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THE LOUIS CHARLES ELSON MEMORIAL FUND



MUSIC INTO WORDS

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY

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*Professor of History, Columbia University*

IN

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LOUIS CHARLES ELSON was born on April 17, 1848, and died on February 14, 1920. He was educated in Boston, his native city, and Germany. As a teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music, as music editor for Boston newspapers, he exerted a great influence for music in this country over a period of many years. He also served as musical correspondent for several European and South American papers, and enjoyed distinction as a lecturer to the public as well as in the classroom. As author, composer and editor, he had a career of great significance in America's musical development.

In 1945 the Library of Congress received a bequest from the late Mrs. Bertha L. Elson, widow of Louis Charles Elson, to provide lectures on music and musical literature in memory of her husband. Professor Barzun's lecture was one of the series made possible by Mrs. Elson's generous bequest, which also supplied funds for this publication.



## MUSIC INTO WORDS

*The world, the mind, is an endless miscellany.*  
—William Hazlitt (1829)

### I

THE INVITATION to deliver one of the Elson lectures under the auspices of the Library of Congress must come to anyone as a great honor, and so it was to me. But I must candidly add that I found myself regarding it as providential besides, an opportunity ideally contrived to suit my own purposes. For the occasion would put at my mercy, for an hour or so, just the kind of audience I had long wished for, an audience interested in music and yet equally interested—or else it would not be here—in discourse about music. I wanted such an audience in order to try out upon it some ideas about the relation of music and words that I had so far been able to test only piecemeal, in private conversation, where the irrelevant, skeptical, and—shall I say—uncalled-for interruptions of my guest or host interfered with full exposition.

Now in the usual kind of audience one is likely to find a mixture of amateurs, who derive their artistic pleasure almost exclusively from listening to music, and of “literary people” to whom music is worse than a closed book; for they can open a book but they cannot penetrate music. This fact defines my problem, which is also indicated by the title “music into words.” The problem is, Are there genuine connections between music and words, or only accidental associations, some of them tolerable but most of them forced or farfetched? Is it possible to describe music in ordinary prose, or is technical jargon indis-

pensable? And if description is allowed—perhaps “translation” would be the fitter term—does its possibility imply that music conveys a meaning outside itself, like the arts of literature and painting?

You can see that on the answer to these questions a good many of our activities depend for their justification—the whole status and value of music criticism for instance. You may not care much about music criticism; you may be willing to let it perish unwept. But you are something of a music critic every time you open your mouth about a concert you have just heard. Can it be that your words are meaningless, that you are saying just nothing with great vehemence? Again, the teaching of music is inseparable from comment, appreciation, and interpretation of styles. Are all the words of all the patient souls who push young talents through the mill just so much gibberish? We are inclined to say so even as we go on gibbering. We have been told so often that the adagio of the Moonlight Sonata is not “dreamy” and certainly not moonlight; that there is nothing “stark” about any of Bach’s two-part inventions; and that pieces with a title like *Des pas sur la neige* are music in spite of their silly, reprehensible allusions. Snow is snow and music is music; the one is a physical, tangible thing, and hence there is a word for it; the other is immaterial, elusive, absolute, and hence no words can reach it.

From this it follows that only the names of the notes (which are interchangeable parts of no intrinsic significance) can legitimately be used in discussion, and hence discourse about music must remain technical. As such it can only interest professionals, and it is limited to some few salient points within a piece. A bar-by-bar technical analysis of a large work would be unendurable even to professionals—in short, great works of music are unquestionably great but their greatness is as it were unspeakable.

All this, I need hardly say, is the prevailing view. It has an astringent quality which was no doubt needed when the loose-

ness of gushing "appreciation" became general fifty years ago. But on reflection this self-denial about words appears really as a rather crude remedy, which I suspect is now more often used as an instrument of intellectual pride than in any good cause. Indeed it resembles nothing so much as the cant of the old-fashioned scientist and secularist who loved to shock naive believers in Genesis by facing them with some bit of high school geology or astronomy. At any rate as regards music today, I think we have reached a point where we are in honor bound to avoid the naiveté of both parties: we know of old that a piece of music tells us nothing about snow. So it is childish to keep reminding the world that inarticulate sounds are not articulate. The formidable question remains, why the great musicians, the great critics, *and the great public* keep talking about music as if their words meant something.

The historical truth behind this question was deeply impressed upon me recently when I was engaged in selecting, translating, and editing for the general reader a collection of prose pieces about music.<sup>1</sup> Having to exclude technical discussions, I nevertheless found that I had on hand an abundance of stories, sketches, essays, confessions, letters, and anecdotes, which taken together gave an excellent idea of what music is for, what it is like, how it lives and moves in the lives of those attuned to it.

And when I looked at my cast of characters as a whole, I saw that it included the great composers from Monteverdi to Van Dieren; the great writers from Cellini to Shaw; the great performers (who might also be writers and composers) from Bach to Busoni. It was then I formulated the conclusion that whatever affectation we might be mouthing today about music being undiscussable must be deemed local and temporary. It could not withstand the weight of testimony that

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<sup>1</sup> Pleasures of Music. A reader's choice of great writing about music and musicians from Cellini to Bernard Shaw. Edited with an introduction by Jacques Barzun. New York, 1951.

had grown under my hand in support of the proposition that music can be talked about like any other art; and that perhaps it must be talked about if it is to give its devotees full measure in enjoyment and significance.

