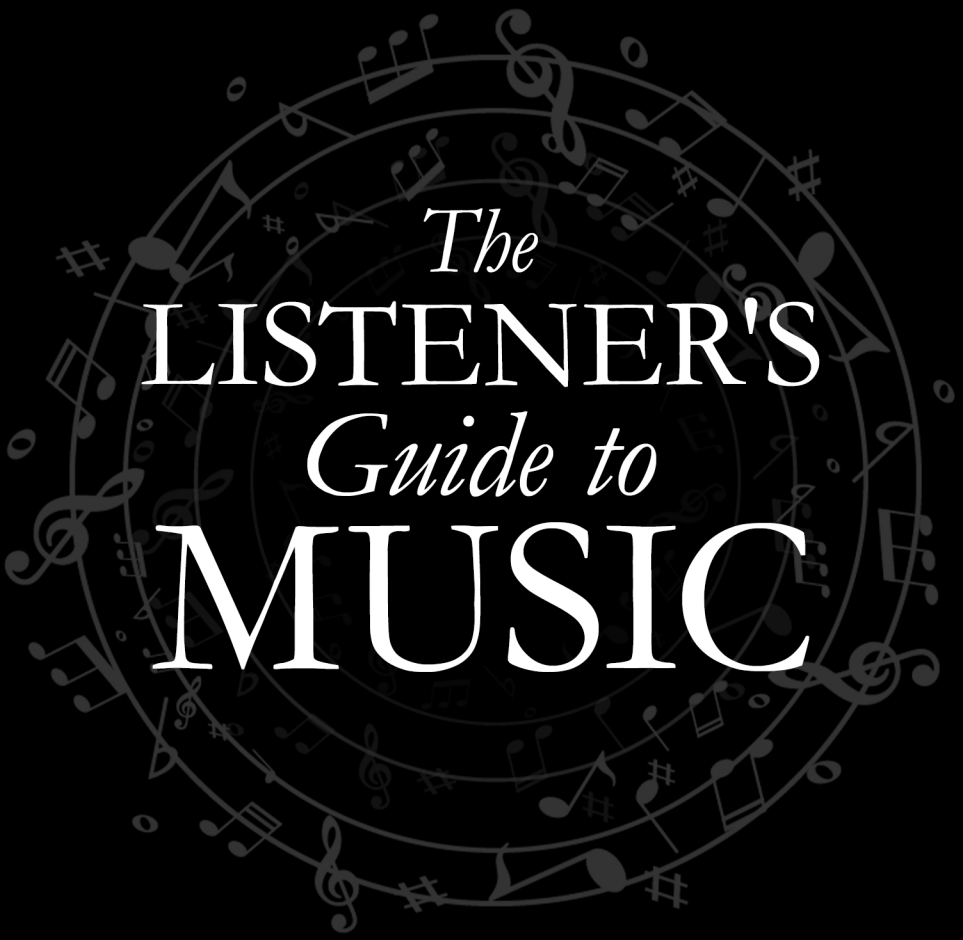
Hear not just the notes, but the design, color, and meaning behind them.



The LISTENER'S *Guide to* MUSIC

PERCY SCHOLES

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by

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The above Illustrations are not strictly proportionate in size

THE WOOD-WIND OF THE ORCHESTRA

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Mr. H. E. Wooldridge was Slade Professor at Oxford, he devised what, to many of us, was a new method of lecturing. In place of the customary set discourses on schools and principles of art, he collected us into a dark room with a sheet and a magic lantern and proceeded to show us how to look at pictures. I can still remember those hot summer afternoons — the shuttered windows, the professor in cap and gown reading his manuscript by the light of two small candles, while we sat in serried rows following, with literally breathless interest, his accounts of the different ways of drawing hands or drapery, of the influence of one artist on another, of the rise and fall of conventions and schemes of composition. He never, so far as I recollect, endeavored to direct our taste; he did not scold us for admiring Rembrandt or failing to understand the Primitives; he told us what there was to see in a picture and left us to form our judgments for ourselves. To many of us, a picture gallery has become, since those days, an entirely new place.

This is what Mr. Scholes is doing in the present volume. He has addressed it not to students and connoisseurs but to plain, simple people who like music but are a little bewildered by its complexity and by the pace at which it passes across their attention. He opens the door of the masters' workshop and shows, not the secret of their mastery, for none can show that, but the way in which they used their tools and dealt with their materials. Any reader who follows

him carefully and makes use of his illustrations will confess at the end of the volume that he has gained something in power of appreciation; he will have learned more fully what there is to appreciate.

