CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

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With an Introduction by

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the want of the *interesting*, a want due chiefly to the want of those two great elements of the interesting, which are elevation and beauty." This use of *interesting* (and, perhaps, this tone of a curator pointing out what is plain and culpable) shows how far along in the decline of the West Arnold came; it is only in the latter days that we ask to be interested. He had found the word in Carlyle. Carlyle is writing to a friend to persuade him not to emigrate to the United States; he asks, "Could you banish yourself from all that is interesting to your mind, forget the history, the glorious institutions, the noble principles of old Scotland—that you might eat a better dinner, perhaps?" We smile, and feel like reminding Carlyle of the history, the glorious institutions, the noble principles of new America, that New World which is, after all, the heir of the Old. And yet . . . Can we smile as comfortably, today, as we could have smiled yesterday? listen as unconcernedly, if on taking leave of us some tourist should say, with the penetration and obtuseness of his kind:

I remember reading somewhere: that which you inherit from your fathers you must earn in order to possess. I have been so much impressed with your power and possessions that I have neglected, perhaps, your principles. The elevation or beauty of your spirit did not equal, always, that of your mountains and skyscrapers: it seems to me that your society provides you with "all that is interesting to your mind" only exceptionally, at odd hours, in little reservations like those of your Indians. But as for your dinners, I've never seen anything like them: your daily bread comes *flambé*. And yet—wouldn't you say?—the more dinners a man eats, the more comfort he possesses, the hungrier and more uncomfortable some part of him becomes: inside every fat man there is a man who is starving. Part of you is being starved to death, and the rest of you is being stuffed to death. . . . But this will change: no one goes on being stuffed to death or starved to death forever.

This is a gloomy, an equivocal conclusion? Oh yes, I come from an older culture, where things are accustomed to coming to such conclusions; where there is no last-paragraph fairy to bring one, always, a happy ending—or that happiest of all endings, no ending at all. And have I no advice to give you, as I go? None. You are too successful to need advice, or to be able to take it if it were offered; but if ever you should fail, it is there waiting for you, the advice or consolation of all the other failures.

ARTHUR BERGER

Notes on the Plight of the American Composer

IN RECENT YEARS there has been much rejoicing over the phenomenal improvement in American taste for "serious" or "concert" music. As far back as 1951, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Americans leave more money at the concert-hall box-office than at the gates of professional baseball games. In 1920 there were some hundred symphony orchestras in the United States; today there are over a thousand (including those of colleges, communities and youth groups)—about half the current total of all symphony orchestras in the world.

Domestic cultivation of serious music also shows progress on many other levels. A much larger percentage of the American population now hears more and better music than ever heard it before, thanks to radio and—especially since the launching of the economical long-playing record in 1948—the phonograph. Early fears that "canned" music would deplete audiences for "live" concerts have been unwarranted. The loudspeaker cultivates interest in serious music and brings recruits to concerts and opera houses.

It seems to follow that the state of music in America could scarcely be more flourishing. Unlike most other arts—isolated from the public and practiced by esoteric groups—good music, at least, seems to have won a firm place for itself within the media of American mass culture. Technology has made products of this art more economical for the consumer and, thus, more easily accessible.

This conclusion is, however, tenable only if we disregard the very important native musical creativity. I am inclined to take the extreme view that precisely because the outlets upon which our advanced composer must depend (symphony orchestras, recordings, opera

companies, and organized networks for touring artists and chamber groups) have become successful mass media, the efflorescence of vital new American music is seriously hampered. A mass medium is not favorable to the problematic. Yet a composer, unlike a poet or a painter, cannot realize his works without an intermediary. The musical symbols rely on performers for their fulfillment. Only by hearing his music can a composer be sure he has achieved what he has conceived, and only faithful reproduction can suggest further development of new ideas for his next work. Charles Ives, whose innovations were spurned as incompetent and unfeasible by instrumentalists, resigned himself to a professional life as a Connecticut insurance man, with music as an avocation.[1] His career offers a revealing contrast to that of his contemporary, Wallace Stevens, also an insurance man, whose avocation was poetry. Stevens was the more finished artist, while Ives typified the artist whose remarkable gifts were unrealized. Given the technological developments in the field of recording and playing music, Ives would presumably have greater opportunities to fulfill himself today. I shall try to show later the extent to which these opportunities are illusory.

