

A Composer's Confessions

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I AM going to tell you the story of how I came to write music, and how my musical ideas and my ideas about music developed.

I remember that when I was eight years old, in Santa Monica, California, I saw a sign – PIANO LESSONS – two doors away from where my mother and father and I lived. It was love at first sight; I remember that running and eating became faster and day-dreaming became longer and slower. It made no difference to me what I was taught: the exercises, a piece by Victor Herbert called *Orientale*, and *Für Elise*. I was introduced to ‘neighborhood music’, that branch of the art that all the world loves to play, and I did too.

Neither my mother nor my father took this turn of events with the passion and the intensity that I did. Having before them the examples of two of my aunts and one uncle, they were aware of the economic difficulties which musicians can run into. And deeper than this, my father, who is an inventor and electrical engineer, would have preferred to see me follow in his footsteps, I am sure.

However, they were indulgent and practical:

they bought a piano ; nothing could have pleased me more. We moved to another neighborhood in Los Angeles and I remember that when the movers were bringing the piano into the house, before they had its legs on, I was walking along with them playing already by heart Victor Herbert's evocation of the Orient.

My new teacher was my Aunt Phoebe, and she taught me how to sight-read. This was her particular interest, and I am grateful to her for it. She also extended my awareness of the music of the nineteenth century, avoiding, however, that century's masters. Together we played Moskowski's *Spanish Dances* and alone I played Paderewski's *Minuet in G*. Music appeared to be divided according to the technical difficulties it presented to performers : it was first year, second year, third year, and fourth year.

Later on I studied with a teacher who was also a composer, Fannie Charles Dillon. She taught me to play Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, but my Aunt Phoebe did not agree with Miss Dillon's interpretation.

I remember having a kind of sinking feeling inside myself every time Aunt Phoebe or Miss Dillon played the piano for me or at a recital. The music they knew how to play was fantastically difficult, and my sinking feeling was

the realization that I would never be able to perform as well as they.

I stopped taking lessons and fell back on the 'open sesame' that Aunt Phoenix had given me: the sight-reading. And that, together with a library card, changed music's aspect for me. It no longer was first to fourth year: it was rather A to Z. Of course, my aunt had warned me about Bach and Beethoven (Mozart wasn't mentioned at all) and her remarks about the *Hungarian Dance* also contained references to a side of Brahms that she felt I would not like. So I confined my curiosity to the minor figures of the last century. I became so devoted to Grieg that for awhile I played nothing else. I even imagined devoting my life to the performance of his works alone, for they did not seem to me to be too difficult, and I loved them.

This was my first ambition. Nothing in school had suggested to me a life-work. Going to church had, indeed, made me feel that I should become a minister. But this feeling was not very strong because two years at college removed it. I was caught in the too great freedom American education offered, and I did not really know what on earth to do with myself. This I did know: that continuing in college would be useless. Therefore, I persuaded my family to send me to Europe for

a year, since, as I told them, I had determined to become a writer and 'experience' was certainly more valuable for a writer than education.

After a month in France, the whole place seemed to me to be nothing but Gothic architecture. So I spent another month in the Bibliothèque Mazarin studying stone balustrades of the fifteenth century. A professor from college, passing through Paris, found out what I was doing, literally gave me a kick in the pants, and managed things in such a way that I found myself working in the atelier of a modern architect. He set me to drawing Greek columns when I wasn't running errands. One day he happened to say that to be an architect, one must devote oneself entirely to architecture, that is, give all one's time to it. The next day I told him that I could not do that because there were many things I loved that were not architecture, and there were many things I did not even know, and I was still curious.

One evening in the home of La Baronne d'Estournelles de Constant, I was asked to play the piano. La Baronne found my playing very bad but somehow musical. And she offered to arrange lessons for me with Lazare-Lévy who taught at the Conservatoire. He began to teach me to play a Beethoven Sonata, and he

insisted that I should attend concerts of music, particularly that of Bach. I had never gone to concerts before, and now I went every evening. One evening I heard some modern music: Scriabin, Stravinsky. I also had seen modern painting in Paris.

My reaction to modern painting and modern music was immediate and enthusiastic, but not humble: I decided that if other people could make such things, I could too.

In the course of the next three years I left Paris, travelled a good deal, returned to California to find the Depression well under way, but all that time I spent painting pictures and writing music, without the benefit of a teacher in either art.

I remember very little about my first efforts at composition, except that they had no sensuous appeal and no expressive power. They were derived from calculations of a mathematical nature, and these calculations were so difficult to make that the musical results were extremely short. My next pieces used texts and no mathematics; my inspiration was carried along on the wings of Aeschylus and Gertrude Stein. I improvised at the piano and attempted to write down what I played before I forgot it. The glaring weakness of this method led me

to study Ebenezer Prout's books on harmony and counterpoint and musical form. However, wishing to be a modern composer, I so distorted my solutions of the exercises he suggested that they took on a tortured contemporary aspect.

I have mentioned the Depression and how it was going on when I returned from Europe. Although nothing in my experience had prepared me to make a living, I now had to do it. I did it by giving lectures on contemporary music and painting. I advertised these lectures as being by someone who was young and enthusiastic about all modern art and that was all. I confessed that I knew nothing about my subject, but promised that each week I would find out as much as I could. In this way I became familiar with quite a lot of modern music. When the music was easy to play I illustrated the lectures at the piano; otherwise I used recordings. When the time approached to give a lecture on the music of Arnold Schoenberg, I asked Richard Buhlig, who was living in Los Angeles, to play the *Opus 11* because I had read that he played its first performance years before in Berlin. He said he would "most certainly not". However, I had met him and he is a great musician, and he became my friend and teacher. He said that he