

ON THE ART OF BOOK REVIEWING

By GUSTAVE REESE

Anyone familiar with such periodicals as the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and *Die Musikforschung* will be aware that a considerable portion of these journals is devoted to the publication of reviews of scholarly editions of music and of literature about it. Moreover, all steady readers of *Notes* will know that it normally sets aside an even greater part of its space for such reviews. These observations would seem to indicate that reviewing must stand close to the center of scholarly activity in music, though it has to be admitted that not every musical periodical of distinction regards reviewing in just this way.¹ Partly because recent writings bearing in one way or another on the scope and purpose of musicology, such as the report of Professors Harrison, Palisca, and Hood,² have in the main omitted consideration of this integral aspect of the musicological discipline, it seems appropriate to grant the subject an airing in these pages.

What takes place when a publication is reviewed? A serious book on music is a synthesis of facts already known and opinions previously stated with newly discovered data or a freshly conceived point of view or interpretation. In one sense, the author is continuing an old discussion while simultaneously initiating a new one. When the author's work is subjected to review, the scrutinizer, assuming that he takes his task seriously, continues this discussion still further. It is clearly desirable that the reviewer, like the author, be able, as a result of long and careful study, to speak with authority regarding the subject matter of the book—a criterion that is, unfortunately, not always met. In examining the book, the reviewer should point out what is significant in it, what its novel aspects are, what its principal contribution is. Because he will necessarily approach the subject from a direction somewhat different from the author's, the reviewer is able to supplement the latter's findings with material drawn from his own research, oppose some or even all of the author's positions if he interprets the data differently, supplement the

The author, who is Professor of Music at New York University, was honored recently with a *Festschrift* prepared by his colleagues, students, and friends: *Aspects of Medieval and Renaissance Music. A Birthday Offering to Gustave Reese*, edited by Jan LaRue (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966).

¹For example, see Armen Carapetyan, "Editorial: Book Reviews and Musica Disciplina," *Musica Disciplina*, VI (1952), pp. 3ff.

²Frank L. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963).

book in areas overlooked by the author, and, finally, detect and rectify the errors that inevitably occur. Such a review—the most valuable kind—is more than a mere report on or summary of the author's work; it is a scholarly contribution in its own right.

Naturally, not all books call for this type of review. Inconsequential works and “rehashes” can be passed over with a few remarks regarding their reliability or lack of it. Really inferior works and studies based on “crackpot” speculation require that a warning be issued, but with this the reviewer may be justified in regarding his task as accomplished. Books that promise to become “standard” treatments of a subject and large-scale re-evaluations of important or controversial areas demand the type of detailed review described above.

Examples of such reviews are less numerous than might be wished, one reason being that not every scholar is willing to disseminate important findings in the usually limited format of a review. Indeed, what is actually a review will sometimes appear in the guise of a normal article. Let us consider a few examples of the type of review under discussion, whatever the format in which they have been printed. Heinrich Besseler's *Bourdon und Fauxbourdon*³ is a comprehensive study touching on nearly every aspect of the music of the early and mid-fifteenth century. The result of nearly three decades of steady activity in this field, it is filled with new insights, fresh interpretations, and novel theories. Besseler clearly understood that one of the functions of a scholarly book is to continue, not to conclude discussion; this is proved by a list of eighty-five “theses” appended to his study for the express purpose of stimulating scholarly debate.⁴ In “Fauxbourdon Revisited,”⁵ the late Manfred Bukofzer provided a study that highlights Besseler's main points, tempers some of the author's theories in the light of his own findings, and, in general, fully complements Besseler's study in expansive fashion. Such reviews are illustrative of scholarly discussion at its best; the review becomes a vehicle for co-operation and the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

Another example may be found in Friedrich Ludwig's old review of Johannes Wolf's *Geschichte der Mensuralnotation*.⁶ Wolf's path-breaking study, the result of his almost single-handed research in an area previously unexplored in depth, was subjected to a minute analysis by Ludwig, the only other scholar of the time who was equipped to evaluate such a work properly. The result was forty-five pages of revisions and

³Heinrich Besseler, *Bourdon und Fauxbourdon* (Leipzig, 1950).

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 229ff.

⁵Manfred F. Bukofzer, “Fauxbourdon Revisited,” *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (1952), pp. 22ff.

