AN ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF THE
CRITICAL WORKS OF VIRGIL THOMSON
AND OLIM DOWNES

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Major Professor

Minor Professor

Dean of the School of Music

Dean of the Graduate School
AN ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF
THE CRITICAL WORKS OF VIRGIL THOMSON
AND OLIN DOWNES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North
Texas State Teachers College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Elizabeth Kincaid Teasley

Denton, Texas
August, 1947
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. THE PURPOSE OF CRITICISM</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. A COMPARISON OF THE CRITICISM OF VIRGIL</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMSON AND CLIN DOWNS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRITICAL WORKS OF VIRGIL THOMSON AND CLIN</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOWNS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE PURPOSE OF CRITICISM

The word, "criticism," has for centuries been applied loosely to many forms of writing, regardless of the author's purpose. Ambiguity and disagreement have been inevitable and will be until the word has been clearly defined. Since the beginning of criticism, there have been many different opinions as to what it really is, what it ought to be, and what value it has. Some popular usages of the word are given by Gayley in his Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism. It has been used to mean fault-finding and a hostile attitude. Later, writers tried to make it a more pleasant task and said that criticism was simply a clash of opinions. Others defined criticism as the passing of judgment. This definition was based on the Greek origin of the word which meant to separate and then to judge. Matthew Arnold wrote that the function of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is."\(^1\)

There are as many differences of opinion concerning the purposes of criticism as there are concerning its definition.

\(^1\) Charles Mills Gayley and Fred Newton Scott, Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism, pp. 1-2.
Gayley points out the following purposes:

1. Criticism is interesting for its own sake.

2. Criticism is a kind of literature; its justification rests on the same basis as other literary forms.

3. Criticism is a help to our appreciation of literature (the arts). It interprets and makes clear what is obscure in the thing criticised.

4. It teaches us what in literature is bad, and thus saves time and mental energy.

5. It prepares the public for the author (composer).

6. It shows the author (composer or performer) how to adapt himself to the public.

7. It regulates and disciplines literary (musical) taste.

8. It frees literature (music) from the tyranny of prejudice and whim.

9. It destroys morbidity in the author (composer) or the public.

10. It gives people who have not time to read the original, information about new books (music) and new ideas.

Criticism has received, perhaps, more than its share of bitterness. It has been said that it tends to crush.

originality, that critics are naturally hostile to authors; but is this not "due to vicious methods of criticism employed by bad critics?"3

Ibsen has expressed his opinion of criticism, shared by hundreds of other members of the world of arts and letters, in his tale told by Peer Gynt. Peer tells how the devil, coming to a mountebank meeting, said that he was, "in a manner convincing," able to grunt like a pig. He was not recognized there. Hiding a real pig under his coat, he pinched it at the proper moment. The pig "gave voice" and ended up with a slaughter-house squeal whereupon the performer bowed low and retired. The critics discussed and appraised the affair, the tone of the whole was attacked and defended. Some fancied the vocal expression too thin, while some thought the death shriek too carefully studied; but all were agreed as to one thing: qua grunt, the performance was grossly exaggerated. Now that, you see, came of the devil's stupidity in not taking the measure of his public first.4

Failure of critics in general to settle upon their philosophy, their purposes, and their method of criticism has been responsible for a great deal of the bad feeling directed at them. Yet they have not been able to agree. Some critics have thought that criticism can be only subjective; some have attempted to make it scientific and

---

3 Ibid., p. 8.

objective. In spite of these efforts, no recipe has been found for criticism in general and musical criticism in particular. Ernest Newman has said that the music critic has no established first principles and that he is far worse off in this respect than the practitioners of the other arts. He said that in other arts, these principles remain fairly constant, not only in objects, but in materials, while the material of music is always changing, and that with the changes come new forms and new ideals of expression. Newman believed that the vocabulary and the grammar of each nation’s speech have remained unchanged for centuries and is likely to change very little in the future, but that the grammar and more especially the vocabulary of music has changed enormously in the last three hundred years alone. So far as he could see, new additions will be made to them, new changes rung upon them, in every century to come. Thus it has been almost impossible to set up standards of judgment under such conditions.⁵

There are those who believe that there can be no standards, that criticism is subjective. They believe that criticism is nothing but “adventures of the soul among masterpieces.”⁶ They do not recognize judgment as a part of

---


this process. But, with the selection of a masterpiece, judgment has been passed. "Evidently a good deal depends upon the quality of soul that has the adventure." 7 If criticism is purely subjective, then we have no right to look down upon those who prefer inferior music.

A different kind of subjectivism was seen in George Bernard Shaw, who, according to Max Graf, banished dogmatic stiffness when he "set off the sparkling fireworks of his wit, his malice, and his guttersnipe insolence." 8 Shaw felt that it was not the business of criticism to be just. He asked who was he to be just since he felt that there was no more insufferable affectation in criticism than the impersonal, abstract, judicial, authoritative air. 9

Shaw also thought that a critic who had no personal feeling about what he criticised was not worthy of the name. He said without hesitation that he had personal animosity toward anybody who did less than their best, that he hated them, loathed them, detested them, longed to tear them limb from limb and strew them in gobbets about the stage. 10

---


8 Max Graf, Composer and Critic, p. 294.


10 Ibid., Vol. 26, p. 54.
He had vast contempt for what he called the "inoffensive, considerate, say-nothing-to-nobody sort of criticism" and the "gentlemen who keep only one quality of margarine, which they spread impartially over all composers of established reputation."

