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Contemporary Composers

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Edited by
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Paul Hindemith

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Although Hindemith's music has often been referred to as neo-Classical, its roots are more complex than this simple term would indicate. The spirit of eighteenth-century music is often evoked in Hindemith's work, particularly in its insistence upon strong metric drive, its feeling for tonal center, and its heavy reliance upon contrapuntal technique. On the other hand, his stand on the ethical obligations of the composer toward society is reminiscent of the nineteenth century, and would be considered Romantic when compared with the more objective approaches of Stravinsky and Babbitt. Moreover, he was a great innovator in the early years of his career, and was among the first to explore the uses of jazz chords built in fourths rather than the traditional thirds, and dissonant counterpoint.

The essays reprinted here illustrate important tenets in Hindemith's philosophy. He believed that music has a social role to play, and that all music must be composed—and judged—with a specific social purpose in mind. Much of his own music was written with such a purpose; his Gebrauchsmusik, "music for use" or "workaday music", includes works composed for neglected instruments, for performance by children or amateurs, for occasions of state. These are only a few of the circumstances that—in Hindemith's view—demand music of the contemporary composer.

This view of the composer's role assumes that the creation of new music is only one of many ways—including performing, conducting, writing and teaching—in which the composer must function as a complete musician, enriching the cultural life of his community.

Reprinted from Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World, Horizons and Limitations* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 104-12, 121-25, 177-87.

From "A Composer's World"

Technique and Style

There is a widespread opinion that questions of technique are irrelevant: that the creator of music, in particular, need not bother with the worldly problem of how to assemble tones, since he, the gods' favorite, cannot help simply and involuntarily fulfilling his superhuman mission. This opinion promptly leads to the often-heard statement that in music the question is merely one of quality: that there is only good or bad music. This is a statement you hear equally from the initiated, namely the composer, and from the layman, be he a plain music-lover or a well-trained philosopher. What the composer's attitude towards this statement ought to be we shall see later on. Here and now, in our quest to clarify the role of technique in the process of musical production and reproduction, we must resort to the experience of the performer, the man who, as we have found, is by his very actions necessarily closest to such decisions.

If all music ever written could only be classified as "good" or "bad" with some pieces perhaps occasionally falling short of either extreme, what would a singer or player do with a composition of the highest quality, viewed objectively, but not serving his personal purposes? Take one of the more florid Gregorian melodies, such as those sung at Easter time or on Whitsunday, which will doubtless be considered by every musician of some taste the most perfect, the most convincing one-line compositions ever conceived. Of course, in order to fully understand their overwhelming linear power, you cannot restrict yourself to just reading or hearing them. You must participate in singing these melodic miracles if you want to feel how they weld the singing group into a spiritual unit, independent of the individualistic prompting of a conductor, and guided only by the lofty spirit and the technical excellence of the structure. Now imagine that you are forced to sing them by yourself—solo, that is—transplanting those immaculate creations into another environment. Don't you feel as if you were expelled from a community of worthy friends? Has the music not lost its savor and assumed a taste of bitterness instead? And then play these same melodies, which were the precious vessels of highest linear revelations, on

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a wind instrument, then on a fiddle, and finally on the piano. The quality of the melodic line seems to disappear gradually, greatness turns into inexpressive melismatism, then becomes insipid passage-work, and finally ends in ridicule. If, as our aforementioned light-hearted philosophers believed, perfection remained under all circumstances, how could such a disintegration of values take place merely by altering the means of performance?

Let us once more illustrate our point, this time with an example in which the change of the means of expression is not quite as drastic as in the gradual metamorphosis of a chorus into a piano, but which, due to its closeness to our everyday musical experience, is perhaps even more convincing. We all agree that in a fugue the linear arrangement of the musical material must be strongly emphasized, and this is often carried to the highest degree of contrapuntal rigidity. Consequently, any group of instruments that allows this contrapuntal fabric to appear in transparent lucidity should in principle be preferable to all others. Since linear writing for pianos or other keyboard instruments can only be an artificial projection of several independent melodic planes into one single plane, a keyboard fugue played on nonkeyed melodic instruments should reveal its linear spirit in a more appropriate and therefore more convincing manner than the original form could ever do. Now play some of the undisputed masterpieces of this species, namely fugues from Bach's *Wohlt temperiertes Klavier*, as string trio or string quartet pieces. You will have a queer and rather disagreeable sensation: compositions which you knew as being great, heavy, and as emanating an impressive spiritual strength, have turned into pleasant miniatures. With the increase in contrapuntal clarity we have had to accept a deplorable loss of majesty and gravity. Although the supremacy of the piece has remained the same, the pieces have shrunk, despite the improved reproduction, and their structural and spiritual relation to the original keyboard form has become that of a miniature mummified Incan head to its previous animate form. In our fugues we have reduced to almost nothing the heavy technical resistance that a player of polyphonic keyboard music has to overcome, since the string players have produced their isolated lines without noticeable effort. This example shows clearly that with the artless classification of good and bad, nothing is said about the real technical quality of a composition so long as no further criteria are introduced. One of these criteria is, as our experiments in the transformation of Gregorian and Bach pieces have demonstrated, the degree of resistance that the particular technical form of a composition offers to the players' or singers' technique of performance, a factor which the performer has to cope with before either the listener or the producer need be aware of it.

