

Television Music

1 [Unite, Lowbrows!]

Lowbrows of the world, unite! It's a pity, of course, that you are lowbrows, but it's a far greater pity that the highbrows are highbrows and, pathological snobs that most of them are, they are after you. They want to educate you. With consciences that are as unconsciously guilty as hell, they want to pump their miserable culture, sorry, Culture, into you. With crocodile tears of self-centred altruism, they envy you your TV sets, they envy you the programmes you watch, they envy you every calm, joyful minute of your lives. They want to make you happy, of course – the way they have failed to make themselves happy. If you tell them that you enjoy 'Late Extra' on ITV, the programme that 'introduces the personalities who give late night London its glamour, vitality and spirit' (they wince at every word of this, which is why they know all about the programme without ever having it switched on), they consider you ripe for what, in ITV parlance, is known as the nut-house. Oh well, they consider you ripe for the nut-house anyway. But at the same time ripe for their education.

Let me tell you this – that 'Late Extra', so far as I know it, is a highly professional job that intermittently proffers genuine entertainment. There even is a chance that you get a spot of music somewhere in between, which is more than can be said about most of the sterile sessions of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, on whose Council I have the highbrow honour to vegetate. If you ask me what's better for you, 'Late Extra' or the usual SPNM recital – you know my answer: bad music is certainly bad for you. Unite, lowbrows, and follow me into the no man's land of artistic realism, reason, and spontaneous emotion. If we cultivate the land, perhaps, in the end, we shall educate the highbrows. They'll watch us, don't worry, for they are only sure of themselves when they teach others. I am a musician, and my concern on this monthly page will be television music. Far be it for me to suggest that TV's approach to music has reached anything like early maturity. But I shall never work on the highbrow assumption that anybody ought to hear what he doesn't want to hear.

For the moment, I am still feeling my way. I have much to learn about the new medium, and as distinct from some of my colleagues, I prefer to learn before I pronounce critical principles. Two things, however, are clear in any case. On the one hand, television is not primarily a means of musical communication; music will always take second and third place. On the other hand it all depends on the place. There are things that you can do on TV that you can't easily do elsewhere: for certain well-definable musical purposes, television itself takes first place.

A simple, drastic example. You can't show a music example on sound radio and, without a projection apparatus, you cannot even given substantial visual demonstrations in a lecture – not while the music is going on, anyhow.

On TV you can.

This is the point where our newly-united lowbrows will wrongly protest. "You can't do that to us", they will say, "and, anyway, you have your head in the clouds, for no television producer will make himself ridiculous by showing us a musical score when he can, instead, provide us with the excitement of watching the performer at work."

The one, however, doesn't exclude the other; and as for my head in the clouds, it wasn't in a cloud that I actually saw it happen. Last July on BBC Television, Walter Todds, a musical producer (accent on 'musical') presented a 'Celebrity Recital' in which an outstanding American piano virtuoso, Julius Katchen, played a single extended work, Brahms's Paganini Variations. While Mr. Katchen played the theme, we saw printed music; it moved along, or rather tried to move along, with the sound. On future occasions, it will be advisable to offer the viewing listener a somewhat wider printed field at every given moment; the widest possible, in fact. It seems to me that for the purpose, the size could safely be reduced. But these are minor criticisms; the major point is that Mr. Todds has done something that is both strictly musical and specifically televisional. And our lowbrows, once they have overcome their automatic prejudice against anything that seems to smell of technicalities and specialism, will perhaps agree that here is one of those new, excitingly factual possibilities where popular and specialist interests readily coalesce; diverse types of listeners are interested in diverse facts about music, many of which simultaneous listening and score-reading can supply.

In musical instruction, of course, whether for schools or adults, the printed music would eventually prove of invaluable help – from the first rudimentary stages to actual advice in composition. I here remember the (English) letter Schoenberg wrote shortly before his death to Humphrey Searle in reply to the BBC's invitation to give a talk or series of talks: '... your message that the BBC will ask me for a lecture, to be spoken on tape, has suggested to me at once a subject: "Advice for Beginners in Composition with Twelve Notes." Unfortunately, when I conceived this idea, I had forgotten that television is not so general in use in England than in America. Thus I don't know whether this lecture which will use many music examples, coming into effect only if one reads them, is acceptable for the BBC ...'

