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Robert D. Crowley

“Why good music isn’t popular and popular music isn’t good”

November 7, 1963

Portland State College

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Transcribed by Nina Gulbranson, July 2020

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[program opens with applause]

ROBERT CROWLEY: I've been trying to decide upon a metaphor. As a musician, a person preoccupied with the practical manipulation of sound, should I, standing here, feel that I resemble more a Puritan in Babylon or a snowball in hell? [laughter] Either suggestion seeming... neither suggestion seeming friendly enough towards yourselves. I shall leave both to denote what they may, and simply acknowledge that this course on the subject of musical form and matter before the laity, so to speak, is both a forbidding and a tantalizing prospect. I should like to avoid jargon and yet to say something of some use to someone, if only to myself. I feel diffident in the wake of Dr. [...] precise thinking and masterful presentation a month ago, yet since our series is entitled “Form and Art,” I find myself perforce in the domain of philosophy and I must make an effort, however inappropriate my tools and my habits.

Dr. [...] lecture, I should think, both exemplified and stated as clearly as possible the profound resistance offered by works of art to human abilities in conceptualization and generalization. The central term “form” could probably occupy the lifetime of the linguistic philosopher. Discursive as it must be, imprecise in its vocabulary because of implied generalizations and unintentional connotation if not otherwise, in musical parlance a tissue of metaphor, anyhow, language promises almost no insight whatever. Personally, I should not want to go nearly all the way with Ben Shahn and his now famous dictum that an artist needs an esthetician as a bird needs an ornithologist... [laughter] but I understand perfectly Stravinsky’s insistence that he

himself is a doer, a maker, not a thinker. Schoenberg put a nearly related thought in a characteristic manner when he observed in the preface to his harmony book certain differences in the credentials of musicians and carpenters. "There are," he notes, "many master carpenters but no doctor of carpentry. On the other hand, there are many doctors of music, but few master musicians." The point is simply that insight develops out of practice, if it develops. I mean to say that while practice does not necessarily lead to insight, insight is not accessible without practice.

Now in view of the theme of our discussion, my colloquial and imprecise title suggests the one thing that what I shall call objectively verifiable value in musical works may be sought in the area or on the level of form. Does this sound like tautology? Perhaps it is. Louis Horst says a thing has no aesthetic existence until it has form. Does that sound like a paradox? A thing with no existence. Let me offer an illustration, mainly what I think is still called the American popular song, leaving aside the nice distinction between pop tune and show tune. Through happenstance my example is not quite as familiar as I should like it to be, but it will serve. A tune called "Mountain Greenery" from Richard Rogers' first Broadway show, *The Garrick Gaieties* of 1925. Here is the printed music for voice and piano.

I'm going to take a chance on trying to show you a little about how that sounds as the chorus starts. I'm not a pianist, but I didn't want to enlist anybody else to play eight measures. It's marked 'To be played cheerfully'; it means [laughter] I should cheerfully play it, but the tempo won't be good. [laughter]

[piano music: "Mountain Greenery" played by Crowley]

The piano part is pedestrian in the extreme and probably not by Rogers, who was only the idea man on the entertainment industry assembly line. It would be difficult indeed to locate a performance of this exact text. Because even demonstrating pianists in a music store would depart considerably from what is printed in order to get a smoother texture of the line more comfortably under the hands. Here are three recorded performances, listed on record labels as "Mountain Greenery."

