

AN APPROACH TO MUSIC STUDY

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OVER a half century ago, when I was a very young and inexperienced teacher, I happened upon a short article with the heading, "Music Without Tears." It made a great impression upon me. The writer, a young woman with aspirations to be a concert pianist, was reflecting somewhat sadly upon the fate of the beginner studying music at that time. She called attention to the fact that in literature and art, attempts had been made to meet children on their own ground, so to speak, but that in music, the loveliest of all the arts, nothing was being done to smooth the way of approach, in a word, to introduce the novice to music itself. How well do I remember this time to which she was referring. Those were the days when four hours per day were the minimum requirements for practice — eight hours the maximum. And the first question a parent asked the teacher in those same days (and indeed sometimes in *these* days) when a child was brought for lessons, was, "How much shall he or she practice a day." Practice, forsooth! When the way towards music was uncertain and fraught with many difficulties. Since that day how the mists have cleared!

In order to more fully comprehend the transformation that has taken place during the past decades, we shall do well to trace the history of music teaching in our public schools. In the gatherings of the M. T. N. A. all these years, recognition has always been given to this ever-widening movement touching so intimately the daily lives of the children of the land. First and foremost, therefore, let us give to those who direct the destinies of music in the public schools the appreciation due them. Slowly but surely have the old haphazard methods given place to well-directed planning. And a clearer and more suitable presentation of the art of teaching music has been adapted to each grade in turn. This evolution is traced by one of the honored members of this Association, Mr. Edward B. Birge, in a book recently issued, entitled, *Public School Music in the United States*. The period covered, 88 years, has marked an astounding development. No private teacher should be indifferent to the trend of this mighty movement. Not only should one be abreast of the times in the recognition of this significant musical ongoing, but again, the private teacher should be among the very first to evince a sympathetic interest in whatever affects the community at large.

And what a contrast in the material given to the pupil to study, from the days of long ago, and now. Much that was trivial was then the daily food. Today the best thought of our foremost writers is devoted to the interests of the youth of the land. But those yesterdays held no doubtful values for the child born with music in his soul. With what avidity did he seize upon all that savored of the art. How eagerly was every opportunity embraced. How we treasured our songs, our hymns, our piano numbers. With what consuming curiosity did we investigate the contents of the portfolios of any friend so fortunate as to have been away anywhere for study. How were we to come in touch with those charmed names, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann — Schumann who was then being introduced to America by his *Happy Farmer* alone.

There is no time to dwell at length upon these yesterdays. We have happily come upon a day when so much thought and care has been expended upon music for the children's sake that one is confronted with another and quite as serious a problem, what path or paths to choose. As I reflect upon these changed conditions, many of them for the better, not all of them to be followed blindly, I feel that a few burning facts should be presented in these brief moments we can have together.

For the private teacher, then, for whom this Piano Forum is arranged, first, a survey of what should be expected of the little child of tender years, and through the years that follow. Congratulations to those teachers whose ministry lies in the presentation of music to little people of pre-school age and the earlier grades. This is indeed a rare privilege for any instructor. How wide is our view? How extended is our horizon? Do we confine our activities to only the beginnings of music or do we survey the field to be traversed by the one just entering upon the fascinating study? Even if our work is limited to the elementary stages, our vision should suffer no limitations, else these limitations will be imposed upon the pupil. The opportunity is ours. The responsibility is also ours. Can you, the teacher and the child, fare forth together upon this beautiful questing? The poets, who never fail us, have voiced in no uncertain tone the approach to a child. Follow with me these exquisite lines by Lucie Haskell Hill:

Reach down your hand!
The little one who trudges by your side .
Is striving hard to match your grown-up stride;
But oh, his feet are very tiny yet,
His arm so short — I pray you, don't forget —
Reach down your hand.

Keep soft your voice!
For it was such a little while ago,
This small one left the place where tones are low;
His voice still holds the cadence of that land
Where no one ever gave a stern command —
Keep soft your voice!

Lift up your heart!
The little child you struggle so to teach
Has resource far above the human reach;
Lift up your heart!

That line, "Has resource far above the human reach," is an arresting one. Let no teacher belittle a child's mentality. The best we can give him is none too good. Life is much too short to lose any time. Every stroke made should count toward real attainment. Perhaps we have a way of thinking that we can "see through" the child. Has it ever occurred to you, my fellow-teacher, that the child can "see through" us?