Schoenberg never taught his twelve-note method and only wrote a single essay on the subject in his whole life; the series would therefore have been of the intensest interest to friend and foe alike. A far cry from our opening sentence? By no means. The highbrow atmosphere with which twelve-note technique has been surrounded (largely by bad highest-brow composers) is, musically speaking, absolutely phoney, and when Schoenberg once wrote to the conductor Hans Rosbaud (in a recently published letter) that he simply wanted to have his music whistled like Tchaikovsky's, he gave an inkling of whom his music is addressing: not highbrows or lowbrows, but just musical people. From my own practical experience I would conclude that there are more musical people among lowbrows than among highbrows. It is, by now, factually untrue to say that Schoenberg's music is without wide appeal, though it is perfectly true to say that it is without wide appeal amongst music critics: how much televisional instruction could do towards rendering harmless their highly articulate prejudices!

My head has now arrived in the clouds; but today's clouds are tomorrow's rain and the next day's earth. Meanwhile, there is today's earth, which is not composing technique, but playing technique, and here again television has a unique function to fulfil. The producer of any programme is in a highly responsible position: he directs your eye within a given field of vision, he does part of your looking for you. If he does it stupidly, you will justly resent television's assault upon your freedom of vision. If he does

it wisely, he will show you the things you want to see, show them more clearly than you can see them elsewhere.

Now, the lowbrow's interest in *seeing* what the performer or orchestra does is in fact eminently and naturally musical, strictly to the point, which is to understand what these people are doing. What the highbrow's closed eyes usually mean, on the other hand, is that he can't play an instrument anyway. I well remember the pleasure I derived, many years ago, from seeing the film, *Melody of Youth*, wherein Heifetz played Saint-Saëns's *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* and the last movement of the Mendelssohn Concerto – except that in the latter he broke the sound barrier, with the result that not merely the eye, but also the ear had some difficulty in following him along. Most stunning visually, if somewhat disquieting aurally, was bar 211, just before the coda, where the quavers go up on the G-string to the C# above middle C#, before the final semiquaver rush ensues. This leap, in my opinion, is a composed hesitation: Mendelssohn (who, as is commonly forgotten, was an excellent fiddler and viola player) had the feel of the legato change into the 7th position, and the slight hold-up involved – an inevitable one before the advent of Heifetz – was just what he wanted. Heifetz, whose magician's technique deafened him to the possibility that a technical obstacle was actually implied in the music, was past the C# before you could say, "Hold it!"; and the way in which he raced over it had to be not only heard, but seen, to be believed. One had to admire it physically, indeed musically, despite the fact that it was out of place; after all, what is out of place in one context can be absolutely on the dot in another.

Neither sound broadcasting nor indeed the concert hall, then, can provide us with this genuinely musical lowbrow pleasure – the technical close-up. There are, of course, other television lowbrow pleasures from which the highbrows can learn a great deal, chief among them, perhaps, the opportunity of getting a strong and intimate impression of a creative artist's personality. At the present stage of our musical culture, in particular, this kind of personal contact can be of the greatest musical importance, in that it can help break down the unmusical barriers between leading contemporary composers and their potential audiences. I shall go into this question in some greater detail next month, when, after this introductory proclamation, I shall get down to TV show business and shall discuss, amongst other things, the fascinating film of Stravinsky talking about his music, his life and friends, which was shown in the course of one of the BBC's fortnightly *Monitor* programmes. Needless to add, I shall get down to more purely musical business too, always with reference to television's special problems and possibilities – not to speak of topical occasions. Among the performances thus to be reviewed will be Stefan Askenase's of Mendelssohn's G minor Piano Concerto.¹ Mendelssohn was born on February 3rd, 1809: there may be quite a few readers who will see my review on his 150th birthday, and perhaps the event will help to remind them that this great master is in urgent need of revaluation. Lowbrows of the world, unite! It is the highbrows of the modern world who have, quite superficially, reacted against Mendelssohn's style without opening their hearts to his natural feeling and their minds to his consistent thought. It is curious to reflect that without TV's lowbrow interest, Askenase's broadcast of Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto would not have taken place.