

**THE CLAIMS OF MUSIC (1934)**

by D. VAUGHAN THOMAS

(This article consists of the larger part of a broadcast talk given at Nairobi on July 18th, 1934, by Dr. Vaughan Thomas while on an examining tour for Trinity College, London. He was to die a few weeks later at Johannesburg, on 15th September.)

In whatever part of the world I may happen to be, (and here I am also reflecting the attitude of my colleagues on the examining staff of Trinity College) it is a pleasure to press the claims of music, and music making, as an essential element in the culture of the race. In these days of depression, and the forcing on our attention of the hard economic facts of our existence on the globe, the cultivation of art should tend to mitigate the severities of struggle. But, first things come first. Musician as I am in the main, I recognise that today an understanding of the causes of the world's troubles, and the study of the best way out of the impasse, and the duty of expressing our attitude on these matters, are more vital and urgent than the pursuit of artistic culture. In an order of society other than ours at present, art and science and all the spiritual agencies will be held in their rightful place of esteem. They are the flowerings of life, whether viewed in a social or in an individual light. But the most of our life is in the old Earth, our universal mother. We cannot exist without that first, fundamental nourishment. The tragic position of the world today is that humanity in the bulk cannot get at that nourishment, although it abounds. One of the advantages of living in a young colony, and even in the older dominions should be the opportunity it affords of bringing the human mind back to the beginnings of things. But strangely enough the realisation of man's dependence on the bounty of Earth is often more marked in the stricken coal-fields of England and Wales, than in those parts of the world where nature is most prolific. The machinery, whereby Earth's gifts can reach man is today inadequate. To realise this machinery and to help in improving or in inventing a substitute that will act is to be enlisted in the army of humanitarianism.

But now, having made clear that it is no fault of man's nature that values are topsy-turvy, but rather of a system which has blinded us to their relative position, we can the more confidently recommend the intrinsic value of musical culture. For, whether we wish or not, a new order is being slowly but surely laid down. Those of us who live in England know it, and from what I can gather from opinions expressed in all parts of the Empire the world is sensing it. And in that new order music will have an honoured place. It will not be a mere excuse for conversation at functions, receptions, and intervals at theatrical performances, and a killer of conversation at dinners, and a ruiner of the natural beauty of the human voice by the effort to make itself heard. It will perform nobler tasks. It will bring us the joy of realising the harmony of things, and much more besides. In the new world we shall, because of the easing of our minds from consideration of the more material (or better, economic) considerations attendant on getting a livelihood, we shall I feel, judge of artistic performance more fairly than we do today. The ever present fear of straitened circumstance creates in us a tense desire for success, for impressing others and winning their approval. We argue that such success means higher status and consequently the probability of higher income, and social prestige and so on. The type of mind which modern conditions of life engender, is not, to my thinking, likely to get the greatest pleasure from our artistic pursuit. How often, those of us who have to judge at musical festivals, have detected the prize-winning mentality of some competitors? Of course they don't win under adjudicators who are artists first and last. Nevertheless, it is not a happy experience for an adjudicator. It is an intrusion of the old spirit connected with our daily struggle for existence into the realm of art.

Some day it will not be so. Music will be considered more – not merely enjoyed as a sensuous pleasure, but felt to be one of the factors in the making of a self-possessed rational and highly sensitive personality. I may be wrong in my attempt at prophecy, but as it will be through the effort of clear thinking and of sensitively balanced minds that the order of the new world will be realised. So in the world of music, the future inheritors of the genius of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms – the noble architects of sound – rather than the inheritors of a more sensuous musical tradition, these will reign supreme. It is in order to impress my hearers with the thought that the highest enjoyment to be derived from music, or in fact from any art, is to have the capacity to value its merits, detachedly, rationally and withall sensitively that I have emphasised one essential pre-requisite – freedom from

anxiety of mind, and the desire to impress. There are countless examples of this frame of mind in the works of the masters of music. Of course, even they sometimes succumbed to the human failing I have touched upon – but their claims to Jovian altitude is based on this serene detachment from baser considerations. We have it in Bach's Mass in B Minor; Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata (slow movement) and the big C sharp minor String Quartet; the Mozart Quintet in G minor; Brahms's Second Piano Quartet, etc.

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I am sometimes asked, as though in surprise, whether I really claim for music what I declare it does do for humanity. The art seems today to serve such ordinary purposes (or should I not say extraordinary?) – an organ bellowing out Sea Shanties or *Land of Hope and Glory* in a crowded building prior to a big political utterance – as a means whereby the worldly noise of falling coins on a collection plate may be conveniently drowned. Of course the organ must stop when the collection is stopped! The capacity of some organists for synchronising the last full cadence of their improvisations with the exact fall of the last penny is wonderful. My discerning listeners will foresee that such feats have nothing to do with music and will not take place in the new world.

But even now, the study of music amply rewards the amateur and the professional. It is one of the big spiritual factors in life, and is a repository, even as the highest literature is, of some of the most wonderful expressions of human experience. Often where the written word cannot penetrate there the strains of a Bach or a Beethoven will lead us. Moreover, the enjoyment of music diminishes not with the passage of time. Our purely intellectual faculties may not be as sharp as in youth or adolescence, but our experience of the deeper things of life will find in the strains of music adequate expression and bring comfort at the setting of the sun. If proof is needed I commend you to Bach's Organ Chorale-Preludes; to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (slow movement); Brahms's Requiem; and Schubert's Songs, *Das Wirthshaus*, *Litanei*.

*(We are grateful to Mr. T. Haydn Thomas, M.B.E., the composer's nephew, for allowing us to reproduce the above, and also the two poems given in this issue. -Ed.)*