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A composer may remain totally ignorant of the wider world of musical thought, musical creation, and musical reception shown in these pages; he may never outgrow his oxlike devotion to the moment's technical demands; but may we not hope that after he is told of the performer's keenness in respect to a composer's technique he, for his part, will comprehend that his own technique of assembling musical material should likewise be applied with utmost discrimination—a discrimination not arising out of his own preoccupation with the peculiarities of sounds and their application, but determined by factors more important than his individualistic speculations?

What are these factors?

There is, first of all, the prosaic decision concerning the space in which a piece is to be performed. In a very small hall, in a living room, we can readily discern the most involved melodic lines, the most complex harmonies, and the most intricate rhythmical patterns, because we are in closest spatial connection with the source of the sound. And besides, the instruments and singers can make use of the most refined subtleties of technique, because nothing will get lost, and the performers themselves can transmit their production as directly as in intimate talk. The composer, writing for such conditions, enjoys the greatest possible freedom to develop his technique into the most esoteric realms. Almost everything he writes will have a chance to be lucidly presented and clearly understood. No wonder, therefore, that chamber music has always, so far as application of the musical elements is concerned, been the preferred medium for technical audacity.

A composer writing for a larger hall loses a good deal of the freedom afforded by the small one. Melodies, in order to be understood, must be written so that the physical and mental distance between the performers and listeners cannot distort them. In rhythm, metrical structures will push themselves into the foreground, due to their greater intelligibility. Thus rhythmic patterns which, in order to be grasped intelligently, require a keen analytic mind on the part of the listener, ought to be avoided. Rapidly moving harmonies or harmonies of too great a complexity are not advisable, for the same reason. It is striking to see how sensitive our classical masters were in this respect. The technique of their symphonic works is essentially different from that of their chamber music, although all the basic material is identical. Nowadays we find many writers who neglect these necessities. Oftentimes we hear orchestra pieces written in a technique of complete linear independence, of great harmonic and tonal detail, and of rhythmic obscurity, all of which lose about fifty per cent of their substance before they reach the listener's ears. On the other hand, some chamber music pieces are presented in the rudest orchestral technique,

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which in small places of performance gives merely an impression of boorish awkwardness. What would an expert in steel production say, if a simple-minded waitress suggested the use of paper drinking cups as the most suitable molds for white-hot steel? Or what sense would there be in serving a milk shake in a Bessemer converter? In music we find many works the musical contents of which are no less incongruous with their containers—the places of performances—than milk shakes and steel in our metaphor. The larger such places are, the more the complexity of technique has to be reduced. So far no music has been written that would fit our gigantic stadiums and bowls. We are using them for the performance of classical music, music that depends on the closest physical and mental proximity of not more than a few hundred listeners, and now this music is blown up to fill spaces in which the listener in the last row of the third balcony hears the fiddles' tones about a second after he has seen the players' bows executing them (a second equaling one half measure in 4/4 time at ordinary walking tempo!). Here again we could learn from the past—from Perotin, for instance, who about 1200 wrote his *Organa* for the then overwhelmingly new spatial conception of the Gothic cathedrals. These pieces, by no means primitive, provided in their technical planning even for the echo within those columned and vaulted halls, so that retarded echoing harmonies, intermingling with the straight progress of the normal harmonies could not disturb the over-all impression.

Once I heard a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in one of those tremendous stadiums which seat thirty thousand or more people. The piece was performed by a chorus of about one thousand singers with a five-hundred piece orchestra. The group of performers, although of a high quality, and the dimensions of the place were so utterly disproportionate to the shape and character of the piece, that it sounded ghastly. One could not make head or tail of it. After this symphony a dance was performed by thousands of school children to the accompaniment of some specially manufactured music of no significance. It was written for a couple of recorders, two or three lower-ranged instruments, and some soft percussion. This music, transmitted by loud-speakers, made a masterpiece appear like an amateurish attempt at composition by some nincompoop. Had Beethoven, while writing the symphony in its familiar technique, conceived it for the spatial conditions just mentioned, we would have to accuse him of the grossest technical miscalculation. Fortunately, he had the finest feeling for the proportional relationship between space and compositional technique and he cannot be blamed for the sins of his interpreters. Our performers may, for their own ephemeral glory, adhere to such barbarisms as playing a Brandenburg concerto, written for not more than fifteen players and an audience of fifty to one hundred, with eighty or

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more players before an assembled audience of forty thousand, but the living composer should at least try to prevent his own pieces from being performed under adverse conditions. Alas, he usually is only too elated if his compositions are played at all, no matter what the conditions of performance are.