What was further remarkable as I considered my two hundred thousand words about music was that no author or composer in the total span of four centuries had even tried to make rational the connection between his words and the musical experience that he discussed. All seemed to take the connection as self-evident, which must be because these literary and musical artists lacked on that point the benefit of modern skeptical thought. But given the prevalence of this skepticism we cannot be so lordly, we are compelled by the current opinion to build up a step-by-step defence of the position unconsciously taken in the past by the great composers and critics. At the same time it would be foolish to neglect whatever may be found valid in the negative view, for our whole effort should tend towards something I consider the great desideratum in contemporary American culture, namely a comprehensive grammar of criticism for dealing with art.

## II

TO TAKE OFF from the negative view that music is untranslatable, we must first separate the upholders of it into sheep and goats, that is to say, into musical people, who are usually gentle and much alike but limited in vocabulary—like sheep; and literary people, who feel vaguely put upon by music, and whose intellectual hides are tough—like goats. Both groups maintain that music cannot be talked about properly or usefully, but their grounds for thinking so are exactly opposite. The literary person proclaims that “he knows nothing” about music, and yet he may own a record collection and listen with enjoyment. He infers that he is tongue-tied because of his ignorance of technicalities and he concludes that the only

possible criticism of music is technical. His argument amounts to saying: "I am a man of words; if words could be used about music I should be able to produce them; I can't, hence music is an experience absolutely self-contained."

To this reasoning the first rejoinder is that the "literary" listener has perhaps not sufficiently reflected about such musical experience as he has. How can a man "know nothing" about sensations he has undergone willingly, repeatedly, and pleasurably for a whole year, for ten years, for a lifetime? Obviously he is confusing the conventions of a trade with the essentials of human knowledge. He is suffering from the twentieth-century disease which is to suppose that knowledge and professionalism are synonymous; by which principle it is clear that primitive man could never learn to build bridges since there were as yet no schools of engineering.

Turn now to the professional or the accomplished amateur musician. He swims among sonatas like a fish in water, but contents himself with but a single pair of critical terms beyond the strictly technical: to him any musical work is either "a swell piece" or "pretty lousy." Immersed as he is in performance and in judging performance, he has no need to go whoring after more language. Music for him is quite truthfully a self-contained experience. He can share it with his fellows by an almost bodily communication of sympathy. He is moreover so busy practicing or composing or coaching others—not to speak of putting up music stands and dog-eared scores—that he rarely has time to straighten out his impressions. If he ever does so, his temper is bound to be hostile toward anything "literary." The violinist senses that the Razoumowsky Quartets do not pertain to the Napoleonic Wars as does Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. He assumes that he knows all there is to know about music, and concludes that it is an art diametrically opposed to the so-called "representative arts" of literature and painting. If challenged, he clinches his case by pointing out that each word in the language has a distinct meaning

known to all, whereas single notes or chords mean nothing, and thus may mean anything.

It is here that the counter argument must take hold and destroy, once for all, the platitudes offered about words. It is not true that words have intrinsic meanings; it is not true that meanings reside in words. Turn to the dictionary and look up a common noun: the first striking fact about it is that it has eight, ten, a dozen, or a score of meanings. If someone were to break into this room shouting "Chair!" it would be impossible to tell whether he was asking for a seat or calling upon the chairman. He might be a mad professor who had been deprived of his post—for in a University (as you know) a chair is a post . . . which is why it cannot be sat on. In an eighteenth-century novel a chair is a vehicle, and in a twentieth-century drawing room a chair is almost anything that is not a rug or a lamp. This last fact is very important, for it reminds us how wrong it is to say that a word automatically puts us in mind of an object. On hearing the word "chair" and being told further that it means a seat, anyone will visualize something different; a thousand people will picture thousands of dissimilar objects. "Chair" is really an empty sound which we can fill with meaning only with the help of many other words and of much other knowledge which is not and which never can be put into words.

This is universally true of workaday life, where we can seldom understand the snatches of conversation overheard on the street, the quick undertones exchanged within a strange family, or the easy allusions of other men talking shop. In short, there is nothing mechanical about verbal meanings, not even the practical meanings of daily life. All communication in words remains an art, no matter how habitual, and like every art it is made up of more elements than can ever be enumerated. Tone of voice, gesture, and facial expression, choice and placement of words, omission and superfluity of sounds, plus the indefinite sphere of relevancies that we call context, all play

their role in the transmission of any one meaning, not excepting the most trivial.

Obvious though all this may be, it can stand being underscored again and again because discourse about art and criticism usually forgets it. Speech is so common that we seldom analyze its mysteries, and as a result comparisons among the arts are strangely distorted. For the sake of simplicity the stuff of each art is assigned some flat, blunt attributes that supposedly exclude one another: words stand for things and ideas; paint reproduces the visible world of nature; music is pure form; architecture is machinery for living—singly or in groups; poetry, dance, and music are time arts, the plastic and graphic arts are concerned with space . . . —none of these aphorisms is without suggestiveness and importance, but not one of them is wholly true. And the terms of each are in some sense transferable to the rest. Thus, on the basis of what has been so far rehearsed about the character of verbal meanings, one can say that the two forms of sound called speech and music are alike in requiring a multitude of qualities and modifiers before they can make a significant impression on a human mind. Just as you cannot produce a solitary middle C and expect a listener to be greatly affected one way or another, so you cannot utter the single word “chair” and hope for much of a response.

