



The Need for Music

A wise man once said that music is the only cheap and unpunished rapture on earth. It is that and much more. It is an aid to living, a shield against despair, and a triumph of the human spirit. Here its nature is explored . . .

□ "What is the use of music?" a famous English judge once asked. That is a very important question, even though one might suspect that His Lordship raised it only because he had no ear for music himself. Music has so many "uses" to people that it is hard to imagine them living without it. Yet it is curious how little thought is ever given to it as a vital force in human affairs.

It is clear that music fills a need deep in the psyche. This manifests itself soon after birth. A fretful infant will settle down contentedly to the strains of a lullaby. Long before he can understand a single spoken word, he is profoundly influenced by melody, rhythm and tone.

The ability to make music would seem to be a fundamental feature of the human species. Man appeared on this earth as a self-contained musical instrument, equipped to sing, hum, whistle, dance, and clap his hands. Making music ranks with making fires and using weapons and tools as one of the activities that initially separated human beings from the lower animals. It did more than anything else to set them apart as special, ascendant beings.

To build fires and shelters and to hunt with more than the hands and teeth were essential to the survival of a thin-skinned, relatively weak creature. To make music was to strike out beyond the bare exigencies of existence into a dimension unknown to the other inhabitants of the earth — that of the spirit or soul.

The human spirit finds its main outlet in art, and music most likely was the world's first art form. It may also have been the world's first science. Behind all science are curiosity, ingenuity, and an urge to do or know things better. These qualities were present in full force as people learned how to make music by artificial means.

It is generally believed that the first musical instrument as such was a hollow reed which someone had the curiosity to blow through. Having done so, early man was not content with this pleasant effect. He had to see what would happen if graduated holes were punched in the reed. Out came an articulate vocabulary of notes.

Before history was ever recorded, the forerunners of the flute, horn, drum, maraca, harp and guitar had been invented (legend has it that the first sound box of a guitar was a turtle shell). The concept of writing music dawned almost as soon as the concept of writing language. Crude musical symbols were chiselled on tablets in the Middle East as early as the 2nd millennium B.C.

Why this concentration of effort on something that was not essential to survival? Probably because primitive human beings realized that music was not as inessential as it appeared. Although they could not touch it, they knew that it had useful applications. It did something of great value to them: It lightened the burdens of life.

It had the power to change people's moods, usually for the better. As soldiers have known ever

since, music lifts morale. Under the trying conditions of prehistoric times, it must have seemed marvellous to have available a way to pick up your spirits when they were weighed down by hardship. Music made people forget their troubles and generally feel good before anyone thought of making wine.

Miraculously enough, a song or a rhythmic chant seemed to get work done faster. It took your mind off your aching back as you dug a hole or harvested a field. Someone realized that a certain kind of music could inspire a man to face death in battle with a heady mixture of confidence, courage and ferocity. Whoever composed the first patriotic (or in those days, tribal) song forged a mighty political weapon. "Give me the making of the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes the laws," the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher wrote.

Music helped to perpetuate the folklore of a people by making the words of poems and ballads easier to remember. It also blended easily with drama and comedy. Culture, as we now know it, was on the march to a musical beat.

Music had a role in the mating process which it plays to this day. It was a civilized person indeed who composed the first love song. It was used, too, to worship the gods, as it still is. No wonder; primitive people believed that the gods had bestowed it on them as a gift.

Men as knowledgeable as the Greek philosophers of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. believed that it was of divine provenance. They thought of it as one of the disciplines controlled by the goddesses they called the muses, hence its name. This did not prevent them from closely examining its nature. They were acutely conscious of the sway it held over behaviour through its influence on people's feelings.

In line with the Chinese sage Confucius, Plato regarded music as a critical element in the universal scheme of things. He believed that rhythm and melody ideally should be in concert with the movements of the celestial bodies, which lent order to human affairs. This rendered him something of a philistine in his tastes, preferring plain and simple modes of music. These days we might say that Plato liked schmaltz.

