

The Teaching of Appreciation of Music

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It must be obvious even to the most casual observer that individuals vary enormously in what music means to them and what they get out of it. Even among the best and most cultivated minds in matters of art and literature, marked individual differences are found;—from Dr. Johnson who found music to be "the costliest of rackets," to Carlyle to whom music was "a kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech which leads to the edge of the infinite and lets us for moments gaze into that." How can these extreme points of view and all shades of variations between them be reconciled? Evidently by isolating the quality called "the appreciation of the beautiful," marking out its distinguishing characteristics, and using the findings as a standard of evaluation.

A human being dwells in a three-fold world—a world of facts, a world of meanings, and a world of values. A fact is a universal truth, objectively established .

Current practices in conducting appreciation classes in music are, in general, of two types: (1) in which pupils are taught about music, and (2) where they are taught the music. In the first case the music is described to the pupils, the description assuming the form of either a story about the particular selection, or stories and anecdotes about its composer, or in encouraging the pupils to build pictures and stories around the music. A splendid example of description as a path to appreciation is the book called "The Lure of Music" by Olin Downes. In the second case, the music is explained, this usually in the form of structural or formal analysis. The first is the method of description, the second that of explanation.

Our problem is to evaluate these two methods on the basis of the criteria for the beautiful. It must be quite evident that the method of description is ruled out of court at once, since it violates all criteria. The attention given the music is not due to the music itself but rather to its incidentals while the feeling aroused is likewise due, not to the music itself, but to its by-products. The method is therefore to be deplored as vicious, particularly with young children, since it creates habits of listening destructive of the true end of appreciation. In this procedure the word of art is considered either the cause of an effect or as an effect of a cause. In each case, the music is a means toward an end instead of being an end in itself. In each case, the interest is aroused, not by the music, but by something about the music.

The objection to the method of explanation or structural analysis is, that, far from being a safe guide to the beautiful, it may even be destructive of it, or, in other words, formal analysis, instead of leading to admiration, may result only in its baser counterpart, intellectual curiosity or interest. This method may lead to a state where attention, instead of being on the thing itself, thus resulting in an experience of beauty, may be fixed only on the constituent elements of the thing, on its parts. Beauty is not the sum total of a number of specific elements, but a new something that results from the combination.

Therefore, when the finished product is broken up by analysis, the beauty is destroyed, and one is no longer dealing with the beautiful, but with its skeleton.

A human personality is not simply the sum total of anatomical, physiological, mental, and emotional factors. A child is not solely the combination of the traits of its progenitors, a home is not but father, mother, children, and house, nor is a chord nothing more than a simultaneous combination of tones, and a melody nothing more than a sequential combination of tones. All these, the human personality, the child, the home, the chord, the melody, are, rather, new entities that arise out of the combination of parts. And just as soon as an attempt is made to break up an entity into its constituent elements, it is no longer the entity that is under observation but simply this plus this, plus that.

A musical composition is no more merely a summary of motives and themes of various sorts developed in various ways than water is but the combination of atoms of hydrogen and oxygen, or salt that of atoms of sodium and chloride. And you might as well offer a child two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen to quench its thirst as offer it themes and motives to satisfy its hunger for music. Analysis may arouse interest, curiosity, or even admiration, but never appreciation. The performance may be admirable, but the accomplishment may be mean. Let me remind you here of what happened to the six blind men who mistook a part of the elephant for the elephant, and let me recall to your memory the sublime line of Browning:

"And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three /sounds we frame, not a fourth sound, but a star."
And when the Prior, in Fra Lippo Lippi objects that art does not "instigate to prayer," the artist answers:

"Why for this
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
Two bits of stick nailed cross-wise, or, what's best,
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well."

When we approach a musical composition scientifically, that is, analytically, it is not the whole that is present, but motives, phrases, figures, expositions, developments and restatements, that is, the fragments of the whole. When the music is treated philosophically, or speculatively, we dwell around it, a game of stalking and hunting the composition and getting farther and farther away from it. But the musical art work "is an individual, indivisible whole which the composer has created and the performers apprehend, and not the aggregate of discrete sounds into which it can at any time be decomposed."

But now, and finally, what of the teaching of appreciation? My answer is that for the sake of the children and of music do not try to teach it; although you might try to educate it. That is, don't try to describe it or to explain it into the children, but try to bring it out of the children. Angelo of Foligno, while dictating her revelations to her amanuensis, would frequently exclaim, "I blaspheme, brother, I blaspheme ! All that I have said is nothing, and there is nothing that I can say." This would be an ideal motto for teachers of art appreciation whenever they feel tempted to describe and explain. To this I would add the lines of Browning:

"Consider it well; each tone in our scale in itself is nought;
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said.
Give it to me to use ! I mix it with two in my thought
And there ! ye have heard and seen; Consider and bow the head!"
But try to educate it. How? Sir Arthur Quiller-Conil in a remarkable and fascinating essay- on Reading for Children in his book on The Art of Reading tells teachers of literature to "Just go on reading, as well as you can, and be sure that when the children get the thrill of it, for which you wait, they will be asking more questions, and pertinent ones, than you are able to answer."

I say, likewise, "just go on playing the best music in the best possible way, a very easy thing to do today with the perfection of the phonograph and the player-piano, and be sure that when the children get the thrill of it, for which you wait, and provided you have it yourself, which is sometimes open to doubt, they will be asking you more questions, and pertinent ones, than you are able to answer.

"Appreciation," says Plato, "is not capable of expression like other branches of study; but after long intercourse with the thing itself, and after it has been lived with, suddenly, as when the fire leaps up and the light kindles, it is found in the soul and feeds itself there."