And even now the comparison still remains a little unfair to words, for the parallel has been drawn between the high art of music and the merely workaday use of speech. If we pass from daily talk to literature proper, the force of all that has been shown is augmented manifold. Augmented and also complicated by the presence of the new element which we recognize as artistry, though it is impossible to define and difficult to isolate. The borderline between the utilitarian and the literary uses of speech is not intrinsic and fixed, as we might casually suppose; it is circumstantial and shifting, and this variability is reproduced in all of the so-called fine arts, includ-

ing music. A bugle sounding taps in camp says "go to bed" just as clearly as the vesper bell says "come to church." This is by context and convention, exactly as in articulate speech. But in an opera those same musical sounds would be quite transfigured and charged with new meanings. Again, certain pieces of music, for instance a jig or a Virginia reel, though they utter no distinct message, are nevertheless little else than invitations to the dance. The appeal to mind or spirit is slight, whereas the pull upon the legs is powerful. Yet a dance movement in a Bach suite or the finale of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony uses the same conventional rhythms and figures with wholly different effect.

It is therefore not the presence or absence of conventional forms and phrases that distinguishes art from messages of utility, or that distinguishes the art of music from any other. All we can say is that art differs from workaday communication in that it transcends the literal—not excludes it or denies it, for it often contains it—but it goes beyond. If this is so, then another imaginary barrier between music and the other arts disappears: no art denotes or gives out information. We can test this generality by considering in its light a passage of literature, say the scene in Shakespeare where Hamlet finds Yorick's skull and says: "I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorrèd in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft . . ." etc. Clearly these words are not to *inform* us that Hamlet knew Yorick. They do not answer the question that a lawyer might put: did you or did you not know and associate with one Yorick, deceased? Their purpose is quite other, namely to impress us with certain realities of death and thus to heighten the shock with which we shall soon see Ophelia's burial procession. Nor is this all. The words, while disclosing yet another aspect of Hamlet's character, suggest his constant harking back to the old days when his

father reigned; moreover, the facts presented fit and sustain the brooding atmosphere of the whole play, so that the effect—as it is the purpose—of those simple words is to reverberate endlessly.

If, contrariwise, Hamlet came on and said: "Death really does dreadful things to the nicest, jolliest people," the gist of his remarks would be exactly what it is in the scene as we have it, but the impression made would be nil. The *meaning* that only art conveys would be blotted out. As a working part of that meaning, altogether unlike "information," notice the small but effective shift from Hamlet's "he" and "him," denoting the Yorick he remembers, to: "how abhorred in my imagination *it is*." *It is* at once Hamlet's recollection and Yorick turned to earth. This, if I may say so, is the secret of literature; the adjective "literary" means: doing this sort of thing with words; it does not mean using words to denote physical objects.

For conceivably Shakespeare could have used many other objects, invented other details, to serve his same purpose in the same way. Hence we should never mistake the literal ballast of the sentences for the meaning of the piece. The play—any play—is not about the ideas, people, or cocktail glasses that it juggles with; in a strict sense literature is not *about* anything, it *is*—precisely like music. And precisely like music, like any art, literature offers a presentment having significance. What kind of significance will be suggested in a moment; at this point it is enough to conclude from all we have said that the things signified are not the things named.

If it should be objected that a poetic drama such as *Hamlet* is not a fair test (even though the passage chosen was common prose) I would remind the objector of a scene in *Madame Bovary*, a prose work notoriously designed to exhibit the prosaic in life. Well, in *Madame Bovary* Flaubert makes one of the principal love scenes take place in a cab that keeps driving aimlessly round and round the provincial city; the incident is

in keeping with the rest of the story, but it is safe to say that anyone who believes in the literal circuit of that vehicle knows nothing about love, cabs, or literature.

Here, of course, one must beware of falling into the trap of symbolic interpretation: the cab does not "stand for" anything. Such an explanation would only be literalism at the second remove, duller still than the simple-minded sort. Let someone suggest that Flaubert's cab means the wild drive of the passions, or the vicious circle of sensuality, and the very thought makes one groan. Why? Because it is limiting and mechanical; it sets us to solving riddles instead of grasping meanings. Allegories are frigid for this very reason, that they seem to offer significance only to dilute it into information. Similarly, works of literature that communicate by means of broad generalities about love, death, fate or revenge are invariably tedious and, paradoxically, false. We cease to believe in propositions which in other contexts we should readily accept. And this in turn explains why it is fatal for an author to go directly after the eternal verities. He can state them, but the statement won't be art; for let me repeat at the risk of being tedious myself, literature does not reside in propositions; though it may say a great deal, it tells nothing; it thereby resembles music: it is a music of meanings.

