

D: Opinions for Dover

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May 20, 1996

To : Ron Herder,
Music Editor, Dover Publications

THE AMERICAN COMPOSER SPEAKS edited by Gilbert Chase

This collection of essays by selected composers ranges from early American history to 1965. Each essay is preceded by a brief summary of the background of each composer. These introductions are informative, and reflect the admirable qualities of the editor, one of our foremost scholars of American music. There is no central orientation to the essays, each projecting a particular theme of the composer's own choosing. Some of the essays, which originally appeared in other contexts rather than separated and sometimes quite brief statements, do not offer any arresting insights. Others are more attractive. Some of them are well-known through their previous appearances, such as Milton Babbitt's arresting and frequently cited, "Who Cares If You Listen". Some of the articles are quite dated, e.g., Gunther Schuller's "The Future of Form in Jazz", important at the time of writing. Other appealing articles are by MacDowell (on suggestion in music), Charles Ives (a well-written and deeply felt exposition of human values in the aesthetics of art), Edgard Varese (on the fundamental need for innovation in music, and the necessities to achieve such), Milton Babbitt (mentioned above), Elliott Carter (new directions) Roger Sessions (problems facing the composer).

The introduction of 27 pages by Chase is strong, but now somewhat out of date in assessing the conditions of mid-century American music now that we virtually have reached the end of the century.

I have mixed feelings about the book. As an historical source it ^{has} some worthwhile qualities. But not all the articles are of strong stuff. I cannot assess the attractiveness of a reprint to the general reader. Specialists who do not have the work would be happy to purchase a copy.

Debussy Letters

Selected and edited by Francois Lesure and Roger Nichols.

This is an impressive collection of the letters of this very important composer whose works to a large extent usher in the twentieth century and the new styles of musical style that emerge. His importance is too well known and accepted to require further comment. The editing by Lesure, and to some extent by Nichols, represent a first-rate scholarly achievement. The footnotes that accompany almost all the letters do more than identify the numerous names, works, etc. They add a formidable dimension to the letters in relating them to the life and times of the contemporaneous French cultural scene. As such, these letters constitute a valuable source for anyone pursuing an in-depth interest in French culture, as well as Debussy, of course.

To those interested in Debussy's aesthetic views, the essays in his *Monsieur Croche* collection. For further knowledge, other studies offer rich insights, for example, Léon Vallas's *The Theories of Claude Debussy*, (reprint published by Dover, 1967). The letters in this collection do not offer a sufficient source of value.

I find the letters helpful for specific references which would motivate me to seek out, as for example, a particular work or a performance, etc. For continual reading, however, it is not sufficiently rewarding. These letters for the most part do not reveal Debussy's views in depth. They are more crowded with diurnal matters which are not important at all. Within some letters one will find a phrase, sentence, or thought that reveals Debussy's wit or a particular view of importance. A number of letters are for the most part plainly boring. There are even important letters. e.g., to Stravinsky, which are mainly filled with references that are not of substance.

S. Novack 6/96

The Compleat Violinist Yehudi Menuhin

To those whose memories go back several decades, the name of the author is a vivid reminder of a very distinguished performer. Even to this day the name of this artist commands respect. On the whole, a noteworthy exposition of the techniques and art of violin performance would be most attractive.

Unfortunately, this work has no such quality, for the details of techniques are somewhat incidental in the total work and given a rather perfunctory consideration. The subtitle is "Thoughts, exercises, reflections of an itinerant violinist". The totality of physical equipoise as a necessary ingredient is explored in detail, with accompanying photographs illustrating the various non-musical exercises Menuhin practiced daily to maintain the ideal physical-psychological state for performance.

Some of Menuhin's insights into musical styles of a few composers are mentioned, but they are all too brief to command one's attention as a serious study.

This book is a minor work of limited interest. Menuhin is a unique personality, and this personal "reflection" captures the insights of this distinguished musician. His years in the practice of yoga (not specifically mentioned) have shaped his views and his artistry. One might hastily conclude that to ~~become a good performer~~ one should learn to stand on one's head, as shown, in order to become a good performer!

S. Novak.