There is another school of thought which says that criticism should be only the play of a critic's mind upon masterpieces. Again judgment is implied although not admitted. The process by which the masterpiece was selected is the important step. Newman maintains that a work is or is not a good work for reasons that are independent of the critic's state of mind or body at the moment he comes in contact with it, and that, for this reason, it is desirable that there should be a certain technical basis for criticism as for composition.

One other kind of critic believes that the critic's whole duty is to attempt to give the reader a running account of a performance or a composition without forming a judgment for him. This type of critic, who takes no side, lacks driving power and fails to show whether a work has vitality and to give even a characteristic description of the work.

---

There are, then, these two main differences in conceptions of what criticism ought to be. According to Calvocoressi, one conception asserts that there exist certain standards of beauty, the critic's function consisting in discovering how far works conform to these standards; the other denies the existence of such standards and has its guiding principles summed up in Wordsworth's belief that "every great and original artist, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is seen."\(^{15}\)

Among those critics who not only believed that standards of beauty can be set up and that there can be objective means for forming judgments of music, but who also attempted to set up a system, a basis, for doing so are W. H. Hadow, who wrote his *Studies in Modern Music* in 1892, M. D. Calvocoressi, who attempted to give the student a basis for beginning his criticism in his *Musical Criticism*, and Theodore Meyer Greene, who works out by far the most detailed plan for the analysis of all the arts.

Hadow has the most general plan for forming judgments. He recognizes the difficulty of expressing musical criticism clearly because our language "has been so much framed in relation to external nature that it finds itself at a loss

in dealing with correlatives in the world of phenomena." The result is that the critic often resorts to technical terms which affect the public about as "an imperious preacher haranguing an inattentive audience." The laws of musical science apply only to the age which uses them. They may be superseded by some other law in the next age. He says, then, that the test of good music is to be found, "not in subservience to formal rules" but in its capacity to satisfy "an almost universal requirement of human nature." He says that criticism should rest on psychological grounds and that the aesthetic basis of music cannot be explained mathematically; therefore, it remains to determine as far as possible the broad general principles which all implicitly recognize as constituting the artistic code. He also determines laws which underlie the distinctions of classical and romantic, of counterpoint and polyphony to be

I. Vitality—First and most essential, a part of the knowledge of the composer, the thought, the truth, not just facility in writing. The primary test of bad art is its want of genuineness. It is deliberate, artificial, imitative, lifeless.

II. Labour—Not the appearance of effort, but that the workmanship shall be as good as possible in its kind.

17 Ibid., p. 11.
18 Ibid., p. 16.
19 Ibid.
III. Principle of Proportion—In accordance with which the factors of a composition form members of a single organism.

IV. Principle of Fitness—Music is suggestive and should be in keeping with the conditions under which it is to be heard. Religious music should not contain secular idiom.\(^{20}\)

Calvocoressi believed that a musical critic’s studies should include much besides that which properly refers to music as an art; various branches of philosophy, viz. psychology, aesthetics, and logic; acoustics and other branches of musical science, if only to test the assertions of writers who draw upon these for controversial purposes; and history (not music only). He says that this is a good deal for a man engaged in work which is so little appreciated that it is often described as superfluous, futile, inferior, or detestable; which some people hold, not without some reason, to be the last resource of those who fail in all other branches of music, writing, or reporting.\(^{21}\) After he is thus equipped, the critic should take as his main standards of criticism those factors whose origins are traceable to three sources: the emotions, the intellect, and the imagination, the latter setting standards of appreciation which are, in the final analysis, the determining factors of aesthetic judgments.\(^{22}\)

Pure intellect cannot be exercised alone. Hadow points out that men like Hummel and Czerny copied the design of Sonata but left the poetry out.\(^{23}\) Some music looks all right

on paper but lacks the spark of vitality. Hadow also calls attention to the twelfth bar of Chopin's Nocturne in E flat (Op. 9, No. 2).

There is a connecting passage which, when we see it on paper, seems to consist of remote and recondite modulations. When we hear it played in the manner in which Chopin intended, we feel that the rest of the passage is an iridescent play of colour, an effect of superficiality, not an effect of substance. 24

Here, after the intellect has had its say, imagination steps in and says the only thing that matters, incidentally defining a principle of aesthetic effect practically unknown to criticism in the nineties.

In short, it is suggested that no adequate critical conclusions can be derived from the data of music, the mind alone being powerless to establish standards of judgment. 25

The mind can be a regulating principle. For instance, in forming a judgment of Schoenberg's work, key-relationship is not a part of his problem. The work is not condemned on this score; but, if the physical displeasure is great enough at the clash of atonal combinations that an effort of mind and will power cannot bring the listener to endure it, if it is not meant for the ear and does not stimulate the imagination, atonal music will have to go. The fact that combinations which were intolerable a few decades ago are nowadays found quite pleasurable does not imply that there is no limit to the ear's tolerance. 26

24 Hadow quoted by Calvocoressi as a part of the following reference.

25 Ibid., p. 67.

26 Ibid., p. 113.
Judgments must be a combination of mind cooperating with emotions and imagination. If there is not agreement, one will probably take the upper hand. For instance, the intellect would say that the Overture to the Rheingold is monotonous, but imagination would say that it is effective.

