

THE SOCIALIZATION OF MUSIC

Fighting the Perils of Commercialism in an Industrial Era—The Indifferent Attitude of a Democracy Toward the Arts Contrasted with Conditions in a Feudal Empire—First Steps in a Movement Toward Better Things.

By IVAN NARODNY

MORE than fifteen years ago, I was much concerned with the question as to what was the best medium for counteracting the tendency of the arts to drift gradually into the grip of commercialism. At that time I was a young student of psychology and social conditions and my views lacked the support of experience that life has given me since. I have witnessed no improvement in the matter since that time, however, and I find that our civilization is facing a serious danger if proper steps are not taken immediately to avert it. This peril of commercialism is more serious in music than in anything else, although the war may change the condition slightly in Europe. The danger is not less or greater here than it is in Europe. It is not a national but a universal problem.

We are living in an industrial era, in which material issues play the foremost rôle. The great benefit materialism has conferred upon humanity is in abolishing feudal systems and bringing about closer relations between the most distant nations of the world. In one word, industrialism has freed humanity from the yoke of feudal lords and feudal views and made the world a cosmic community. In late years it has even begun to destroy the bulwarks of racialism and nationalism. But it has left art, the noblest of human undertakings, in the same state socially in which it was during the feudal era. It has abolished the significance and magic of the folk-arts, yet it has failed to give a compensating cosmic art. The era of boasted democracy has done away with the perfumed patronage of the feudal barons, but it has left matters in the greasy hands of cold-blooded business-men. This peculiar condition has brought about a temporary standstill in aesthetic evolution. We see that in countries where commercialism is strong art is weak and *vice versa*.

Thinking in Commercial Terms

Our school systems and moral standards have not developed far beyond the feudal grasp. We still worship brute heroism, brute force. A young student leaving college thinks altogether in commercial terms. His first conception of success and a career is in terms of so much money. We can read in thousands of stories of our celebrated artists that commercialism figures first of all. This adoration of a material power has

brought the modern artist face to face with a problem; either he goes with the money and has the success, fame and name, or he goes with the abstract art, the absolute ideal of beauty and is ignored, pitied, avoided and starved out of existence. No matter how strong the individual's will or character, in fighting such odds, he will succumb in the end. Only the few who happen to have the money and the genius (which occurs only once in a hundred years) can stand the strain and "beat the game."

One cannot blame the average young student of music when, after finishing his studies, he dreams of making a career of commercial success, earning so much money as an equivalent to his talent; there is nothing else left to do. There is nothing that appeals more powerfully to a young imagination than the glamour of the footlights and headlines; and these depend altogether upon commercial means and bring commercial returns. The whole code of social ambition is based on that very thing.

But this strain is so strong and so lasting that all aesthetic ideals crumble at the end. We have many press-agented artists, yet practically none of them leaves anything behind. They have nothing to say, they have no aesthetic message.

We are living in an age when the danger of retarding and destroying the noblest gifts of humanity by a merciless monster is just as great as during the era of the Inquisition. We are crushing hundreds, nay, thousands of our noblest geniuses under the wheels of our boasted democracy, simply because our public opinion ignores the importance of an aesthetic factor. We are boasting of our riches and institutions, our heaps of iron and stone, yet the fact is that money has never made any geniuses; power has never created art.

History is the best illustration of this argument. And other arguments are to be found in the true life stories of men who created something great. A friend of O. Henry told me that this lamented author complained that he never wrote his artistic best when he was measuring his effort by the money he expected to get. Mr. Sibelius told me two years ago that Richard Strauss had ceased to compose music worth while since he had been figuring it in terms of marks, francs and dollars. The late Count Leo Tolstoy told me that he was once offered an immense sum of money for writing a short story for a foreign publication. He wrote the story while the man was waiting for the manuscript. And he said it was the greatest trash he could imagine!

Attitude of Public Men

How our public men belittle the significance of music and art is best illustrated by an experience of my own in this country. Two years ago I asked President Wilson to pay a visit to the MacDowell Festival in Peterborough, N. H., which was near his summer residence. I did it with the idea that the President's presence might help the noble cause. Mr. Wilson wrote, apologizing that he was pressed by more important political matters and thus could not take part in it. This was our democratic America. But I had a better experience with the late Czar Alexander the Third, whom I invited to attend the Music Festival in Reval in 1892. Both the Czar and his family attended, and I received a very cordial letter from His Majesty, thanking me for the invitation, etc.