⁶Johannes Wolf, *Geschichte der Mensuralnotation von 1250–1460* (3 vols.; Leipzig, 1904); Ludwig's review appeared in *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, VI (1904–1905), pp. 597ff.

supplementary data. Such reviews become indispensable tools that should be used in conjunction with the work reviewed whenever the latter is consulted.

Reviews of works that derive largely from a study of sources—and this, obviously, would include reviews of scholarly editions of music—must be based on a close knowledge of such sources as are relevant. Reviews of this kind sometimes tend to assume the form of lists of errata and corrigenda; an example is Kurt von Fischer's valuable review of the posthumous publication of Johannes Wolf's edition of the Squarcialupi codex.⁷ A different format was employed by Georg von Dadelsen in his appraisal of Friedrich Smend's edition of Bach's B minor Mass.⁸ Smend had prepared an elaborate text-critical study, upon which he erected a complex chronological structure and based his edition.⁹ Dadelsen, utilizing the massive critical apparatus developed by recent Bach scholarship, wrote an essay that projected a considerably different view of the textual history of Bach's masterpiece and of the interrelationships of the sources. Without a thorough knowledge of these sources, Dadelsen (who had contributed substantially to the critical apparatus just referred to) could never have produced the review-essay under discussion.

When a reviewer finds that he must take issue with a substantial portion of an author's work, the problem of tact and courtesy will inevitably arise, unless the author is a charlatan unworthy of such consideration. The reviewer who must at all costs show how witty he is, who cannot be temperate and objective, should seek some other occupation. The way in which Yvonne Rokseth differed over certain points with Friedrich Ludwig—not, to be sure, in a review—may be regarded as the perfect example for those who wish to dissent in a deferential way.¹⁰ To be sure, not every author deserves quite such respectful treatment.

We have tried to touch upon at least some of the most important aspects of reviewing. Some others, however, remain to be mentioned. Naturally, if a review is intended primarily for a special reading public, an effort should be made to provide that public with the kind of information that is suitable for its particular needs—to let the readers of a librarians' journal, for example, know whether a new book or edition is likely to prove a desirable acquisition. Occasionally publications include useful features not hinted at in the book's title; they can be pointed out in a review, thus leading a scholar to a helpful tool that he might other-

⁷Johannes Wolf (ed.), *Der Squarcialupi-Codex Pal. 87 der Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana zu Florenz* (Lippstadt, 1955); the review was published in *Die Musikforschung*, IX (1956), pp. 77ff.

⁸J. S. Bach, *Missa Symbolum Nicenum Sanctus, Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei et Dona nobis pacem*, ed. Friedrich Smend (NBA, II, 1; Kassel & Basel, 1954); Dadelsen's review appeared in *Die Musikforschung*, XII (1959), pp. 315ff.

⁹Friedrich Smend, *Kritischer Bericht* (to NBA, II, 1; Kassel & Basel, 1956).

¹⁰Yvonne Rokseth, *Polyphonies du XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1939), vol. IV, p. 186.

wise overlook. Book reviews can also be valuable timesavers. Writing on music is a rather recent occupation when compared with similar activity in the fields of art history and literary history, and it appears that musicographers are attempting to make up for lost time with the quantity of material they are currently producing.¹¹ The contribution of the reviewer in assisting the reader to wade through this flood of publications is becoming increasingly important. At the same time, of course, his responsibility becomes all the greater. To be sure, the danger of which Carapetyan has warned¹² exists here: the scholar may be tempted to feel relieved of his responsibility to examine each new publication in his field personally. But let us give him the benefit of the doubt. Perceptive students always have a way of becoming acquainted with publications relating to their work; the book review can benefit and facilitate their activity rather than hinder it. It is to be feared that scholars who lack the instinct for finding their way around our present bibliographical tangle will not produce works of significance anyway.

When all is said and done, the fact remains that there is no one formula for a book review; the shape must be dictated by the material of the subject itself, a characteristic shared by all types of scholarly writing. We have been concentrating on book reviewing in music, but there would seem to be no real difference between reviews appearing in *JAMS* or *Notes* or the *Musical Quarterly*, for example, and those in a learned periodical in any other discipline. Different terminology and technical knowledge are required, but the ideals and results are essentially the same.

¹¹For a six-page survey of recent publications in the field of the music of the Renaissance alone, see Gustave Reese, "Recent Studies in Renaissance Music," *Renaissance News*, XVIII (1965), pp. 352ff.

¹²Armen Carapetyan, *op. cit.*