If this assertion is true we should expect that great works of literature, in spite of being verbally explicit, would give rise to widely different interpretations. This is exactly what we find. No two critics agree about the meaning of any given masterpiece, and the greater the work the greater the disagreement. This remains true after the most laborious reading of the text and the most honest attention to previous commentaries. From this one can infer what must be the unspoken differences that co-exist in the thousands of minds which have read *Hamlet* or *The Divine Comedy*. We get a glimpse of this chaos of opinion when we discover what an earlier century thought of a work that we think we know well: it seems like a wholly other

treatment of the same subject—the movie we gape at after reading the novel.<sup>2</sup>

You have no doubt jumped ahead of me in applying this generality to our continuing parallel between the art of words and the art of music: the well-worn argument that denies clear meaning to a piece of music because no two listeners give the same account of it is an argument that works equally well against clear meaning in literature. Yet, it will be said, no one will ever confuse what happens in *Hamlet* with what happens in *King Lear*, whereas your musical program hunter will hear the waves of the ocean in a piece which another takes for the Rape of the Sabine Women. Quite so, but this contrast is only superficially correct. The plots of Shakespeare's dramas are not likely to be confused because they are the skeleton, not the significance of the piece; whereas what the programmatizer hopes to tell us with his ocean or his Sabines is the significance, the upshot, the net effect. If we want in music the true parallel of plot we must look for the form of the work and its key relationships, a skeleton about which there will be no confusion either, assuming an educated listener.

Returning now to the significance of the given piece of music, we may grant that the inventor of programs is almost certain to fail; he fails, that is, to convince us that the piece is the same thing as, or a true copy of, a storm on the ocean. Being now profound students of literature we know why he fails. He fails because he has tried to equate a work of art with a proposition or with the name of a thing or an idea. And we rebel against this either because we know such an equation to be impossible or, in less conscious moments, because we have a pet name or proposition of our own, which clashes with the other; this conflict itself helping to prove the impossibility.

Thus when Sir Laurence Olivier produced his motion picture version of *Hamlet* he prefaced it with a short explanation—

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<sup>2</sup> Note that within living memory Mozart has turned from a gay, superficial composer to a profound and tragic one.

a few programmatic words—that defined the forthcoming action as “the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.” My feelings were immediately up in arms against this hoary misinterpretation of a play in which the hero makes up his mind quickly, repeatedly, and brilliantly. But the play would not be more accurately described by maintaining the opposite of Olivier’s view—which happens also to be Goethe’s view and Coleridge’s. Rather we must give up these attempts at summarizing, or at least acknowledge that they are nothing but shorthand reminders, and careless shorthand at that. Is Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* a novel about Napoleon—no, certainly not; and yet . . . well, yes and no. Is *Don Giovanni* an opera about a Spanish libertine? Does the Ninth Symphony celebrate the brotherhood of man? Is Velasquez’ “Surrender at Breda” a historical painting? Yes and no; yes and no; yes and no. The “yes” answer is correct in the same sense as the statement that the earth is one of the planets. It is one of the planets, but to an earth dweller it does not feel like one: there is so much more to say, a myriad qualities to add, which swamp the mere definition.

The analogy is one to which the critic of the arts must keep coming back: a great work resembles an animated world that is perceived and inhabited by the beholder. It is various, extensive, treacherous, perfectly still and yet in constant motion. Like the moon seen from a vehicle, it follows one about while looking down with indifference. The masterpiece mirrors the mind of one man and of all men; it annoys, delights, instructs, and sometimes preaches, though it contradicts itself and other revelations equally true; it shapes the conduct of multitudes who have never so much as heard of it, and it is often powerless to improve the behavior of those who study and believe its message. It was created out of nothing, but pieces of other worlds lie embedded in it like meteorites; it is the cause of endless unimaginable creations after itself, yet its own existence is so precarious that its survival often suggests miraculous inter-

vention through the agency of fools and thieves. It seems to have neither purpose nor utility, though it commands veneration, it bestows money and prestige, and it arouses a hunger that some find insatiable.

This and much else is the fluid phenomenon named Art, which we try to decant into our little individual flasks of consciousness with the aid of words. The attempt must seem hopeless until we remember that it is quite like another task which we have no option but to perform—the task of organizing the experience of living. We begin this second task as soon as we learn to talk, and the volume of words which comes out thereafter shows how necessary we feel discourse to be, even about familiar acts. But the words by which we capture the flux of life were not given mankind ready-made. Hard as it is to believe, the best words, like the worst clichés, had to be invented; they were once strange and fresh; and the entire charting of our perceptions, from stomachache to religious ecstasy, had to be made bit by bit like a geodetic survey. The coverage is by now so extensive that we forget its historical growth, its slow progress towards sharper and sharper analysis. We come to believe that every experience for which we have a word, be it heartburn, hypocrisy, or ambivalence, was a plain fact from the beginning. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each piece of reality had to be carved out from all its neighboring parts, had to be named, and the name elaborately explained until it became a commonplace. I mentioned “ambivalence” to give an example of recent carving and naming: in many places the word and the fact would not be as readily understood as the word and the fact of hypocrisy, while these in turn would in primitive circles be less intelligible than heartburn.

