

*Library of
The Harvard Musical
Association*



**Report No. 1
January, 1956**

Library Committee

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To the Members of the Association:

Your attention is called to an article in this issue by Cyrus Durgin.

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I shall write and issue no more bulletins. Bulletin No. 23 under date of February, 1955, is the last and final one.

The first twelve bulletins dealt with the story of the Association: its origin, founding, and its important activities affecting the community for fifty and more years. Subsequent issues dealt with matters musical, always of a local nature, the most interesting, perhaps, as well as the most important historically being the National Jubilee of 1869 and the World's Peace and International Musical Festival of 1872.

I repeat an appreciation of the willingness of various persons to contribute articles. The writers had to be found in the membership; I could not with good grace call on non-members. The choice was occasionally a gamble but the bulletins won handsomely. So many of these articles were of interest or of historical value that it would be difficult and invidious to single out any for mention but for peculiar interest and historical significance those by Arthur Foote and Heinrich Gebhard stand well among their peers.

There should be annually a listing of the accessions in order that members interested in borrowing music or books may know what is added to the shelves. From time to time the annual reports of certain activities of the Association should appear. Even members whose chief if only interest is in the concerts should know that the Association is by no means a sleeping beauty but is active in four wide-awake committees: Library, Entertainment, Orchestra, and Records. Occasionally, to lighten these pages, some member may respond to the appeal for an article.

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JANUARY 1, 1956

REPORT OF THE ORCHESTRA COMMITTEE
FOR THE YEARS 1954 AND 1955

The orchestra is now in its ninth season. The average attendance of approximately twenty-eight for the past two years is down a bit from the previous three years and considerably below our peak of thirty-eight in 1950. However, we have a hard-core of about twenty-eight who come very regularly and of these twenty-three played with us the first season. We are not so concerned with numbers as we are with balance. We do need horns, another bassoon, a trumpet and a trombone, and since Bob Morse retired we have had no regular timpani player. Unfortunately the excellent drums he left us won't beat themselves. We also have acquired a bass fiddle through the kindness of Everad Appleton, who commutes quite regularly from Providence to play it. A violin or viola is needed.

At a meeting in January, 1954, we were guests of our H.M.A. member, Edward P. Brown. Stands and chairs were transported out the West Cedar Street door, through his back door on Acorn Street, to the basement of his house at 100 Mt. Vernon Street where he has installed a fine pipe organ. We spent a memorable evening playing organ concertos with Dr. McKinley at the console. Also in 1954 we had Walter Wheeler, first 'cellist of the Little Symphony, and a Miss Bacon, pianist from the Conservatory, as guest soloists. On another occasion we were reinforced by four oboists from the Conservatory.

At our second meeting this fall we were conducted by Kenneth Schermerhorn, a talented young man who had led the Seventh Army Symphony Orchestra in a tour through Europe and is now conducting the Conservatory Orchestra in their sight-reading course.

Each year we have ended the season with a mixed sight-reading evening at which we augment our group with about ten extra players, mostly ladies. Family and friends of orchestra members are also invited as a cheering section. Dr. William Stevens ably manages these pleasant affairs.

We have not had a demand for a performance from the Association now for about six years.

Chester Williams continues to do a splendid job of conducting us, and his access to the New England Conservatory Library is a great convenience. Quite often old music such as Haydn's or Mozart's appears on our stands stamped with the seal of the H.M.A. Apparently this was music that the Association's Harvard Orchestra used between 1865 and 1882. I am told that sometime after this orchestra disbanded there seemed to be no need for full orchestral parts in our library, and Miss Thayer, who preceded Miss French, traded this music with the New England Conservatory. Mr. Nutter can probably tell us what we received in return. At any rate, it is mildly interesting that this old music is back again among the old members of this old Association.

As to expenses, we have kept well within our budget of \$750 per year.

	1954	1955
Organization	\$ 72.05	\$ 38.68
Steward's Wages	80.40	83.00
Refreshments	203.81	207.11
Conductors	300.00	300.00
Permanent Equipment	1.50	
Moving Chairs to 100 Mt. Vernon Street	6.00	
Mixed Sight-Reading Night	7.25	7.46
	\$656.51	\$636.25

Our expenses have been less for the past two years mainly because we have held fifteen meetings each of these years instead of sixteen as in previous years. We should, however, like to continue our budget of \$750 so that we will not feel restricted in case we wish to hold more meetings or incur other expense that we feel will benefit the orchestra.

Again my thanks go to all who have helped the continued success of this project, including the members of the Committee and the Association staff.

Respectfully submitted,

ORCHESTRA COMMITTEE by

JOHN CODMAN, Chairman

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Cyrus Durgin, the well known critic of music and drama on the *Boston Globe* and incidentally a valued member of the Library Committee, requires no introduction. I greatly appreciate his willingness to write the following article, particularly as the request for it came at the last moment in the midst of important duties claiming priority.

