Aaron Copland

What to Listen for in Music

With a Foreword and Epilogue by
Alan Rich

and an Introduction by
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and a New Appreciation by
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SIGNET CLASSICS

SIGNET CLASSICS
Published by New American Library, a division of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632,
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Previously published in a Mentor and New American Library editions. This is a revised edition of a McGraw-Hill Book Company hardcover edition.

First Signet Classics Printing, November 2002
First Signet Classics Printing (Slatkin Essay), February 2011
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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From Composer to Interpreter to Listener

Thus far, this book has been largely concerned with music in the abstract. But, practically considered, almost every musical situation implies three distinct factors: a composer, an interpreter, and a listener. They form a triumvirate, no part of which is complete without the other. Music begins with a composer; passes through the medium of an interpreter; and ends with you, the listener. Everything in music may be said, in the final analysis, to be directed at you—the listener. Therefore, to listen intelligently, you must clearly understand not only your own role but also that of composer and interpreter and what each one contributes to the sum total of a musical experience.

Let us begin with the composer, since music in our own civilization begins with him. What, after all, do we listen for when we listen to a composer? He need not tell us a story like the novelist; he need not "copy" nature like the sculptor; his work need have no immedi-

ate practical function like the architect's drawing. What is it that he gives us, then? Only one answer seems possible to me: He gives us himself. Every artist's work is, of course, an expression of himself, but none so direct as that of the creative musician. He gives us, without relation to exterior "events," the quintessential part of himself—that part which embodies the fullest and deepest expression of himself as a man and of his experience as a fellow being.

Always remember that when you listen to a composer's creation you are listening to a man, to a particular individual, with his own special personality. For a composer, to be of any value, must have his own personality. It may be of greater or lesser importance, but, in the case of significant music, it will always mirror that personality. No composer can write into his music a value that he does not possess as a man. His character may be streaked with human frailties—like Lully's or Wagner's, for example—but whatever is fine in his music will come from whatever is fine in him as a man.

If we examine this question of the composer's individual character more closely, we shall discover that it is really made up of two distinct elements: the personality with which he was born and the influences of the time in which he lives. For, obviously, every composer lives in a certain period, and each period has its character, too. Whatever personality a composer may have is expressed within the framework of his own period. It is the interreaction of personality and period that results in the formation of a composer's style. Two composers with exactly similar personalities living in two different epochs would inevitably produce music of two different styles. When we speak of a composer's style,

therefore, we refer to the combined result of an individual character and a particular period.

Perhaps this important question of musical style will be made clearer if applied to a specific case. Take Beethoven, for example. One of the most obvious characteristics of his style is its ruggedness. Beethoven, as a man, had the reputation of being a brusque and rugged individual. From the testimony of the music alone, however, we know him to be a composer with a bold, uncouth quality, the very antithesis of the suave and the mellifluous. Still, that rugged character of Beethoven's took on a different expression at different periods of his life. The ruggedness of the *First Symphony* is different from that of the *Ninth*. It is a difference of periods. The early Beethoven was rugged within the limits of an eighteenth-century classical manner, whereas the mature Beethoven underwent the influence of the liberating tendencies of the nineteenth century. That is why, in considering the style of a composer, we must take into account his personality as reflected by the period in which he lived. There are as many styles as there are composers, and each important composer has several different styles corresponding to the influences of his own time and the maturing of his own personality.

If it is essential for the listener to understand the question of musical style as applied to a composer's work, it is even more so for the interpreter. For the interpreter is a kind of middleman in music. It is not so much the composer that the listener hears, as the interpreter's conception of the composer. The writer's contact with his reader is direct; the painter's picture need only be hung well to be seen. But music, like the theater, is an art that must be reinterpreted in order to live. The poor

composer, having finished his composition, must turn it over to the tender mercies of an interpretive artist—who, it must always be remembered, is a being with his own musical nature and his own personality. The lay listener, therefore, can judge an interpretation fairly only if he is able to distinguish between the composer's thought, ideally speaking, and the degree to which the interpreter is faithfully reproducing that thought.

The role of the interpreter leaves no room for argument. All are agreed that he exists to serve the composer—to assimilate and recreate the composer's "message." The theory is plain enough—it is its practical application that needs elucidation.

Most first-rate interpretive artists today possess a technical equipment that is more than sufficient for any demands made upon them. So that in most cases we can take technical proficiency for granted. The first real interpretive problem is presented by the notes themselves. Musical notation, as it exists today, is not an exact transcription of a composer's thought. It cannot be, for it is too vague; it allows for too great a leeway in individual matters of taste and choice. Because of that, the interpreter is forever confronted with the problem of how literally he is expected to keep to the printed page. Composers are only human—they have been known to put notes down inexactly, to overlook important omissions. They have also been known to change their opinions in regard to their own indications of tempo or dynamics. Interpreters, therefore, must use their musical intelligence before the printed page. There is, of course, the possibility of exaggeration in both directions—keeping too strictly to the notes or straying too far away from them. The problem would

probably be solved, up to a certain point, if a more exact way of noting down a composition were available. But, even so, music would still be open to a number of different interpretations.

