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Alec Robertson

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ALEC ROBERTSON

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who broadcasts is liable to receive letters, from listeners unknown to him, which are either congratulatory, critical or downright silly: and without putting it in the category to which, in my opinion, it belongs a sentence from such a letter, which I once received after a talk on music, will serve very well as text for the start of this essay. 'Do not talk to me about music', it began, 'I like it to flow over me in a beautiful golden stream'. The temptation to address the writer, in replying, as 'Dear Mr. Suet Pudding' was almost irresistible; and only for courtesy's sake resisted.

Such a flabby attitude towards the most spiritual of the arts is no doubt the result of regarding music as being primarily, or wholly, a purveyor of emotion and devoid of meaning: a pleasant device to titillate the nerves and play upon the emotions of the listener, or to provide a background against which he can dream dreams or wallow in romantic episodes of his life, past or present. Little wonder, therefore, that the range of music that appeals to such a listener—if he can be said to listen, in any true sense, at all—is small: the 'beautiful golden stream' does not flow into a larger sea. The very type of such a sentimental listener is perhaps Orsino, Duke of Illyria, who opens *Twelfth Night* with the words 'If music be the food of love, play on'; he is obviously a man seeking only for soothing syrup and not for the food that nourishes and strengthens the spiritual part of man.

It was in this sense that Bach is reported to have said that the aim and final reason of all music is the glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit, and that William Blake spoke of music, poetry and painting as 'Man's ways of conversing with Paradise'. Such definitions, also, can be comprehensive enough to include those kinds of music that are a delightful decoration on life and sensibly add to the gaiety of nations.

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It may be remembered that when Brahms heard *The Blue Danube* waltz at a party, he wrote a few of the opening bars on the fan of Madame Johann Strauss and put underneath them the words ‘unfortunately not by yours truly Johannes Brahms.’

It may be obvious enough, but it needs to be said repeatedly, that music is a communication from the mind and heart and soul of the composer to the listener, made in its own language—which has few analogies with that of any other art and most of those misleading—and delivered, as it has to be, through human channels.

The composer, like all of us, has his full share of human frailties but is marked out from other men by his special gift of expressing himself creatively in musical sounds, and if our education in the arts was more liberal everyone would be able to read the composer’s language, and not only those who sing and play.

Bernard Shaw, in this context, remarks in *Music in London* ‘people refuse to learn their notes because they feel they will never be able to play well enough to be worth listening to. They might just as well refuse to learn to read because they will never be able to recite or declaim the contents of volumes of poetry well enough to delight an audience’.

It is true that familiarity with the ordinary ways of the musical language undoubtedly develops with constant and appreciative listening: but it has yet to be realised by many sincere lovers of music that great as is its emotional appeal, the emotion is conveyed to us by an exact and calculated process of musical thought. That musical thought ranges from the trivial to the sublime and can even be represented by a unit as small as a couple of notes. The essential thought in the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, for example, is conveyed in a phrase of four notes which anybody could have invented, but which only a great master

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could make the basis of a symphonic movement and subject to such amazing developments.

In this matter of listening to music there must be, of course, no compulsion and the ordinary music lover is certainly not required to bring a trained and analytical ear upon what he hears, but to whatever degree of knowledge he attains he will find his enjoyment thereby deepened, not hindered; and that, as a moment's thought will show, is true of all spheres of knowledge.

Attendances at concerts, attention to broadcasts of 'good' music, and talks on it, the extraordinary sales of long-playing records, all go to prove that an increasingly intelligent interest is being taken in the art, but—and this long preamble is at length reaching its goal—decidedly less interest is taken in books about music.

The idea that the buying of books of any kind is a luxury dies hard, and perhaps the idea of buying a book on music may seem to some an outrageous extravagance; or it may be feared that such books will be full of musical jargon and technical terms, and so prove unintelligible to the 'ordinary' listener; or merely that he may simply be unaware of the large range of such books which he might enjoy, profit from, and want to own. Hence the reason for the Guide that follows: and it would be pleasant and rewarding if it helped to eliminate a cliché one has come to dread. 'I love music but'—here it comes!—'I'm afraid I don't know anything about it'. To which the correct answer is 'why not?' and a copy of this pamphlet.