[jazz quartet and mezzo vocals: "Mountain Greenery"]

VOCALIST: *In the mountain greenery, where God paints the scenery
Just two crazy people together
While you love your lover, let blue skies be your coverlet
When it rains we'll laugh at the weather*

*And if you're good, I'll search for wood
So you can cook while I stand looking
Beans could get no keener reception in a beanery
Bless our mountain greenery home*

[trumpet solo]

*In the mountain greenery, where God paints the scenery
Just two crazy people together
How we love sequestering where no pests are pestering
No dear mamma holds us to tether
Mosquitos here won't bite you dear
I'll let them sting me on the finger
We could find no cleaner retreat from life's machinery
Than our mountain greenery home*

[song ends]

[different version of the song with jazz quartet and horns: "Mountain Greenery" plays]

[instrumental/orchestral fast tempo "Mountain Greenery" plays] [laughter]

CROWLEY: Which was it? In all three cases the first sixteen measures, known colloquially as the verse, has been eliminated. So as in the trio with patter, another thirty-two measures of music and a repetition of the tune's last sixteen measures with new words. In one instance the two sung choruses are separated by an improvised trumpet solo not specified by Richard Rogers, and in the others the words have been suppressed entirely. In the jazz quartet version, the note values have all been revised, the bass has been freely adapted, the harmonies have been modified, and a tidy little formal scheme has been effectuated through a two-measure introduction which occurs at the ends of both choruses, and a change after the bridge in the presentation of the recurring eight-measure phrase. I have a diagram of this piece. [laughter]

This light blue represents the introduction and conclusion, and the only reason for... [laughter] the only reason for most of the colors is to show the instrumentation; there isn't any change in the structure of the thing as it goes along. This represents the same color as this, the only difference being that the configuration has been changed here from what it was over here; and these of course are just solos, both of them improvised. The overall form of the piece is an element; we wanted two repeated phrase with a contrast, two repeated phrases with a

contrast, and then a return to the first phrase. If you notice, despite the virtuosity in the case of the jazz quartet, I mean the virtuosity and in the case of the jazz quartet, the appropriateness of the improvising. The phrasing is still extremely symmetrical in both cases. The pervasive eight-measure spans are relieved only by the soaring at the beginning with the vibraphone answering the ensemble on the second half of each phrase. Also note that despite such nuances and despite the improvisation, the second thirty-two measures is an exact repetition of the shape of the first thirty-two measures.

This is the crux of the matter in three senses. First, the basic structure of the tune is almost as primitive as it can possibly be made, comprising two eight-measure strains of music formed in the repetition pattern AABA. This structure is not only primitive but routine, since at least ninety percent of the commercial tunes in existence, as well as many folk tunes, exemplify it also. Third, the extensibility of such material commercial and jazz terms is limited to repetition, at most a repetition of a kind to be found in the plainest examples of the most static kind of art music, namely variations. "Mountain Greenery" is copyrighted, which means that it exists legally, [laughter] but aesthetically it seems to be an abstraction, or perhaps a do-it-yourself kit, a paint-without-numbers outfit. Practical musicians find completely adequate the text of such tunes as given on Tune-Dex cards like this one. We have tune and guitar chords above the tune, and this is the standard equipment of professional commercial musicians in places where they play.

As we have seen, such a piece becomes something concrete in a given performance. Now suppose such a performance were a little better than any of those heard so far. Suppose that the performance consists of a four-measure piano introduction by Teddy Wilson, a thirty-two measure adumbration or anticipatory variation of the tune shared between Benny Carter's alto saxophone and Roy Eldridge's trumpet. A vocal chorus by Billie Holiday, with clarinet obbligato by Lester Young, and other improvised variation shared by Wilson and Eldridge; a further variation of the second half chorus by Lester Young on tenor saxophone, which in its imaginative compass and rhythmic force will cap everything heard previously, and a four-measure [...] by the ensemble elided with the last two measures of the chorus.

In other words, the material is to be developed by the musicians who possess the most superb talent combined with the maximum of naive integrity. We can expect that Ms. Holiday will relieve the deadly rhythmic monotony of the tune, and perhaps improve its melody here and there. She will certainly contribute a personal approach to the words; perhaps naive, perhaps ironical, so that they will mean something in spite of themselves. The instrumentalists will contribute a firm bass line and a texture of some richness. Their solos will constitute cogent variations more or less individual and striking, and the harmonic... harmonies agreed upon in

advance. The totality will be well-balanced as to unity and variety. It will have an appropriate kind and amount of ornamentation. It will, however, exploit a tiny minority of sound's potentialities for design and it will consequently hover tentatively on the borderlines of art. Perhaps it is for this reason that we cherish such performances in memory, and as preserved by recording, with such sentimental fervor.

