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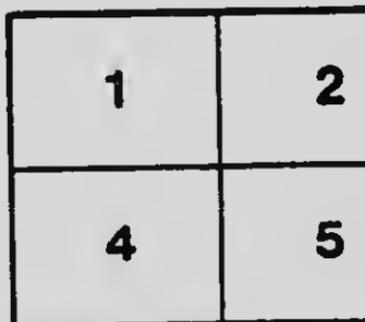
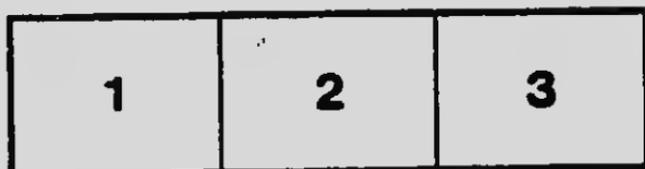
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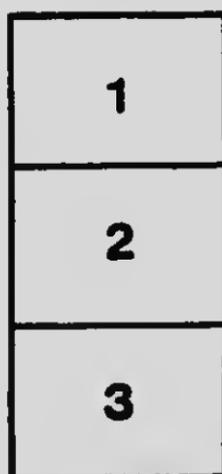
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THE MEANING
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John Ridington

THE MEANING AND THE MISSION OF MUSIC

A popular definition of music is that it is the language of the emotions. It is unquestionably the finest of the pleasures of sense.

Everyone to whom music makes any genuine appeal must have noticed frequently, and with wonder, its extraordinary power to tranquilize the heart, to instil a peace quite magical and beyond explanation. It soothes while it excites; and, more wonderful than its power to stimulate our emotions, is its power to reconcile and harmonize them. It does this, too, without the aid of any intellectual process; it offers us no argument; it formulates no solacing philosophy. Rather, it abolishes thought, to set up in its stead a novel activity that is felt as immediately, inexplicably grateful. It has done this through all the generations since Tubal Cain, right on down through the days when the shepherd boy's harp stilled the moody broodings and gustful passions of King Saul—on through classical days, when Apollo soothed the vigilant Argus to sleep with his lyre, and when Orpheus, with his lute, tamed the fierceness of beasts, moved rocks and trees, and lulled to sleep the very watch-dogs of hell.

What it has done through all time, music is doing to-day.

In a gross and material age, such as this, there is more need than ever for a response to the appeal of pure

beauty. The mission of music is, in this twentieth century, both more needed and more noble than at any previous time in life's history. Let us be thankful that never before was music better fitted for its work. Let us be thankful, too, that never before was its mission and its service better appreciated.

It is hardly necessary to state that music is the most universal of the arts, both in its appeal and in its response. From the cradle to the grave we move to, and are moved by, a musical accompaniment. Mother's lullaby and the simple songs of childhood stir tender memories in the minds and hearts of stern and mature men. The jovial drinking songs, and the reckless songs of good-fellowship, reflect the ideals and temperament of youth. The multifold manifestations of the love-passion are illustrated by thousands of songs. The love of the love of country, the love of duty have each dedicated to themselves some of music's noblest compositions.

There is not an emotion, there is not an inspiration, but that can be expressed in terms of music, and hardly one that has not been expressed in terms of music. Neither climate, age, race nor religion can give immunity from its power. The rice-eating Hindoo, the African aborigine, the Polynesian islander, are all as amenable to its influence as is the full-flowered product of civilization,

the "heir to all the ages, in the foremost files of time." Old and young, rich and poor, cultured and illiterate, alike yield to its sway. The most blissful happiness finds only in music adequate expression; the most poignant grief finds no language like that of music with which to portray its sorrow. Whether in Doric or Phrygian mood it melts to tenderness, it inspires to valor, it stirs to patriotism, it calms to peace. From the beginning of time it has been the handmaid of religion. On earth it is the voice of aspiration towards the Divine; in Heaven it is the eternal delight of the redeemed.

What is the meaning of music? How can we explain the universality of its appeal? I shall not presume to attempt a complete answer, but, in my thinkings on this matter, some thoughts have occurred to me which, with some diffidence, I set forth.

