprint from the "Saturday Review of Literature") is a Hungarian-born American, aged 45, professor of Musicology at Columbia University, editor of the "Musical Quarterly" and author of a notable book, "Music in Western Civilisation." By his combination of imaginative scholarship with lively journalism, he has put new vigour into musical learning and musical criticism in the United States. The article we print here appeared in the section "Hearing Things" which he contributes to the "Saturday Review."

THE conductor raises his baton, the audience is hushed, and the concert begins. The gyrations of the baton, imperious gestures of head and body, vivid facial expression, here approving, there pleading, seem to draw the music from the orchestra as if by magic. The magic is the more convincing because quite often there is no score in front of the conductor and everything seems to be concentrated in, and emanating from, the slender piece of wood in his right hand. There can be no question that the admiration bestowed a generation ago on

the great virtuosos of the violin or piano cannot compare with the worshipful reverence accorded to our present-day virtuoso conductors; the answer is, of course, that they are not entirely free from the suspicion of sorcery.

The reaction to the conductor's mysterious doings is different, however, on the part of those who face him, for to them it is of vital importance whether those gestures have any practical meaning upon which they can rely during the execution of the work. An experienced orchestral player can tell after a few measures whether the conductor is attending to his business or is indulging

in hocus-pocus for effect, and will govern his playing accordingly. Because—and this is not sufficiently appreciated by the public—he can play without paying much attention to the conductor.

The art of conducting is 90 per cent. rehearsing, with 10 per cent. added for the performance. The gestures are largely meaningless unless the all-important essentials of a composition—such as tempo, dynamics, phrasing, balance—in short, the depth and breadth of the composition are communicated to the orchestra in detail. All this takes place during the rehearsals, when the true skill and mastery of the conductor count. Many a person who unreservedly believes in the limitless memory and sovereign ease of action of our famous conductors would be surprised to see them in their overalls when, *with a score before them*, they rehearse a symphony.

Influence of Toscanini

On such occasions a few of our glamour boys cut a sorry figure in the eyes of their players. In the "old days"



the conductor was a man who knew his score inside out before starting on the first rehearsal; yet he would not part with his copy. To-day, some of our star conductors do not bother very much with their scores in advance. At the first rehearsal or rehearsals they sit up in the balcony and have the orchestra put through its paces by the assistant conductor or concert master, usually a very efficient musician thoroughly

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