Most of us develop a strongly marked preference for the work of one composer or, preferably, a number of composers, without prejudice, one may hope, to a lot of others who affect us less deeply. The incredibly rich repertoire made available to all lovers of music, no matter how remote the place in which they live, on long-playing records, virtually

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throws open the entire world of music: and one's adventures in it are limited only by one's financial resources. But gradually, as I have suggested, we form our preferences, choosing those composers whose works will be 'lamps for my gloom, hands guiding where I stumble': and as we have come to love them so much it seems only natural to want to know not only more about their music but also what manner of men they were, what the surroundings were like in which they worked and lived, what was their historical background, what they looked like, and so forth. And so books about them, that can be trusted to tell the truth, should become a necessity, not a luxury.

Mozart (in this year of his bi-centenary) is a case in point. There have already been available for a number of years two books about him of exceptional interest and value, Eric Blom's volume in the *Master Musicians* series and Alfred Einstein's larger book *Mozart, his life and character*, in an excellent translation from the German. In the first part of Einstein's book, Mozart comes before us as traveller, genius, human being, Catholic and Freemason, while the remainder of the book discusses him as musician and composer. We can complete that vivid picture by turning to the composer's letters which, as Professor Einstein says, are 'the liveliest, least dressed-up, most genuine letters ever written by a musician—we really know Mozart the man'.

A recently published selection of these letters, taken from Emily Anderson's superb three volume edition and edited by Eric Blom, is fortunately now available to everyone in a Penguin book. It is always dangerous to read a man into his music but also foolish to abstract him wholly from it and those lovers of Mozart's music who may have been puzzled by some of the dark places in his work—for example, his G minor Symphony—will surely understand them better when they come across these passages from two letters

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written in the year before and in the year of his death. 'If people could see into my heart, I should feel almost ashamed. To me everything is cold—cold as ice': and, 'I can't describe what I have been feeling—a kind of emptiness, which hurts me dreadfully—a kind of longing, which is never satisfied, which never ceases, and which persists, nay, rather increases daily . . .'

That is one aspect of Mozart: there emerge also his gaiety, his touching and constant love for his wife, his opinions on the problems of operatic composition, and a wealth of other things that illuminate his character, art, and time.

Mozart is, no doubt, an exceptional case—though both Beethoven's and Wagner's letters make fascinating reading—but even in the case of composers not given to letter writing and whose exterior circumstances were humdrum, a worth-while biography can be enormously rewarding and inspiring. Albert Schweitzer's book on J. S. Bach is a case in point, and I well remember the mounting excitement with which I read it in my student days and with what quickened interest and affection it sent me back to the composer's music.

Composers are not given to writing autobiographies—Wagner, Berlioz, and Stravinsky are among the notable exceptions—but there are many performers, especially singers, who have done so, with results that vary from naive records of 'triumphant tours' to the genuinely informing and revealing.

The lists that follow will show how well music lovers are catered for in the matter of histories of music, and of books, analytical and descriptive, about different categories of music, with Donald Tovey's six volumes of *Essays in Musical Analyses* as a shining example of how to deal with this most difficult subject.

Some sort of musical dictionary should be on the shelves

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of every music lover, and here too there is an ample choice. Learned judges in court may ask 'what is sul ponticello'? We, at home, should have no need to do so!

If, as William Blake thought, music, painting and poetry are 'Man's ways of conversing with Paradise' then to be well read about the art to which we particularly incline will surely enable us to take a more intelligent part in those conversations than might otherwise be the case. And that is what books on music are for.

In compiling the reading list the difficulty has been, of course, not what to put in but what to leave out: and there is, it must therefore be remembered, a number of books of merit that could not, for reasons of space be included. It has also not been easy to be consistent in the listing of books according to their category where that category is not well defined, but it is to be hoped the reader will find his way about without too much labour.

Books that deal mainly with the technics of composing, performing, interpretation, and so forth have, except in one or two cases, been omitted, nor must the reader expect to find in the list reference to such impressive volumes as Gustave Reese's *Music in the Middle Ages* and *Music in the Renaissance*, Alfred Einstein's *The Italian Madrigal*, Robbins Landon's *Haydn*, or *The New Oxford History of Music*.

Some of the books are at present out of print but all of them should be found in any well equipped library, while bargains can often be picked up in secondhand book-shops.