There are other factors besides places of performance that influence—or, let us say, ought to influence—the composer's technical considerations. There is the intellectual capacity of his listeners. If he writes for an audience well acquainted with symphonic music and its performance, he can apply a technique more involved than the one he would use for unaccustomed listeners. For instance, an orchestral piece that is good for New York or Boston is not necessarily good for Musselshell, Mo.; and chamber music, enjoyed in a salon by a sophisticated, overcritical bunch of high-brow intellectuals, may be boring to people with plain musical intelligence or those with a desire for uninhibited directness in musical communications. Of course, there is always the haughty point of view of the composer who does not want to step down to the populace, "My music is as it is. I am not influenced by all these considerations. If people want to understand my music, they will have to grow up to my standards." It is one thing to write down to the bad instincts of the unrefined listener, and another to satisfy by technical means the just demands of a cultured customer. The attitude of the arrogant composer is similar to that of the millionaire who cannot understand that other people are in want of money. Even the loftiest musical spirit grew from a state of simple-mindedness to its superior position; thus, it is acting the parvenu to look with contempt upon those left far behind on the road to success. Moreover, there are many people who never will be and never want to be millionaires, financially or musically. Are we to lose them and their propensity towards music merely because we are unable or unwilling to write music that satisfies their demands?

Another important factor in technical decisions is the performer's degree of skill in playing and singing. For the Boston Symphony you can write anything from open strings to complicated arrangements approximating those that only Harvard's "mechanical brain" could be expected to handle with a formidable consumption of electric current; they will play it. But what about orchestras in small towns, amateur groups, and school orchestras? What about amateurs who have perhaps one hundred times the good will of the professional musician but only one hundredth of his technical skill? If the nature of our pieces is such that they can master them only after fifty rehearsals and even then never to their own satisfaction, they will gladly consign their fiddles and voices to cold storage and become one hundred per cent listeners, driven away from practical music

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by the very musician who usually complains bitterly of the public's ever-growing aversion to practical participation in music.

Finally, do we want to drive away all those who have all the culture and education that make them perfect listeners; and those excellent players or singers, professionals or amateurs, who simply are not always in the mood to solve intricate musical problems? Shall we leave them to tin-pan alley and the juke boxes? There is a great choice of technical possibilities that can take care of their needs.

Once, in the Rocky Mountains, I had a strange musical experience. In a gorge famous for its waterfalls and filled with aerial railways, summer guests, cars, and ice-cream vendors, a well-coordinated loud-speaker system screamed Isolde's *Liebestod* all over the place, as part of the gorge's daily routine. I am sure the managers of the establishment wanted to please their customers, true to the rule which seems to be one of the leading theses of the American way of life: enjoyment plus enjoyment gives you more enjoyment.

We cannot blame them for the idea that the accumulation of single enjoyments results in an accumulated sensation: that *Liebestod* plus waterfalls plus ice cream give us more pleasure than *Liebestod* or waterfalls or ice-cream solo. After all, it was the composer of the *Liebestod* himself who concocted the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which singing voices, orchestra, stage, light effects, horses, rivers, cardboard mountains, artificial beads, et cetera, et cetera, were part of the over-all enjoyment. The catch in this conception is that our over-all enjoyment cannot be more than one hundred per cent. Hence, three factors of enjoyment, which each by itself would provide one hundred per cent enjoyment, do not add up to three hundred per cent; they are, rather, compressed into the one hundred per cent, so that each of them, if participation is equal, has but thirty-three and a third per cent of its original effect. I personally even believe that too much of an accumulation of artistic or presumed artistic enjoyments not only reduces the percentage of the single constituent enjoyment, but also reduces the over-all effect from its one hundred per cent to a much lower degree. Thus the effect of the aforementioned *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the mountains will most likely be that you will take your car, cursing waterfalls, *Liebestods*, and ice cream in equal percentage and drive to a place where there is nothing but a hundred per cent view.

This time the disproportion between the composition and its performance was not, as it was in the case of the Ninth Symphony, of a musical-technical nature. Although the operatic piece was originally not written for gorges and waterfalls, the many loud-speakers provided an even distribution of sound, so that acoustically the conditions of a big opera house were

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reproduced not too inaptly, and thus the technical shape of the piece was not in disturbing disagreement with the space in which it was performed.

The disturbing effects in this case originated in a discrepancy between styles. The piece with all its technical, intellectual, historical, and aesthetic implications belonged to one certain sphere of style, from which the style of the pleasure-voracious crowd with their dull, indeterminate, and restless surrender to anything sensuous is far removed—if ever such brutishness can be honored with the name style—a term that usually indicates at least a faint tendency toward a cultured life!

It is obvious that the gorge's managerial benefactors of the vacationing crowd thought "If *Liebestod* is good in the Metropolitan, it will be equally good in our gorge." They forgot that the composition deals with the most refined feelings of two sublime lovers, expressed in exalted music for those who come especially prepared for its reception, and that it should not be projected into an environment which, although gigantic, has become nothing but a tremendous prop for the proverbial having-a-good-time of thousands of daily vacationists. The discrepancy between the vacationists' good time and Isolde's unfortunate experience is more than disgusting.