The point of these commonplace truths is that if we agree to see art as a source of meaning, something like the carving and naming of experience has to take place. Something *like* it, rather than something identical with it, for we have not yet

considered the way art and life are related, nor the kinds of words that can apply to each. And before we can be critics we must be clear about these relations. Life, art, discourse—an eternal triangle in which it is difficult to avoid mistaking parts, as we discovered in dealing with literature: we mistake words for things and knowledge for information. We can err in the same way about life and suppose that it is made up, simply, of all the things named in the dictionary. The truth is, the experience of life is not by any means exhaustively rendered by words. We have, for example, the word “anger,” but each angry man, each bout of anger, is in some respects unlike any other. The common words by which to mark those differences soon run out. We feel about *our* anger, or that of our friends, or about any vivid example of an enemy’s anger, an inexpressible immediacy and richness that overflows the poor word. What do we do about that? We turn to art. We refer to Achilles’ rage, to the furies, to Othello, or to any other creations that we have “experienced” as if they embodied those fireworks of feeling erupting from the abstract core of human anger. But it is not because Shakespeare copies, it is because he discriminates and distils that we go to him for an extension of awareness. He—or any artist—enlarges the scope of our perceptions without throwing us back into the total stream. For one thing, the choice of a single medium, such as words, or paint, brings clarification. Through it the artist gives us not life but equivalent sensations sorted out. There is no anger in the stage Othello nor in ourselves watching him. I should in fact be willing to define art in relation to life as “equivalent sensation”; it being understood that in a work of art the sensations are purposefully organized.

But contrary to a prevalent notion it is not the organizing that is fundamental, or else we could take no pleasure in fragments of ancient sculpture. The fundamental thing is that the fragment speaks to us. In color and texture it is as unlike flesh as can be, but the equivalence intended by the human fashioner still holds for a human observer.

In other words, the several arts compel the different materials at hand to serve the curious purpose of producing sensations that we recognize as commentaries on our existence. By habit or convention some of these materials seem to be "closer" than others to the original impressions of life, but this is merely habit or convention. "Closer" has no meaning here. Stone is not closer to flesh than word is to thing. Just think of the immense diversity of words used in different languages for the same things, the great diversity of styles used in the graphic arts for the creation of lifelikeness, and the enormously rapid change in musical taste without much change in the effect produced on human beings. The means of artistic communication are infinite, and a tapestry is as lifelike as a ballet. If I were asked to illustrate the situation of the arts in relation to life, I should create a sort of seven-layer cake, with a large ineffable fruit in the exact centre. From this a single strong flavor irradiates the whole confection. Each layer is one of the arts, and it tastes different by virtue of the different filler within; but all draw a common sweetness and nutritious force from the central fruit. We can eat our slice and have it too, for it grows back magically—art is inexhaustible. But the fruit is to most of us out of reach; much of the time we taste it through art alone, which in the broad sense that includes language is the conveyer, distiller and organizer of life par excellence.

### III

IT WOULD BE EASY but highhanded to argue that since this is true of the arts and since music is an art, music must also present an equivalence of life. Many would continue to doubt the validity of the reasoning, or at least would puzzle over the connection. "Does he really mean to say," they would ask themselves, "that music embodies anger, or manifests hypocrisy? Why, I thought he admitted that music doesn't tell us anything. Of course, he did say that literature doesn't tell us anything either: it's all very confusing." I am glad you remembered

literature because what was asserted of it was that it speaks to us *by virtue* of not being literal. So does music, as I hope an example will make clear. In the introduction to the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, we are given sensations contrived in such a way that the ear—the thinking ear, that is—remains uncertain of the tonality, the direction, the fulfillment of the sounds. This is protracted until the tutti comes crashing down upon us in D Minor and all doubts are at an end. This is a favorite effect of Beethoven's, another instance being the transition from the Scherzo to the finale of the Fifth.

Now, why is it “an effect”—an affecting thing? Why do we respond to it, and respond to it, I should imagine, all alike even though it may cause annoyance to some and pleasure to others? The impression as a whole has no name, and no good would be served by calling it Resolution of Uncertainty. Any such term is limiting, literal, and—you may properly add—unmusical. Just so: music is a medium through which certain unnamable experiences of life are exquisitely conveyed through equivalent sensations for the ear. As Mr. Roger Sessions has admirably put it: “Emotion is specific, individual, and conscious; music goes deeper than this, to the energies which animate our psychic life. . . . It reproduces for us the most intimate essence, the tempo, and the energy of our spiritual being; our tranquillity and our restlessness, our animation and our discouragement . . .—all, in fact, of the fine shades . . . of our inner life.”<sup>3</sup>

I would qualify this statement in only one way, by pointing out that although music is not like, nor about, namable emotions, being neither literal nor abstract, it has a way of interweaving itself with some of our perceptions that do have names, and so tempts us to tag the music with the experience of which we are reminded. This accounts for the programmatizing, the naming of pieces large and small, and the in-

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<sup>3</sup> “The Message of the Composer,” in *The Intent of the Artist*, edited by A. Centeno (Princeton, 1941), pp. 123–4.

evitable amateur comments about passages that are like sunset on the Matterhorn or the kiss of an archangel. Notice that these analogies are usually with the rare and the fanciful, precisely because they are not readily namable in spite of their vividness and intimacy. If you should ask, "what is the kiss of an archangel like?" you would probably be told, "It's just like the close of the Siegfried Idyll."