For there are, as a philosopher said, more false facts than false theories in the world. The power of enjoying and loving the best music is not a rare and special privilege but the natural inheritance of everyone who has ear enough to distinguish one tune from another and wit enough to prefer order to incoherence. The cause of almost all misjudgment in music (apart from willful pedantry and willful fractiousness) lies in a want of observation — in a failure to hear what the composer is saying and to interpret it in reference to our own needs and emotions.

That is why so much of the best music gains by frequent recurrence; we cannot, as the phrase goes, "take it in" at a first presentation and must grow more familiar with its words before we can understand their significance. With the greatest music of all, we can never be too closely acquainted; its meaning is as infinite and unfathomable as that of Sophocles or Shakespeare. But at each repetition, we may understand more of it if we will, and the first step in understanding is to learn the actual elements of which it is composed. There is no need to traverse or complicate this by discussing the different degrees of musical susceptibility and their bearing on artistic judgment. Such degrees undoubtedly exist, and the more sensitive ear starts with a great advantage. But if the man of little sensibility errs on one side, the man of little knowledge errs on the other. Berlioz divided bad critics into "ceux qui ne sentent pas" and "ceux qui ne savent pas," and anyone who will take the trouble may at least keep out of the latter class. If he does, he will find to his reward that

admiration grows as knowledge grows and that the keener his perception and the more sympathetic his judgment, the fuller and more enduring his pleasure will become.

W. H. HADOW

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CHAPTER I

THE NEED FOR A GUIDE

THE orchestra gather. With tentative piping, bowing, and blaring, they prepare to play. The conductor appears, the audience applauds, the baton is raised, silence falls, the pipes are in the mouths, the bows are on the strings, all is ready — Crash! The symphony has begun.

At once, a thrill. It lasts thirty seconds; then interest flags. A tender tune comes from the strings playing softly, and attention is regained. Then the mind wanders again.

Enjoyment? Yes, but intermittent. Understanding? Yes, but mixed with perplexity. Something wonderful is happening, but only half the audience understands what. There are passages of poetry, but they seem to be mingled with passages of philosophical disquisition on some subject above our heads. What is it all about? Why on earth cannot the composer make his meaning clear?

The symphony goes on for forty minutes, fifty minutes, one hour — and bewilderment lasts the same time. There is a sensuous pleasure in the blare of the brass, the sweetness of the muted strings, the piquancy of a momentary dialogue between two woodwind instruments whose names one does not know. Our time is not altogether wasted, but on the whole, was it worthwhile coming to the concert? A book, a lecture, a play — one can understand; these are made up of plain words. A music-hall performance needs no understanding

at all. But these symphonies, sonatas, piano concertos, and string quartets seem vague and wandering. There may be a principle of order in this sort of composition, but if so, where is it? There *must* be such a principle, for a part of the audience seems to grasp the purpose of the piece and is able to applaud with obvious sincerity. Is there some knowledge they have and we have not? If so, what is it?

It is to supply that very knowledge that this book exists — and to supply nothing beyond that knowledge. There is an art of composing, an art of performing, and an art of listening, and the third is the one least taught, least studied, and least understood. There are few books on the art of listening, and what books there are, are sometimes too long and generally too difficult for the use of the ordinary concert-goer. Moreover, their text is made to depend on music-type illustrations, and this places their argument beyond the grasp of many a reader. The object of the present book is to supply the means of an initiation into the art of listening and to do it in the briefest and simplest way possible. Nothing not strictly pertinent to the listener's problem will be admitted into its pages, and such music-type illustrations as are given are an inessential part of the book.

The book, then, is one for the private reading of the ordinary listener. It is intended also as a textbook for classes in what is sometimes called "The Appreciation of Music" — and such classes are becoming increasingly common on both sides of the Atlantic. And the young piano pupil or the violin pupil studying for the profession may here find a simple opening-up of a subject which may, in his case, be pursued in deeper treatises.

But it is the need of the ordinary listener — the *quite ordinary, humble-minded, so-called "unmusical" person* — that

has prompted the writing of the book, and it is his approval which will decide its success. This book is, frankly, for the man, woman, or (elder) child to whom music is to be one of life's hobbies; put it right down on that level, and the author is satisfied.

CHAPTER II

SOME SIMPLE NECESSARY TERMS EXPLAINED

BEFORE music can be discussed in any detail, certain ground must be cleared. If this book is to serve its full purpose, the assumption must throughout be made that some of its readers "do not know a thing about" music. The very names of the notes may be strange to them, the conception of "key" may be novel, and the rhythmic combinations implied in "time-signatures" may have no meaning. It is impossible to explain musical form without the use of the names of notes, the names of keys, and the names of "times." A chapter in which this and similar apparatus may be put at the reader's disposal must therefore follow. It may be dry, but it is necessary — and it is as short as possible.

