



## ***Should Music Be National?***

Whistler used to say that it was as ridiculous to talk about national art as national chemistry. In saying this he failed to see the difference between art and science.

Science is the pure pursuit of knowledge and thus knows no boundaries. Art, and especially the art of music, uses knowledge as a means to the evocation of personal experience in terms which will be intelligible to and command the sympathy of others. These others must clearly be primarily those who by race, tradition, and cultural experience are the nearest to him; in fact those of his own nation, or other kind of homogeneous community. In the sister arts of painting and poetry this factor of nationality is more obvious, due in poetry to the Tower of Babel and in painting to the fact that the painter naturally tends to build his visual imagination on what he normally sees around him. But unfortunately for the art of music some misguided thinker, probably first cousin to the man who invented the unfortunate phrase ‘a good European’, has described music as ‘the universal language’. It is not even true that music has an universal vocabulary, but even if it were so it is the use of the vocabulary that counts and no one supposes that French and English are the same language because they happen to use twenty-five out of twenty-six of the letters of their alphabet in common. In the same way, in spite of the fact that they have a musical alphabet in common, nobody could mistake Wagner for Verdi or Debussy for Richard Strauss. And, similarly, in spite of wide divergencies of personal style, there is a common factor in the music say of Schumann and Weber.

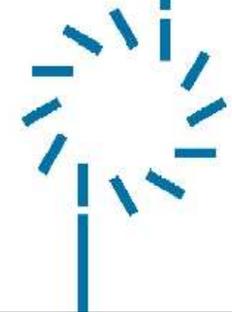
And this common factor is nationality. As Hubert Parry said in his inaugural address to the Folk Song Society of England,

‘True Style comes not from the individual but from the products of crowds of fellow-workers who sift and try and try again till they have found the thing that suits their native taste .... Style is ultimately national.’

I am speaking, for the moment, not of the appeal of a work of art, but of its origin. Some music may appeal only in its immediate surroundings; some may be national in its influence and some may transcend these bounds and be world-wide in its acceptance. But we may be quite sure that the composer who tries to be cosmopolitan from the outset will fail, not only with the world at large, but with his own people as well. Was anyone ever more local, or even parochial, than Shakespeare? Even when he follows the fashion and gives his characters Italian names they betray their origin at once by their language and their sentiments.

Possibly you may think this an unfair example, because a poet has not the common vocabulary of the musician, so let me take another example.

One of the three great composers of the world (personally I believe the greatest) was John Sebastian Bach. Here, you may say, is the universal musician if ever there was one; yet no one could be more local, in his origin, his life work, and his fame for nearly a hundred years after his death, than Bach. He was to outward appearance no more than one of a fraternity of town organists and ‘town pipers’ whose business it was to provide the necessary music for the great occasions in church and city. He never left his native country, seldom even his own city of Leipzig. ‘World Movements’ in art were then unheard of; moreover, it was the tradition of his own country which inspired him. True, he studied eagerly all the music of foreign composers that came his way in order to improve his craft. But is not the work of Bach built





up on two great foundations, the organ music of his Teutonic predecessors and the popular hymn-tunes of his own people? Who has heard nowadays of the cosmopolitan hero Marchand, except as being the man who ran away from the Court of Dresden to avoid comparison with the local organist Bach?

In what I have up to now said I shall perhaps not have been clear unless I dispose at once of two fallacies. The first of these is that the artist invents for himself alone. No man lives or moves or could do so, even if he wanted to, for himself alone. The actual process of artistic invention, whether it be by voice, verse, or brush, presupposes an audience; someone to hear, read, or see. Of course the sincere artist cannot deliberately compose what he dislikes. But artistic inspiration is like Dryden's angel which must be brought down from heaven to earth. A work of art is like a theophany which takes different forms to different beholders. In other words, a composer wishes to make himself intelligible. This surely is the prime motive of the act of artistic invention and to be intelligible he must clothe his inspiration in such forms as the circumstances of time, place, and subject dictate.

