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*MUSIC AND
IMAGINATION*

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Introduction

IT PLEASES ME to think that Charles Eliot Norton might have approved the appointment, in 1951 for the first time, of a native-born composer to the Poetry Chair established in his memory a quarter of a century ago. The thought that it was I myself who had been entrusted with this high responsibility made me sensibly less happy. To address the student body at Harvard in the tradition of the learned scholars and poets and composers who had preceded me as incumbents of the Norton Chair was not an easy task. Fortunately, this same tradition sanctioned a free interpretation of my title as poetry professor, so that I was able to discuss the one thing I profess to know something about: the art of music.

Perhaps I had better begin by frankly admitting that when I was a younger man I used to harbor a secret feeling of commiseration for poets. To my mind poets were men who were trying to make music with nothing but words at their command. I suppose there exist at all times some few men who have that much magic in them, but words at best will always seem to a composer a poor substitute for tones—if you want to make music, that is. Later on, after I had had some slight reading acquaintance with the poetry of Hart Crane and Gerard Manley Hopkins, I came gradually to see that music and poetry were perhaps closer kin than I had at first realized. I came gradually to see that beyond the music of both arts there is an essence that joins them—an area where the meanings behind the notes and the meaning beyond the words spring from some common source.

If that is true, if poets and composers take flight from a similar impulse, then perhaps I am more of a poetry professor than I had

thought. The music of poetry must forever escape me, no doubt, but the poetry of music is always with me. It signifies that largest part of our emotive life—the part that *sings*. Purposeful singing is what concerns most composers most of their lives. Purposeful singing to me signifies that a composer has come into possession of musical materials of related orders of experience; given these, the composer's problem then is to shape them coherently so that they are intelligible in themselves, and hence, communicable to an audience. In music the process does not stop there. The musical work must be reinterpreted, or better still, re-created in the mind of the performer or group of performers. Finally the message, so to speak, reaches the ear of the listener, who must then relive in his own mind the completed revelation of the composer's thought.

This very familiar recital of the musical experience suddenly takes on, as I tell it, the aspect of a very hazardous undertaking. It is hazardous because at so many points it can break down; at no point can you seize the musical experience and hold it. Unlike that moment in a film when a still shot suddenly immobilizes a complete scene, a single musical moment immobilized makes audible only one chord, which in itself is comparatively meaningless. This never-ending flow of music *forces* us to use our imaginations, for music is in a continual state of becoming. Wystan Auden, who knows a great deal about verse and song, recently made this distinction between the two. "A verbal art like poetry," he wrote, "is reflective; it stops to think. Music is immediate; it goes on to become." This elusive quality of music, its imagined existence in time, is made the climax of Jean Paul Sartre's treatise on *L'Imaginaire*. Sartre, in a well-known passage on Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, very nearly succeeds in convincing us that the Seventh isn't really there at all. It's not on the page, for no music can be said to exist on the silent page, and it's not in any one performance, for they are all different and not one can be said to be *the* definitive version. The Seventh, Sartre says, can only be said to live, if it does live, in the unreal

world of our imagination. Whatever one may think of Sartre's theory, it dramatizes one of the basic facts in music—a fact to which we shall return more than once in these pages.

What I have set down here I have learned from my own experience in the writing of music and in considering the music of other composers. These reflections, I should add, are not meant to be a contribution to knowledge: the typical artist cannot be said to function on the level of knowledge. (I use the word in its usual meaning of learning and scholarship.) I can only hope to speak to you on the plane of intuitional perception—the plane of immediate or sensitive knowledge—perceptual knowledge, if you like. This is an important distinction—at least for me it is—because it makes clear that those of us who are doers rather than knowers expect others to deduce knowledge from the testimony we bear. This is not to say, as sometimes is said, that a composer describing a musical state of affairs is doing nothing more than describing his own musical tastes. A composer's apperceptions need not necessarily be so circumscribed as that. A well-known conductor once confided to me that he invariably learned something from watching a composer conduct his own composition, despite possible technical shortcomings in conducting, for something essential about the nature of the piece was likely to be revealed. I should like to think that an analogous situation obtains when a composer articulates as best he can the ideas and conceptions that underlie his writing or his listening to music. If my conductor friend was right, the composer ought to bring an awareness and insight to the understanding of music that critics, musicologists, and music historians might put to good use, thereby enriching the whole field of musical investigations.