NOTES

The sounds of nature range from "low" to "high" (to use purely conventional terms), proceeding by a mere smooth incline (to follow out the idea of those conventional terms). When a dog howls, a cat mews, or a cow moos, it is merely using a section of that incline, beginning at the lowest point of which its vocal chords are capable and proceeding to the highest, or vice versa. Birds do not glide like cats; they hop. Their song, too, as it happens, proceeds not by a smooth

movement but from point to point in the "incline" of sounds. In other words, birds use notes — and so do humans, birds and humans being the only two truly musical families of the world's creatures.

SCALES AND KEYS

A bird inherits a little combination of notes from its ancestors and contents itself with repeating this over and over again as long as it lives. Man invents new combinations in infinite variety. Consequently, man needs a working system. He fixes on a certain series of notes with a definite relation to each other and makes his tunes out of these. Such a series is called a scale. A scale is simply the regiment of the notes used in a human tune, drawn up on parade, and made to number off.

It is found, as an acoustical fact, that any given note recurs at higher and lower pitches, so that the whole long staircase of notes is divided into a number of short flights of stairs, and these become the scale-units of music.

In normal European and American music, each of these scale-units is divided into twelve equal parts[1], of which seven[2] are chosen for chief service, the others being called on as auxiliaries. These seven may be chosen out of the twelve according to two systems. One system produces what we call the major scale, the other the minor scale.

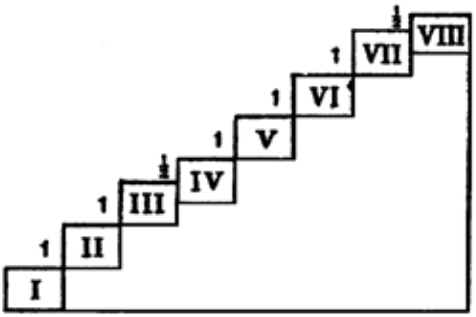
The twelve notes are divided from each other by intervals called "semitones;" two semitones make a tone. On the piano keyboard, any two adjacent notes are a semitone apart; any two notes next-but-one to each other are a tone apart (whether

1 Many of the statements in this book are practical rather than scientifically exact.

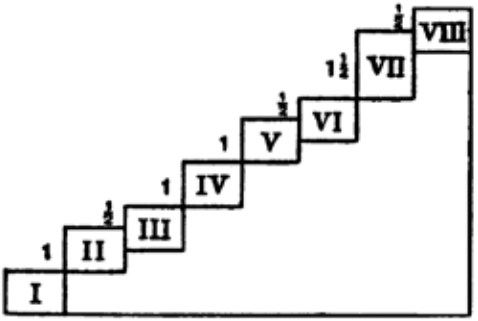
2 Eight, instead of seven, if the main note is included both at the top and bottom, in which case we have what is called an octave.

white or black has nothing to do with it; there is no social distinction of color — all enjoy equal rights of citizenship).

The major scale can be begun from any of the twelve notes by proceeding upwards as follows: (I = tone; ½ = semitone)



The minor scale can be begun by proceeding upwards as follows:



[The arrangement of the notes VI and VII is sometimes varied slightly.]

The essential difference between the major and minor scales is that in the lower part of the major scale the semitone occurs between III and IV, and in the lower part of the minor scale between II and III. Play a few scales, major and minor, beginning on any note of the pianoforte and proceeding

according to the diagrams just given, and the great difference of effect will be realized.

For convenience, letter names are given to the white notes of the piano as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The note next above any of these white notes is called its sharp; the one next below, its flat. A glance at the piano will show that on the keyboard sharps and flats generally fall on black notes, but in two or three cases, they fall on white notes. These white notes thus have not only their own proper names but also an additional name acquired from another note. (This is simple enough: you may speak of a man as Tom Brown, or you may speak of him as Bill Jones's neighbor.)

The object of our explanation so far has been to enable a reader who did not know a fact about our tonal system when he began this chapter to understand in the future what is meant by such terms as "C major" or "D minor," "G sharp minor," or "B flat major." A piece "in" the key of C major is one of which the main prevailing choice of notes is made by the use of those found in the major scale beginning on the note C, and so forth. (Where the note C is found on the piano does not matter to the reader, but if he does not know the names of the notes on the piano and wants to do so, he can get a friend to show him in two minutes.)