This should come unself-consciously to the artist, but if he consciously tries to express himself in a way which is contrary to his surroundings, and therefore to his own nature, he is evidently being, though perhaps he does not know it, insincere. It is surely as bad to be self-consciously cosmopolitan as self-consciously national.

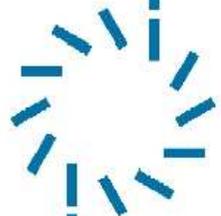
The other fallacy is that the genius springs from nowhere, defies all rules, acknowledges no musical ancestry and is beholden to no tradition. The first thing we have to realize is that the great men of music close periods; they do not inaugurate them. The pioneer work, the finding of new paths, is left to the smaller men. We can trace the musical genealogy of Beethoven, starting

right back from Philipp Emanuel Bach, through Haydn and Mozart, with even such smaller fry as Cimarosa and Cherubini to lay the foundations of the edifice. Is not the mighty river of Wagner but a confluence of the smaller streams, Weber, Marschner, and Liszt?

I would define genius as the right man in the right place at the right time. We know, of course, too many instances of the time being ripe and the place being vacant and no man to fill it. But we shall never know of the numbers of 'mute and inglorious Miltons' who failed because the place and time were not ready for them. Was not Purcell a genius born before his time? Was not Sullivan a jewel in the wrong setting?

I read the other day in a notice by a responsible music critic that 'it only takes one man to write a symphony'. Surely this is an entire misconception. A great work of art can only be born under the right surroundings and in the right atmosphere. Bach himself, if I may again quote him as an example, was only able to produce his fugues, his Passions, his cantatas, because there had preceded him generations of smaller composers, specimens of the despised class of 'local musicians' who had no other ambition than to provide worthily and with dignity the music required of them: craftsmen perhaps rather than conscious artists. Thus there spread among the quiet and unambitious people of northern Germany a habit, so to speak, of music, the desire to make it part of their daily life, and it was into this atmosphere that John Sebastian Bach was born.

The ideal thing, of course, would be for the whole community to take to music as it takes to language from its youth up, naturally, without conscious thought or specialized training; so that, just as the necessity for expressing our



material wants leads us when quite young to perfect our technique of speaking so our spiritual wants should lead us to perfect our technique of emotional expression and above all that of music. But this is an age of specialization and delegation. We employ specialists to do more and more for us instead of doing it ourselves. We even get other people to play our games for us and look on shivering at a football match, instead of getting out of it for ourselves the healthy exercise and excitement which should surely be its only object.

Specialization may be all very well in purely material things. For example, we cannot make good cigars in England and it is quite right therefore that we should leave the production of that luxury to others and occupy ourselves in making something which our circumstances and climate permit of. The most rabid chauvinist has never suggested that Englishmen should be forced to smoke impossible cigars merely because they are made at home. We say quite rightly that those who want that luxury and can afford it must get it from abroad.

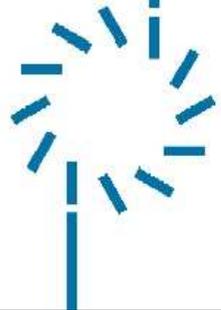
Now there are some people who apply this 'cigar' theory to the arts and especially to music; to music especially, because music is not one of the 'naturally protected' industries like the sister arts of painting and poetry. The 'cigar' theory of music is then this - I am speaking of course of my own country England, but I believe it exists equally virulently in yours: that music is not an industry which flourishes naturally in our climate; that, therefore, those who want it and can afford it must hire it from abroad. This idea has been prevalent among us for generations. It began in England, I think, in the early eighteenth century when the political power got into the hands of the entirely uncultured landed gentry and the practice of art was considered unworthy of a gentleman, from which it followed that you had to hire a 'damned foreigner' to do it for you if you wanted it, from which in its turn followed the corollary that the type of

music which the foreigner brought with him was the only type worth having and that the very different type of music which was being made at home must necessarily be wrong. These ideas were fostered by the fact that we had a foreign court at St. James's who apparently did not share the English snobbery about home-made art and so brought the music made in their own homes to England with them. So, the official music, whether it took the form of Mr. Handel to compose an oratorio, or an oboe player in a regimental band, was imported from Germany. This snobbery is equally virulent to this day. The musician indeed is not despised, but it is equally felt that music cannot be something which is native to us and when imported from abroad it must of necessity be better.