I don't have such a performance of "Mountain Greenery." The tune involved in my optimum illustration is "Sugar," written about 1925 or '30, and recorded as described on January thirtieth 1939. "Sugar" is a superior tune as compared with "Mountain Greenery" in several respects, especially in the way the dominant key is prepared just before the bridge. This is the only place I know of in popular music where a chord absolutely has to be placed in the 6/4 position. In other words, there's a degree of precision imperative here.

The tune goes: [piano chords of "Sugar" played by Crowley] and the second time, [piano music continues] we have the chord in that position then. [piano music] It has, however, the typical restricted melodic contour and monotonous rhythm of other commercial and folk songs. [basic melody of "Sugar" played by Crowley on piano] I've been playing this for twenty-five years.

[recording of "Sugar" plays: jazz quartet with horns and Billie Holiday singing]

VOCALIST: *Sugar, I call my baby my sugar
And never maybe my sugar
That sugar baby of mine
He's special ration
Funny, he never asks for my money
All that I give him is honey
And that he can spend anytime
I'd make a million trips to his lips
If I were a bee
Because he's sweeter than chocolate candy to me
He's confectionary
Sugar, I never cheat on my sugar
Cause I'm too sweet on my sugar
That sugar baby mine*

[instrumental music plays]

CROWLEY: The obvious alternatives to such a performance may be considered manifestly inferior, especially the familiar commercial farago which attempts to disguise its lack of variety through gratuitous elaboration of the material, applying academic skills in modulation and instrumentation and so on, with or without certain stereotyped ornamentation. Such treatments, of course, play Tchaikovsky to Ms. Holiday's Mozart.

I spoke of the jazzmen's naive integrity. This is an euphemism, at least in part, for ignorance and intellectual apathy. Their achievement, for all that, is far more valuable than that of countless learned, sophisticated, idealistic, industrialist composers who lack any original talent and spontaneous integrity.

Not to make invidious comparisons, but further to clarify my contention, I turn now to a song which is indeed a work of art. This is almost too much; I've been worrying about the taste of this particular transition. This is "The Miller and the Brook," the next-to-the-last piece in Schubert's cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*, written in 1823. It is, first of all, a document from a single hand that exists independently of performance and in spite of certain performances. [laughter] But it has a light of its own, because its constituent parts constitute a web of interdependence not too unlike that in an organism. Call it a detailed plan for an organism at least. Here's the score.

The poem set to music describes the contrast between a gloomy man and an apparently ebullient brook, and there is a reconciliation at the end with the man somewhat cheered by the confrontation.

["The Miller and the Brook" plays]

VOCALIST:¹ *Wo ein treues Herze
In Liebe vergeht,
Da welken die Lilien
Auf jedem Beet;
Da muß in die Wolken
Der Vollmond gehn,
Damit seine Tränen
Die Menschen nicht sehn;
Da halten die Englein
Die Augen sich zu*

¹ Transcriber's note: Vocalist on this recording is most likely Dietrich Fischer Dieskau.

*Und schluchzen und singen
Die Seele zur Ruh.
Und wenn sich die Liebe
Dem Schmerz entringt,
Ein Sternlein, ein neues,
Am Himmel erblinkt;
Ein Sternlein, ein neues,
Am Himmel erblinkt;
Da springen drei Rosen,
Halb rot und halb weiß,
Die welken nicht wieder,
Aus Dornenreis.
Und die Engelein schneiden
Die Flügel sich ab
Und gehn alle Morgen
Zur Erde herab.
Und gehn alle Morgen
Zur Erde herab.
Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,
Du meinst es so gut:
Ach Bächlein, aber weißt du,
Wie Liebe tut?
Ach unten, da unten
Die kühle Ruh!
Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,
So singe nur zu.
Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,
So singe nur zu.²*