The form a critic's judgments take will depend a great deal upon his proposed object. Calvocoressi declares that this object, in theory, is simple enough. He says that it is to see how far and why he considers a work good or bad, and to pronounce accordingly, to define as plainly as possible the position, merits, and demerits of composers and others, to show the issue of tendencies, and to offer solutions of various art problems or to contribute to their solution. He believes, however, that in practice, things are not so simple.\textsuperscript{27}

Whether a critic writes for educated music-lovers or for music-lovers in the elementary stages of education, all essentials are the same. The wording should be "forcible, specific, and, so far as needful, circumstantial, so as to insure unambiguity, consistency, and above all things, adjustment of the means to the end."\textsuperscript{28} Clive Bell says that a critic's end is to bring his spectator before a work of

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 123.

\textsuperscript{28} Badow quoted by Calvocoressi in \textit{Musical Criticism}, p. 124.
art in an alert and sympathetic frame of mind — it matters hardly at all what words the critic employs provided they have the power of infecting his audience with his genuine enthusiasm.

Calvocoressi suggests many purposes from which a critic may work. Certainly that critical work which considers the greatest number of factors will be the most effective. The critic's purpose might, according to Calvocoressi, be one or many of the following:

1. To deal with the problems of music.
2. To determine what scope music offers to criticism and what criticism can do with regard to music.
3. To stimulate our attention where it falters.
4. To supplement our knowledge where it falters.
5. To illuminate points of issue.
6. To give judgments good or bad.
7. To stimulate interest with arguments, elucidations, and suggestions that give rise to and substantiate judgments.
8. To be propagandist for what he cares about.
9. To champion certain works or to attack others.
10. To educate.
11. To kindle enthusiasm.

---

Clive Bell, *Since Socrates*, pp. 156-158.
12. To dictate or suggest opinions.
13. To enable readers to form opinions.
14. To deal with problems of the minute or to lay a foundation for a fresh force in criticism.
15. To bring a spectator before a work of art.
16. To lead — (should be true critic's aim according to Calvocoressi).
17. To call attention.
18. To extirpate bad music.
19. To inspire readers with wish to know works he praises.
20. To judge technical efficiency of performers.
21. To smooth way for composer of merit.
22. To judge performer's conception of the works, style, trend, character.
23. To judge technical efficiency of performers.
24. To help — not to hinder.30

Studying this list carefully, it may be seen that judgment is implied by all of them which are not actually a process of judging. Calvocoressi, then, believes that the critic must basically know music and all sciences pertaining to music and must form judgments of it from definite standards tempered by the imagination. He believes that every

30 Calvocoressi, op. cit., passim.
Judgment of a critic must, above all, be justified by concrete example, except in short notices.

Theodore Meyer Greene more nearly establishes a basis for judging music than any of the other critics mentioned. He sets himself, first, the task of showing the objectivity of aesthetic quality. This, of course, means that works of art can be judged objectively. He says that judgment is rightly the final step of the critical process. The process is not complete without judgment. Greene believes that it is the critic and the thoughtful art-lover who make certain objects works of art by deciding that they possess the requisite quality to merit inclusion in this class, and that since artistic quality presupposes critical competence, it is necessary for the critic to acquire this competence through actual critical investigation. In order that he may start his investigation he must have critical knowledge of what it is that he is to investigate. 

Because of this belief, Greene sets up a plan for investigation which applies equally well to all of the seven major arts. It gains validity for this reason. He has established a means for determining the presence or absence of both concrete evidence of good workmanship and those abstract qualities common to all the great

---

arts which have seemed so inexpressible. His plan sets up three basic artistic categories of art: matter, form, and content. Matter is broken down into raw material (the concrete) and the artistic medium (the aesthetic). Form is broken up into structural ingredients (the concrete) and generic forms (the somewhat abstract). While content is broken up into universal (the perceptual and spiritual) and individual (portraiture) qualities. Each of these categories is broken down into minute instances. In spite of the great value of his plan for evaluation, Greene recommends it only as a starting point for the critic and says,

Appraisal cannot be based on rules or principles permitting of a purely mechanical application. We must feel what we would judge; our appraisal must be based upon an immediate artistic experience in the presence of the work of art itself. 32

There are then three aspects of criticism, none of which can be overlooked. They are the historical, recreative, and the judicial. He states that, although judicial appraisal is, in a sense, the culmination of criticism, it actually pervades the entire critical enterprise. 33

It is apparent, after a study of critical thought, that each critic is searching for a purpose and a basis for beginning and substantiating his criticism, but that the greatest critics realize that, in the final analysis, great music

32 Ibid., p. 371.
33 Ibid., p. 372.
is equal to something more than the sum of its parts. If it is true that music takes up where speech leaves off, then the critic's greatness will depend upon his ability to recognize the something more than the sum of its parts. Hadow's principle of vitality, Calvocoressi's factor of imagination, and Greene's re-creative step in his process of judgment are, each one, a recognition of this something more. Every critic must have a set of objective criteria as a point of departure; but, finally, it is also a necessity that he recognize the presence or absence of the life spark. Certainly a critic can be no greater than his objective will allow.
CHAPTER II

A COMPARISON OF THE CRITICS: OF CLIN BOWNES AND

VIRGIL THOMSON

A study of the critical work of Virgil Thomson, critic for the New York Herald Tribune and of Clin Bownes, music critic for the New York Times, will perhaps give a better understanding of how different emphasis on purposes may influence critical work. Each man wrote brief, journalistic reviews. They attended many of the same concerts; yet, their critical judgments differed in many respects.