The fact that music begins to speak to us at the point where words stop accounts also for something rather more important and certainly more aboriginal—the fact that articulate and inarticulate sounds can combine to form one meaning, the fact that songs can be composed and understood. If a good judge can say that one setting of given words is better than another, it is not merely because one tune is better adapted to the conventional accent of those words but also because it wraps itself more snugly around their significance. We appreciate this in reverse when we remark that the Star-Spangled Banner is a tune somewhat wanting in martial fire and ill-adapted to the patriotic feeling of the words. When we know that its traditional form was that of a convivial song "To Anacreon in Heaven," we recognize its fitness to that theme and discover that the awkward wandering of the notes turns from blemish to expressiveness.

Music's same power to present the sensations missing from the verbal signs of an experience explains why as a general rule the text of the best songs and operas is inferior in its kind to the musical setting. A great poem is complete in itself and needs no additions from another art. Great music is complete in itself, and only a disagreeable overlap of intentions can result from its being harnessed to great literature. Fortunately, many musicians have shown a certain indifference to poetic expression and thus have expended their powers on verse that was literal and required to be made into art. We then enjoy both the independent beauty of the music and the pleasure of its adaptation to a rudimentary conception in words.

This rudimentary conception is still with us, of course, in instrumental music, to which we must return as the true test of our entire theory. For music has taken rank among the high arts by virtue of its relatively recent emergence as a presentment that can stand by itself: all its claims to absoluteness and disconnection from life rest on the fact that intelligent people will sit silent and motionless for twenty minutes while upwards of a hundred men blow and scrape "meaningless" notes. But consider this strange institution. In order to find one's way in this supposed desert of significance, it appears advisable to distinguish "suspensions" of sound, "resolutions," cadences (or fallings), *appoggiaturas* (or leanings), sequences (something like raised eyebrows), broken chords and what not other inarticulate suggestions of bodily experience. Again, the movements are called gay, fast, walking, dying, joking, or retarded—all in defiance of plain fact, since nothing moves or dies, is suspended or resolved. Stranger still, there is often a madman, sandwiched between the performing and the listening lunatics, who is delegated to lead and interpret the meaningless sounds by means of a pantomime which is said to be as necessary as it is expensive.

When the noise and gestures have subsided, the audience are heard to say whether the new piece has merit or whether the old one was played right. Obviously they are comparing the flood of sensations with a preexisting pattern in their minds or memories, a pattern to which they readily ascribe a value akin to revelation as well as the power of producing pleasure. The sensations offered are extraordinarily complex and the receiving mind must be extraordinarily acute, for it sometimes happens that all the notes of a familiar piece are played in the right order at the right speed, and yet good judges declare they could hardly recognize the work. It lacked force or coherence or was subtly bereft of its accustomed virtue. This fairly usual experience surely goes to prove that music communicates something beyond the relation of its audible parts.

It conveys a meaning which some people catch and others not; a meaning which is not *in* the notes, since these can be played correctly and yet meaninglessly; a meaning which is not universally intelligible, since listeners vary in their judgment of composers, of works, of performances; a meaning which like verbal meaning depends on a mass of previous knowledge and feeling.

This last truth is not merely one of common observation, it has also been the subject of experiment. The classic statement of the results is that of Dr. Philip Vernon, a British musician and psychologist, who twenty years ago subjected the Cambridge Musical Society to a series of tests proving conclusively that to consider music a purely auditory experience is contrary to fact. His report should be read and pondered by every amateur or professional listener who believes that, whatever vulgar souls may do, his own pleasure in the art is the contemplation of pure form. The facts are so enlightening, and so amusing besides, that I have reprinted Dr. Vernon's article in the anthology to which I referred earlier. The honest reader cannot fail to recognize how much that is commonly deemed non-musical goes into intelligent listening.

The reason for this paradox is that on his side, the artist-composer, even while he attends to the demands of his material or to his formal design, consciously or unconsciously endows the familiar elements with qualities that also correspond to his grasp of life as a whole. The order in which he puts things, the things he repeats and the things he avoids; the suggestions, emphases, and climaxes; the pace of his thought and the intensity of his will; the stops, the false starts, the crashes, and the silences—everything he does or leaves undone—is a signal to the listening mind that recalls to it the qualities of life. The composer has probably no intention of being autobiographical; he may indeed be a dramatist composing the wordless biography of some imaginary being, like Mozart depicting Figaro or the Queen of the Night; but the concourse of sounds

is as surely the equivalent of a lived experience as are the lines of an expressive face or the gestures of an inspired actor.

The conclusion is inescapable that musical meaning relates to the existence of the creature that man is, not solely because music delights man, and not solely because he assigns to it a value beyond mere delight, but because it requires from him a special attention to particulars within and without his own mind. He must, as we say, understand the idiom, that is, he must record and relate the multitude of sensations aroused in him, and so make them into food for his soul.