[piano outro]

CROWLEY: An adequate analysis of its wonder would take the rest of the evening at least, and your following such an analysis would require appropriate previous experience. We must content ourselves with the briefest possible summary, and may we start with the score of the song over again. The first sound we hear in the piano [two piano notes played together] is an open fifth, [piano chord arpeggiated] a stark sound, which is sweetened but not relieved when

² Transcriber's note: Lyrics from http://www.gopera.com/lieder/translations/schubert_795.pdf

the right hand completes the minor triad above it. [previous sound with chord] This sets a somber mood before the voice enters. The voice sings a rather tortuous melodic line involving a fall from the leading tone which we first arrive, and indeed a fall emphasizing an interval of an augmented fourth, an interval which has troubled musicians... had troubled musicians for at least a thousand years before Schubert's birth. It's where the line goes up to F#, which in this key [piano chord] means [piano music] that; instead of [piano music] finding its destiny, it goes [descending melody] [clashing notes] and you get that problematic interval.

The first phrase proceeds to a full cadence which is not quite as conclusive as it might be, the melody ending on the third rather than the first degree of the scale.

[beginning of phrase of "The Miller and the Brook" plays]

VOCALIST: *Wo ein treues Herze
In Liebe vergeht...*

CROWLEY: I'm having a little trouble with the tuning of this player... The first... this gives perhaps a feeling of not quite hopeless resignation. The second phrase is still darker, the Neapolitan harmony being the darkest directly available within the key. We're in this key [G minor piano chord] and the Neapolitan harmony sounds like this: [different piano chord] ...that's where the A flats occur in the music.

[second phrase of "The Miller and the Brook" plays]

*Da welken die Lilien
Auf jedem Beet*

CROWLEY: Then there's a second augmented fourth from... down from the D to the A \flat . [descending piano notes] All of this in accordance with the expressive intention of the words. The second cadence confirms and consolidates the sense of the first. The self-sufficient statement has been made at this point. The next event is a turn to the relative major by a series of dominants which give a sense of energy, if not of cheerfulness.

[song plays]

*Da muß in die Wolken
Der Vollmond gehn...*

CROWLEY: The tonic triad returns now disguised as a subsidiary of the relative, and begins a distortion of the second phrase which leads us to the dominant and a decided feeling of anticipation.

[song plays]

*Damit seine Tränen
Die Menschen nicht sehn*

CROWLEY: This invasion... I pressed record, is that going to cause trouble?

[reply from voice in background]

CROWLEY: I pressed the tape... stop. That will be all right? This invasion of the middle section by material from the first statement constitutes the first of several ambiguities in the text. Ambiguities which register in the ear both as compactness and as expressive potency. The miller's first two despondent phrases are now repeated.

[song plays; laughter]

*Da halten die Englein
Die Augen sich zu
Und schluchzen und singen
Die Seele zur Ruh.*

CROWLEY: The cheerful bubbling of the brook is heard in the piano, the expressive climate has been changed by a simple turn to the major mode, entailing the raising of a single scale tone by a half step.

[piano chord played by Crowley]

The previous music has constituted what is called a three-part song form, a very simple unadorned one, rendered just a trifle asymmetrical by a one-measure extension of its fourth phrase. What now ensues is also a three-part song form, but it is brighter, being in the major mode and energetically seeking the dominant which is still brighter. Specifically, the first cadence is on the enhanced dominant triad and the entire middle section is in the dominant key. The second three-part form is also more graceful than the first, because its outer

members' consequent phrases are repeated to give asymmetry, or at least a change of symmetry.