Arthur Guiterman sketched with uncanny insight and unerring touch this poem which I cannot forbear quoting to you. It is called:

TO ANY CHILD*

Clear-eyed and grave, you look me through and through
And know me as I am, not as I seem.
The masks I wear may cheat the world, not you.
What I have done the coldly-wise may deem
Noble or paltry, weighing good or ill;
Buyers and sellers! Let them mete and dole,
Appraising gauds and tokens as they will,
But, all unconsciously, you see the soul.
Can you believe in me, in me who must
Be humbly schooled by you before I teach?
You smile the smile of childhood's perfect trust:
I am not all unworthy? May I reach
Again the stainless peaks of April's prime?
Put your small hand in mine and help me climb.

Any one who has been privileged to climb towards the heights of music, holding the small hand of the child meanwhile, has been thrice-fortunate. With, then, a clearer apprehension of the relationship between pupil and teacher, with a proper estimate of an exchange of ideas that there may be no confusion as to the viewpoint of the little beginner, what gratifying results may be expected. We have come upon a day of astonishing musical talent. In count-

*This sonnet used by permission of the poet.

less instances one finds children of tender age encompassing almost unbelievable things, pianistically speaking. These children of rare endowments set the pace for each generation in turn. But they have their latitudes and longitudes and form a group by themselves. Our classes are largely composed of the average pupils whose gifts, of course, are not so pronounced. What can we do for them? For them the lesson hour should be the happiest period of the week. How, with the overcrowded school schedule can this be brought about? First, by making what the Norwegians call "A good landing." If the study of music can be begun very early in the child's experience, if it can be presented from the aural side, the rhythmic response enlisted, the melodic and harmonic concepts quickened, the song side emphasized before the study of any instrument is undertaken, think what an advantage such a child will have with this preparatory work. He will have discovered that here is not only one more thing to be studied, but a new realm in which to explore and enjoy. Some day the ambitious parent (and by the same token, the ambitious teacher) will eagerly subscribe to this vital preliminary training which so facilitates the later progress. To hasten the coming of this happy day one must learn to choose material that is child-like instead of that which is childish. And all sentimentality will have to be dispensed with, the fruitless imagining of what one supposes a child needs and wants being supplanted with true sentiment which is the highest quality of intelligence one can bring to any art.

The ultimate in all teaching is to inspire within the individual a love for and a desire to express the beautiful in music. To what extent this can be attained is dependent upon temperament, general culture, physical fitness, and the amount of time devoted to the subject. Ruskin used to plead, in speaking of the education of a daughter, "That she should be taught to understand more than she accomplishes." If our desire is, to have the pupil form a cultivated musical taste we should ever bear in mind this question — "Who are the truly cultured?" And its answer — "Those who see beautiful meanings in beautiful things." As has been wisely said by Albert Edward Wiggam in his book *The Marks of an Educated Man*:

Beauty comes from within. Every man creates his own world of beauty; he must train his own perceptions, synthesize his own images, direct his own emotions. . . . Every man is born to beauty in the same way. All may not enter the fine and high company of the creators, but every one may enter the precious gentle company of the appreciators. He must train his senses, however, to gain admission. He is himself the judge of his own credentials. He knows when he has been admitted. He knows that he possesses something precious and abiding that the average man does not.*

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These eager souls who come to us for lessons — how can we minister to their needs? How can we set astir the inner sense of music residing in their souls? Unfortunately for all of us there are two reasons why more progress has not been made, musically speaking, within the last decades. One reason is the influx of Methods and Systems that have bewildered the teacher and delayed the pupil. And the other reason, a most serious phase of our American life, "The modern tendency to ripen everything before its time." Were we not, as parents and teachers, in such an inordinate hurry, far more attention would be given to that basis of all educational progress, the training of the five senses and the pupil's ability to think clearly. Do not misunderstand my reference to methods and systems. One should be open-minded in appraising their claims. One should remember, however, that no one system can hold all of music no matter what the originators proclaim. America needs strong teachers, teachers who think for themselves, teachers who "Prove all things and hold fast to that which is good," as the Book says. There are universal teaching principles that never alter. Discover these, make them your very own.