On October 11, 1940, both men went to the concert of the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra with John Barbirolli conducting. The program was the Overture to Emmont by Beethoven, Enigma Variations of Liszt, and Symphony No. 2 in D Major by Sibelius.

Bownes said of the Overture to Emmont that Beethoven never produced more compact, dramatic, and powerful pages. He said that everything great, defiant, and triumphant is said in the fewest possible tones and with a matchless simplicity and concision. ¹

Thomson made the unqualified statement that the Overture was a classic hors d'oeuvres, that nobody's digestion

¹New York Times, October 11, 1940.
was ever spoiled by it, and no late comer had ever lost much by missing it. It may be noted in passing that it is unusual that Mr. Thomson did not give specific reasons for his judgment.  

Downes said only that Elgar creates with exceptional vivacity and lack of pretense and that the *Sinfonie Variations* is a familiar and popular score.  

Thomson called the *Variations* an academic effort not all lacking in charm. He then proceeded to explain why he called them academic. He said that he thought the composer's interest in the musical devices which he was using was greater than his effort toward a direct and forceful expression of anything in particular. He said that Elgar orchestrated accurately and completely and consequently looked for occasions to use the thing that he could do well. He thought that the Elgar *Variations* were mostly a pretext for orchestration, a pretty and a graceful one, not without charm and a modicum of sincerity, but a pretext for fancy work all the same.  

Downes thought that the audience received a good impression of Sibelius, whose music he thought tragic and primitive. He believed that Sibelius was almost the only

---


3 *New York Times*, October 11, 1940.

4 Thomson, *op. cit.*
living composer whose spirit was equal to the need of the times. Thomson went to great lengths to say that he did not like Sibelius's music. He considered it to be vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description. He not only did not like it himself but he also did not know any educated professional musicians who were Sibelius-lovers. He realized that it had the same kind of popular power that a Hollywood class A picture had. He insisted that Sibelius was merely provincial, but stated that he had not as yet analyzed a score to find out what really was in it.

Upon hearing a concert of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conducting, Thomson wrote that Ormandy's arrangement of Handel's Concerto for Orchestra was brilliant and gay and Handelian as one could wish, a great deal more so than if the original text had been observed. He found it no end jolly and wanted for once to praise a man for tampering with the classics.

Downes did not care for the arrangement, because, he said, that Ormandy had added twentieth century devices to eighteenth century ones. Admitting that Handel was very free in such matters himself, he said that he found the arrangement full to the point of heaviness which was

5 *New York Times*, October 11, 1940.

6 Thomson, *op. cit.*

rarely a quality of Handel. He thought the arrangement had not the transparency and glow of tone that Handel secured, the result being that noise at times replaced sonority and nobility was disguised by turgidness. These changes did not elevate the effect.  

Both men devote a great deal of time to the Symphony No. 1 in E of Sibelius. Downes points out the sincerity, imagination, primeval directness of Sibelius's music. He mentions that the First Symphony got the big applause of the program. He did say that this symphony is the least nature of all the Sibelius symphonies; it has awkward turns and corners in it and derivations and immaturities of technic and style. He said that Sibelius wrote with more harmonic distinction later. He thought that Ormandy gave a performance generally effective, but not heroic enough and in too many places sentimentalized. He believed the symphony to be more greatly conceived than was evident from the performance.  

Thomson believed, after listening attentively, that his previous opinion of Sibelius's music was correct. He said that the melodic material was everywhere of inferior quality; the harmonic substructure was at its best unobtrusive, at its worst corny. He thought the scoring

8 New York Times, October 16, 1940.
9 Ibid.
seemed accurate and surefire, but he hinted in a footnote that Ormandy might have changed the scoring. The formal structure, he thought, was a smooth piecing together of oddments, not unlike what is known to the film world as "cutting" and compensation for the essential jerkiness of the flow was made by something not unlike "plugging" a theme song at these points. He reiterated his former opinion that Sibelius's music was vulgar and said that by its side Respighi's *Festa Romana* sounded like good clean musical fun.10

Downes mentioned the conductor only when he did not approve of his arrangement of the *Concerto for Orchestra* and when he did not think his reading of the Sibelius *First Symphony* was adequate. Thomson said that there were more highly paid and more highly advertised conductors than Ormandy but that very few musicians anywhere in the world conducted with such straightforwardness, lively understanding, and dependable architectonics. He also said that his every gesture was civilized, sane, and effective, with a resultant musical performance which was civilized, sane, and effective beyond all comparison with his more showily temperamental colleagues.11

In spite of the fact that Thomson did not mention the time he spent living and working in Boston, it was not difficult to tell from his writing where his heart lay, and, with his heart, his understanding. The beginning of his article concerning the Boston Symphony Orchestra concert in Boston exuded pleasure from beginning to end. He started his article thus:

"And so, in cerulean sunshine and through indescribable splendors of autumnal leafage, to Boston—the Hub of the Universe, the Home of the Bean and the Cod. The heart, as well, of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the finest by all-round criteria of our resident instrumental foundations."