[song plays]

*Und wenn sich die Liebe
Dem Schmerz entringt,
Ein Sternlein, ein neues,
Am Himmel erblinkt;
Ein Sternlein, ein neues,
Am Himmel erblinkt;
Da springen drei Rosen,
Halb rot und halb weiß,
Die welken nicht wieder,
Aus Dornenreis.
Und die Engelein schneiden
Die Flügel sich ab
Und gehn alle Morgen
Zur Erde herab.
Und gehn alle Morgen
Zur Erde herab.*

CROWLEY: Now follows a return to the opening mood and a third semi-autonomous form, which not only rounds off the whole structure but also contrasts formally with each of the preceding substructures while simultaneously recapitulating melodic features of both. It contrasts in structure especially because of the deployment of its cadences, which give a dominant at the midpoint and active dynamic feature.

[song plays]

*Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,
Du meinst es so gut:
Ach Bächlein, aber weißt du,
Wie Liebe tut?*

CROWLEY: You shouldn't have stopped it there... I trust we have the rest.

[song plays]

Ach unten, da unten

Die kühle Ruh!

Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,

So singe nur zu.

Ach Bächlein, liebes Bächlein,

So singe nur zu.

CROWLEY: Such a description leaves out most of the subtleties. The specific character of most of the vocal line, the progress of the bass, and many other essentials. Here is a formal diagram of the song referring to something of its complexity. I've tried to use two shades of red here to show the balanced phrases with which it starts, the one ending on minor tonic, the melody on the third and the second; I used an exclamation point to show that that's a more emphatic cadence. Then there's a middle section, which however brings back this material, and I made that striped in the same color in order to convey that idea; then a literal repetition here. Here's what I meant by more grace: we have a first phrase and a second phrase, antecedent and consequent, and then a slightly varied repetition of that same one, which changes the identity and the lengths of the phrases. A balanced middle section here going back to the tonic, and this literal compared to the rest of it. Here then we get this antecedent but this, which had previously occurred in the middle section, becomes the consequent, and as a result we have what we call an open cadence here, something that's moving ahead rather than a neat little package which is all finished. Then the second half of that, which combines this part of this first middle section and still another transformation of this material.

The piece, like the Billie Holiday performance of "Sugar," is built on a small scale. But the technical resources drawn upon, while they occupy only a small corner in Schubert's arsenal, are infinitely more elaborate and more precise than those involved in the jazz performance. There is no specious ornamentation, no call for virtuosity, no easy excitement. The pleasures offered by the piece are veritable musical pleasures. Contemplative, but not, I think, precisely intellectual. If they were intellectual, perhaps you might have to understand every word of my capsule analysis in order to enjoy this song. On the contrary, my description simply affirms what you can perfectly well hear for yourself if you're equipped with a normal ear and have had some instruction and experience in listening, the more the better of course. These pleasures amount, I should guess, to a quiet rejoicing in human potentialities, for Schubert was, so far as we know, a man like you and me. And note, please, that ordinary mortals can experience Schberts song directly as performers, whereas they can only observe the kind of jazz performance we heard a few minutes ago.

You now know that I accept as art that music which displays certain minimum... a certain minimum of richness, subtlety of interrelationships, proportion, and poise in its forms. Since I have dwelled on the issue so extensively under the title announced, it must be apparent also that I believe this to be the definition of good music. In other words, I find the value and the meaning in the form, and praise its embodiment as art. This is what Dr. [...] did also, I believe, if only by implication. He tended to affirm that form is an achieved quality which characterizes works of art; meanwhile placing a much higher premium on audacity than I have done so far. We might say in unison that constructions which display striking and novel forms comprise the world of art, that those that strive for this distinction and fail to achieve it populate a purgatory of poor art or non-art, and that those which betray entire obliviousness of the issue belong somewhere else altogether. [laughter]

The matter of audacity is by no means beside the point, and to deal with it, we must refer again to our examples. In a fair appraisal, nowhere could music be viewed as though it existed outside of time, or I should say, as though it had come into existence outside of time. It will be the case always, that discoveries and audacities in the realm of technique will characterize the practice of a great composer. I am not saying that one may establish oneself unfailingly as a great composer through incorporating technical discoveries and audacities in one's work. I am saying that no great composer has ever failed to incorporate them.