Let me take an analogy from architecture. When a stranger arrives in New York he finds imitations of Florentine palaces, replicas of Gothic cathedrals, suggestions of Greek temples, buildings put up before America began to realize that she had an artistic consciousness of her own.

All these things the visitor dismisses as without interest and turns to her railway stations, her offices and shops; buildings dictated by the necessity of the case, a truly national style of architecture evolved from national surroundings. Should it not be the same with music?

As long as a country is content to take its music passively there can be no really artistic vitality in the nation. I can only speak from the experience of my own country. In England we are too apt to think of music in terms of the cosmopolitan celebrities of the Queen's Hall and Covent Garden Opera. These are, so to speak, the crest of the wave, but behind that crest must be the driving force which makes the body of the wave. It is below the surface that we must look for the power



which occasionally throws up a Schnabel, a Sibelius, or a Toscanini. What makes me hope for the musical future of any country is not the distinguished names which appear on the front page of the newspapers, but the music that is going on at home, in the schools, and in the local choral societies.

Can we expect garden flowers to grow in soil so barren that the wild flowers cannot exist there? Perhaps one day the supply of international artists will fail us and we shall turn in vain to our own country to supply their places. Will there be any source to supply it from? You remember the story of the *nouveau riche* who bought a plot of land and built a stately home on it, but he found that no amount of money could provide him straightaway with the spreading cedars and immemorial elms and velvet lawns which should be the accompaniment of such a home. Such things can only grow in a soil prepared by years of humble toil.

Hubert Parry in his book, *The Evolution of the Art of Music*, has shown how music like everything else in the world is subject to the laws of evolution, that there is no difference in kind but only in degree between Beethoven and the humblest singer of a folk-song. The principles of artistic beauty, of the relationships of design and expression, are neither trade secrets nor esoteric mysteries revealed to the few; indeed if these principles are to have any meaning to us they must be founded on what is natural to the human being. Perfection of form is equally possible in the most primitive music and in the most elaborate.

The principles which govern the composition of music are, we find, not arbitrary rules, nor as some people apparently think, barriers put up by mediocre practitioners to prevent the young genius from entering the academic grove; they are not the tricks of the trade or even the mysteries of the craft, they are founded on the very nature of human beings. Take, for example, the

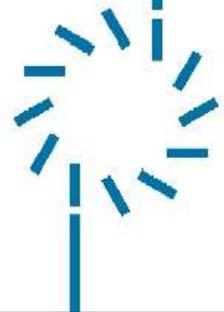
principle of repetition as a factor of design: either the cumulative effect of mere reiteration, such as we get in the Trio of the scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or in a cruder form in Ravel's Bolero; or the constant repetition of a ground bass as in Bach's organ Passacaglia or the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony. Travellers tell us that the primitive savage as soon as he gets as far as inventing some little rhythmical or melodic pattern will repeat it endlessly. In all these cases we have illustrations of the fundamental principle of emphasis by repetition.

After a time the savage will get tired of his little musical phrase and will invent another and often this new phrase will be at a new pitch so as to bring into play as many new notes as possible. Why? Because his throat muscles and his perceptive faculties are wearied by the constant repetition.

Is not this exactly the principle of the second subject of the classical sonata, which is in a key which brings into play as many new sounds as possible? Then we have the principle of symmetry also found in primitive music when the singer, having got tired in turn with his new phrase, harks back to the old one.

And so I could go on showing you how Beethoven is but a later stage in the development of those principles which actuated the primitive Teuton when he desired to make himself artistically intelligible.

