

The College as the Composer's Patron

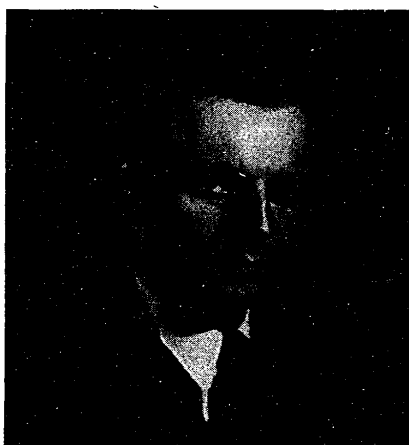
CONSTANT VAUCLAIN

A member of the music faculty of the University of Pennsylvania gives a clear picture of the role college music departments are playing as patrons of composers.

COMPOSERS need and have always needed two basic things to enable them to practice their art: first, highly specialized training, and second, some means of sustaining themselves economically other than through their compositions. I should like to discuss the second of these necessities first.

Even the most successful composers of serious music have generally found themselves unable to exist on the direct proceeds of their compositions. The astonishing difficulties which such major artists as Mozart and Beethoven had in making money from their works are familiar examples of a chronic problem, and the answer to this problem has always been the same—patronage. At first this was furnished by the church, and, in spite of the incalculable debt which music owes to it, the church had a defect as a patron—it exerted a strong restrictive influence on the music produced under its protection. Later, patronage was furnished by the state, or by a combination of church and state, and modern secular music, with its instrumental forms, began to develop only after it found a patronage free from ecclesiastical restriction, as it did in the Venetian School. Here, it is true, it was the Capellmeisters of St. Mark's Cathedral who began this development, but these masters were answerable to the doges of Venice rather than to the church itself, and were free to develop secular as well as religious music, and to let the elements of folk song and dance enter the realm of serious art.

From the seventeenth century onward, patronage of some sort,



whether private, by the church, or by the state, continued to be the mainstay of the composers' livelihood. Many of these men received their initial training in choir schools attached to various courts, and went on to depend on court or church appointments. Sometimes these artists were taken up by people of wealth and fashion, and were able to make money by giving high-priced lessons; sometimes, if they were instrumental virtuosi, they earned considerable amounts by appearing in performances. But official positions of one kind or another helped support nearly all of them during at least a portion of their lives. While some composers succeeded in making substantial financial gains directly from performances of their music, this was generally, except in the case of a few operatic writers, only far along in their careers, and after they were well established.

These official positions were not

always all they might have been—sometimes they were poorly paid, and restricted the composers' movements, as witness Mozart's treatment by the Archbishop of Salzburg. But they performed the all-important function of giving the composer a secure, paying position in music which left him enough time to compose. They generally provided him with an orchestra or other means of performing his music, as well as an audience to listen to it.

Today, in the United States, the composer needs precisely the same support as in the preceding centuries in Europe—a position in music which will be his economic mainstay, and at the same time allow him time and energy to compose. But there are no such positions to be had as were available formerly in Europe. There are no aristocratic groups to maintain musical organizations. The subsidization of composers by wealthy private individuals has been infrequent here, and current income taxes suggest that it will be less frequent still. The church is no longer significant as a patron of music. Protestant Church music has long since declined owing to the absence of a uniform liturgy, and the Catholic Church, in reviving the music of the past, has excluded the possibility of a contemporary idiom being nurtured by it. The United States has not followed the example of such countries as Finland and Russia in patronizing its outstanding composers, yet the composer of serious music is today still faced with his chronic dilemma—he cannot make enough to live on directly from his compositions. He can't

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which is much broader than just the training of prima donnas.

It desires to increase the knowledge and ability of its members; to make them more helpful to the students who come to them; and in general to bring order into the profession.

Despite the criticism leveled at voice teachers, because of the acts of some who have called themselves by that name, it is a fact that hundreds of able teachers throughout the country are doing a sound, praiseworthy job in their chosen field. When these latter unite for cooperative work of such broad scope as has been undertaken under the N. A. T. S. banner, some very worth-while and permanent results will be achieved.

When these are evident to the general public, and the voice student supplements his answer to the question "Who is your teacher?" with, "He (or she) is a member of N. A. T. S.," we hope that the questioner will be assured that the student is under the instruction of a capable, conscientious, and ethical teacher. If the teacher proves not to fit that description, N. A. T. S. wants to know it.

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make money from a successful production, as a writer or a playwright can, for performance fees for even the most extended works are so small as to represent little more than token payments. He can't sell his scores to enthusiastic amateurs, as painters sell their paintings. If he is commissioned to write music, the amount he is paid will probably be inadequate, compared to the time he spends on it, and this is to be expected, for it is not the commissioner's fault that a half hour of music which he purchases for a thousand or two thousand dollars takes the composer many months to produce. An established composer can join ASCAP and realize substantial benefits from his membership, but hardly enough to live on. As far as receipts from publishing houses go, the serious composer of today cannot hope to duplicate the earnings of a nineteenth century composer such as Brahms, who could

publish the highest order of chamber, piano, and vocal music and have it eagerly bought by a large number of amateurs of a high level of musical appreciation and training. In America today the published works which sell best are not too difficult pieces for piano, chorus, school instrumental groups, and the like. These fields do not attract the best efforts of most of our composers, who, in this age of the rise of the orchestra and the decline of chamber groups, express themselves more often in symphonic works which represent the least possible appeal to

publishers. A composer may, of course, be honored by an invitation to Hollywood, but Hollywood has a way of devouring the artists it hires, and a man like Aaron Copland is a distinguished exception among a number of promising talents which have been buried there.