THREE WISHES FROM A GENIE,
OR THINGS WILL WORK OUT
FAIRLY WELL, GIVEN TIME

Only someone well out of it would call this the best of all possible worlds, but it does have its points. Somehow, in the long view, most things work out fairly well. At least that is my conviction about music, although a learned, urbane, and friendly professional musician, now deceased, once declared that, with Beethoven, music had gone completely wrong. He was a gentleman of the old school, very tidy and orderly, and his musical instincts were all on the side of Bach and others of the rational 18th Century. Beethoven and his revolutionary “Eroica”, not to mention the last string quartets, “had spoiled everything.” Had Beethoven not lived, my friend maintained, music would have run an orderly and logical course from the 18th Century onward, and we would not now be in all this mess with modern music and its nasty sounds.

My friend is dead and the work of Beethoven still lives, and we are still faced with modern music. Since the situation is inevitable, we may as well conclude it is all to the good, even in the presence of the 12-tone system and some other manifestations of the contemporary art.

I suspect we are all too impatient about quick, easy pleasure in music, and short-sighted in our views—if we have any—about where music is going to end. Our age has become one of extremely rapid communication. Everything is done quickly, if not hurriedly. We accept as normal a tempo of daily life that might have ruined the nerves of our ancestors. We are restless, as well as impatient, and if we are Americans, we are likely to be further complicated by the notion that a little industry and common sense will put everything right soon and permanently.

Nature just doesn’t work that way. She takes her time and arrives where she wishes to go when it pleases her. Our impatience today, I believe, is an exacerbation of circumstances which always have existed since man began to walk upright, to cook his food and to put musical sounds together. Those circumstances are the seemingly inescapable differences between one period and the next, between a generation and that succeeding.

The son wants to be himself and to have his own views. Not infrequently that very human and in a sense renewing process of rebellion takes the form of reaction against his father’s tastes and beliefs. By extension the process applies to all of any period and the one which follows. Paradoxically, nothing is deader than yesterday, and yet the day before yesterday is now perceived to have been quaintly interesting in its own way; it fascinates us and we try to learn about it; there seems to be more correspondence between today and the day before yesterday than between today and the one just ended. This is why, should some smoky genie ever appear to me out of a Wonderful Lamp, and offer me fulfillment of three wishes, I would not mention money in any of them. I would use all three to be able to go back, as a rational adult, into numerous periods of past time, just to get a notion how people felt then.

I would want to live in the first half of the 17th Century, and come to understand what was the real nature as then perceived of the musical evolution from, say, Palestrina, to Monteverdi; in the first half of the 18th Century, and get an idea of the revolution exerted by Bach and the tempered scale, and of the popularity of Handel. Thereafter, I would ask to be able to sample the life, intellectual thought and artistic ideals of every decade following, right down to 1925, when my own personal interest in music began.

Just think of the tremendous excitement and the enlightenment to be derived from hearing the first performance of the “Messiah”, of the “Eroica”, of Wagner’s “Ring” and “Tristan”, and of various other epoch-marking (and sometimes epoch-making) masterpieces! Could any living human ever truly experience all this at first hand, he would know, in one sense, more about music and human nature in relation to it than ever yet has been collected in written thought. Most important of all, he would have the basis for comprehension of the divergent

impulses and ideas of successive periods. He would know directly how it felt upon first experience to be exposed to revolutionary innovations in musical art. He would know as much how the "Eroica" and the "Ring" sounded to ears accustomed to less drastic and complex and dissonant harmony as he knows how the 12-tone system sounds to our own ears conditioned by the traditional system of tonality. Furthermore, he would experience all these aspects in relation to each other, and thereby be enabled to look just a shade more clearly into the future. The point of such adventurings into the past would be to gain an inkling of what may be expected—and expected, mind you, not prophesied—to happen in future expansion of our technical vocabulary in music.

The growth of tonal resources has taken various forms, among them fractional tones, electronic instruments and so on. It has also taken the form of mingling several keys in dissonant inter-relationship, and of mingling several rhythms, simultaneously, in a complex of conflicting strong and weak beats.

An idiom based upon fractional tones has not gone very far. There are two good reasons for this: (1) inability of many human ears, short of years of conditioning, to perceive exact fractional differences of pitch, and (2) the mechanical construction of most instruments in use today which do not permit sounding of fractional intervals smaller than the semi-tone. This line of experimentation, I believe, long since finished in a dead-end alley.

Polytonality and polyrhythm have yielded a residue of benefit, both in what is basically homophonic music, and in music of contrapuntal texture. This has depended upon the skill of the composer in producing music that possesses a certain degree of clarity and expressive power above the mere fact of experimentation itself. The final test along this line is how it sounds to the human ear; whether, given time enough to become accustomed to it, the human ear will accept polytonality and polyrhythm as musical expression, as emotional expression. Yet, in theory, the ultimate end of unlimited combinations of keys and rhythms would be a great mass of unrelated sounds and metrical stresses. There then would be no contrast, no pure harmonic or tonal colors, no single, recognizable rhythms.