Mortal life, as we become acquainted with it in experience, unmediated by any philosophic or artistic mental activity, is complex, irrational. From our babyhood, when we put our fingers in the pretty fire and draw them forth cruelly burned, until the moment when a draught of air or the bursting wall of an outworn artery suddenly arrests our important enterprises in mid-course, we constantly find our faculties, both animal and divine, encountering a world not kindly adjusted. On the material plane we find drought and tempest, famine and flood, accident and disease. On the plane of feeling and sentiment there are the separations of friends, the death of dear ones, loneliness, doubt and disappointment. In the world of the spirit are sin and sorrow, the weakness and folly of ourselves and

of others, meaningless chance and the caprice of destiny. In such a world all of us have often felt that good fortune is sometimes as insulting as bad, and that happiness or misery bear little relation to either effort or deserving. Where all seems accidental, can aught be significant? When our highest interests are defenceless against the onslaught, not only of grave evil, but of mere absurdity, how is it possible to live with dignity or hope?

Nevertheless, men have, at all times, and by various means, fought sturdily against the capriciousness of life and the despair it engenders. All practical morality, to begin with, is one form of defence. The moral man, facing the universe undaunted, asserts his own power to develop in it at least his own personal particle of righteousness. As much strength as he has shall be spent on the side of order. If the world be unjust, at least he will love justice!

But the intellect is more ambitious than the moral sense. Not content with the degree of unity that a man can develop in this seething world by his single action, philosophy seeks to prove that the world itself, as a whole, deriving its nature as it must from mind, is orderly. We like to think and believe that, were it not for our human limitations—could we but see things in their proper perspective—were our span of consciousness widened until we could perceive the whole of existence in one thought, we should see and feel the deep organic beauty that now we yearn for in vain. But no philosophy has any word of comfort for the sorrows and the perplexities of our daily lives. It leaves us often longing for a warmer, nearer assurance of the rightness

of things. Human love will do much, and religion will do more, to supply the deep-seated needs of the human soul. But even to those who find solace in these, there come hours of weariness and confusion, times when they feel themselves groping in a formless world. The moralist knows moods of discouragement, when his power is at ebb, and the forces of evil press him sorely, entering even his own heart in the form of temptation, sloth and despair. The scientist encounters facts which his theories cannot embrace or explain. The philosopher at times grows tired of attempting to guess the answer to "the weary riddle of this world." Love has its tragedies, and faith its hours of eclipse. The world, in a word, is too big for us. Facing its vast whirl and glitter with our modest kit of senses, intellect and spirit, we are blinded, deafened, dizzied, completely bewildered. And then, recalling with a wistful regret our partial insight, we fancy them gone forever, and ourselves wholly lost. It is just at these moments, when the mind momentarily fails in its unequal struggle with reality, that we discover the deep meaning and supreme service of Art. For Art is the tender human servant that man has himself made for his solace. He has adjusted it to his faculties and restrained it within its scope. Fashioning it from the infinite substance, he has impressed upon it a finite form. It is a voice less thunderous than nature's, a lamp that does not dazzle like the great sun. It simplifies the wealth that is too luxurious and complex, and makes tangible a fragment of the great ethereal beauty no mortal can grasp. Thus Art is visible or audible rightness—a

particular symbol of the universal harmony. When we are too weary to be comforted by the remote, abstract good that religion promises—when our faith in "that far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves," becomes feeble and dim, Art comes with an immediate, substantial, caressing relief and beauty. Seeking to prove nothing, requiring of us no activity, saying nothing of aught beyond itself, it is supremely restful. Finding us defeated in our search for rationality, it says: "Search no more—at least not now! Puzzle no more—at least not yet! Merely listen and look! Here is pure beauty! Delight and rest."