The newness in Billie Holiday's performance of "Sugar" is not in the material but in the most delicate and evanescent details of its presentation. The tune itself, which was written about 1925, relates to a musical language which was fully developed, say, seventy five years before, say the language of [...]. It is unmistakably pre-Wagner and pre-Debussy, and even in terms of middle Verdi, it is only comparable on the basis of the fundamental harmony, questions of voice leading aside. Verdi's structures, while regular in that point in his career, will not be this regular, and Verdi will employ non-harmonic tones, often very tart and obstinate ones, especially appoggiatura. The commercial popular song as arranged for dance orchestra by Jack Mason, for example, scarcely knows a dissonance more absurd than those of Palestrina.

The Schubert song also looks back in part. The shifting between major and minor would seem to have originated with Mozart about forty years before "Die schöne Müllerin," and Schubert handles it appropriately as though it were nothing but a technical commonplace. Likewise, the Neapolitan harmony, which still had a certain expressive force in Mozart. But Schubert's melody is unprecedented in its expansiveness and in its motific freedom and richness. We would say it has a tunefulness completely foreign to the music of Mozart and Beethoven. His phrases are associated with an intricacy all his own and, astounding as Mozart's boldness can be, I doubt that there is in the works of Mozart an event like this third relationship between phrases.

[recording plays]

Ach unten, da unten

Die kühle Ruh!

CROWLEY: [while song continues to play] B flat...

Ach Bächlein...

CROWLEY: Changes to G major...

...liebes Bächlein...

CROWLEY: Through this gesture, Schubert accentuates the poet's sudden change from what appear to be suicidal thoughts: "Under your waters is cool peace," to the simple admonition, "Little brook, keep singing to me." It is not only then that Schubert wrote some remarkable pieces, as can be demonstrated, but that he invented a large part of the language in which they are cast.

You may think that these remarks are accurate enough, but trivial. As each of my friends has told me, in the recent weeks that he would be here tonight, he has looked at me from behind an enigmatic smile. I haven't borne these experiences with perfect equanimity; recalling the many occasions on which I have recorded with rapt enthusiasm discoveries of mine that have always been self-evident to everyone else. [laughter] That I can't believe that I'm beating a dead horse. There was only recently published in this country, for example, a lavish four-volume encyclopedia of music, costing fifty dollars retail, a picture book, basically, with a little text and good accuracy but no depth. This set, which will find its way into countless wired-for-sound American homes offers, in exactly the same size, portraits of Roger Sessions, Thelonious Monk, and Vaughn Monroe. If that ain't democracy, you name it. [laughter]

We inhabit a community in which philanthropy rushes to the aid of Gilbert and Sullivan. In their defense, it should be allowed that the donors probably know full well that they are building the tourist trade and not fostering music. Our national and local journals offer criticism of musical performance with a total indifference in the quality of works performed, unless god forbid these works happen to be new ones. Thus, to the public, the only musical artists are performing artists, and interest is directed only towards the most superficial aspects of performance. The conductor's fieriness, the violinist's ravishing tone, the singer's intonation in certain registers. But all works of musical art are not as easy to explicate and to praise as is "The Miller and the

Brook" by Franz Schubert. Affirmation of the value of such works is continuously necessary in the context of our huckster-ridden world, but such affirmation doesn't require any particular courage or self-reliance.

Schubert's music is thoroughly established. Generations of theorists, notably Schenker and Tovey, have minded and marveled over it, and our radio stations even broadcast a certain amount. Schubert has been assimilated also by a Brahms, by a Wagner, by a Mahler, even by a Arthur Sullivan, one of his most ardent partisans.