Let us investigate briefly some allegedly "modern" achievements. The best known and most frequently mentioned is the so-called twelve-tone technique, or composition in preëstablished tone series. The idea is to take the twelve tones of our chromatic scale, select one of its some four hundred million permutations, and use it as the basis for the harmonic (and possibly melodic) structure of a piece. This rule of construction is established arbitrarily and without any reference to basic musical facts. It ignores the validity of harmonic and melodic values derived from mathematical, physical, or psychological experience; it does not take into account the differences in intervallic tensions, the physical relationship of tones, the degree of ease in vocal production, and many other facts of either natural permanence or proven usefulness. Its main "law" is supplemented by other rules of equal arbitrariness, such as: tones must not be repeated; your selected tone series may skip from one stratum of the texture to any other one; you have to use the inversion and other distortions of this series; and so on—all of which can be reduced to the general advice: avoid so far as possible anything that has been written before.

The only segment of our conventional body of theoretical musical knowledge which the dodecaphonists have designed to admit and which, in fact, alone makes their speculations possible, is the twelve-tone tempered scale. We have already been told of this scale's weakness: because of its basic impurity it can be used only as a supplementary regulative to a tone system containing natural intervals—at least, so long as we want to save

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our music from total instrumental mechanization and have human voices participate in its execution. True, some kind of a restricted technique of composition can be developed on a foundation of compromise, scales and arbitrary working rules, but doubtless the general result will always be one similar to the kind of poetry that is created by pouring written words out of a tumbler without calling in grammar and syntax: A higher tonal organization is not attempted and cannot be achieved, especially if one permits the technical working rules to slip off into the aforementioned set of supplementary statutes which are nothing but stylistic whims and, as such, not subject to any controlling power of general validity. Of course, there are those superrefined prophets who proudly claim that they can, by the rules of this stylistic method, write pieces in C major, which seems to be a procedure as direct as leaving one's house in New England through the front door and entering the back door by a little detour via Chicago.

Twelve-tone operations are not the only nightmares that haunt the composing zealot who wants to be up to date. Are there not city sky lines whose ragged contours demand to be reproduced in melodic lines? Some other composers invent, with the aid of addition, subtraction, and other numerical operations, ways of combining tones mechanically; and finally, there are always colors as organizing agents. It is easy to recognize the underlying principle in all these and similar methods: it is a simple equation between a given number of tones and anything else that consists of an equal number of constituent parts. We could go on counting such methods of tonal equations, but only to enter a sphere in which there is almost nothing that could not be brought into direct equational relationship with harmony and melody: fever curves, cooking recipes, railroad timetables (the music resulting from them may be rather monotonous, though), catalogues of country fairs, the depth of the ocean between Halifax and Ireland, and so on.

If the inventors of such systems had looked into music history, they would have found that their methods are by no means as modern as they think. Moreover, their predecessors' lack of lasting success should have made them suspicious. The earliest attempts at composing by a method of this kind can be found in several treatises of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in which an equation of the five vowels of the Latin language and five successive tones of a church mode is used. The melodies thus constructed must, even to the inventor of this system, have sounded trivial enough, because we see an additional, transposed equation recommended to heighten the poor melodic effect somewhat. (I was never quite sure that this invention was not contrived with tongue in cheek.) Obviously this method did not appeal to contemporary composers, since in spite of the medieval theorists' fondness for plagiarizing each other, it did not reappear in later treatises.

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Other equations were devised with the spots of dice, a pastime very popular in Mozart's time—in fact, some of the methods of composing with this recipe are published under Mozart's or Haydn's name, one even in Boston, Massachusetts.

The method which in my opinion showed the greatest subtlety is one suggested in a little book published in 1751 by the English musician William Hayes. Its title is *The Art of Composing Music by a Method Entirely New, Suited to the Meanest Capacity*. It is a satire on the wave of Italian music, with its composers of frequently inferior quality, which at that time swept over London. His advice is, to take a brush with stiff bristles (like a toothbrush), dip it into an inkwell, and, by scraping the bristles with the finger, spatter with one sweep a whole composition onto the staff paper. You have only to add stems, bar lines, slurs, et cetera, to make the opus ready for immediate performance. Whole and half notes are entirely absent, but who cares for sustained tones anyway! (What a striking forecast of one of the ulgiest modern musical diseases!)

Despite the intentional humor of these directions, the similarity with our twelve-tone technique cannot be overlooked. The characteristic difference seems to be that Hayes's method gives the composer, or whatever you want to call the fellow who uses the brush—the "spruzzarino," as he calls it—a greater freedom in artistic enterprises than does the rather rigorous twelve-tone technique. Moreover, it prevents the once accepted technique from degenerating into stylistic irrelevancies.