He said that the Vaughan Williams London Symphony was the same piece he heard twenty years ago in spite of some cuts by the composer. He said that the first two movements were long, episodic, disjointed; the third was short, delicate, neatly sequential, compact, efficacious, charming. He said of the finale that it was rich and varied, its musical material of high quality, its instrumental organization ample and solid. He said also that the last two movements were anything but dull which the first two were, more than a little.

Thomson thought that making a program out of one dead German, Beethoven, and one live Englishman, Vaughan Williams, was a reference to current events and sympathies. He thought that this reference might not have turned out to be

\[^{12}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 5.\]
nearly so effective if the last two movements of the London Symphony had not been so impressive, the finale so moving and deeply sombre. He felt that its expressive content was so actual that it might have been written the month before although it was written in 1913.

Thomson thought that the London Symphony was also a fine vehicle for a display of orchestral virtuosity on the part of Koussevitzky and his men since every passage, any passage, served as a pretext for those miracles of precision and of exact equilibrium that a first class modern orchestra was capable of. He believed, however, that these refinements tended more to interrupt the music's continuity. He thought that Koussevitzky did not try to do too much careful modeling but, rather worked for rhythmic exactitude that added monumental weight to the Beethoven dynamism that was appropriate. He said that when Koussevitzky tried to get more weight than that, the sound that came out was less loud and less weighty than it would have been had he not surpassed the point of maximum resonance. He was firmly convinced that the Boston Symphony Orchestra was one of the finest instrumental ensembles in the United States; if not the finest. In all of Thomson's writings of the Boston Symphony his more than casual interest in and understanding of that organization was apparent even when he made unusually kind criticism of it.

\[13\] Ibid., p. 6.
Of the same concert Downes wrote that its program notes were a good example of one kind of snobbery that was current in the upper musical circles. He said that it was an example equal to the ridiculous custom, instituted by czaristic conductors, of not permitting audiences to applaud between movements of symphonies when that would be the intelligent and spontaneous thing to do and an action entirely in accord with the nature of the music and the purpose of the composer. The program notes were an example of an attitude of superiority to program music. He continued

Whoever is interested in what the story is about, or the story that may be back of a composition, is presumed to lack imagination and to have the most questionable taste. He is a creature of the outer darkness. And even composers caught cold with a program more or less openly avowed, get frightened and subscribe to the pretense.14

Downes pointed out that Vaughan Williams had at one time allowed program notes for the London Symphony to be written but had retracted them. He regretted that because the Boston Symphony concert programs gave very few program notes, only a few people understood the music or the prolonged and dramatic silence at the end of the chime motif. The implication of the London that was the great and ancient city which would never be what it was again, and the eternal, unchanging passing of time and the river was largely lost, according to Downes, because the audience

14 New York Times, December 8, 1940.
knew little about the music.

In the same article Downes raised the question of why a symphony must stand or fall as absolute music. He asked if it must be music which meant precisely nothing, would it be lesser music, or would the listeners be less worthy, if they knew that the mysterious introduction portrayed the eternally flowing river which heeded neither the passions nor the tragedies of man, nor the passing wars, governments, generations, and epics. Downes felt that program music might be trivial and imitative and inartistic, or that it might be in the highest sense imaginative and beautiful.15

Two things were evident from Downes' article. One is that he evidently did not consider the Boston Symphony Orchestra the epitome of perfection, as did Thomson, since he devoted his whole article not to the excellencies of the orchestra and its conductor, but to what he considered to be a flaw in the program. Downes stated in his discussion of program notes an attitude which clearly affects all of his critical work. This attitude may be seen in his criticism of the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony.

The symphony was played at a concert of the M. B.O. Symphony Orchestra with Arturo Toscanini conducting. Downes said that Toscanini's reading of the symphony had

---

15 Ibid.
brought him new understanding of it. Previously, Downes had agreed with the consensus of opinion that the Seventh Symphony was a work puffed and canonaded into public attention for political purposes; that the great amount of advance publicity had given it an overestimated value for both conductor and audiences, and that the composition was inexcusably long, superficial in its contents, poorly put together, and highly derivative from other composers; that in short its pretensions exceeded its manufactured reputation and actual merit.