We can congratulate ourselves on owning the treasure of Schubert's music, but we cannot congratulate ourselves on having discovered it, or on having ourselves defined or accounted for any of its wonders, or on having ourselves interpreted these to others whose duller intelligences and perceptions we have consequently enlightened. All these things were done for us long ago. With respect to the music of Schubert, we can only cry, "Me too," secure in our conformity as the lady who told me she was a Presbyterian and a Republican, and would shout as much to Congressman [...] anytime. Exclusively to extol Schubert, or Bach, Beethoven and Brahms as Mr. [...] does, is as intelligent, as courageous, and as just as it is to proclaim that the planets revolve around the sun. For there may be new Schuberts among us; there probably are. After all the world is many times as populous as it was in 1800, and education is much more extensive if not improved. If there are no Schuberts, then the human race must be running out of gas, and from here on the best that can be expected is a gradual and reasonably comfortable decline into general imbecility. [laughter]

A new Schubert will not, of course, simplify our task of identification by authoring this stainless theme as is modeled.

[orchestral music plays]

[laughter]

CROWLEY: Audio-visual aids gone mad. [laughter] This music may sound outrageous at first, for its achievement will lie in part in its having found new potentialities for design and sound. His constructive imagination will have led him to a technical domain lying beyond the perfect mastery of his craft. How is he to be discovered? Who will perform his music? Who will be bright enough to discern its virtues, study them, and leave the rest of us to understanding? Who will record his music and broadcast it from a good music station so that it may perhaps speak directly to persons who are free of the vested interest governing concert life? Who, indeed.

This music is for us the very best because it not only exemplifies one kind of human capacity at its very zenith, but also confirms our faith in the eternal renewability of life. This music will be massively unpopular, ridiculed, calumniated, and most of all ignored, because it will be very difficult, as Schubert's was once also. And by and large people don't want daring and challenging experience in music, they want comfort, if anything, and a piteous comfort at that, since it seems to relate most generally to a simple fear of silence.

Why should this worry me? The reason is that I feel an exceedingly sharp challenge in our social context, including the most enlightened segment of it. The only way for me to avoid discouragement and even feelings of guilt is to assert what can be determined more or less scientifically, and to discover if possible how the others developed their present attitude. The characteristic present attitude of the others is based upon what I might call a start-off principle, which can be stated thusly: anybody who buys a ticket or spends his time at a concert has a right to understand and enjoy the music. If he does not, and the works are old, then there must be incompetence on the platform. If he does not, and the works played are new, then the composer must be incompetent and he is probably vicious besides. [laughter]

The start-off principle is official in the Soviet Union, common law here. The trouble with it is that it flies in the face of knowledge. We know that the art of music is always been a preoccupation of only a handful of people, a handful with the right moral equipment, the right temperament, and leisure for study and practice. The availability or unavailability of records and hi-fi sets had very little to do with it. Castiglione was not speaking to drivers of oxen when he says a man should be able to sing at sight. He was speaking to a handful which lived off the toil of others and had leisure to learn. The Soviet inclination to dump art music on the masses via concerts in factories and so on may seem good-hearted, but it is foolish. All a tank assembly worker can perceive is a glorious confusion, and perhaps a tune or two made familiar by his neighborhood accordion. Art there is frankly viewed as a commodity, one for the proletariat at the barricades. Here it is viewed, less frankly possibly, as a commodity for sale and as a matter of *noblesse oblige* for the fortunate.

But art is an achievement, not a prize, and it can only be achieved through surrender followed by lots of patient work. Musical taste has been corrupted and the vitality of music threatened again and again since 1637, when the first public opera house was opened in Venice, by efforts to create spectacles that would delight the ignorant. Today, when that venerable symbol of power and enlightenment, the symphony orchestra, is fighting the income tax for its existence, there is a frantic effort made to enlist the support of anyone and everyone who can be

convinced that all he has to do is relax and listen. [laughter] Regiments of music educators have been deployed under the fantastic slogan, “All of the music for all of the children.”

For nearly forty years before 1918, Colonel [Major Henry Lee] Higginson was able to maintain the Boston Symphony Orchestra almost exactly as Duke Karl Theodor, elector of Palatine at Mannheim, had maintained his in the 18th century. But there will be no more such personal orchestras, and the saddest aftermath of the symphony will not be its absence, but the residual belief that music is really not very complicated at all and that folk song is just about the best of it anyhow.