Movements of this kind spring up like epidemics of measles, and they disappear just as enigmatically. We have already once seen a twelve-tone movement die, due to lack of interest on the part of musicians who liked music more than operations on music. That was shortly after World War I. At that time the germ was introduced to this country and caused minor disturbances, which by now have all but disappeared, with a few scars remaining. After World War II, Europe was again infected, but already the patients are feeling better and there is hope that after some minor relapses only a few diehards will survive to be the prophets who, in quiet solitude, will prepare the next big outburst. This, if we can trust past experience, will probably occur after World War III, provided any people are left over to be interested in tone combinations. One little sign of reconvallescence may perhaps be seen in the following fact, which could not remain hidden even to the most stalwart dodecaphonists (or is it dodecaphonists, as many people have it?): with this method no pieces can be produced which could fill big spaces with broad symphonic colors, or which could satisfy many people's demands for simplicity, directness, and personal sympathy. A strange feature of all these movements is their sectarian character. It is almost as in the Nazi state or in a Red dictatorship: the supreme condition for your participation is that you have no disbelief whatsoever in the

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perfection of the system. You will have to fight against the adherents of other "systems," against the writers of program music, and against those who use sky lines and numerical equivalents other than the permutations of the numbers one to twelve, although your "meanest capacity" would tell you, that their activities are of the same kind as those you adore. The parallelism to religious sects goes so far, that an idol is felt to be necessary, to whom everything of importance ever created or uttered in music is ascribed, although for his glory some real instigators and inventors may have to be obscured and rendered innocuous. It is all so reminiscent of some kind of voodoo cult, and the idolizers of the superstition seem to bear a painful similarity to the haruspices in ancient Greece and Rome. The entrails of sacrificial animals by means of which the haruspex predicted the future have just as little to do with world events as have numerical permutations with musical creation.

I would not have dwelt so long on these strange peripheral endeavors, were it not for the fact that such a discussion shows how far one can be led astray by the emphasis upon a musical factor of secondary importance—namely, style. The ethical power of music is entirely neglected; the composer's obligations towards his fellow men are degraded to a game of double-crosses, which certainly gives enough stimulus to one's self-content but leaves the other fellow like the doleful child outside the house in which the Christmas tree is shining. If music written on this basis has any message for others, it is the crassest order "you have to obey, you have to believe in my constructions," in a time when we all are so terribly in need of some shiny little reflection of that other message, the one that Schiller and Beethoven gave to mankind: *Seid umschlungen, Millionen—be embraced, ye millions.*

Education

In earlier times composition was hardly taught at all. If a boy was found to be gifted for music, he was given as an apprentice into the care of a practical musician. With him he had to get acquainted with many branches of music. Singing was the foundation of all musical work. Thus singing, mostly in the form of group singing, was one of the most important fields of instruction. The practical knowledge of more or less all instruments was a *sine qua non*. Specialization was almost unknown. Frequently a musician may have been better on the keyboard than with the bow and with woodwinds or brass, but that would not have absolved him from playing as many other instruments as possible. And all this playing was done with one

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aim in mind: to prepare the musician for collective work; it was always the community that came first. Solistic training was nothing but a preliminary and preparatory exercise for this purpose. Hand in hand with this daily all-round routine in instrumental training went a solid instruction in the theory of music—not only what we call theory in our modern curricula, namely harmony, counterpoint, and other branches of practical instruction, but true theory, or if you prefer another name, the scientific background of music.

This vast stock of general musical knowledge was the hotbed in which the germs of composing grew. If a musician had any talent for composition, he could always draw on this tremendous accumulation of practical experience, once he wanted to convert his ideas into audible structures. Composing was not a special branch of knowledge that had to be taught to those gifted or interested enough. It simply was the logical outgrowth of a healthy and stable system of education, the ideal of which was not an instrumental, vocal, or tone-arranging specialist, but a musician with a universal musical knowledge—a knowledge which, if necessary, could easily be used as a basis for a more specialized development of peculiar talents. This system, although it provided for the composer the best preparation possible, did not guarantee him any success. Only posterity decided whether he was to be counted among the few extraordinary creative musical figures each country had produced throughout the world, or among the many preparers and pioneers who had to blast the way for those great fulfillers, or finally among those who generalize, smooth out, and popularize the more original work of the genius.

Today the situation is quite different.

First of all, it is almost never the gift of composing that sends young people into this field of musical activity. Musical creative gift cannot, in my opinion, be recognized until after a rather well developed general knowledge of practical music has been acquired. If there is no such knowledge, the sole evidence of that gift can be afforded by written-down attempts at building musical structures. Usually such attempts are not at all a sign of creative talent. The minimum requirements for entering the creative field, such as a good ear for musical facts and perhaps even a feeling for absolute pitch, are too common among all people, musical or nonmusical, to be taken for the foundation upon which to build a composer's career. Their presence acknowledged, the further creative inclination of a youth inexperienced in practical music normally is the desire to express himself in some way or another. The ordinary urge to put something on paper is most readily attracted by notation symbols. Their being distinctly remote from the banalities of written language symbols, the widespread talismanic

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belief that by some power of their own they may turn from a vague conception into a work of art, and finally the pictorial satisfaction they give to people otherwise lacking the gift of drawing or painting—all these factors make the writing of notation symbols, following some self-imposed rules of combination, the ideal medium for minds who in their youthful innocence try to compensate for confusion and immaturity by means of exorcistic mysteriousness.