Aaron Copland has always conscientiously sought to preserve a balance between his creative aims and the new public's demands.[2] Yet even he has admitted that the artist "must never give up the right to be wrong, for the creator must forever be instinctive and spontaneous in his impulses, which means that he may learn as much from his miscalculations as from his successful achievements."[3] But the colossal arena that is supposed to serve as a proving-ground for new American music is scarcely the place for a composer to risk making mistakes or attempting techniques that may seem monstrous and arbitrary until they are later revealed—as so often happens in the life-span of a masterpiece—to be epoch-making and inspired. Purveyors of serious music, bent on reaping financial gain from public interest in this music, cannot take chances. Their need for prompt success restricts them to the narrow path of repertory already approved: the "fifty pieces" that, according to Virgil Thomson, dominate orchestral fare. For the most part, new works are ventured only if they are so conventional that they do not repel listeners frankly disposed toward the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and only if they are so simple in conception that they do not require much intellectual effort.

A mass audience that has grown up to be comfortable listening to

Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms does not feel at home with Anton Webern, Elliott Carter, or Karlheinz Stockhausen. Gabriel Marcel once observed that many people were indifferent to revelation. It takes time for what is revealed by vital new art to be interpreted to the public through watered-down imitations and propaganda from the experts. It has always been so. Why expect it to be otherwise now? The new factor is a reversal in the attitude toward traditional music. Traditional music has become the object of public devotion; formerly it was contemporary music that was played while earlier composers went out of fashion and their music was forgotten. Thus after his death in 1750, Bach fell into oblivion for the better part of a century until Mendelssohn and Schumann revived him. Before long, current fashion caught up with Bach, who was rearranged to sound like Brahms. By 1900 the *Bach Gesellschaft* had completed its sixty-volume edition after working for half a century on the scholarly restoration of the authentic texts.

In our century the development of musicology has made faithful reproduction of the classics a major objective. The public has undeniably come a long way in its regard for good music, and no one should resent or deprecate our musical awakening. Indeed few would have predicted it four or five decades ago. But, because we are intoxicated with the progress of public interest in serious music, we are apparently blind to the fact that in some areas the situation of the musician and the condition of music are still poor—perhaps worse than they were before. By 1950, for example, the avant garde groups, which had been organized in the opulent twenties to perform new music before select audiences, had pretty much ceased concert activity. These were snobbish coteries, attended by some people just to be seen and thus numbered among the "select." But the ends justified snobbery. Dissolution of these groups resulted when the composers who were their leading spirits began to have their music disseminated by radio and phonograph, either because their manner was suitable to a mass medium or because they adapted their language to it. As a highly deplorable corollary to this development, the official organ of the League of Composers, *Modern Music*—for years the only domestic periodical devoted to expert and literate commentary on new music—was abandoned, leaving no substitute.

The need for specialized listening groups grows rather than decreases. Since public-supported concerts as we now know them have become common (not much more than a century ago), the cleavage

between the public and the composer has widened considerably in some realms. Milton Babbitt presents the most uncompromising view of this condition:

> "The unprecedented divergence between contemporary serious music and its listeners, on the one hand, and traditional music and its following, on the other, is not accidental and—most probably—not transitory. Rather, it is a result of a half-century revolution in musical thought, a revolution whose nature and consequences can be compared only with, and in many respects are closely analogous to, those of the mid-nineteenth century revolution in mathematics and the twentieth century revolution in theoretical physics." [4]

Babbitt suggests that musicians who are occupied with advanced techniques be subsidized as scientists are, so that compositional research and test-performances of new works may be carried on within professional groups and for professional audiences.

Many people find this idea shocking since music is considered a social art. But let us recall a few landmarks from epochs when music was far less complex than it is now. No musical genre has more popular appeal than opera. Yet it was a small *Camerata* of savants and noblemen, meeting at the Florentine home of Count Bardi around 1600, whose lucubrations over a revival of Greek drama yielded a new fusion of music, poetry, and spectacle. In the eighteenth century the Esterhazys required the most menial servant in their employment to be qualified to play an instrument in an orchestra placed at Haydn's disposal. Still later, Wagner had grandiose aspirations that might never have been carried out without support from King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

The old system of private patronage, according to Mr. Shils, imposed "misery and humiliation" and was "capricious and irregular." I do not quarrel with this, but the public can be capricious, too, and more selfish. We still depend on patronage—foundation patronage—of a perhaps less capricious kind than that from vainglorious noblemen. But experts who determine foundation policy often seek to cut down those whom they benefit to their own size. Only a small part of foundation aid to music has gone to advanced causes: the Rockefeller Foundation subsidy of a Columbia-Princeton project for research in electronic music, for example, or the commissions of the gratifyingly unbureaucratic Fromm Music Foundation.

One may ask why expert performers cannot be assembled without subsidy to try out new works before the public is exposed to them. After all, the courageous innovations of atonality and twelve-tone

music had the laboratory of the *Verein Für Musikalische Privataufführungen*, the private Viennese concerts after World War I, at which a handful of dedicated performers played the music of Schoenberg and his school for interested audiences.