Thus it is primarily as a composer—a musically observant composer, posing temporarily in the guise of a professor of poetry—that I have chosen to consider the general topic of the relation of the imaginative mind to different aspects of the art of music.

Part One

**MUSIC AND THE
IMAGINATIVE MIND**

CHAPTER ONE

The Gifted Listener

THE MORE I LIVE the life of music the more I am convinced that it is the freely imaginative mind that is at the core of all vital music making and music listening. When Coleridge put down his famous phrase, "the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of the imagination," he was referring, of course, to the musical delights of poetry. But it seems to me even more true when applied to the musical delights of music. An imaginative mind is essential to the creation of art in any medium, but it is even more essential in music precisely because music provides the broadest possible vista for the imagination since it is the freest, the most abstract, the least fettered of all the arts: no story content, no pictorial representation, no regularity of meter, no strict limitation of frame need hamper the intuitive functioning of the imaginative mind. In saying this I am not forgetting that music has its disciplines: its strict forms and regular rhythms, and even in some cases its programmatic content. Music as mathematics, music as architecture or as image, music in any static, seizable form has always held fascination for the lay mind. But as a musician, what fascinates me is the thought that by its very nature music invites imaginative treatment, and that the facts of music, so called, are only meaningful insofar as the imagination is given free play. It is for this reason that I wish to consider especially those facets of music that are open to the creative influences of the imagination.

Imagination in the listener — in the gifted listener — is what concerns us here. It is so often assumed that music's principal stumbling block is the backward listener that it might be instructive to contemplate for a change the qualities of the sensitive listener.

Listening is a talent, and like any other talent or gift, we possess it in varying degrees. I have found among music-lovers a marked tendency to underestimate and mistrust this talent, rather than to overestimate it. The reason for these feelings of inferiority are difficult to determine. Since there is no reliable way of measuring the gift for listening, there is no reliable way of reassuring those who misjudge themselves. I should say that there are two principal requisites for talented listening: first, the ability to open oneself up to musical experience; and secondly, the ability to evaluate critically that experience. Neither of these is possible without a certain native gift. Listening implies an inborn talent of some degree, which, again like any other talent, can be trained and developed. This talent has a certain "purity" about it. We exercise it, so to speak, for ourselves alone; there is nothing to be gained from it in a material sense. Listening is its own reward; there are no prizes to be won, no contests of creative listening. But I hold that person fortunate who has the gift, for there are few pleasures in art greater than the secure sense that one can recognize beauty when one comes upon it.

When I speak of the gifted listener I am thinking of the nonmusician primarily, of the listener who intends to retain his amateur status. It is the thought of just such a listener that excites the composer in me. I know, or I think I know, how the professional musician will react to music. But with the amateur it is different; one never can be sure how he will react. Nothing really tells him what he should be hearing, no treatise or chart or guide can ever sufficiently pull together the various strands of a complex piece of music — only the intruding floodlight of one's own imagination can do that. Recognizing the beautiful in an abstract art like music partakes

somewhat of a minor miracle; each time it happens I remain slightly incredulous.

The situation of the professional musician as listener, especially of the composer, is rather different. He is an initiate. Like the minister before the altar his contact with the Source gives him an inner understanding of music's mysteries, and a greater familiarity in their presence. He possesses a dual awareness: on the one hand of the inscrutable mystery that gives certain common tones meaning; on the other of the human travail that enters into every creation. It is an awareness that no layman can hope to share. There is a nicety of balance in the musician's awareness that escapes the musical amateur. The amateur may be either too reverent or too carried away; too much in love with the separate section or too limited in his enthusiasm for a single school or composer. Mere professionalism, however, is not at all a guarantee of intelligent listening. Executant ability, even of the highest order, is no guarantee of instinct in judgment. The sensitive amateur, just because he lacks the prejudices and preconceptions of the professional musician, is sometimes a surer guide to the true quality of a piece of music. The ideal listener, it seems to me, would combine the preparation of the trained professional with the innocence of the intuitive amateur.

All musicians, creators and performers alike, think of the gifted listener as a key figure in the musical universe. I should like, if I can, to track down the source of this gift, and to consider the type of musical experience which is most characteristically his.

The ideal listener, above all else, possesses the ability to lend himself to the power of music. The power of music to move us is something quite special as an artistic phenomenon. My intention is not to delve into its basis in physics — my scientific equipment is much too rudimentary — but rather to concentrate on its emotional overtones. Contrary to what you might expect, I do not hold that music has the power to move us beyond any of the other arts. To me the