Like many the social critic since, Plato would cheerfully have banned types of music that he considered corrupting. He viewed "far out" music

as a threat to the body politic. "Musical innovation is full of danger to the State, for when the modes of music change, the laws of the State always change with them," he warned. In this the antique philosopher might have been a modern conservative inveighing against the degeneracy of rock or disco music — or, earlier in this century, of boogie-woogie or jazz.

The intellectual world, it seems, has always been divided between those who overestimate the social impact of music and those who dismiss it as meaningless. The Greek philosopher Democritus was of the latter school, declaring that it arose out of superfluity. Twenty-two hundred years later, like-minded social scientists would find themselves able to write thousand-page tomes on the present and future condition of the world without accord- ing a passing nod to this potent influence on how people feel and act.

Music gives the world a unique new language

If men have always associated music with the gods, it is partly because they saw it as a form of communication between the earthly and the ethereal. Great sacred music almost has a divinity of its own. The Abbot Angelo Grillo expressed this nicely in the early 17th century when he wrote to Claudio Monteverdi thanking him for a copy of his latest book of madrigals: "I can assure you of the eminent worth of your melodious gift; it seems to me to belong not so much to the earth on which I accept it, as to the heaven in which I listen to it."

That was during the Renaissance, when many of the guiding ideas were derived from ancient Greece. Among these was Plato's theory that music should be controlled lest it lead to voluptuousness and immorality. Church leaders — and most of the serious music was played in church — were wary of effects of music on social mores. They assigned it a distinctly secondary role to the words of the liturgy, and placed restrictions on the ability of composers to experiment and innovate.

Outside the churches, however, music was thriving. Minstrels drew crowds to hear them sing

their ballads to hummable melodies. No secular ceremony was complete without music, and there were always dances on festive occasions. Theatrical performances often took the form of "musicals" which the clergy condemned as profane.

Music burst the bonds they had tried to impose on it. Popular tunes crept in among the intricacies of the Gregorian chant. "Instruments of the devil" such as the pan-pipes, fiddle and cornett had to be allowed on church property to cope with the growing richness of orchestration. The restrictions on form gradually disappeared.

The most significant progress in the art during the Renaissance came in the musical "writing" called notation. For the first time, a composer was able to send a written copy of his work to someone who could play it more or less exactly as he intended it to sound. In the 1320s the French bishop, composer and musical theorist Philippe de Vitry added bar signs to the system of notes on parallel lines devised 200 years earlier. The result, according to *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Music*, was that "composers found themselves in possession of a notation that could satisfy all requirements and which comes close enough to our modern ideas."

Music had given the world a unique new language — one that could be mutually understood among people who might not understand one another in speaking or writing. It has been said to the point of triteness that music is the international language. In the case of musical notation, this is literally true.

Technology is harnessed to the pursuit of beauty

A golden age of music followed the Renaissance in the 18th century. Chamber music and opera came into their own. Composers like Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel laid the stylistic groundwork for classical music as we now know it. The strides made in musical form were at least paced by developments in what we would now term "hard technology." While Bach and the rest were writing their immortal music, Gottfried Silbermann was building his magnificent organs. Antonio Stradivari and his fellow Italian artisans were raising the craft of string instrument-making to a pinnacle never touched since.

It is interesting for a present-day person to contemplate the technological priorities that then prevailed. War was still being waged with swords, muskets and cannons that had not changed greatly in 300 years. Long-range transportation remained the preserve of beasts of burden and sailing ships. Industry ran primarily on hand labour. Yet in the pursuit of beauty through music, there had been spectacular progress in the state of the art.

The brilliant versatility of the violin family had eclipsed all the bowed instruments before it. The invention of the piano in 1710 was a breakthrough in the quest for a standing concert instrument that would combine expressiveness, resonance and range. Great organs with as many as five keyboards and 50 sets of pipes crowned cathedrals. Like space satellites today, they were the wonders of their age.