The answer is that a strong American union has established good fees for the instrumentalist, while radio and recording lure him with more work than he has time to accept. The performance of advanced music requires more hours for its preparation, but the players have fewer to spare. The performer is normally more anxious to take advantage of the opportunities to earn a living than to donate his services. Private concerts are an ideal to be pursued. But in the climate of American prosperity, even if they are exclusively restricted to chamber music, private concerts must be heavily endowed.

The increased cost of preparing advanced music makes it difficult to include such music on programs of a major American orchestra whose annual budget runs as high as two or three million dollars. One such orchestra has only about twelve hours to rehearse its weekly program. Performances of some highly demanding new works have been cancelled because funds for an extra rehearsal were unavailable. It is difficult to justify an increase in the orchestra's deficit by around $1,500 (the cost of an added three-hour rehearsal) when most subscribers will find the new work objectionable anyway. But even if this were not the case, a conductor must spend most of his time repolishing standard works on his program, for the public and critics will be alert to the slightest mishap in their performance. A new work is fortunate if it receives a few hours of rehearsal, scarcely enough time for the orchestra to grasp it, with no time at all for polishing. Mishaps in execution will be attributed to the composer.

The extent to which long-playing records redeem new American composers is easily exaggerated. Soaring LP and paper-back sales are often viewed as symptoms of a cultural upswing. However, the American composers recorded are usually those who have already made some impression at concerts. This is almost entirely true in symphonic and operatic music. Record companies spare huge costs by taking advantage of preparations for public performances. The normal procedure is to assemble the orchestra in the studio soon after the concert. Recording engineers can proceed directly to tape the results.

True, record catalogues today contain a much wider range of offerings than they did two or three decades ago. In anticipation of its hundredth issue (April 1958), which roughly coincided with the

launching of stereo and the tenth anniversary of LP, the *Schwann Long Playing Catalog* contained some interesting statistics. For example, the March issue of the Catalog listed 303 labels in contrast to eleven in the first issue (Oct. 1949).[5] Since LP records are cheaper to make and mail than the old 78 rpm's, small record manufacturing companies have sprung up in profusion in recent years. Incapable of competing with the major companies, for which high-priced celebrities make multiple versions of the same standard works, new companies promote themselves with contemporary and pre-classical works previously absent from the catalogue. In a hundred issues of *Schwann*, the number of serious American composers listed rose from four to over one hundred and fifty.[6]

Statistics of this order have led some observers to conclude that recordings offer more opportunity to American composers than do concerts. But the correlation of record and concert repertory is a knotty statistical problem that has yet to be solved. Annual surveys of American concert programs count orchestral works which, because of the costs involved, comprise a small portion of recorded American music. Most American composers in the catalogue are credited with chamber music or brief choral pieces. A more convincing comparison between concert and recording gains would have to be made by collating, genre by genre and year by year, the American works publicly performed with those added to the record catalogue.

Even so, numerical results would not be altogether reliable. The amount of truly advanced American music on records is small—smaller, I suspect, than the amount heard at concerts. To be sure, the advantages of hearing this music over and over when it is recorded are incalculable. But except in occasional cases of special subsidy, the record industry takes its cue from concert life, and eighteenth and nineteenth century music far outweighs all other music played on records or in the concert hall. The *Schwann Catalogue* of March 1958 had 868 listings for Mozart, which is almost twice the number of listings for all living serious American composers.[7]

Advanced European music fares somewhat better on domestic records, as exemplified by the very welcome album of Webern's complete works. We pay lip-service to the claim that American music has "come of age," but we still bow to European initiative. The fact that Elliott Carter's commanding String Quartet (1951) won first prize in a Belgian competition of 1953 played no small role in catapulting him into a well-earned position of eminent musical statesman. Firmly established as one of a handful of the most recognized American composers of intellectual distinction, he now commands infinite respect from young men in the universities, who have become consecrated exegetes of his complex scores.

Yet Carter remains a musician's composer. The larger public is scarcely aware of him. American symphony orchestras have played little of his music, although they doubtless will play him before long. Meanwhile, however, his prestige among the informed demonstrates that an American composer can still make a solid reputation without the benediction of a mass audience. But, since it becomes increasingly difficult for him to do so on his own, the environment within which he carries on his advanced work must be subsidized.

In *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, the interviewer, Robert Craft, asks: "While composing do you ever think of an audience? Is there such a thing as a problem of communication?" Stravinsky responds (italics mine):

> "When I compose something, I cannot conceive that it should fail to be recognized for what it is, and understood. I use the language of music, and my statement in my grammar will be clear to the musician *who has followed music up to where my contemporaries and I have brought it.*"[8]

Stravinsky has adapted his methods lately to advanced serial techniques as developed, in particular, by Webern. If concert and radio programs as well as sales of advanced music on records are taken as indices, a very small percentage of the mass public (measured in six or seven figures) follows this kind of music. Even Schoenberg's half-century old "Five Pieces for Orchestra" which antedates twelve-tone practice is rarely played. When it is, the average listener still finds it very "far out."