#### IV

It follows readily enough that what the artist has put together, the critic can take apart and restate in the foreign tongue of prose discourse. In doing this, he is really doing no more than accounting to himself and to others for what he has undergone. The critic may, for example, ask himself how it is that some works using all the devices of modulation, cadence, anticipation, etc., according to rule are nonetheless unbearably dull; whereas others are not only agreeable but great? One composer, we say, has good or great ideas, another has not. But this is to repeat the fact without explaining it. The ideas we refer to are obviously something else than clever tricks for linking the common elements of the medium, though this cleverness is not to be despised when, as we also say, there is a *point* to it. And the point is always something larger than devices and the linking of devices; for we can recognize the presence of genuine ideas at both extremes of technical knowledge: Bach is not a great composer because he was adept at counterpoint, but because he had a purpose in using it. Gluck is a great composer despite his clumsiness of technique—if art that is successful can ever be called clumsy. Both equally served an intention that we can recover and rejoice in. When we receive a communication we value, it is idle to carp at the means employed, art being the first and truest pragmatism.

But criticism immediately asks how a diversity of means can achieve similar results. This remains a complete mystery unless we admit the proposition to which our long argument has been leading, namely, that the "point" of speech or music or art is to summon up and shape the stuff of human experience. Anything we understand, we understand in the light of human experience, actual or potential. We must bring our little share of wisdom and remembered life with us, and pour it into the given mould, or else remain deaf and dumb to messages the most heavenly; since, as we know, neither words, nor paint, nor music nor science can take up and unload at our feet the full cargo of even the smallest portion of reality.

For "potential experience" we have the word Imagination, and it is this faculty that the artist possesses in great strength and uses to spur our own. By a combination of instinct and design he so orders the elements of his art that the interplay of resulting sensations produces a decipherable code to new meanings. Our attention is arrested and sustained. The stream of impressions holds us because it refers to our past and future being, to our conscious or submerged memories, to our anxieties and our purposes; it arouses and satisfies our expectations on all planes, from rhythmic sympathy with our heartbeat to flattering our ego by subtlety. When I say that the work of art, the musical masterpiece, does all this, I mean that in any given instance it may do some or all of these things. At first, the very great work may appear to do none of them: it defies our expectations and unpleasantly disturbs our heartbeat. Our ego is flouted and our anxieties increased. We leave the concert hall muttering. But history has taught us that we should expose ourselves repeatedly to such icy showers of seemingly *non-equivalent* sensations until one of two things happens: either we reject the new alien world for good, or we adopt it by adapting to it. In gifted or determined devotees of art, adaptation comes easily, of course, but most of us need help, and even the gifted ones occasionally find themselves face to face with art that

looks impossible to assimilate. It is to help digestion by resolving doubts and dispelling mysteries that criticism exists. The traditional belief that criticism is intended to separate the good from the bad seems to be a confusion between means and ends. It may at times be necessary to point out the bad, but only as a corollary to defining the character of a piece by imputing to it an intention that is bad, or an intention that is good but poorly executed. Again, those who maintain that criticism judges and gives grades for the sake of the artist's next performance mistake criticisms for teaching. Even the teacher might be said not so much to pass judgment as to show the pupil, like a critic, what the pupil's own work does and fails to do.

The role of critic is, in a word, to act as go-between, as midwife, between the artist's conception and the beholder's recognition of it in the created thing. The critic says: "Where you see chaos, or possibly where you see nothing at all, there exists nevertheless a valuable entity. It has such and such features. Look at this, and again look at that. If you will but subject yourself to its influence once again, noting the truly salient parts, I will try to point out their connection and their meaning. I will, in the fullest sense of the term, identify the object for you, so that you will never again misconceive its place and purport, nor mistake it for another or for a dead thing."

Obviously, an undertaking so ambitious is never perfect or complete, which is why there can hardly be too much criticism—despite one's frequent feeling that there are too many critics. The remedy to this excess is to improve the quality of criticism by making stringent demands on those who criticize. In music particularly we should be very exacting, and also very receptive, because music criticism is still in its infancy. Indeed we may pray that its puniness is not a sign of stunted growth, due to the impediments of prejudice and false belief that it has encountered and that I have been enumerating. Their removal is prerequisite to critical per-

formance because otherwise the common goal of all critics is hidden from the musician by his own self-righteousness: he denies the possibility expressed in the title of our discussion. And yet, still, notwithstanding, the critic of music must, like the critic of literature, translate one kind of experience into another. To do so he must use words, for they are the most general medium of communication. And he is entitled to translate music into words because all the arts concern themselves with one central subject matter, which is the stream of impressions, named and unnamed, that human beings call their life.

If he is himself at home in life, in music, and in words, the critic may rely on his readers' keeping in mind the difference between life and art and between words and music. His remarks will naturally replace literalism with significance, and will automatically show that meaning is always above and beyond the thing said. The stupidest man is brighter than any device of speech because he always finds more in it than a device. Establish that same happy relation between the naive listener and music in general and you have got rid forever of the bugbear of "programmatically" interpretation.