The greatest artist belongs inevitably to his country as much as the humblest singer in a remote village - they and all those who come between them are links in the same chain, manifestations on their different levels of the same desire for



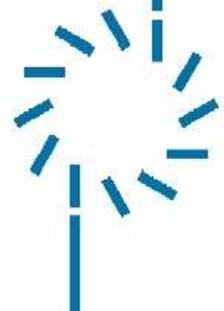
artistic expression, and, moreover, the same nature of artistic expression.

I am quite prepared for the objection that nationalism limits the scope of art, that what we want is the best, from wherever it comes. My objectors will probably quote Tennyson and tell me that 'We needs must love the highest when we see it' and that we should educate the young to appreciate this mysterious 'highest' from the beginning. Or perhaps they will tell me with Rossini that they know only two kinds of music, good and bad. So perhaps we had better digress here for a few moments and try to find out what good music is, and whether there is such a thing as absolute good music; or even if there is such an absolute good, whether it must not take different forms for different hearers. Myself, I doubt if there is this absolute standard of goodness. I think it will vary with the occasion on which it is performed, with the period at which it was composed and with the nationality of those that listen to it. Let us take examples of each of these - firstly, with regard to the occasion. The Venusberg music from *Tannhauser* is good music when it comes at the right dramatic moment in the opera, but it is bad music when it is played on an organ in church. I am sorry to have to tell you that this is not an imaginary experience. A waltz of Johann Strauss is good music in its proper place as an accompaniment to dancing and festivity, but it would be bad music if it were interpolated in the middle of the *St. Matthew Passion*. And may we not even say that Bach's B minor Mass would be bad music if it were played in a restaurant as an accompaniment to eating and drinking?

Secondly, does not the standard of goodness vary with time? What was good for the fifteenth century is not necessarily good for the twentieth. Surely each new generation requires something different to satisfy its different ideals. Of course there is some music that seems to defy the ravages of time and

to speak a new message to each successive generation. But even the greatest music is not eternal. We can still appreciate Bach and Handel or even Palestrina, but Dufay and Dunstable have little more than an historical interest for us now. But they were great men in their day and perhaps the time will come when Bach, Handel, Beethoven, and Wagner will drop out and have no message left for us. Sometimes of course the clock goes round full circle and the twentieth century comprehends what had ceased to have any meaning for the nineteenth. This is the case with the modern revival of Bach after nearly one hundred and fifty years of neglect, or the modern appreciation of Elizabethan madrigals. There may be many composers who have something genuine to say to us for a short time and for that short time their music may surely be classed as good. We all know that when an idiom is new we cannot detect the difference between the really original mind and the mere imitator. But when the idiom passes into the realm of everyday commonplace then and then only we can tell the true from the false. For example, any student at a music school can now reproduce the tricks of Debussy's style, and therefore it is now, and only now, that we can discover whether Debussy had something genuine to say or whether when the secret of his style becomes common property the message of which that style was the vehicle will disappear.

Then there is the question of place. Is music that is good music for one country or one community necessarily good music for another? It is true that the great monuments of music, the *Missa . Papae Marcelli*, or the *St. Matthew Passion*, or the Ninth Symphony, or *Die Meistersinger*, have a world wide appeal, but first they must appeal to the people, and in the circumstances where they were created. It is because Palestrina and Verdi are essentially Italian and because Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner are essentially



German that their message transcends their frontiers. And even so, the *St. Matthew Passion*, much as it is loved and admired in other countries, must mean much more to the German, who recognizes in it the consummation of all that he learnt from childhood in the great traditional chorales which are his special inheritance. Beethoven has an universal meaning, but to the German, who finds in it that same spirit exemplified in its more homely form in those Volkslieder which he learnt in his childhood, he must also have a specialized meaning.