MODULATION

Hardly any piece, however tiny, stays in one key. Even an Anglican chant to which the psalms are sung in church, with its mere ten notes, generally moves to another key about halfway through — that is to say, some flat or sharp is introduced in place of one of the original notes, and thus the key is altered. Such an alteration we call a modulation.

A modulation, or a series of modulations, is, however extended, merely an incident. The piece returns before its end to the key in which it started — which is felt to be *the* key of the piece.

A piece may modulate from any key to any key, but there are certain close relationships of key within which it is easier and apparently more natural to modulate. Thus we speak of related keys, and in a quite short piece, it is likely that all modulations which occur will be to keys closely related to the main key of the piece.

RHYTHM AND TIME

The whole universe moves in rhythm: suns revolve and seasons change, tides rise and fall, flowers appear and die, hearts beat and horses trot according to a periodic system which we call by that name. Poems are written and declaimed (or ought to be declaimed) in rhythms. Regular beats or pulses and recurring accents can be felt in a line of poetry, and these occur also in music. These accents divide the line of poetry or phrase of music into rhythmic units. In both poetry and music, there are felt to be either two beats or three beats, as the case may be, to each unit. If a phrase of music seems to have four beats to a unit, these will be found to be really two units of two beats each, making together the larger group of four. Similarly, six beats fall into two sets of three, and twelve beats into four sets of three.

The reader is now in a position to understand the "time-signatures" he sometimes sees quoted in concert programmes. The indication of 3/4 means that there are three beats to a unit, or bar (neglect always the lower figure, which has no real significance except for the performer), 2/2 has two beats, 6/8 has two sets of three beats, and so forth.

Within each unit (or bar[3]), there may be, and generally are, smaller combinations — groups of half-beat notes or quarter-beat notes, two-beat notes, three-beat notes, one-and-a-half-beat notes, etc. There is thus possible an infinite variety of long and short notes and combinations of such, but underlying these shifting note-rhythms, the regular rhythmic pulsation of the beats and bars can be felt.

Another part of the rhythmic system of music is the use of "phrases" or "sentences." In addition to its shifting rhythms of short notes and long ones, and its regular rhythms of beats and bars, any tune you may hear will be found to fall into lengths of (say) two or four bars apiece. Thus, God Save the King[4] has the time-signature of 3/4, i.e., its bar-rhythm consists of groups of three beats each. But its bars also fall into groups as follows:

3 Phrases Making One Sentence

God save our gracious King,
(2 bars)
Long live our noble King,
(2 bars)
God save the King:
(2 bars)

4 Phases Making Another Sentence

Send him victorious,
(2 bars)
Happy and glorious,
(2 bars)
Long to reign over us,
(2 bars)
God save the King. (2 bars)

3 English *Bar* = American *Measure*.
4 American readers know this tune as *My Country, 'tis of Thee*,

The reader is now in a position to understand the words "beat," "bar," "phrase," and "sentence" when he meets them in annotated concert programmes.

MELODY, HARMONY, AND COUNTERPOINT

The poet and the plain man often use the words "melody" and "harmony" interchangeably. By either, they mean merely pleasant sound.

Technically used, as in a concert programme, the words have distinct meanings. Melody is a simple string of notes such as you could whistle or sing by yourself, and harmony is a combination of notes such as you could play with your hands on the piano. A handful of notes, whether sung by a choir or played by instruments, is called a "chord." When you sing *God Save the King*, you are uttering melody; if you sit down and accompany yourself by "chords" on the piano, you are also producing harmony. Despite the poets, neither melody nor harmony necessarily connotes anything pleasant; in fact, poor melody and bad harmony are very common. Moreover, new styles of melody and harmony are constantly being introduced to which many people object very much until they get used to them.

Counterpoint is simply a combination of melodies. A composer might take *God Save the King,* leaving the existing tune for you to sing as before, but fit with it two or three other tuneful parts for two or three other voices to sing at the same time. You would then be singing your old melody and each of the other voices would have its melody, the whole would be a piece of counterpoint, and, further, since the voices sounding together would produce a series of "chords," there would be harmony.

It may be well to call attention to the adjective from counterpoint, frequently used in later pages. It is contrapuntal. *God Save the King* as sung by one person is melodic; as usually sung by a choir, or accompanied at the piano, it is *also* harmonic; as just arranged in imagination in the last paragraph, it is, *further*, contrapuntal.

FORM

The relation of portions of a musical composition to each other and to the whole — fully explained in later chapters.

