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What to Listen for in Music

With a Foreword and Epilogue by
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Introduction by
William Schuman

and a New Appreciation by
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Preliminaries

All books on understanding music are agreed about one point: You can't develop a better appreciation of the art merely by reading a book about it. If you want to understand music better, you can do nothing more important than listen to it. Nothing can possibly take the place of listening to music. Everything that I have to say in this book is said about an experience that you can only get outside this book. Therefore, you will probably be wasting your time in reading it unless you make a firm resolve to hear a great deal more music than you have in the past. All of us, professionals and non-professionals, are forever trying to deepen our understanding of the art. Reading a book may sometimes help us. But nothing can replace the prime consideration—listening to music itself.

Luckily, opportunities for hearing music are much greater than they ever were before. With the increasing availability

of good music on radio and phonograph, not to mention television and the movies, almost anybody has the chance to listen to music. In fact, as a friend of mine recently said, nowadays everybody has the chance *not* to understand music.

It has often seemed to me that there is a tendency to exaggerate the difficulty of properly understanding music. We musicians are constantly meeting some honest soul who invariably says, in one form or another: "I love music very much, but I don't understand anything about it." My playwright and novelist friends rarely hear anyone say, "I don't understand anything about the theater or the novel." Yet I strongly suspect that those very same people, so modest about music, have just as much reason to be modest about the other arts. Or, to put it more graciously, have just as little reason to be modest about their understanding of music. If you have any feelings of inferiority about your musical reactions, try to rid yourself of them. They are often not justified.

At any rate, you have no reason to be downcast about your musical capacities until you have some idea of what it means to be musical. There are many strange popular notions as to what "being musical" consists of. One is always being told, as the unarguable proof of a musical person, that he or she can "go to a show and then come home and play all the tunes on the piano." That fact alone bespeaks a certain musicality in the person in question, but it does not indicate the kind of sensitivity to music that is under examination here. The entertainer who mimics well is not yet an actor, and the musical mimic is not necessarily a profoundly musical individual.

Another attribute which is trotted forth whenever the question of being musical arises is that of having absolute pitch. To be able to recognize the note A when you hear it may, at times, be helpful, but it certainly does not prove, taken by itself, that you are a musical person. It should not be taken to indicate anything more than a glib musicality which has only a limited significance in relationship to the real understanding of music which concerns us here.

There is, however, one minimum requirement for the potentially intelligent listener. He must be able to recognize a melody when he hears it. If there is such a thing as being tone-deaf, then it suggests the inability to recognize a tune. Such a person has my sympathy, but he cannot be helped; just as the color-blind are a useless lot to the painter.* But if you feel confident that you can recognize a given melody—not *sing* a melody, but recognize it when played, even after an interval of a few minutes and after other and different melodies have been sounded—the key to a deeper appreciation of music is in your hands.

It is insufficient merely to hear music in terms of the separate moments at which it exists. You must be able to relate what you hear at any given moment to what has just happened before and what is about to come afterward. In other words, music is an art that exists in point of time. In that sense it is like a novel, except that the events of a novel are easier to

*William Schuman contests this statement. As a result of practical work with amateurs he claims good results in aiding those previously held tone-deaf to recognize melodic materials.

keep in mind, partly because real happenings are narrated and partly because one can turn back and refresh one's memory of them. Musical "events" are more abstract by nature, so that the act of pulling them all together in the imagination is not so easy as in reading a novel. That is why it is necessary for you to be able to recognize a tune. For the thing that takes the place of a story in music is, as a rule, the melody. The melody is generally what guides the listener. If you can't recognize a melody on its first appearance and can't follow its peregrinations straight through to its final appearance, I fail to see what you have to go on in listening. You are just vaguely being aware of the music. But recognizing a tune means you know where you are in the music and have a good chance of knowing where you're going. It is the only *sine qua non* of a more intelligent approach to understanding music.

Certain schools of thought are inclined to stress the value for the listener of some practical experience of music. They say, in effect, play *Old Black Joe* on the piano with one finger and it will get you closer to the mysteries of music than reading a dozen volumes. No harm can come, certainly, from pecking the piano a bit or even from playing it moderately well. But as an introduction to music I am suspicious of it, if only because of the many pianists who spend their lives playing great works, yet whose understanding of music is, on the whole, rather weak. As for the popularizers, who first began by attaching flowery stories and descriptive titles to make music easier and ended by adding doggerel to themes from famous compositions—their "solution" for the listener's problems is beneath contempt.

No composer believes that there are any short cuts to the better appreciation of music. The only thing that one can do for the listener is to point out what actually exists in the music itself and reasonably to explain the wherefore and the why of the matter. The listener must do the rest.