Downes said, however, that Toscanini, by difference of treatment and emphasis and the singular divination of the artist, had changed the meaning and value of the symphony. Toscanini took eleven minutes less time to play the piece than was taken at a previous performance. To Downes, the symphony seemed incomparably more terse, concentrated and direct in its progress and more to the point than it had sounded at earlier hearings. He said that there were a hundred newly impressive details, remarkable elasticity of tempo, a continuity of thought that everywhere obtained, and a wealth of fresh dramatic detail and treatment of climax. These, he said, could be described and enumerated, but they would obscure the picture. He felt that the surprising thing was the depth of meaning that the music had accumulated in the interpreter's consciousness.
As a result of the performance, Downes asked himself where interpretation began and music left off. He felt that the work remained in its material very flimsy, conventional, and derivative, but that Toscanini’s performance caused it to blaze. It was perfectly clear to him that this score had been flung together, page by page, in intervals of the bloody siege of Leningrad. He expressed his greater understanding as follows:

It is as if, in mood there engendered, the composer had put down, indifferently as to choice or actual melodic significance of the phrase, whatever notes came quickest to hand for his purpose, regardless of style or esthetics, for him who fights to read. The terminology, figuratively speaking, could be that of a scream heard in Pravda, or the latest oath from the trenches.

It is an inelegant and undistinguished speech. It is splash and bang, and violent cartoon, and a musical war of nerves which is obvious, and blatant and humptious. Somehow it fits, a monstrous, misshapen and shoddy concentration, and you could take it or leave it, as said Shostakovich and Toscanini.16

Downes finally reached the conclusion that the work was written for the men who came from the trenches in Russia and the multitudes living an existence in which esthetic refinement and critical dissertations are far indeed from the thoughts that beset them, that the melodrama and banalities of the thing might answer their need of emotional outlet. He believed that back of this symphony was the reality of the times and the unsophisticated,

dirty, supplications and dreams and furies of a people who have neither time for nor need of art for art's sake. Downes concluded, however, that the score was not for secure and cultivated estheticians. Downes has thus supplied himself with a story and it seems to have increased the value of the music for him.

Thomson said of the Seventh Symphony that it seemed to have been written for the slow-witted, the not very musical, and the distracted. He said that it was merely a stretching out of material that was not difficult to understand. He believed that the stretching out was not development, but for the most part, straight repetition. He thought that the length was not because it could not have been said in less time but because the composer wished it so. He had no doubt that the reason was clear to its author because he thought the piece bore all the marks of complete assurance all the way through. The piece, he thought, was no pent up pouring out of personal feelings and still less a display of musical skill. He found it as straightforward and as limited in spiritual scope as The Great Gatsby. He believed that nothing about the piece was accidental since he believed that the themes were clearly thought out and their doings were simplified with a master's hand. He thought also that the harmonies, the contrapuntal web, showed no evidence of floundering or of
experiment. He felt that the piece had no mystery and consequently no real freedom of thought but also no obscurity or any evidence of personal frustration. Thomson went further to say that it was as objective as an editorial, as self-assured as the news report of a public ceremony.

Thomson continued his discussion entirely in terms of the concrete facts of the music. The Seventh Symphony had the same formal structure as Shostakovich's other symphonies. He said:

It is a series of production numbers, interspersed with neutral matter chiefly in that same two-part counterpoint. There is a mechanized military march and the usual patriotic ending, neither of them quite as interesting as it might be. And the rest of the episodes are even tame. The Pastoral and the Protestant Chorale are routine stuff, no more; and the continuity counterpoint, though less static than usual, just sort of runs on, as if some cinematic narrative were in progress that needed neutral accompaniment. The opening passage, which is said to represent the good Soviet citizen, is bold and buoyant. But nowhere is there any real comedy, which is what Shostakovich does best.\(^{17}\)

Thomson's final judgment was that it would probably not make much difference to anybody's inner musical life whether he heard it or did not, and that if it was an indication that Shostakovich was willing to write down to a real or fictitious psychology of mass consumption, it might eventually disqualify him for consideration as a serious composer.

\(^{17}\) Thomson, on. cit., pp. 102-103.
Thus the opinions of the critics continued to vary. Thomson said that the Martinu Symphony No. 2 was less fresh than his first. He supported his opinion by stating that its melodic material was a little too plain and sensible for the ornate figuration in which it was imbedded; that there were many themes repeated, but that they did not go anywhere. He thought the piece had high class workmanship but that it followed a formula that was becoming monotonous. 18

Downes said that the symphony was a success. He identified the work with Czech folk music which he described at some length from the point of view of the meaning of the music. He believed that the work followed the classic form closely, that it savorcd in those places of the conventional. He withheld final judgment as to whether the second symphony was as good as the first until later hearings. 19

Downes revered Toscanini with any mention of him. 20 Thomson admired Sir Thomas Beecham and Serge Koussevitzky more. He suggested that Toscanini had a beat which is too fast, a trait which he had noted in other old men, and believed that Toscanini subjected the meaning of the music to

18 Ibid., p. 107.
20 Ibid., April 7, 1941; January 11, 1942.
architectural building, streamlining, except in the case of Italian music. This he admired wholeheartedly. Downes realized the speed with which Toscanini conducted part of the music, but he was sure that Toscanini knew what he was doing and had his own reasons for it.

The judgments of the two men are not always at odds, although it is evident that Downes approves of a performance more often than does Thomson. One performance concerning the excellence of which they were in agreement was the concert of the City Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Beecham. But again within this agreement, they differed. Thomson, in every case, admired the results of Beecham's Conducting. He did not mention the process. Downes was interested in the conducting aside from the results but thought that Beecham had genius. He said that everything Beecham did with his baton was done in defiance of all accepted rules of finished orchestral conducting with energetic and unbeautiful and eccentric gesticulations. He believes that this proves that a conductor produces results not by what he does but by what he thinks and what he can communicate instantly to the players. He mentioned also that the orchestra was enjoying playing.