During last summer's Woodstock, N. Y., Music Festival, Harvey White wrote a most cordial letter to Governor Whitman, asking him to honor the venture by his presence. Mr. Whitman was then but a dozen of miles away at a political meeting, but he excused himself. In feudal Russia, a Governor considers the music festival the greatest of events and makes it a special occasion. These

are sad instances of how democracy and commercialism ignore art. Music in our American terms is something below a man's dignity, when it has to do with an average business man.

I have met many unrecognized geniuses of music and other arts, who have frankly confessed that they did not think it worth their efforts and sacrifice to exchange their spiritual selves for something obvious and superficial. Of course, we all have to live and must have our bread and butter, but the question arises as to where the limit is in the wild chase for money. We have come to a point where the commercial in art must stop. We measure the aesthetic achievements of our artists by material standards, which is wrong. The people unconsciously feel the objectionable side of this and resent it keenly. We can see that best from the success of so many comparatively amateurish ventures, as, for instance, that of the Washington Square Players, etc. We mix art with groceries and dry-goods, while it belongs in the class of a religion.

When Art Is Purchased

Mr. Kussewitzky, the celebrated Russian contrabass player, began an open propaganda against commercialism in music, many years ago, by giving a series of free performances throughout the country. In Russia, conditions are different, as life there still bears, more or less, a semi-feudal stamp. But here, in free America, we have absolutely ignored the question of the ideal aesthetics. Like the ancient Romans, we purchase the best art of the world from abroad. But the difference between a purchased foreign art and a sacred native art is like the difference between a moving picture play and a real drama. The real reward of a genuine art is the rapturous feeling, the inspirational emotion, that it produces, and thus is absolutely subjective. This is especially strong in music.

Mme. Narodny, a concert singer of wide experience, has repeatedly explained to me that she revolts in facing an audience whose mind mirrors the street and whose attention has been doctored by press agents. She has

flatly refused to make any concert tours in the service of an affected and not a real art, an industrialized and not a free form of expression. Many other Russian musical artists feel the same way.

What is the first step to take in the solution of the difficult problem? I am reminded of an attempt of Mr. White in Woodstock to enable all arts represented by those who live in that community to find expression as free as wind or rain in nature. Mr. White built an open-air stage in an old stone quarry, overlooking a beautiful meadow and a romantic landscape, and the first music festival of the kind was given in August of last year. Mme. Narodny, Lada and Mme. Kéfer acted as the soloists, and an orchestra of eighteen musicians played pieces of more or less popular character. This Woodstock Festival remains in the memory of the huge audience that attended it as one of the most inspiring artistic events ever seen.

Mr. White intends this summer to have a sufficient number of musicians in Woodstock so that open-air Sunday concerts may be given regularly till the fall. The second music festival in August will be held on the same stage as last year. American and foreign composers are invited to submit their works to the Woodstock Music Festival Committee, and will find an appreciative audience, provided there is artistic merit in their work. Among those who will be soloists in the Woodstock concerts this summer are Hervey White, Mme. Maria Mieler Narodny, Paul Kéfer, Pierre Henrotte, Lada and others.

Mr. White, while publishing a monthly magazine which he writes and prints himself, is doing something similar to what Tolstoy did in Russia. Mr. White is a champion of the art that emanates from nature, and he maintains that a country which lacks a national art has to find it in solitude and free nature. Since all folk-art of Europe originated in the rural parts, Mr. White thinks this should be the case with America. Mr. White was a prominent settlement worker in Chicago and co-operated with Jane Addams in her Hull House work. But he has come to the conclusion that it is not the city but the country in which is formed the backbone of a nation's art and soul. Artists lose the divine as soon as they get too interested in the material.

The Woodstock attempt is perhaps the beginning of a new art. The idea of socialization of music is more important than has been admitted. That our material riches make us one of the foremost countries in the world should not blind us to our duty to seek that beauty and those ideals which lie beyond the reach of the dollar.



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