One of the most marked changes for the better in these days has been found in the material put out by publishers aware of the trend of the times, for the elementary grades. Our best composers have given much thought to their contributions to this province of music teaching. As I have already stated, there has been and is still, an enormous output of inconsequential studies and pieces written down to the supposed level of the child's comprehension. Only those writers imbued with real musical ideas simply but beautifully expressed can hope for enduring fame in this domain. I am constantly amazed at the inane numbers that are all the while appearing on the counters of our music stores. Many of these contain words of no poetical character, but the very opposite, doggerel. It is an insult to the child's native intelligence to lay before him for serious study verses of that kind.

Then, too, the instrumental music is so often wholly lacking in intrinsic merit. One is reminded of Dr. Henry Van Dyke who somewhere says, "Through the wilderness of books flows the slender stream of literature." If this is true of books what must one say of the vast accumulation of compositions that have been offered for sale in past years. There must indeed be a discriminating taste shown by every teacher who would build into the life of each pupil an enduring love for good music. And if this musical development should be carried on throughout the school years, an assured background of musical understanding will be the possession of the child of average gift before he reaches maturity.

And what shall this development include? Not only a permanent repertoire of pieces from classic and modern writers suitable for each grade in turn that will in after years be a joy to re-study with a larger concept of their content, but the ability to play in ensemble, in duet, trio, or quartet form, the art of accompanying a singer or any instrumentalist, a thorough and continued acquaintance with church music (a province sadly overlooked by many instructors), the ability to read at sight according to grade, familiarity with all tonalities, as much elementary theory as pupils in these early grades can encompass. As to technic, that should be a part of one's very growth and made to serve purely musical ends. Above all, to work for that kind of technic that does not vanish with the years but that stands one in good stead to the end of life.

It is plain to be seen that when a teacher or pupil is imbued with this devotion to his work, with this steady progress, that he cannot have wasted those years. And now the rewards have come not only in the ability to play acceptably for one's friends, to really interpret the masters, but in that great accomplishment, to sit down to a new composition and play it *prima vista*, revealing the musical intentions of the composer. This indeed is musical happiness! Naturally the question will be raised, how can one bring about these very desirable results. By a constant growth in musicianship and that skill of hand that comes with well-directed and sustained study; by an increasingly keen rhythmic sense and unrestrained freedom of hand, arm, and body; correct posture; an unaffected manner; and an ever-quickenened aural sense that will always lead one to produce a beautiful singing tone. I am well aware that this element of beauty has been scoffed at and derided in this noisy age. But I ask you to think for a moment of the pianists who have given you the greatest pleasure by their interpretations. The element of a singing tone-quality was always manifest in their playing. This also must always be the case, all arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

I have not time to speak of an imperative requisite of artistic piano playing, the use of the imagination. If, as Amiel says, "The art of the teacher is to suggest," we should not fail to kindle in each soul committed to our care that subtlety, that elusive quality that marks the dividing line between the amateur and the artist. Indeed, one can be an artist in first grade. All big people are made of little people. If one is to have "music without tears," one must love it for its own sake and must in turn be prepared to interpret it to others who have not been thus fortunate in having such advantages.

To sum up, then, our obligation as teachers, is it not our first duty to the child to so direct him that he will approach his task

with the feeling that music is a serious study, not a mere whiling away of the hours. Too long have temporizing measures in the way of misdirected devices blocked the way to a dignified approach to the art, an art so exacting in its requirements that there must be no dallying if one is to make the necessary headway through the grades. The wealth of literature provided for each step of the way makes an easy ascent to Parnassus. And if one must halt at the foothills or up some slight elevation still far from the top, one should have received so lasting an impression of the charm of this study that one will always turn to it with fresh enthusiasm, thankful forever for the guidance of the teacher who carried the torch until one, in turn, could light his own.

If we as teachers can so inspire those committed to our care that we can enkindle within them the love of perfect work while they are very young, as perfect as their immature standards can produce, we shall conform to the requirements set forth in such a masterly manner by Bliss Carman who, under the caption "Art and Life," says:

It is not what we do that counts, but how well we do it. There is no saying one kind of work is art, and another kind is not art. Anything that is well done is art; anything that is badly done is degrading. The sense of beauty and the sense of goodness are so closely related, that any injury to one means an injury to the other. The two must go hand in hand.

The pupil who has early learned to love this exacting but delightful study of music, who has had his imagination touched by the fantasy it holds, who has, with Plato, experienced "wings to the mind," who has partaken of its orderly essence, who has been guided towards the endless realm of beauty and caught some of the revelations that come to the soul by contacts with the immortals, such a pupil has only feelings of gratitude for the help of those who have turned him in this heavenly direction.

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