Art, therefore, answers our problems, not directly, but by making them, for the time being, irrelevant. Like morality, philosophy, love and religion, it deals with life, but it eliminates and excludes all it cannot unify. Selection and imagination are its fundamentals. Though the eye cannot shut out the ugly or the superfluous, the painter can. He can exclude from his picture the building, the tree, the colors that would mar its composition or beauty. Actual men and women present all sorts of incongruities of face and figure, but the sculptor can suppress the stooping shoulders, the knobby hips, the bandy legs. He can remodel the receding forehead, the uplifted nose. It is the same with the literal arts. Language bristles with trivial and vulgar words, but the poet uses only such as are descriptive and euphonic. So also with art that is audible. Out of the infinite number of sounds that knock on our auditory nerves, musicians have selected about ninety definite tones, preordained to congruity, with which to weave their mar-

vellous fabric. This is ever the method of art; it excludes the irrelevant or the discordant, in order to secure a salient and pure integrity. By sacrificing something of the richness of experience, it gains a rationality unknown to experience. For the truth of this, consider a few representative examples. Browning's Pippa is a gentle, noble soul, bringing goodness everywhere; in real life she would be a poor millhand, insulted by a thousand sordid and accidental details. Shelley portrays Beatrice Cenci in the transfiguring light of poetic truth; actual experience would show her tortured by a sinister and ignoble fate. No Greek youth ever matched the perfect plastic beauty of the Discus-thrower, and no Italian woman ever symbolized cruel, sphynx-like loveliness as does the Mona Lisa. Corot's nature is grayer and softer and more harmonious than ever existed on earth. And in the same way some songs pulsate with a passion as intense, but far less torn and fragmentary, than that by which they were inspired. This serene perfection, which wraps like a mantle all works of genuine art, is attained only by excluding irrelevancies always present in nature. Whistler was wise as well as witty when he exclaimed that "to ask the painter to copy nature as he sees it, is to invite the pianist to sit on the key-board!" To be sure, were there a perfect adjustment between nature and our faculties, were we able to discern the unity that doubtless exists even in the infinite complexity of this old world, and of that great universe of which it is but a fragment of stardust, then such a dictum would be outgrown, and selection would cease

to be a condition necessarily precedent to all forms of art expression.

Meanwhile, the conditions that govern art have, of course, their inevitable and accompanying limitations. If art be more orderly than nature, it will be far less rich and various. Effects that nature presents in a bewildering drench of experience, a work of art will have to isolate and develop alone. A pictured landscape, however perfect, is but one phase of the reality; in nature there is ceaseless play and change; mood succeeds mood, and the charm is more than half in the wayward flux and transformation. A portrait shows but one character; a human face is a whole gallery of personalities. Art unconsciously, and perforce, has to adopt a narrower standard, and this fact marks its boundaries and limitations.

The application of the foregoing to the art of music, is, I think, apparent. Though the most modern of all forms of art expression—music as we know it is but some four centuries old—it has had from the first certain advantages over its sister arts in the struggle for richness and clarity, the goals to which all art is eternally struggling and progressing. These advantages proceed from the fundamental nature of music. Musical tones are unique in our mental experience as being at once more directly expressive of the emotional inwardness of life than any other art-material, and more susceptible of orderly structure.

That music is beyond all the other arts directly expressive of man's deeper passional life scarcely needs theoretic proof; the fact is in the experience of everyone who has listened to a military band, or to a ragged

Hungarian with a violin, or who has heard a home song lovingly rendered. These things take a physical grip upon our emotions; they stir our diaphragms, they give us "burns up the back," and compel us to shiver, laugh or weep. Combined with such physical effects, however, are ideas of indescribable vividness and poignancy. Joy and grief, hope and despair, serenity, aspiration and horror, fill our hearts as we listen to music. These come in their pure essence—not as qualities of something else. This is what is meant by the familiar statement that the other arts are representative, while music is presentative. Poetry, sculpture, and painting show us things outside ourselves—joyous or grievous, perhaps, hopeful or desperate or beautiful or ugly things, but still THINGS. But music shows us nothing but the qualities, the disembodied feelings, the passional essences. Recall for a moment the effects of painting or of poetry, the way in which they provoke emotions, and you will grasp my meaning. Is it not always by symbolism, by indirection? Does not the feeling merely exhale from the object, instead of constituting the object, as it does in music? In looking at a pastoral landscape, for instance, do we not first think of the peaceful scene represented, and only secondarily feel serenity itself? Yes, in the representative arts emotion is merely adjective; in music alone it is substantive! We see in a portrait a lovely woman; we behold in marble a noble youth; we read in poetry a desperate story; in music, on the contrary, we HEAR love, nobility, despair! It matters little that we are unable to explain how this can be: we know that it is. Psychology

may one day be able to discover the nature of the deep bond that connects the biological apparatus of emotion with that of sound sensation; for the present we must be content with the unequivocal evidence of our senses that music is the one adequate language of our passional life.

