

HOW TO ENJOY MUSIC

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It is safe to assume that a master of musical composition knows a great deal about his subject, and that he speaks in decent phraseology and style, rather than in slang jargon. He is worth listening to.

When one is as familiar with the tunes of the masters as with the tunes of the street, they are found to be just as pleasure-giving and vastly more interesting; while their charm sinks deeper and lasts longer.

Just by way of making the concert less irksome, instead of passively submitting to a conglomeration of sound, listen for something definite.

Some Music Like Oratory

Listen to the rise and fall of the music--the sky line, as it were--as you might listen to an orator speaking in a foreign tongue. You will sense the introduction or presentation of the subject; its elaboration (like variations of a statement presented in different words); the occasional rising to a climax; and the holding of the listener's attention with a contrasting quiet level stretch.

Forceful repetition will help drive the argument home, with an imaginary pounding on the desk to increase impressiveness; not forgetting dramatic pauses to let the thought sink in.

Then finally you will sense the "coda"--the peroration--that builds to a huge close full of the oratorical impression of finality; or that contrariwise drops to an ultimate whisper that leaves one wondering where the music ends and one's soul begins.

The Underlying Rhythm

Listen for rhythm. Music at its very source is based on the rhythmic or periodic principle. It has pulse and is one manifestation of the great rhythmic scheme of things, which controls all, from the solar system down to man's heart-beat.

You know how the jaded regiment revives at the sound of the brass band's enlivening tune, and marches along forgetful of worn-out spirit and tired muscles. That is the power of rhythm. In listening try to find where the stress or principal accent is. Get the vital pulse of the composition, the time or "tempo," as we call it. It may seem so spread out or intangible to you that you cannot, at first, find it. Can you count four or three or six or five or eight? Would you walk or march or stroll, dance or run, sway, rock or float to its measure?

Descriptive Music

Or try to catch the spirit of the music, whether grave or gay, dreamy or martial, sweet and vague or purposefully definite, noble or trifling. Amuse yourself letting the music suggest colors as it fleetingly passes as subtly as the rainbow comes and goes. Or let pictures float through your mind in keeping with what you hear.

The title of a piece will sometimes stir the imagination to action. A dance-form—sarabande, gavotte, minuet—will suggest steps or the figures of the dance and even the dress of the dancers. The thought of dainty figures in “powder and patches, silver and old brocade” dancing the stately and graceful minuet will conjure a vision of kings' courts and ducal palaces, with old world atmosphere of dignity and ceremony.

Music is effectively descriptive in pieces that represent nature's phenomena, such as the rush of water, the play of wind or wave, shimmering sunlight, storms or the ineffable charm of mid-summer quietude.

Familiarity Increases Enjoyment

I cannot too much emphasize the value of constant repetition of the same piece to familiarize the listener with its character, its meaning, and its form. For this purpose, the phonograph and the player-piano are wonderful helps.

Familiarity breeds contempt only for unworthy music. In this way one can weed out the trash from among one's rolls and records. Familiarity with worthwhile music steadily increases one's enjoyment in it. New beauties are ever being revealed from time to time, and more and more pleasure comes from fuller appreciation and understanding. One never tires of good music.

Descriptive or “programme” music, though of a lower type than “absolute” music, nevertheless helps the untrained hearer to listen with more intelligence. Of this kind of music are the extraordinarily clever “Death Dance” (“Danse Macabre”), an orchestral tone-poem by Saint-Saens; “Spring Song” by Grieg; Beethoven's “Pastoral” symphony, Wagne's “Waldweben” (or “Woodland Life”), from the opera of “Siegfried.”

Architecture of Music

In a simple composition it is easy to realize the architecture or structure. Structure or musical form is only rhythm elaborated, or rhythm in a large sense. Think of a child's blocks, each block representing one short bar of music or pulse beat, piled up and fitted together to represent the youthful idea of a house. A simple musical form has simple groupings.

Play a minuet on your phonograph or player-piano. Recurrence or repetitions will come in groups of eight or sixteen short bars. Then will come a contrasting or answering section. After awhile the mood will change for the middle section or “trio,” which is also constructed of two phrases. Presently you will discern an entire repetition or recapitulation of all the first short part and its following contrasting section. Sometimes the piece ends quite simply like the first part, sometimes a little coda, or closing part, is tacked on, much as a woman gives a bowknot a little finishing pat after tying.

The Magic Key

I believe harmony is the real stumbling block for many. One “cannot see the forest for the trees”—cannot hear the music for the noise. The mass of sound is in fact too complex.

One can follow two voices singing in two-part harmony (not in unison, mind you), or can follow, perhaps, the simple harmony of simple tunes, or even, after a fashion, the choruses at a musical comedy—though in the latter the dancing, the pretty girls, the gaiety and largely the rhythm make pleasant adjuncts.

Infinite patience will be required to learn to listen to harmonies as they move incessantly in and out as subtly and elusively as quick silver. Chords are as the many-hued threads which the magic weaver manipulates on his loom, evolving patterns according to his will.

In this, the most difficult of our problems, I can only suggest that a step in the right direction would be to practice following one voice in a double quartet as the single voice finds its place in each successive chord throughout a song.

This very act of concentration will simplify the next step of choosing still another inner voice to follow--then two or more inner voices, as they weave their way in and out through successive chords.

Presently the listener, who is now really learning to listen, will sense one chord melting into another. Let him seize on this perception and repeat it. For, lo, there is the secret—further revelations will come now that the magic key is found.

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