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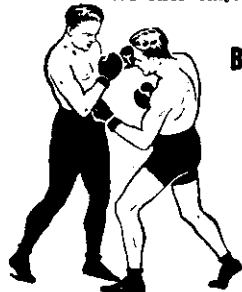
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"MENCKEN NEVER CODDLES"

The Musical Prejudices of a Lexicographer

TCHAIKOVSKI'S a lunatic, Sibelius disorderly, Shostakovich a tub-thumper, Puccini under-estimated, Schubert the greatest genius, in any art, who ever lived — these are a few opinions of Henry Louis Mencken, of Baltimore, who to-day, at the age of 66, believes that contemporary American composers are on a level with Marschner, Rubinstein, and Raff, and that America is a country where first-rate music is impossible.

The Till Eulenspiegel of American letters, essayist, journalist, author of *Prejudices, In Defense of Women*, the autobiography of his boyhood, *Happy Days*, and the lexicographer of the American language, a man whose writings exceed 10,000,000 or more of published words, he paradoxically, despite his caustic theological opinions, reflects the ecclesiastical appearance. Turn his collar around and he seems the prototype of the "rev. clergy" he so frequently lampoons. Yet he remains a thunderbolt personality.

Strangely, in spite of his literary eminence, he never wanted to be an author. In that saga of his boyhood, *Happy Days*, he revealed himself as a frustrated soul aspiring to express himself through the medium of music. He wanted to compose. That this was not to be has been his lifelong sorrow.

Teachers Ruined Him

Asked how this came about he answered: "Because the piano teachers ruined me. They never mentioned harmony, let alone taught it. A piece was never in a key, but only in one or more sharps or flats."

In his newspaper apprenticeship days he became acquainted with the orchestral score of Brahms' *Second Symphony*. He picked out the theme of the allegretto on the keyboard and it delighted him. The music critic of the local paper noticed young Mencken's susceptibility and made it possible for him to attend musical events. In 1903 a group of semi-professional instrumental musicians was formed in Baltimore, with Mencken an ardent participant in four-hand piano playing. They assembled in the back-room of a cigar store whose proprietor was in sympathy with the undertaking. Every Saturday at sundown they met to perform chamber, orchestral and operatic music, concluding always with a Johann Strauss waltz and a large keg of beer. That was in 1903. To-day, in 1946, the group still meets. Players die or are called to the wars; replacements are acquired as occasion necessitates and flute or clarinet parts are transferred to violin or other instruments. Mencken scarcely ever misses attendance. Were he in Bangor, Maine, on a Friday night, he would charter a plane, if necessary, to reach Baltimore for the meeting.

The writer inquired about their current programmes.

"Of late we have gone modern. We play Bach and Bach, and then more Bach."

Critical Reactions

"Would you care to comment on those composers whose music arouses in you the keenest reactions?"

From an interview in
"Musical America" by
FELIX DEYO

"My taste in composers is catholic," was Mr. Mencken's reply. "I enjoy the work of all who know their business from Bach to Offenbach."

"Your favourite?"

"Probably Schubert. I believe that he was the greatest genius, in any art, who ever lived: but a steady diet of Schubert's music would be cloying. I realise that, in this way or that, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, were all his superiors. I am also an earnest admirer of Haydn."

"Might I have your estimate of other composers such as, specifically, Puccini?"

"Under-estimated; I believe chiefly by people who blame him for writing something he did not try to write. He was an opera composer *pur sang*, and a very good one; unquestionably the best that Italy has produced since Verdi."

"Tchaikovsky?"

"A lunatic, but also a man of genius. He had more good ideas in one week than most composers have in a year. A great deal of his music, to be sure, was maudlin, but there is a touch of the maudlin in every Russian."

"Shostakovich?"

"He is not a composer, but simply a tub-thumper for Communism."

"Sibelius?"

"His symphonies leave me in doubt. He has a disorderly mind, and first-rate music demands clear thinking."

"And Schonberg?"

"Of his works that I have heard, I like only *Verklarte Nacht*; but his books on harmony are intelligent and valuable."

"Richard Strauss?"

"Any single act of *Der Rosenkavalier* is worth all of the music of the Stravinskys, Ravels, Schonbergs and Elgars."

"Elgar?"

"A genuine Englishman, and we must be gentle with him. If the *Enigma Variations* had been written in Little Rock, Ark., or Jackson, Miss., it would have been even more remarkable."

"Arthur Sullivan?"

"Probably the best British composer of modern times. Which is to say, he was an Irishman of Jewish blood and German training. It seems to me that *The Mikado* was one of the few perfect works of art that the 19th Century produced. It would be impossible to improve it, considering what it pretends to achieve."

"Victor Herbert?"

"Within his limits a man of the highest talent, but his popularity threatens to make him seem trite and banal. If it does, then he will be vastly underrated."

"Romberg?"

"Very charming tunes. His melodic gift is extraordinary."

"Gershwin?"

"Nothing save a competent Broadway composer. Jerome Kern was worth a dozen of him."

American Composers

"And what of contemporary American composers," the interviewer con-



H. L. MENCKEN
"Piano teachers ruined me"

tinued, "as exemplified by Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Morton Gould, George Antheil, Walter Piston, Leo Ornstein and Henry Cowell. Are they fulfilling the heritage of the European past?"

"No! They are, at best, on a level with Marschner, Rubinstein and Raff. When one of them shows signs of coming up to Dvorak it will be time to drape the Statue of Liberty in Christmas tree tinsel. They are almost as bad as the Russians now being unloaded upon American suckers. These American composers are honest and laborious men, but they live in a country where first-rate music is quite impossible, as common decency is impossible. The most one can say of them is that they do their level damndest, and angels could do no more."

"What do you think of juke box arrangements of accepted classics? Are such transcriptions a valuable contribution to our national musical education?"

The answer was contemptuous.

(continued on page 30)