

What Constitutes Good Music?

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WHAT are the qualities in music which distinguish the great from the mediocre? What makes a musical selection live for hundreds of years, always maintaining an appeal, regardless of the changes which occur in human cultures? To the connoisseur of music or to the professional musician, there are, no doubt, many technical aspects which account for the relative merits of compositions. But to the person who has limited technical knowledge of music, these qualities are not determining factors in the enjoyment, stimulation, and inspiration that music gives him. He listens to music for its beauty of tone, rhythm, and melody, and for its emotional value.

Music of deep emotional intensity is the reflection of its composer's feelings. Only if the composer has a sincere emotion to express is his work inspiring to others. I am convinced that all worthwhile music can be traced to its origin in a profound spiritual state of its composer. Folk music, originated by untrained musicians, is often filled with surprising power because it is a sincere expression of the uncomplicated reactions of simple people to joy or pain. Our American Negro spirituals are an example of a particularly beautiful type of folk music. Listening to them, one can vicariously experience the misery of slavery, the peace of uncomplicated faith, and the joy of an uninhibited imagination. Patriotism motivated Chopin's musical genius. A deep understanding of his countrymen's characteristics and needs stirred Liszt. Schubert found inspiration in romantic love. And it must have been an almost unequalled religious experience which gave voice to Handel's "Messiah."

I believe that its basis of sincere emotion and its ability to stir its hearers are the two principal qualities determining the worth of music. Not every composition which has become a classic is perfect in technical structure; and I have heard certain selections judged flawless in form which have not lived because they had no deep feeling. A melody may be lovely but superficial; a rhythm may be attractive but monotonous; a tone may be brilliant but uninspired. As is true of literature, to be truly great, music must have a universal meaning, a variety of possible interpretations, and a foundation of truth. Again as with literature, to truly appreciate fine music an individual must earnestly work at developing a taste for it. He must listen to what is considered great with a mind open to receive it. If he is honest with himself and has the necessary intellectual equipment, he can obtain some form of emotional experience from every fine work, for this characteristic they all have in common: they were born in, and therefore can reproduce, profound and sincere emotion.