The composer, then, is still as much in need of patronage as he ever was. Since he must have it to exist, what substitute is to be found for the patrons of the past? The answer is that this vital function is being assumed here by the music departments of colleges and universi-

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ties, or by schools of music attached to these institutions. Many of the most distinguished composers in the country have become integral parts of these departments; the names of Hanson, Harris, Hindemith, Milhaud, Randall Thompson, Piston, and Schoenberg are some of the best known. Obviously, men of this calibre have found their way into college music departments, and have stayed there, because they find themselves in the right place. The American college department, properly organized, truly seems to furnish the composer with an ideal patron. It gives him all the advantages of the older European systems of protection, free from the restrictions sometimes found in the latter. He is made secure economically. He has time to compose, for college administrators tend to view his composition as they do other faculty research, as a valuable and necessary function, capable of bringing distinction to his department, which should be encouraged and not impaired by loading him with a too heavy teaching schedule. His teaching in such a department can be, and should be, a continual source of clarification, growth, and stimulation of his own creative work. There is no restriction whatever on his output—he may write whatever he likes, religious or secular, without regard to commercial possibilities or to the pleasing of wealthy patrons. Not infrequently he has the advantage of choral and instrumental groups associated with his department which are available for performance of his works. It is difficult to see how a composer could be placed in a better situation than in a properly organized college music department.

But the college department's service to the composer does not end here. It makes it possible for the composer-faculty member to function efficiently in another vital way, as the teacher and guide of those who wish to become composers in their turn, and this brings us to the other basic need of the composer already mentioned—that of highly specialized training. An examination of the formative years of significant composers of the past quickly brings home the importance in their development of proper artistic guidance. There is no one better fitted to guide the embryonic composer than the

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Yes, and Johannes too. And Wolfgang, and Ludwig, and C.P.E. When they wrote their wind and brass compositions they couldn't have been thinking of libraries and musicologists. They were writing for people to play and, we imagine, for young people to play.

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teacher who is himself composing, and who is thereby kept sensitive to the aesthetic problems of his art and prevented from falling into the cut-and-dried sort of teaching which invariably alienates the good composition pupil.

Outside of the college department, the young person who wants to compose stands little chance of finding proper teaching, unless he has the rare good luck to become the pupil of a fine teacher in a fine conservatory. He is likely, rather, to go to the first teacher casually recommended to him, stay with him because he finds him personable, waste his time and money, and end in frustration. To become a composer requires not only talent and desire but also a long, integrated, concentrated period of study under a teacher who knows his business, and good composition teachers are far from numerous. The college departments are placing good composition teachers where they can be reached by promising pupils, pupils to whom these teachers would probably not be accessible otherwise. Furthermore, the first-year theory classes in the well-organized music departments not only give a basic foundation for the study of composition; they also act frequently as the means of finding those potential talents equipped to go on to advanced composition work. These classes nowadays tend to be large, and a freshman harmony class of fifty or so is bound to have exciting possibilities—probably as many as or more than there are to be found among the limited number of composition pupils in a conservatory. This is indicated by the stiff competition which the college departments are beginning to give to the conservatories in the production of able young composers.

More and more college students are electing music courses or majoring in music; a reflection both of the great increase of music in the schools and of the expansion and betterment of the college departments themselves. To find and develop the composition talent among all these young people is a task for which the modern department is very well fitted, and in this way it is operating as a patron of composition which seems better able to screen a sizable number of each generation for po-

tential composers than the old European systems of patronage, in which so often promising young talents were found more or less by chance, came to the notice of wealthy or influential persons, and were dependent on the latter's bounty for education.

America is a musical nation, full of talent. Some of its finest composition potential has for years been going into Tin-Pan Alley—it had nowhere else to go. The modern college department should be able to attract more and more of this country's composer talent to itself, give it proper training in composition, and, which is so important, accompany this training with the general cultural background so vital to the fully developed artist. The magnificent achievement of Gershwin, the only one of the Tin-Pan Alley composers who was able to lift himself into the ranks of serious composers, makes it exciting to contemplate what the college department may do in the future by bringing the best training within the reach of a large number of potential composers.

The college department thus completes a cycle. It offers a splendid means of discovering and training the composer. And, as the composer matures, it provides him with the means to function as a creative artist. This is certainly patronage of the highest and most efficient kind, a logical outcome of our social structure, which is bound to make itself felt by its enrichment of America's musical culture.

KENDALL

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name in the way he would have wished most to have it perpetuated—by smoothing the road for at least one mature young pianist. But again it should be emphasized that the winner must meet the requirements set by the Fund. As Vladimir Horowitz, Fund president, stated in a radio address recently, "The winner has the confidence of knowing he is acclaimed because he came up to the highest possible standards; that he was chosen above all other contestants because of intrinsic excellence, and not merely by comparative standards."

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