Another familiar starting point for presumptive composers is the ambition to imitate somebody whose name is known, to become a famous man, which in the opinion of most candidates can be accomplished in the field of musical creation with less effort and with a greater expectation of success than in other activities. In all these cases the driving factor is the inclination towards release of some tension—frequently but not necessarily of a general artistic nature—and not primarily a musical gift that decides in favor of composition.

True, all these factors must not be underrated. Once a workable knowledge of practical music is acquired, they can aid the assiduous mind considerably. Alone, however, unbacked by solid experience, they are of no greater value than an infant's determination to become a streetcar driver or a garbage man.

Although genuine musical knowledge is lacking, some experience with music is usually evident with those intending to enter musical composition. The main fact in their favor is that they listened most frequently and eagerly to music, predominantly in the form of records or radio transmissions, and that their actual musical activity consisted in turning the radio dial, or putting the records on the Victrola, which latter effort grew obsolete with the introduction of automatic record turners and long-playing disks and was reduced simply to an admiring and utterly unproductive attitude. The fellow who comes as a fiddler or a wind instrument player from a high-school orchestra or band and sees in the study of composition a complementary discipline of his general musical education that eventually may or may not lead him into specialization is already a rather rare bird. And the case in which people come from the place that ought to be the normal breeding ground of future composers—namely, the family that has made singing and playing a part of their daily cultural life—is almost nonexistent.

The situation we described shortly before as the ideal seems to be reversed. In former times one had to be a good musician before he could take up composing, and it was up to history to decide whether or not he was to be regarded a great creative genius. Nowadays we can be sure to find in most applicants' souls, openly shown or bashfully hidden, the conviction "I feel that I am a great creative genius, therefore people have to take me for an excellent musician"; and the equally meaningless and

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boastful addition "I am feeling an irrepressible urge to compose" can be taken for granted. Frequently ominous amendments follow these basic statements, such as: "I do not play any instrument, and I never had any regular instruction in theory and composition, since several attempts in this direction failed due to the fussiness of the teachers who wanted me to go through years of boring technicalities instead of promoting my creative gift; I have written many pieces, some of which have been performed and won awards; in a recent nationwide competition I won the first prize over a number of trained composers and theory teachers." We may count ourselves lucky if the courageous ignoramus does not end up with "My compositions are written in an atonal vein."

If you are a good-natured person and want to give this fellow a chance, you may ask him to submit his compositions for an examination, although you know from hundreds of preceding experiences that there is no hope of discovering a creative musician this way. Nature doubtless has her whims and sometimes permits him to appear, meteorlike, among hundreds of thousands of regular cases, unprepared, uninhibited and full of talent, energy, and fervor, and you want to assist this prodigy in coming to the fore. But despite all well-meaning midwifery, untrained natural talent has not the same chances in music that it has in poetry or painting. In the latter arts the material is much more easily accessible, since language is everybody's property anyway, and there is nobody who does not, from his earliest childhood, have access to pencils, colors, and drawing paper and with them the possibility of acquiring some rudimentary artistic knowledge. In music, however, as in architecture and in sculpture, the materialistic obstacles that rise between the first mental conception of a creation, no matter how naive, and its final form are stupendous and cannot remain cloaked. Thus our applicant turns to the gratifying mysterious symbolism of musical notation, gets doped by writing down his uncontrolled inventions, and uses notation's imperfection as the mask that deceives not only his amazed family, but first and permanently himself—and frequently the teacher and, later on, possible audiences.

Who would ever expect a young man without any experience concerning the carrying capacity of beams, pillars, and walls, or the rules of organizing living spaces three-dimensionally, to enter an architect's office with the words, "I never did anything in this field, but I am a great architectural genius"? In music, this is quite common. How common, is shown by the answer a student gave me when he was told about the years he had to spend in acquiring a decent technique, provided he showed some talent. He said, "But Mr. H., there must be some short cut." This typical remark did not properly assess the situation. Do we not know how long an extraordinary musician like Mozart had to struggle till he was able to bend,

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press, and mold the tonal material into the shape he wanted it? As a boy of five he wrote little compositions, at nine he was as qualified a composer as many others of that period, at twelve he had thoroughly mastered the technique of his time; yet it took him about twenty more years of his short life to write himself free from all restraints, so as to reach that superior technique—not to mention the uninhibited power to reveal his visions in musical forms—which for us is one of the intrinsic qualities of his works. No short cuts for the Mozarts! And none for other great masters. Even such an apparently easygoing composer as Schubert—what a colossal arc of technical and mental development he had to traverse from “Hagens Klage” to the “Taubenpost.”