And since this passional life is the deepest reality we know, since our inner emotions constitute in fact the very essence of that world-spirit which is but projected and symbolized in sky, sun, ocean, stars and earth, music cannot but be a richer record of our ultimate life than those arts that deal with objects and symbols alone. You will remember that, according to Holy Writ, only two of the arts will persist to all eternity—Architecture, the most substantial and time defying, and Music, the most transitory and ethereal. It is the penetration, the ultimacy of music that gives it such extraordinary power. All the other arts excel it in definiteness, in concreteness, in the ability to delineate a scene or tell a story; but music surpasses them all in power to present the naked and basic emotions of existence, the essential, informing passions.

Another advantage possessed by Music over its sister arts proceeds from the nature of its material. Tones, produced and controlled by man, are far more easily stamped with the unity he desires than the objects of external nature can possibly be. Those are stubborn outer facts, created without regard to the aesthetic sense, and in a thousand ways unamenable to it. But tones have no practical utility whatever; not only do they not exist outside of music, but they would be of no use if they did. They may therefore be chosen

and grouped by the free aesthetic taste alone, acting without let or hindrance, except what is imposed by the thing to be expressed. For hundreds of years, man has been testing and comparing, accepting and rejecting, the elements of the tonal series, with the result that we have today the ladder of ninety odd definitely fixed tones, out of which all music is composed. Though the final selection of music's raw material has been built up so slowly and tentatively, it has been done with so sure and delicate a sense of its natural structure, that it is an unsurpassed basis for complex and yet perfectly harmonious tone-combinations, admirably capable of reflecting and arousing every form of human emotion.

But though the musician's art-material is preordained to beauty, yet he is by no means exempted from the difficulties of his brother artists. If they work in a less plastic material, he has to govern subtler and more wayward forces. He can attain a wonderful perfection, but only through genius that is inspired, and labor that is unremitting. His task is to embody the turbulent, irrational human feelings in serene and beautiful forms. He must master the dominating, reconcile the warring, impose unity on the diverse and repellant. He looks into the stormy and tortured heart of man, and seeks to recreate, through tones, the spirit in a travail titanic and interminable. The music of Wagner and Beethoven and Tschaikowsky is the triumphant answer as to music's power to deal

with the portentous verities. Music expresses our deepest passionate nature with unrivalled fullness, and yet so reconciles it with itself as to symbolize our highest spiritual peace!

From the welter and jungle of experience in which it is our lot to pass our mortal days—days which philosophy cannot make wholly rational, nor love wholly happy, nor religion wholly serene—we are thus privileged to emerge, from time to time, into fairer realms. Tantalized with an unattainable vision of order, homesick for a rightness never quite realized, we turn to Art, and especially to Music, for assurance that our hope and faith are not wholly chimerical. Then

"Music pours on mortals
Its beautiful disdain."

Disdainful it is, truly, for it reminds us of the discord and the rhythmless on-march of our days. It voices the passions that have torn and mutilated, and stung and blinded us: it makes us meditate the foolishness, the fatuity, the fatality, the aimlessness of our chaotic lives. But beautiful it is, also; it moves us to thoughts "too deep for tears," it breaks up the fountains of the great deeps that exist, sometimes almost unsuspected, within us all. It stirs us to noble aspiration, it helps us respond to beauty. But whether disdainful or beautiful, music shows us our deepest feelings, so wayward or tragic in experience, merged into ineffable perfection and peace. To my mind, this is what constitutes at once its mission and its meaning.