Remains the question of vocabulary. What words are appropriate to lead the listener into the neighborhood of musical understanding and give him the push that will make him land in the very center of direct perception? A full answer would amount to a manual of critical practice. Here I can only sketch out a few general principles, most of them implicit in all that you have heard. First, the criticism of music, like that of the other arts, must be written for the layman; an educated layman if possible, but a layman and not a professor. The educated reader may be expected to pick up some rudiments of terminology; that is all he knows and all he needs to know. Technical terms are used in criticism simply to point to a part of the work. Just as in a painting we draw attention to a "patch of cobalt blue in the middle distance,"

so we may refer in a piece of music to the cadence, the tutti, the arpeggios, or the second subject. Beyond this the critic attention to a "patch of cobalt blue in the middle distance," must reserve his profundities for the learned journals, exactly as the literary scholar reserves his discussion of acatalectic meters and double syllepsis. All these matters have importance for the trade, not for the public.

Having singled out the parts that he considers noteworthy, the critic then explains what makes them so. Here he uses ordinary words and the range of possible phraseology is infinite. No one can predict what type of commentary will enlighten a particular mind, though it is safe to say that a critic ought to be aware of current doctrines and superstitions, whether or not he takes one of these as a text for his sermon. He should ideally begin where the unaided listener left off—in bewilderment if the work was new and difficult but well spoken of; in horror if it was new and badly spoken of. The critic begins in some familiar key and modulates to his own prearranged full close.

In the course of this exercise nothing is a priori excluded. Provided they are themselves intelligible at sight, the facts of history, biography, psychology, poetry, architecture, or of any art or science may be equally relevant. Analogies may be drawn from the workshop or the boudoir, provided always that anything said really makes a point, that the point is anchored to some precise part of the given musical experience, and that interest attaches to the remark or thesis for people who care about art and life.

This is a tall order and the record shows that it cannot be carried out without recourse to a device I have just mentioned—analogy. The justification for this need not be argued again, for you are (I hope) convinced that in this world things may be alike, though no more than alike. We may say of any group of things: A is to B as C is to D. The statement of a bold critic long ago that the overture to *Figaro* was like cham-

pagne, means the sensation in my palate when I drink the celebrated wine resembles the sensation in my ears when I listen to the celebrated overture. The analogy might of course be boiled down to the single adjective "sparkling," but words of this convenient sort tend to lose their sharpness by overuse. They do not discriminate sufficiently deep and break down under the strain of building up more elaborate analyses. Hence the obligation for critics to keep inventing metaphors and employing their very strangeness to force attention upon what is deemed the critical point.

Analogy is of course not without danger. It can impart an indelible character to the work or the passage it seeks to illuminate. Much nineteenth-century music suffers from having a certain kind of poetical character thus stamped upon it. The Moonlight Sonata, the Pathétique, the Appassionata, have almost become trite through their label, as if the suggestiveness of the music were imprisoned beneath. Perhaps the most striking example is that of Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony*, in which five movements differing markedly in atmosphere are heard and spoken of as if all were demonic like the last; the result being that the adagio, one of the loveliest of pastoral movements, hardly penetrates the mind-hardened eardrum. Such misconceptions are perhaps inevitable; they do result from criticism, and better criticism is the only antidote. The mishap only reinforces the need for the best criticism we can produce—informed, sensitive, and above all explicit; criticism fit to reconcile the tone-deaf and raise the spirits of the frightened Philistine, as well as enchant those who do not need it.

The existence of such criticism matters not only to artists and amateurs but to society at large. In a civilization as old and changeful as ours there is a constant movement between art and social thought. Ideas, attitudes, models for the physique and for the mind, come from the hand of the artist and are popularized by critics. New forms arise as the old

filter downwards. This is what Shelley meant when he called poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." And music's effect is surely as strong as poetry's, acting as it does on the nerves and the very bowels of mankind. But because the art is wonderfully complex in its higher reaches, its action is more uncertain and diffuse. It takes the critic speaking the speech of the literate man to arouse in that man the desire for music new and strange, and to ease the road to pleasure through that desire.

The goal for the critic to keep steadily in view is that of significance. It is meaning that makes sensations cohere, meaning that rewards and justifies the groping eye, ear, mind. In this first half century we have assimilated, among other things, primitive sculpture and non-objective art; in the previous century, a band of geniuses conquered inanimate nature itself as a realm of art—the literal God of thunder had long departed and nature was mute; but now the mountain echoes began to speak ethics and esthetics and to inspire masterpieces in their own image. There is no reason why in the next half century the meaning of music should not become just as well understood as that of the eternal hills. If the critics seek the way, this civilizing effort will not prove a superhuman task, despite the relative backwardness of discourse about music. The language of criticism by which we assimilate and assess literature was not found ready-made. It had to be invented, phrase by phrase and term by term. And so it must be for music. Once made and tested by public use, the critic's grammar and vocabulary are available to all for their several purposes. Music will then no longer be a thing apart, jealously or scornfully cut off from the total sphere of pleasure and significance. At that time the problem that has occupied us will no longer be a stumbling-block. Every literate being will feel as free to translate music into words as he now is to translate love, religion, the joy of living, or the spectacle of nature. It will then be a platitude rather than a heresy to say with Hazlitt: "We listen

to the notes of a thrush with delight from the circumstance not only of sound, but of seasons, of solitude, the recollections of a country life, and of our own."

And lastly, under that dispensation, the false division with which we had to start, of sheep and goats using the words "literary" and "musical" as terms of faint abuse or misplaced pride—that division will abolish itself, and all persons with artistic feelers of whatever kind will share equally the blessings of a common tongue.