The most conspicuous misconception in our educational method is that composers can be fabricated by training. If you go through two years of Harmony, one of Counterpoint, fulfill your requirements in Composition I and Composition II, have some courses in Orchestration and Form, throw in some minor courses for credits, and do some so-called “free” work in a post-graduate course, you are inevitably a composer, because you paid for your courses—or somebody else did—and you can expect to get something for your good money. We produce composers the democratic way, as we produce congressmen. The citizen is by provision of the law entitled to the career of a congressman, and with elbow power and persistence he merely has to convince the majority of about three hundred thousand people of his superiority in order to gain a seat in Washington. Why cannot the man who writes music have the same kind of a career? If a method of production is good for one class of people, why should it not be applied to others?

It cannot be done. Elbow power and persistence are in this field no proof of your superiority, and seats in highest assemblies signify neither quality nor knowledge on the part of a composer. We have never heard of a natural gift peculiar to and indispensable for congressmen, but music cannot be invented without a specific creative talent. This talent cannot be implanted in people, like good manners or smallpox bacilli, and composing cannot be taught the democratic way. If there is anything remaining in this world that is on the one side basically aristocratic and individualistic and on the other as brutal as the fights of wild animals, it is artistic creation. It is aristocratic, because it is the privilege of a very restricted number of people. If it could be democratized, it would lose its quality as an art, become reduced to a craft, and end as an industry. In many branches of our musical life we already have reached this lowest, industrial phase, as we let musical democracy have its unbridled way. Artistic creation is individualistic, because it is as private as your dreams; nobody can interfere

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with your artistic phantasms, and although physical powers may prevent a work of art from coming into structural existence, the individualistic act of creation in the artist’s mind can never be touched. And finally, artistic creation is excessively brutal, because works that have no strength are eliminated and forgotten like living beings that cannot survive the struggle of life, and no reasoning, no excuse can prolong their life or protect them against the crude power of the stronger work.

Although artistic creation cannot be governed and rationalized by democratic methods, although democratic methods of teaching cannot produce a creative talent, nothing is to be said against a spirit of true democracy in the admission to creative instruction, provided we develop an equally well-functioning weeding system that removes the weaklings, the unfoundedly presumptuous, and the untalented. Nowadays many are admitted to an artistic education who in former times had no chance, and with this broad accessibility we have at least reduced the possibility that a supreme artist could be overlooked or lost. But with the influx of the masses the percentage of geniuses in a population will not be increased. A fair estimate is that in our time and in countries adhering to our way of producing and consuming music, about fifty million inhabitants are needed to produce a composer of classical rank. Of course, we know that all these terms, “composer,” “classic,” “rank,” have no accurate meaning; each of them would have to be explained and fixed in its significance before it could be used in a scientific way. But we are now talking about art, art in a very general sense at that, not art in its clearly definable technical aspects; and artistic statements in spite of their inevitable vagueness convey a rather clear meaning to those who agree to a common basis of understanding, namely to the sum total of our individual experiences with music and our knowledge of musical development at least during the last three hundred years with all its social, political, economic, in short, human implications. Fifty millions, producing one significant composer, can only mean, that after years, decades, and perhaps a century this one composer will finally be recognized as the musical apex of his epoch, but that tens of close runners, hundreds of camp followers and competitors, and thousands of miniature contributors had to do their share to make the great creator possible. However, the tragic destination of the individual will hardly ever permit him to understand his role in this gambling for future glory. In no case can he foresee the fate of his production. The creator of the surviving and significant works may not be recognized in his own time, he may feel himself to be the lowliest, the most insignificant musician; and simultaneously some minor writer may think of himself as the master mind of his time, may even see all the glory and admiration of the present bestowed on him, and yet may be forgotten before his last note is written.

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If we believe in the truth of these statements, it will be hard to understand how support can be given to a system of musical education which hides this reality from the students' eyes, deceives them with each exercise they are given. It is extremely dishonest to give every student the education that is meant to turn out a Beethoven, while we know that he will never be more than a medium-sized commonplace composer. Would it not be better, more honest, and even more economical, to provide him with an all-round technique of general validity, on which his talents may thrive. In other words, don't feed people with caviar and champagne which in the long run they cannot digest, but bring them up with a solid fare and teach them to appreciate the extraordinary as a unique donation of heaven. Tell the student: "The gift of composing is nothing that exists by itself, nor can it be nursed and trained separately. It is the fruit of a plant, this plant being the entity of musical experience and talent of a musician. We cannot have healthy and sturdy fruits, if the plant is weak and under-developed. Consequently we must first of all raise a healthy plant. It will bear its fruits in time, and we may even have the chance to produce an extraordinary prize-winning fruit. If our labor is not to be blessed with the production of a fruit, we at least have the satisfaction of having done our utmost to raise a healthy plant."

And, for heaven's sake, have the courage to discourage his ambitions as a composer, if his productions are worthless as an artistic communication.