For a composition is, after all, an organism. It is a living, not a static, thing. That is why it is capable of being seen in a different light and from different angles by various interpreters or even by the same interpreter at different times. Interpretation is, to a large extent, a matter of emphasis. Every piece has an essential quality which the interpretation must not betray. It takes its quality from the nature of the music itself, which is derived from the personality of the composer himself and the period in which it was written. In other words, every composition has its own style which the interpreter must be faithful to. But every interpreter has his own personality, too, so that we hear the style of a piece as refracted by the personality of the interpreter.

The relation of the performer to the composition that he is recreating is therefore a delicate one. When the interpreter injects his personality into a performance to an unwarranted degree, misunderstandings arise. In recent years, the mere word "interpretation" has fallen into disrepute. Discouraged and disgruntled by the exaggerations and falsifications of "prima donna" interpreters, a certain number of composers, with Stravinsky as ringleader, have, in effect, said: "We do not wish any so-called interpretations of our music; just play the notes; add nothing, and take nothing away." Though the reason for this admonishment is clear enough, it seems to me to represent a nonrealistic attitude on the part of composers. For no finished interpreter can possibly play a piece of music or even a phrase, for that

matter, without adding something of his or her own personality. To have it otherwise, interpreters would have to be automatons. Inevitably, when they perform music, they perform it in their own way. In doing so, they need not falsify the composer's intentions; they are merely "reading" it with the inflections of their own voice.

But there are further, and more profound, reasons for differences in interpretation. There is no doubt that a Brahms symphony, interpreted by two first-rate conductors, may be different in effect without being unfaithful to Brahms's intentions. It is interesting to ruminate on why that should be true.

Take, for example, two of the outstanding interpreters of our day—Arturo Toscanini and Serge Koussevitzky.* They are two entirely different personalities—men who think differently, who emotionalize about things in a different way, whose philosophy of life is different. It is only to be expected that in handling the same notes their interpretations will vary considerably.

The Italian conductor is a classicist by nature. A certain detachment is an essential part of the classicist's make-up. One's first impression is a curious one—Toscanini seems to be doing nothing at all to the music. It is only after one has listened for a while that the sense of an art concealing art begins to take hold of one. He treats the music as if it were an object. It seems to exist at the back of the stage—where we can contemplate it for our pleasure. There is a wonderful sense of detachment about it. Yet all the time it is music, the most

*This comparison of personality traits was written during their years as active interpreters of symphonic literature.

passionate of all the arts. The emphasis with Toscanini is always on the line, on the structure as a whole—never on detail or on the separate measure. The music moves and lives for its own sake, and we are considered fortunate in being able to contemplate it living thus.

The Russian conductor, on the other hand, is a romanticist by nature. He is involved, body and soul, in the music that he interprets. There is little of the calculative about him. He possesses the true romanticist's fire, passion, dramatic imagination, and sensuosity. With Koussevitzky every masterpiece is a battleground on which he captains the great fight, and out of which, you may be sure, the human spirit will emerge triumphant. When he is "in the mood," the effect is overwhelming.

When these two opposite personalities apply their gifts to the same Brahms symphony, the result is bound to be different. This case of a profoundly German composer's being interpreted by a Russian and an Italian is typical. Neither one is likely to produce a quality of sound from his orchestra that a German would recognize as *echt deutsch*. In the Russian's hands, Brahms's orchestra will glow with an unsuspected luster, and every ounce of romantic drama that the symphony contains will be extracted by the time the end has been reached. With the Italian, on the other hand, the structural-classical side of Brahms will be stressed, and the melodic lines will be etched in the purest of lyrical styles. In both cases, as you see, it is simply a question of emphasis. It may be that neither of these men is your idea of the perfect interpreter of a Brahms symphony. But that is not the point. The point is that in order to hear an interpretation intelligently, you must be able to

recognize what, exactly, the interpreter is doing to the composition at the moment that he recreates it.

In other words, you must become more aware of the interpreter's part in the performance you are hearing. To do that, two things are necessary: You must have, as point of reference, a more or less ideal conception of the style that is proper to the composer in question; and you must be able to sense to what degree the interpreter is reproducing that style, within the sphere of his own personality. However short any of us may fall from attaining this ideal in listening, it is well that we keep it in mind as an objective.

By now, the importance of the listener's role in this whole process must be self-evident. The combined efforts of composer and interpreter have meaning only in so far as they go out to an intelligent body of hearers. That bespeaks a responsibility on the part of the hearer. But before one can understand music, one must really love it. Above all things, composers and interpreters want listeners who lend themselves fully to the music that they are hearing. Virgil Thomson once described the ideal listener as "a person who applauds vigorously." By that *bon mot* he meant to imply, no doubt, that only a listener who really involves himself is of importance to music or the makers of music.

To lend oneself completely inevitably means, for one thing, the broadening of one's taste. It is insufficient to love music only in its more conventional aspects. Taste, like sensitivity, is, to a certain extent, an inborn quality, but both can be considerably developed by intelligent practice. That means listening to music of all schools and all periods, old and new, conservative and modern. It means unprejudiced listening in the best sense of the term.

Take seriously your responsibility as listener. All of us, professionals and laymen alike, are forever striving to make our understanding of the art more profound. You need be no exception, no matter how modest your pretensions as listener may be. Since it is our combined reaction as listeners that most profoundly influences both the art of composition and interpretation, it may truthfully be said that the future of music is in our hands.

Music can only be really alive when there are listeners who are really alive. To listen intently, to listen consciously, to listen with one's whole intelligence is the least we can do in the furtherance of an art that is one of the glories of mankind.