

From the Quaker Arts Archive

*Music and the Inner Light—
a Personal Point of View*

by **Raymond Dodd**

This article was originally published in the 1965 issue of Reynard, the magazine of the Quaker Fellowship of the Arts in Britain. —Ed.

IT IS ONLY TOO EASY to project one's conflicts and uncertainties on to others, accusing them of a failing or confusion which in fact is one's own particular problem. If I say that there is a considerable number of Friends and other religiously concerned people who still retain certain feelings of distrust, emotional reserve and moral caution in their approach to music, perhaps I am demonstrating precisely this kind of projection in myself. Or perhaps, and this I shall assume to be the case, there are still such people and I am simply one of them. Incidentally, there would probably be more such people if the Q.F.A. did not exist!

One accompanying feature of such reserve, born of scruples, is often that "a priori" notions or prejudices of one sort or another make an honest response to music in all its variety much more difficult to come by. Consider, for example, the following:

Simplicity, when it removes encumbering details, makes for beauty in music, in art and in living. (from *Christian Faith and Practice*, No. 434).

This reads not like art criticism but rather as an irrelevant and confusing application of a moral idea to art. Possessed of such a notion about art one might find it very hard to relate it meaningfully to certain good pieces of music. Some kinds of musical composition proceed, in fact, by a process of accumulation of detail and elaboration: for example, many sets of variations. Or consider the following:

So we return to our Conviction that, unless matters of culture are more clearly shown to be vitally related to religion, an increasing element in life will stand outside of the religious sphere, and life becomes either more and more disintegrated or wholly secularised! (from *Christian Faith and Practice*, No. 463).

But some music cannot be "shown" to be vitally related to religion; other music perhaps may be by, for example, its relation to a particular text. The result is that those pieces that can be "shown to be vitally related" are likely by implication to be thought better pieces than those which cannot—a point of view which leads to complete critical confusion. Let us remember however that such attempts to justify

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #16, Winter 1999-2000

music are entirely understandable, and were probably absolutely necessary, as part of the movement in the Society and in other groups away from the 18th and 19th century attitude of disapproval of music as expressed, for example, in the 1846 Yearly Meeting Epistle which speaks of music as "unfavourable to the health of the soul" and as leading to "unprofitable and even pernicious associations, and, in some instances, to a general indulgence in the vain amusements of the world". (Quoted in the *Oxford Companion to Music*).

WHAT APPROACH THEN CAN WE MAKE to the question of the relation of music to religion or to the inner light? Perhaps a more fruitful alternative approach would start by assuming that musical activity of all kinds is *potentially* a worthwhile contribution to people's lives. If we specify in advance that music should be or do, or make general condemnations of kinds of music, we deny critical and creative responsibility.

At this point a parallel suggests itself between the activities of the inner light in the moral sphere and of the creative and critical activities in the artistic. In each case they show themselves in particular, concrete situations rather than in the power to make rules and conceptual generalisations. Just as we normally should not judge others, because we cannot enter fully into their particular situation, so a school teacher, for example, is in no position to condemn the current "pop" music if he has no experience of it or has not genuinely tried to understand what it's all about! When he's done that he might not, in fact, be quite so wholesale in his condemnation.

In his article "Ruskin on Music", Bernard Shaw quotes this advice of Ruskin's to the young English lady; "From the beginning consider all your accomplishments as means of assistance to others". Shaw countered like this: "I earnestly advise the young ladies of England, whether enrolled in the Guild of St. George or not, to cultivate music solely for the love and need of it, and to do it in all humility of spirit, never forgetting that they are most likely inflicting all-but-unbearable annoyance on every musician within earshot, instead of 'rendering assistance to others'."

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page added August 2001