I think we may be able to pin the [...] principle, like so many other misfortunes, on Richard Wagner. [laughter] Wagner must have certainly been the most popular composer as composer of serious music in history. Verdi had a great following, but his situation was complicated by politics and even by the fact that his name is an acronym for Victor Emmanuel [...] Wagner’s adherence, or adherence of his art, and of his mystic vision; the individuals in his audience surrendered their personal dignity to be welded into a rapt mob, to be smothered in the octopus embrace of the expression of emotion which Wagner exalts in opera and drama, as opposed to what he calls the “meddlesome understanding.”

Here is Hugo Wolf writing of a performance of *Tannhäuser* on the 22nd of November 1876: “I took up my place at a quarter past two, although the opera exceptionally only began at half past six, usually seven o’clock. There was such a frightful scrimmage that I was worried about myself; I wanted to break out, but it was already impossible for no one near me would make way. At last the door was opened, the whole crowd would push their way inside and it was fortunate that I was gone into the middle, for if I had gone to the side I should’ve been crushed against the wall. But I was richly compensated for my mortal anxiety.”

You may compare this description with your last experience of a concert offering music by a living composer. [laughter] This enthusiasm for *Tannhäuser* may or may not be directly related to the enthusiasm evinced in the following words about “*The Ring of the Nibelungs*”; *The Ring* and *Tristan* in any case were already well-known by 1876.

“My second encouragement is addressed to the modest citizens who may suppose themselves to be disqualified from enjoying *The Ring* by their technical ignorance of music. They may dismiss all such misgivings speedily and confidently. If the sound of music has any power to move them, they will find that Wagner exacts nothing further. There is not a single bar of classical music in *The Ring*, not a note in it that has any other point than that of giving musical expression to drama. If Wagner were to turn aside from his straightforward dramatic purpose

to proficiate the professors of correct exercises in sonata form, his music would at once become unintelligible to the unsophisticated spectator on whom the familiar and dreaded classical sensation would descend like the influenza. It is the adept musician of the old school who has everything to unlearn, and him I leave unpitied to his fate." This heady statement bespeaks a certain naivete in its author, not unrelated to his Victorian musical ambience. It sounds like a source of the [...] principle.

It was Wagner who first brought large numbers of non-musical people into contact with music. Wagnerism was a sensation, a cause, the reasons for which and the meanings of which are not at all clear to me. There are many contradictions within Wagner himself, not to mention those among the authors of the more than ten thousand books and articles published about him during his lifetime. But if we tentatively view Wagner as an apostle of unreason, as a demoniac, demonical conjurer whose works absorb and manipulate his audiences by occult, non-analyzable musical means, as an ego so magnificently vast and imperious that even the unconvinced cannot resist; if we so view him, how can we escape acknowledging the obvious political parallel, which was in fact worked out in detail fifty years after Wagner's death? How can we desire the experience of mindless emotional agitation, even though it ostensibly demands nothing of us in the way of knowledge and alertness? The musical work of the 20th century can be viewed as a fight to reestablish the validity of design in music against the romantic notion of emotional communion, which, seeming to offer something for nothing, demands more than we can afford to pay.

Musicians have for forty years regarded Wagner's music as a crushing bore and it is rather infrequently performed today. But we see perhaps in the [...] principle its wakeful ghost, spreading the doctrine that valuable music must be seductive in sound, moving in the manner of the moving pictures, and as grandiose as possible.

Such music obviously has its place in a program of bread and circuses. It produces addicts rather than admirers. The classicism of the 20th century is infinitely preferable. Its representative works, standing aloof, demand of us knowledge and effort but allow us our individuality and our individual responsibility. Good music is not popular, then, because it demands too much of people who have for various reasons been led to believe that music should offer them a haven of mental disengagement. Popular music is not good because, in asking nothing of its auditors, it confines itself either to poverty or to amorphousness of design. Thank you.

[applause; program ends]