21 Thomson, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

22 Ibid., pp. 48-49.

23 New York Times, April 7, 1941.
Downes' reviews, in most instances, give a running account of the entire program so that some of the atmosphere of the concert is communicated to the reader. He rarely fails to mention the audience in some way, most often with regard to its reception of the music or the performance. In one review, he described how the audience gave rather a rude reception to a work of Schoenberg's which Stokowski was conducting and how Stokowski stopped at the end of the piece and lectured the audience on rejection on a first hearing of a new work that required study to be understood. He even invited one lady to leave who laughed and made an all too audible unkind remark.

Stokowski is another point of agreement with Downes and Thomson. They agree that he builds gorgeous tonal effects but that he distorts the music to his own uses. Of course Stokowski, by experimenting with music in a manner not traditional, has invited agreement of all critics as to his bad taste. Downes and Thomson both objected to the theatrical quality of him, and Thomson objected to his arrangement of traditional orchestral seating. They were in agreement as to his power of controlling an orchestra and obtaining the effect he wanted. 24

Another point of agreement between the two men was the performance of the opera Louise. The interesting thing

24 Thomson, op. cit., p. 44.
about this agreement was that Thomson was writing of a performance in January, 1943, while Downes wrote of a performance in December, 1940. They might have been writing of the same performance. They agreed to the excellence of both the music and the libretto. They agreed to the excellence of Grace Moore's performance, although, at the same time each recognized many things to be desired in her voice.

Concerning recitalists there is some agreement between them. Each admired Artur Rubinstein tremendously. Each felt that Josef Hofmann was beyond reproach. When the performing artist was considered excellent, each turned to a discussion of the music; and here again the difference was apparent. Each was in agreement that something was wrong with Claudio Arrau's performance in spite of his phenomenal command of the most difficult music. Thomson thought that he distorted the meaning of the music and ignored markings of composers, while Downes thought that he deliberately changed his style of playing to a steely technical display entirely without feeling in most instances. Downes was, as usual, kind with his criticism, pointing out what he considered to be good points of the performance first.

26 Thomson, op. cit., p. 186.
27 Downes, New York Times, October 26, 1940.
28 Ibid., October 26, 1943.
In an earlier review of Downes, he had stated that Arrau's Mozart, instead of receiving simplicity and directness of statement was all subjected to a fussiness of phrase and an exaggeration of dynamic contrasts quite contrary to their meaning and that the Handel-Brahms set were magnificently treated from an interpretative as well as the technical and coloristic angle, but taken as an entirety, there was a sugariness in the reading that was thoroughly un-Brahmsian. It is possible that Arrau, in his later concert deliberately showed the critics that they would not particularly care about what they were asking for in the previous review.

Each critic devoted some space to subjects pertaining to music and its performance not in connection with any concert. Downes had great understanding of the difficulties of producing organizations and brought it within the understanding of the public in his column, frequently on Sundays. Thomson wrote some of the same kind of articles but his writing took more the attitude of the listener seeing what was wrong rather than that of the man on the inside seeing the difficulties from the producer's standpoint. Thomson's article entitled "What's Wrong with the Met?" was one such article. Here he calls for higher

class performances, pointing out the age, honor, and flaws in the productions at the Metropolitan Opera House. Downes, in a similar article, 30 pointed out first the good features of the organization, then explained the difficulties of producing thirty-two operas in twenty-two weeks with different casts, costumes, and staging and with rehearsals for all. Compared to those of a single long-run production which finally does not require rehearsals, these difficulties of the opera house loom large.

Other such articles were Downes's article on "Music by Radio" and Thomson's comments on the subject in an article called "Levant Tough and Tender." 31 Downes objected to other material than music or material about music being introduced into a musical program. He objected strenuously to Kettering's speeches on unrelated subjects. Characteristically, Downes made this criticism after pointing out that the radio organizations played a much bigger repertoire than other orchestras and that radio reached many more people with the result that America was becoming more musical. Thomson pointed out that radio changes the whole conception of the music, that not all of the parts are audible.

31 Thomson, op. cit., p. 131.
Both Thomson and Lowes write with an interesting style. Thomson's writing is perhaps a little better reading because he brings more issues to light. It is always more interesting to consider a controversy than to read many superlative phrases about people or music which call nothing new to the attention, be the criticism just or unjust.
CHAPTER III

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRITICAL WORKS OF CILIN DOOKS
AND OF VIRGIL THOMSON

It has already been said that a critic can be no
greater than his objectives will allow. In his "intro-
duction" to The Musical Scene, Virgil Thomson gave as his
purposes in selecting the articles for his book the fol-
lowing:

1. For interest -- because he thought the subjects
covered to be of general interest.
2. To give further circulation to ideas that he hoped
might be of use to other persons whose relation
to musical art is not wholly casual.
3. To express a clear attitude toward the art.
4. To give a clear view of music's place in culture.
5. To inform the reader.