The argument that the artist is obliged to communicate directly to the public fails to recognize that the sources for renewal of the popular arts have always been the discoveries of serious art. Without these sources the popular arts languish. The results of research in advanced music frequently seep down into wider channels of communication. We may observe this process in the use of atonal music as background for TV mysteries and the occasional exploitation of twelve-tone devices in jazz. If practical justification for subsidy of this research is necessary, here is certainly a cogent one.

Subsidy is not likely to come from any of the three most important groups involved in the mass commnication of music: audience, managers, and performers. The audience is content with its traditional

music and with the accessible contemporary works that will continue to be written even if advanced music is more extensively subsidized. Profits of the managers are predicated on audience preference. The most problematic figure in the triumvirate is the performer. Even if he is offered compensation for preparing difficult new music, he may prefer to earn a living taxing his abilities less by playing music with which he is familiar. It is the rare performer, usually a youthful one, who will sacrifice himself for the advanced composer. The word "sacrifice" does not refer to technical difficulty alone. The increased determinacy in much advanced music, where every nuance is prescribed, limits the interpreter's capacity to convey his individuality.

The gap between performance technique and the precise requirements of this music has been one of the motivations for developing electronic music. A machine for synthesizing sounds directly from sound wave formations allows a composer to realize his conception completely, without the intermediary of human interpreters. It will be some time before any but a few composers are equipped to cope with the electronic machine, but its possibilities are limitless. To many people they are also frightening—especially the prospect of a machine replacing human musicians. However, photography did not replace painting, and it is likely that mechanical and humanly performed music will exist side by side, somewhat as those two arts do. [9]

As a matter of fact, some of the very musicians who compose with the precise values of the electronic machine have developed a related style based on indeterminacy. Indeterminacy, among other things, allows performers to complete the composer's process of creation by making their own choices. It is distantly related to jazz improvisation or to pre-nineteenth century improvisation in the execution of serious music.

From these examples it may be gathered that the avant garde is developing trends virtually unknown to the American mass public, since even recording has not caught up with them. One new trend, which may be added to those mentioned, will not even lend itself to reasonably faithful reproduction until multiple speakers (not simply two, as in stereo) become common in the home. I refer to the use of several small orchestras or instrumental groups *(Gruppen)* placed around the audience and playing at once from all directions.

Because of government subsidy of the arts, these trends receive more encouragement in Europe than they do here; and erudite journals abroad analyze them carefully. In America the prospect of government subsidy for the arts carries an aura of totalitarianism, while

foundation subsidy is considered more democratic. [10] However this may be, it is urgent that the disparity between the substantial subsidies allocated for specialized study in the sciences and the insignificant amounts granted advanced musical composition be eliminated. The unexpected success of serious music (some of it contemporary) in America should not be taken as an assurance that all levels can prosper on their own. If American musical creativity is to avoid stagnation, we must examine this success more closely and ask, as Joseph Wood Krutch has, "Is the Good always the friend of the Best or is it sometimes and somehow its enemy?" [11]

REFERENCES

1 See *Charles Ives and His Music,* Henry and Sidney Cowell (New York; Oxford University Press, 1955).

2 See *Aaron Copland,* Arthur Berger, New York, 1953, pp. 26-33 and 57 ff.

3 From "Creativity in America," the Blashfield Address, delivered May 28, 1952 before the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

4 "Who Cares If You Listen?" *High Fidelity Magazine,* February, 1958, p. 38 ff.

5 Statistics from 1958 are used here to present the most generous picture. Since publication of the hundredth issue of *Schwann,* record companies have dropped numerous monaural listings as a result of the advent of stereo. Naturally, esoteric music has been the first to suffer.

6 An approximate figure is given because what precisely constitutes a "serious American composer" is open to interpretation.

7 A "listing" is not necessarily one record, since some records may be listed more than once.

8 *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky,* New York, 1959, p. 14.

9 Allen Forte "Composing with Electronics in Cologne" *High Fidelity Magazine,* October 1956, p. 64 ff.

10 I have touched briefly upon a House committee's attitude toward federal aid to the arts on p. 70 of *The Atlantic,* July, 1958, in an article ("Music for Nothing: The Cost of Composing") that relates the composer's large expenditures for preparing orchestral materials to the poor returns from performance.

11 "Is Our Common Man Too Common?" *The Saturday Review,* January 11, 1953, p. 9.