The circle of modern orchestral instruments was completed early in the 19th century when the introduction of valves brought out the full capabilities of the brass and woodwinds. The piano soon became the standard entertainment device in middle class European and American homes, much as the television set is now.

By the latter part of the century, everybody seemed to be playing, singing, dancing and listening to music; it was the leading public preoccupation. Its popularity gave rise to a fresh wave of speculation as to what it meant to mankind.

The German philosophers who were then probing the deepest reaches of thought attached considerable significance to it. Georg Wilhelm Hegel concluded that the music is latent in the listener, and that the external sounds draw it out. Arthur Schopenhauer observed that it is the one art that works on the feelings directly, and not through the medium of thought; it therefore touches something in our being more subtle than the intellect. Friedrich Nietzsche reasoned that art is a natural defence against pessimism, and so the creation of art is a necessary human activity. He saw music, in effect, as an aspect of fantasy, and declared that fantasy is a sustaining and restorative force in life.

It is interesting that virtually the only joy these gloomy individuals ever experienced was through listening to and playing music (Schopenhauer played the flute, Nietzsche the piano). Music has always held a strong attraction to men and women of genius who were not necessarily accomplished musicians themselves. Perhaps this is because, as Walter Pater wrote, "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music." A highly creative person is likely to turn to it in an attempt to give vent to feelings that cannot be expressed in any other way.

Sheer intelligence, however, has never been enough to make a great musician or composer. Musical genius is largely a matter of having what experts can only describe as "the gift." One of the many mysteries of the art is how musical prodigies are able to master its bewildering complexities before other children have learned the alphabet; not only that, but to interpret them with a mature touch.

Yet talent alone is not enough, either. To play or write music at its best takes self-sacrifice, discipline, and a great deal of effort. Years after he had won the title of the greatest pianist in the world, Jan Paderewski rose early every day to put in several hours of practice. Tchaikovsky thought that Brahms was "giftless." If so, Brahms made up for any deficiency in talent he might have had with legendary hard work.

*In music, one man's meat
is truly another's poison*

There can be no harder-working group than a symphony orchestra. A good orchestra in full-flight is a near-miracle of precision, teamwork, and collective panache. This is achieved through an exacting regimen of practice and rehearsal which hones the skills of the players to razor sharpness. Orchestral conductors are sometimes reviled as tyrants, but they know that they must drill the players relentlessly to do justice to the music they perform.

It might be thought that this passion for precision is all very well for the highbrows of the concert stage, but that it has no place among the free spirits of popular music. Many pop and jazz artists seem almost to take pride in their lack of musical knowledge and discipline, in the belief that these would spoil their spontaneity. On the other hand, some of the most successful popular artists, including the Beatles, have been uncommonly conscientious musicians. It is no coincidence that the man known as the most consistently inventive of all jazz soloists, clarinetist Benny Goodman, was also famous for the long hours of practice and rehearsal he imposed on himself and his band.

When it comes to different types of music, one man's meat is truly another man's poison. Classical music lovers have been known to be physically sick from listening to rock. The argument over what is music and what is mere noise will simmer as long as people turn on a radio or put on a record — especially if those people are of different generations and live in the same household. Musical purists would do well to remember the words of American composer Aaron Copland in this context: "Music that is born complex is not inherently better or worse than music that is born simple."

Copland also said that "music is a language without a dictionary whose symbols are interpreted by the listener according to some unspoken Esperanto of the emotions." This leads us back to Hegel's theory that the music is within the listener; if so, it follows that different kinds of music will pique different emotions in different people, according to their conditions of life at a given time.

The emotions that music brings out are mostly good ones: love, joy, hope, humour, sadness. Though it has stirred men in war, it more often has addressed those gentle feelings that people know when they are at peace with themselves and the world.

Why do we need music? Because, in so many ways, it brings out the best in humanity. Poor twisted madman that he was, Nietzsche was right when he wrote: "Without music, life would be a mistake."