Thomson said that he did not hold his opinions to be
all true nor consider them to be permanent since he is both
"submissive to facts and amenable to argument." This was

1 Virgil Thomson, The Musical Scene, p. ix-x.
true, he said, because the pleasures of taste, at best, are transitory, since nobody, professional or layman, can be sure that what he finds beautiful this year may not be just another piece of music to him next year. Thomson also said that he had stated biases as facts. However, he believed that, if his judgments were not wholly biased, they were also not irresponsible. His aim was to inform the reader rather than to protect anybody's career or to help perpetuate any given state of affairs. Thomson's purposes are worthy of any critic.

A study of Downes's writings makes it clear that he also was writing for interest and to inform the public as well as to give circulation to his ideas, some of which are different from Thomson's. He has certainly expressed his attitude toward music clearly.

The main difference in the purposes of the two men seems to be in their basis for forming judgments of a composition or a performance. Thomson places emphasis on intellectual judgment, although at the same time, he recognizes that great music is more than the sum of its parts and a good performance more than the execution of so many notes from a printed page. His reasons for criticism are given more in terms of musical data than of emotion or imagination.

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{ p. xi-xiv.}\]
Downes places emphasis on the emotional and imaginative phase of judgment. He looks for a "program" meaning in music to go hand in hand with musical facts. These facts he uses sometimes. This use makes him a much better critic than if he did not.

Each man shows definite bias which is an outgrowth of long association with certain people and organizations and consequent understanding of these. Thomson's fondness for Boston and knowledge of its institutions is evident in most of his articles concerning these. In most cases it is with a gentler hand that he writes of them. However, the Harvard Glee Club, which he had conducted at one time, was not spared the rod when he felt that its work was not up to former standards.

Downes writes with respectful pen where certain artists of reputed long standing are concerned. This is no doubt a result of long association and understanding on his part.

Downes's articles give more of a running account of performances. The reader not only receives the critic's judgment but also Downes creates an atmosphere such that the reader almost feels as if he himself were present at the performance. There is an innate kindliness and gentlemanly consideration in most of his writing which, no doubt, makes him a better loved individual than Thomson in musical circles.
Thomson's articles give a more concise discussion of whatever catches his interest particularly. They are analytical concise judgments. He gets immediately to faults, if any; and, when Thomson is writing the criticism, there usually are. The faults are so obvious and overshadowing to him that the reader would never know that the performance could possibly have been enjoyed by anybody unless he read another review.

Thomson not only has an uncommon facility for finding weak points, he also has a keen grasp of language with which he expresses himself in a manner not likely to endear him to anybody who is the object of his adverse criticism. However, his work makes excellent reading. Since he is human, there is no doubt that he sometimes makes mistaken judgments; but Virgil Thomson has an uncommon knowledge of music, music history, musical tradition, and a great facility for hearing music through.

Each critic has included in his work ample consideration of the principles laid down by Radó. Each recognizes good workmanship, frequently commenting on the presence or the lack of it. In almost every article of each, reference is made to orchestration, texture, harmony, counterpoint, and melodic style.

Each man frequently mentions that a work does or does not sound as a whole. Thomson's description of the
Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* as a series of production numbers strung together by diluted counterpoint is a good example of what Hadow meant by his principle of proportion. Hadow's principle of fitness is recognized in Downes's article on Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* when he says that the guiraud poems could not have had the effect that they did except as they were integrated with Schoenberg's music. Thomson raises some interesting questions of fitness in his article on Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* entitled "Bach Goes to Church."  

It is concerning the principle of vitality which not only Thomson and Downes differ most, but other critics as well. Downes's decisions are made with emphasis on the emotional and imaginative basis, while Thomson attempts most of the time to form opinions on the basis of musical data, not without regard for the other phases of critical judgment.

Each man is a competent enough writer that he never forces the mechanics of his writing upon the reader; and it is probable that each has written so much that his regard for principles of critical judgment is entirely automatic.

---

3 *New York Times*, November 18, 1940.

as it should be. However, adherence to basic general principles is present in their work.

That both Thomson and Downes have objects which are comparable to objects mentioned by Calvocoressi is obvious in their work. Each man recognizes it as a part of his work to form judgments; each pronounces emphatically. Downes defines plainly from a sympathetic point of view the position, merits, and demerits of composers and performers. Thomson considers from a demanding listener's point of view the same points. Both men are interested in new music in all of its forms and do show its trends clearly. Downes attempts to find meaning and justification for it; Thomson justifying or eliminating in terms of the printed page. Downes takes particular care to explain the various production problems of orchestras, opera, radio, as well as problems of reading new orchestral music. He sometimes offers suggestions for solving them. Thomson also clearly explains the problems of orchestra. Both have actually put into use a set of objectives which Calvocoressi says are theoretically what critical objectives ought to be, but which are not so simple in practice.

In terms of Greene's process of forming judgment, it seems that Thomson attempts to determine the content from a study of matter and form, while Downes attempts to recognize the content from what he knows about the music
and an over-all hearing; he then attempts to justify it in terms of matter and form.

From these comparisons to criteria set up by three authorities on criticism, it may be seen that both Thomson and Downes appear favorably when measured by each set. It is equally apparent that they differ within the boundaries of good criticism. Downes and Thompson have made fundamental and distinctive contributions to the maintenance of high standards of music. Certainly a reader's view of the "musical scene" is more complete after a reading of both critics.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Newspapers


