



WHAT'S IN MUSIC?

2. Something About Rhythm.

You remember we began this series on "What's in Music?" by trying to approach music from a much more "matter of fact" standpoint than is commonly adopted. The main idea was that a piece of music is something satisfying made out of sound by man, who is so constituted that sound has a peculiar fascination for him. There is no need then to think of the composer as a strange sort of animal with fiery eyes, long hair, and a soul full of grand passions, who dashes off work at the obedience of sudden "inspiration."

He is—or was until the romantic movement of the 19th Century got hold of him—a man who wanted, or had, to make things just as you or I might want or have to make a kitchen chair or a short-wave transmitter. Only instead of using wood or wire he uses sounds. At the same time we noted that he is an outstanding man, more keenly alive than most of us. So things which are made to his satisfaction—his compositions—are able to give us some of the richness and subtlety of his own reaction to life. In the same way, a good footballer can, by his play, not only let the barrackers know that he is an adept at the game, but also make them keenly aware of certain human qualities like physical endurance or courage in the face of odds.

Now we said, too, that as a satisfying thing a piece of music is only different from, not necessarily better than, a good piece of football—which is also a human activity calling into play certain faculties within a certain framework of rules. And if you are standing on the sideline you have got to know at least something about the rules in order to appreciate the game.

Conjuring Up Pictures.

Now at this point there is a further matter in regard to music which the analogy with football will clear up for us. Many people like music merely because it conjures up for them all sorts of exciting pictures, because it has pleasant associations for them. Now there is a certain type of music—programme music—which aims to conjure up pictures in this fashion so that this type of approach is the proper one for many occasions. But what needs stressing is the fact that this is not all, or even the most important portion of what music can give them. It gives you its best only when you approach it first, not as a series of pictures, but as a creation in sound to be assessed and appreciated as sound. It is only after you know something of the form



"Surprise inspection by the C.O. at 1100 hours. Better let the boys know."

of a piece of music so that you can grasp the significance of repetitions or of the balance and shape of the principal melodies so that you can recognise subtle changes in them as the work proceeds—it is only after this that the whole of the composer's deeper, perhaps unconscious, intention becomes plain to you.

You see, it is as if a man were to go to a football match because the full-back reminded him of his Great-Aunt Fanny, or merely to see the comedy of a rough and tumble—such motives may be all right, but they are hardly usual and won't help him to appreciate the game to the full. To do that he must be aware of each situation in the game as it proceeds and that means knowing a good deal about the rules. Of course, as we said before, once you do know something about the rules, know just what every player is doing and what situation he is facing, then the full effect of those general human

qualities of which the game can make you aware can be felt. And so with a piece of music—whatever the composition communicates can be known only by knowing the music clearly and thoroughly as sound organised according to certain rules.

A Few Basic Rules.

Of course here the analogy with football is liable to break down. For in football most of the rules are negative "thou shalt not" rules—like the offside rule. In music there are positive "thou shalt" rules, like the rules of harmony, and moreover they are not nearly so rigid. But in each case the rules represent the attempt men have made to organise their activity either in two teams in football or with different kinds of sound. Of course pages and pages might be—and have been—written on the rules evolved to give organisation and form to the composer's work, but actually there are a few basic ones which are easily understood, and very useful in making sense out of a piece of music. They may be discussed under these heads: Rhythm, Melody, Harmony, Form (Sonata, Rondo), etc., and instrumentation or tone colour.

Organised Noise.

Rhythm is placed first in the list because it seems to be absolutely basic both in the sense that it is the groundwork of almost all the music which is most frequently heard to-day and in the sense that it is something for which nearly everybody has some feeling. A schoolboy who runs a stick along a corrugated iron fence does so not merely because he wants to make a noise but because he likes organised, patterned noise, and there are few of us who do not tap rhythmically on the 'phone table when our call takes a long while to come through. So if you sit at the piano and just bang the keyboard you have noise, but if you bang it regularly you have organised noise or rhythm. And you will find that your bangings tend to fall into groups of two, three or four, according as you accent every second note—1 2, 1 2, 1 2—or every third note—1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3—or every fourth note with a subsidiary stress on every second note—1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 4. By this means you will have discovered the three most important rhythmic groupings in music. These you will see expressed at the beginning of a musical score as 2-4, 3-4 and 4-4 respectively. This means that you have 2, 3, and 4 beats respectively to a bar or rhythmic section of the piece.

It is essential in your listening to music that you should be able to distinguish these basic patterns of rhythm.