OPUS

This word will be found occasionally in the following pages, and frequently in concert programmes (often reduced to "Op."). Modern composers of the serious sort generally number their works as they produce them: Op. 1, Op. 2, etc. Frequently several pieces are brought into one opus, and they are then numbered Op. 1, No. 1; Op. 1, No. 2, etc. It is always worthwhile to notice an opus number, as it gives an idea as to whether a work represents its composer's early tentative stages or his maturity. In hearing an Op. 5, for instance, you must generally be a little indulgent. On the other hand, an Op. 50 or Op. 100 has no claim on your charity and must be content to bear your fiercest criticism.

The use of opus numbers is associated by the general public with the performance of what it calls "classical" music, since the more commonplace compositions are rarely numbered by their makers. On the day this chapter was written, the author overheard in the train a conversation illustrating this fact. Two men were arranging together the holding of a

suburban concert, and the guiding principle of the construction of the programme was laid down in these words: "No classical music, all good popular stuff — *none of them ops!*"

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE LISTENER REALLY NEEDS TO KNOW

WHEN one comes to think of it, what a lot of musical knowledge there is that does not help the listener — or at least helps him only very indirectly.

One can imagine a keen but ignorant music-lover looking around for something to study. He finds a book called *The Elements of Music*, he masters it, and finds he has got a grasp not of the elements of music at all, but merely of the details of musical notation.

Something more is needed: he inquires and finds that after the *Elements of Music*, people often go on to the study of *Harmony*. He buys a text-book, engages a teacher, and finds himself able to string chords together and to write a hymn-tune. But his listening is little more intelligent than before: put the piano score of a symphony before him, and he can spell out the chords and analyze the harmonies, but when the symphony is played he profits little by his new ability. He hears of *Counterpoint*, and takes up that subject. After months of work, he can write a tiny exercise, using the technique of the sixteenth-century choral composer. But his listening ability is little increased. The fact is that all this time our poor friend is laboriously acquiring the mere beginnings of the stock-in-trade of a composer (which he will never be),

and neglecting to acquire the necessary stock-in-trade of an intelligent listener (which he wishes to be).

What subjects, then, should a listener study? Mainly three — *The Form of Music*, its *History*, and a trifle of *Instrumentation*. And these he should have set out not in the usual text-book manner, for the ordinary text-book of Form goes into details of which he need know nothing, the text-book of History supplies far more dates and names than he will ever require, and the text-book of Instrumentation assumes that its reader wishes to *write* for the orchestra.

To know something of how a piece of music is built will help the listener. To know something of the period in which it was composed, the stage of musical development it represents, and the personality of the composer will also help him, and, in the case of an orchestral piece, knowledge of the instruments concerned will give a new interest to his listening.

Knowledge of Form will help him, because it will enable him to detect the musical subject-matter of the piece. As soon as he grasps the fact that a piece of music has definite musical 'Subjects', and is able to identify these and note their treatment, his perception is transformed. What was formerly a puzzling web of sound becomes a clear arrangement of definite 'tunes' — and any one can appreciate a tune. He can now recognize the relation of parts to one another and to the whole. The *drawing* of the piece is clear to him.

Ability to recognize tone qualities of the various instruments, singly and in combination, makes it possible to observe tonal contrasts he formerly missed. He notes a little theme taken up in turn by the clear-voiced flute, the rich-toned clarinet, and the thin-sounding, piquant oboe. He marvels at the variety of effects of the great body of fiddles, little and big, playing softly or loudly, bowing or plucking their

strings, muted or unmuted, he admires the warm tone of the horns playing slow chords. The *colouring* of the piece is now clear to him.

The fact that the composer is not to him a mere name is of importance. He knows something of the joys and sorrows that made up the composer's life, and the piece is no longer a *tour de force* of technical achievement, but a human document, a medium of human expression. The fact that it was written in such-and-such a country enables him to regard it as the expression of a nation, and a period. The knowledge of the position the composer and his national 'school' occupy in the story of musical development enables him to avoid looking for what could not possibly be there — a type of feeling that belongs to a century later, or a manner of composition that belongs to another 'school'.

These three things then are useful: a knowledge of Form, a knowledge of History and Biography, and a simple knowledge of Instrumentation. As for other knowledge, why, of course *all* knowledge is of some value, but for the ordinary listener, engaged day after day in weaving or building, in buying or selling, in preaching or teaching, banking or law, a knowledge of these three is all that life will generally allow. And the beauty of it is that, of these three, one, at all events, History and Biography, can become a mere subject of general reading, to be gradually and pleasantly pursued as the days go by, and to be kept up-to-date without effort as new composers appear and articles and books upon them and their works come into one's ken.