As for electronic instruments, there may be in this field more awaiting us than any of us now can easily foresee. A gigantic machine has been invented, and by means of recording, has been made to imitate all known and conventionally used instruments, even to the sound of the human voice singing words! If such is to be the course of our musical future, music as we have known it is certain to be totally changed.

Already some composers of repute have dabbled in recording conventional music and various other sounds on tape, then doctoring it by re-recording it backwards, at different tempo, combining these synthetic effects, and what not. In France this tinkering was dubbed "La musique concrete". Of course it is altogether mechanical, no more related to music as expressions of the human heart or as a manifestation of the human brain, than a race-track rabbit is to the real bunny.

But it is entirely possible that electronic developments will give us instruments which will eliminate a great deal of the technical difficulty imposed by those evolved "natural" instruments we know today. That, too, will surely affect the course of future art. The quality and essential nature of the sounds they produce will challenge acceptance or rejection by human ears and taste.

For many years now, Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton von Webern and others have sought to expand the musical vocabulary with a system first—and vaguely—called "atonality" (without key), then the "12-tone system" and now, more fashionably the "dodecaphonic style". The fundamental points of this system, whose aim is to avoid semblance of conventional tonality, are equal relationships between all semitones within the octave, and the use, as melodic material of a tone row or series, of all 12 semitones in the octave. In such a series each of the 12 must be sounded once before any may be repeated.

Mr. Ernest Ansermet, the Swiss mathematician and orchestral conductor, on a recent visit to Boston as guest conductor of the Boston Symphony, stated his views on the 12-tone system very candidly. "The strict 12-tone system," Ansermet declared, "is a ready-made order for those who are confused or lost, who do not know what to do or where to turn. . . . I have examined the laws of hearing and I have proved by mathematical formulae that the 12-tone system is entirely contrary to those laws. You see objects in perspective, the closer ones bigger to your eye, the distant ones smaller. So in music. You perceive closer certain tones of greater authority in tonality, lesser ones are perceived more distantly, a sort of hearing perspective. The 12-tone system has no perspective, just as it has no strong and governing bass."

But Mr. Ansermet, a musician of deep perception as well as of muscularly individual taste, recognized that elements of the 12-tone system could be employed to make genuine music. But, he added, they must be used in a sense of tonality, that rational system which the human mind, ear and heart have organized and extended over a period of roughly three centuries. It is this rational quality, he emphasized, that human nature so strongly desires and, at last, must have.

I suspect that, at bottom, the fatal weakness of strict procedure in polytonality, polyrhythm and the 12-tone system, is that it would produce a sound tissue of much the same harmonic and rhythmic tension from start to finish. There could be no points of repose, no ascent in tension to a peak of emphasis, no relaxation to further points of repose. It is in these ascents, peaks and relaxations that we find the variety, the contrasts, of timbre and emotional stress which give music both order and appeal.

But if elements of all these procedures are treated under a dominant principle of tonality, order and contrast, as well as with regard to what appeals to the human ear, then those elements are basically musical and can be used to produce music. Such, I am convinced, is the true wave or whatever else you wish to call it, of the future. There are other and lesser matters involved regarding melody, but the big point is selection of resources toward a recognizably expressive purpose. The composers to accomplish just that will appear, make no mistake.

Nor is dissonance, by itself, a factor of over-riding importance, although dissonance is a feature of contemporary music which among conservative listeners causes the greatest disaffection. The human ear can, by exposure, effort and experience, accommodate itself to complexities of opposing sonorities and come to regard them as agreeably musical. After all, the dominant seventh chord, three hundred years ago, was considered a dissonance. Almost every successive great composer, starting with Bach, introduced degrees and qualities of dissonance which dismayed conservatism of their own times. But as years went on, aural accommodation resulted in acceptance.

Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps" is prevailingly a tissue of strong dissonance, but forty years and more after its scandalous Paris premiere, the "Sacre" is pretty generally considered a masterpiece. The important fact is that Stravinsky used dissonance with high logic and order. There is no confusion, no waves of sound without tonal anchor, no unrelated rhythmic impulses.

No one can foretell the future, but my own feeling is that selection and logic will work out music's problems rather well. I'd like to be around to experience it at first hand.

CYRUS DURGIN

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The following list contains most of the recent purchases and gifts since the issue of the last bulletin. An asterisk denotes a member of the Association. The Library appreciates the generosity of donors.

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Hahn—Mozart. Comédie musicale . . . , piano score

Menotti—The Saint of Bleecker Street, piano score

Orff—Carmina Burana. Cantiones profanae. . . , piano score

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