Once this conviction has become our pedagogic credo, we will have to change our education of composers entirely. In fact, we will have to reconvert it into the old, solid, and reasonable system of teaching described above—the system that was, by a wave of general megalomania, distorted into our production line, the result of which can only be battalions of composing mediocrity. This means that practical music would again be the backbone of instruction, composing would not be taught as an end in itself, no illusions would be implanted in the minds of students. Fewer composers would be produced, but the few who grew out of the fertile field of general musicianship would have better prospects of surviving and representing our time than hundreds of half-gifted or ungifted writers. One figure who is nowadays the most deplorable product of our system of education would disappear entirely: the composer who is unable either to sing or to play his own composition, who has to rely entirely on the ability and the good will of other performers. Our era is unique in having produced this pseudomusician, and for this sin alone our educational system deserves every punishment possible.

Trained in this old and renewed system—if the most natural musical activity can be called a system—composers would again be musicians, who could be used in many fields of music equally well; who are useful

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players, not of one instrument, but of several; who sing acceptably, who know how to handle classes, choirs, and orchestras; who have a decent knowledge of theory, and beyond all, who certainly know how to compose. For them the idea of extreme specialization is abhorrent. They must be good performers, but never at the expense of their comprehensive musicianship. If amidst this wealth the gift of composing shows up, it will be fostered by all possible means, but even then always with the understanding that composing is never a profession, that it can hardly be regarded as a job which nourishes its proprietor, and that the talent may one day cease to yield further fruits, or may disappear altogether, just as mysteriously as it appeared. There will be little similarity to those frequent products of our average instruction: the fellow full of vanity and empty of real erudition; and the other fellow, who caught, along with some wisdom, all the frustrations a never-fulfilled aspiration creates.

Teaching according to these maxims, I never found vanity or frustration as a result. How can you be conceited if the overwhelming number of musical facts you can learn makes you conscious of your smallness every moment of your musical existence? And how can you be frustrated, if you know composing is not necessary unless the creative talent shows up unexpectedly? Musicians brought up this way will by the very nature of this instruction see their initial enthusiasm preserved throughout their musical career; disappointment in their vocation will most likely remain unknown to them.

Once I had a discussion on this subject with a well-known composer. He said: "I think your system of teaching composers is all wrong. It discourages young people, to face an almost unsurmountable heap of knowledge and technique. When I studied with a famous teacher in Europe, every student in the class had the feeling that he was the elected genius of the future, that the piece he was writing right now was superb, and that it was merely a question of time and practice before his fate as a successful composer was confirmed." The response to this reproval is: if one cannot face the obstacles lying before a composer's career he should not be permitted to embark upon it at all. Why must an apprentice composer be wrapped in cotton, when instrumentalist students come in touch with those obstacles from the very first day in obvious and mostly discouraging forms? Certainly it is not necessary to emphasize obstacles, but an honest teacher can never hide them. And what else is the result of a constantly flattering instruction but a pampered egotist who to the end of his life will be the only one convinced of his greatness, when everyone else ceased to share this opinion shortly after the performance of his first composition? There is but one conclusion that can be drawn from these statements: Don't teach composition the way it is usually done. Teach musi-

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cians. If once in a long while one of your students shows creative talent, let nature have its course. A fellow educated in the way here described will use all his manifold experiences to the right purpose, and what you can teach him beyond all this is more valuable than the teacher's instructing a pupil: it is the united effort of two equals in the search of perfection, in which the one participant is mostly but not always leading, for his is the greater experience.

Serge Prokofiev

[1891 - 1953]

Prokofiev, like many of the composers of his generation, began his career as a musical rebel, strongly opposed to the excesses of Romanticism. Belonging, as well, to the last generation of Russians before the 1917 Revolution, he reacted less overtly to Wagnerianism than to the introspective, mystical qualities of Scriabin and Rachmaninov, the sentimentality of Tchaikovsky, and the academism of his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. His early music, tonal yet strongly dissonant, harsh in texture, and intentionally "shocking" in its grotesque effects, stems from the same spirit of revolt that marks of work of Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Hindemith in a similar vein.

A brilliant pianist, Prokofiev spent many years in Europe and the United States as a touring virtuoso, acquiring fame as a performer but suffering comparative neglect as a composer. As his music became more respected in the 1930's, Prokofiev devoted his energies more exclusively to composition, and returned to Russia—now the Soviet Union—as a major figure. Permanently residing there, despite occasional trips, Prokofiev produced many of his major works in the last few decades of his life. In these later works, the tendencies that had once brought him great notoriety are tempered by a strong melodic lyricism and a neo-Classical sense of form.

Prokofiev was a prolific author of articles on musical matters, which presented a concise statement of his philosophy as a Soviet composer. Several of these writings are presented here.

Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences, translated by Rose Prokofieva and edited by S. Shilfstein (Moscow, c. 1960), pp. 99-100, 106-07, 133-36. The original sources of the selections are as follows: The Path of Soviet Music, from Izvestia, November 16, 1934; The Masses Want Great Music, from Prokofiev's notebooks, 1937; Flourishing of Art, from Pravda, 1937; Music and Life, from News, 1951.