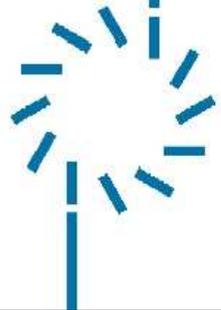
Every composer cannot expect to have a world-wide message, but he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people and many young composers make the mistake of imagining they can be universal without at first having been local. Is it not reasonable to suppose that those who share our life, our history, our customs, our climate, even our food, should have some secret to impart to us which the foreign composer, though he be perhaps more imaginative, more powerful, more technically equipped, is not able to give us? This is the secret of the national composer, the secret to which he only has the key, which no foreigner can share with him and which he alone is able to tell to his fellow countrymen. But is he prepared with his secret? Must he not limit himself to a certain extent so as to give his message its full force? For after all it is the millstream forcing its way through narrow channels which gathers strength to turn the water-wheel. As long as composers persist in serving up at second-hand the externals of the music of other nations, they must not be surprised if audiences prefer the real Brahms, the real Wagner, the real Debussy, or the real Stravinsky to their pale reflections.

What a composer has to do is to find out the real message he has to convey to the community and say it directly and without equivocation. I know there is a temptation each time a new star appears on the musical horizon to say, 'What a fine fellow this

is, let us try and do something like this at home,' quite forgetting that the result will not sound at all the same when transplanted from its natural soil. It is all very well to catch at the prophet's robe, but the mantle of Elijah is apt, like all second-hand clothing, to prove the worst of misfits. How is the composer to find himself? How is he to stimulate his imagination in a way that will lead him to voicing himself and his fellows? I think that composers are much too fond of going to concerts - I am speaking now, of course of the technically equipped composer. At the concert we hear the finished product. What the artist should be concerned with is the raw material. Have we not all about us forms of musical expression which we can take and purify and raise to the level of great art? Have we not all around us occasions crying out for music? Do not all our great pageants of human beings require music for their full expression? We must cultivate a sense of musical citizenship. Why should not the musician be the servant of the state and build national monuments like the painter, the writer, or the architect?

Come muse, migrate from Greece and Iouia,  
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,  
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas',  
Odysseus' wanderings,  
placard 'removed' and 'to let' on the rocks of your snowy  
Parnassus,  
Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's gate and  
on Mount Moriah,  
The same on the walls of your German, French and Spanish  
castles, and Italian collections,  
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere,  
A wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.

Art for art's sake has never flourished among the English-speaking nations. We are often called inartistic because our



art is unconscious. Our drama and poetry have evolved by accident while we thought we were doing something else, and so it will be with our music. The composer must not shut himself up and think about art; he must live with his fellows and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community. If we seek for art we shall not find it. There are very few great composers, but there can be many sincere composers. There is nothing in the world worse than sham good music. There is no form of insincerity more subtle than that which is coupled with great earnestness of purpose and determination to do only the best and the highest, the unconscious insincerity which leads us to build up great designs which we cannot fill and to simulate emotions which we can only experience vicariously. But, you may say, are we to learn nothing from the great masters? Where are our models to come from? Of course we can learn everything from the great masters and one of the great things we can learn from them is their sureness of purpose. When we are sure of our purpose we can safely follow the advice of St. Paul 'to prove all things and to hold to that which is good'. But it is dangerous to go about 'proving all things' until you have made up your mind what is good for you.

First, then, see your direction clear and then by all means go to Paris, or Berlin, or Peking if you like and study and learn everything that will help you to carry out that purpose.

We have in England today a certain number of composers who have achieved fame. In the older generation Elgar and Parry, among those of middle age Holst and Bax, and of the quite young Walton and Lambert. All these served their apprenticeship at home. There are several others who thought that their own country was not good enough for them and went off in the early stages to become little Germans or little Frenchmen. Their names I will not give to you because they are unknown even to their fellow countrymen.

I am told that when grape vines were first cultivated in California the vineyard masters used to try the experiment of importing plants from France or Italy and setting them in their own soil. The result was that the grapes acquired a peculiar individual flavour, so strong was the influence of the soil in which they were planted. I think I need hardly draw the moral of this, namely, that if the roots of your art are firmly planted in your own soil and that soil has anything individual to give you, you may still gain the whole world and not lose your own souls.

