

THE KISS OF THE MUSE

by A.F. Leighton Thomas

“Can Psychology say anything useful on that central problem which baffles musicians, defies philosophers, disconcerts educationists and fascinates the plain man?” (Thus Frank Howes in *The Borderland of Music and Psychology*, a book published in the late 1920s but now, I believe, no longer in print.)

This question it was that impelled the late L. Dunton Green, some forty years ago, to conduct an inquiry into the nature of musical inspiration by placing the “central problem” fairly and squarely before several of the most eminent composers of his time. The response to his referendum made it possible for him to publish, in the pages of *The Chesterian*, more than twenty replies which, taken collectively, disclose a variety of attitudes towards one of the most impenetrable of all mysteries.

Some of those to whom Dunton Green addressed himself – Roussel, Koechlin and Bliss, for example – replied at some length; other such as Holst, Schreker and Cyril Scott, were content to confine themselves to a single paragraph; while a few declined to make any observations at all. One of these last was Elgar. Another such was Pfitzner, who, a few years later, was to refuse to co-operate with Julius Bahle when that eminent psychologist undertook his own inquiry into the processes of musical creation. (The composer of *Palestrina*, of course, would have been amongst the last to deny the validity of the inspired state: did there not come from his pen – 1940, I believe – an essay entitled *Die musikalische Inspiration*?)

It was a perusal of Dunton Green’s pages that first suggested to me the possibility of attempting to elicit the views of several composers who are currently practising their craft in Wales. The idea underlying this present symposium is not, therefore, an original one; but no apology, I feel, is needed on this account, such is the endlessly interesting nature of this particular line of inquiry. Except in so far as they were asked not to exceed a certain number of words, contributors to the symposium have been given *carte blanche*. And though, almost at once, some marked differences of opinion will be evident, it is, perhaps, more remarkable to observe, at a time when man’s pretension to omniscience was never more arrogant and when – as a natural corollary – spiritual values are greatly at a discount, that in each of the memoranda here published – a further number will appear in the next issue of this journal – there is an implied concurrence, at least, in the famous dictum that was Leibnitz’s: “Musica est exercitum occultum descentis se numerare animi”.

MERVYN BURTCH

“Hindemith likens inspiration to a flash of lightning on a dark night. After it has gone, the observant onlooker can, with much effort, recall in detail the scene around him.

“So, too, with the composer. There comes a time in the germination of a work, when the mind takes a great step forward. The composer may be the type of man who works

painstakingly and slowly towards the moment when all this piecemeal activity is over. Some of his gropings are seen to have more vitality and more potential than others, and at this moment, when the inherent potential value of the basic material is realised, a new work is born. At that instant, however dim the details, the whole conception of the work is apparent and all that remains – a very big “all” – is to complete the work in every detail.

“The lucky composer – a Schubert or a Mozart – is able to bypass, to a large extent, the initial groping, but there must surely be the one illuminating moment when the pieces fall into place. This Mozart had above all others, as he could keep a work in ‘cold storage’ in his mind until such time as he could write it down.

“What, then, is technique, the complement of inspiration? Is it the ability to fill in the gaps which a faulty memory has missed out from the original conception of the work? Or is it the way in which the original musical germ grows in the mind – maybe deep in the subconscious, until it erupts complete in every detail? Or is it, in fact, both of these things?”

DAVID HARRIES

“It is first necessary to define Inspiration, and I find myself content with the dictionary definition of ‘that which animates, that which infuses thought or feeling into something’.

“For me, inspiration is a very necessary part of the business of creating music, but nevertheless a small part – almost pre-compositional. In other words, I would regard inspiration as the starting-point of a work, which must be followed by the more technical process of composing or constructing.

“What it is that actually inspires a composer to create a musical work must be an essentially personal matter, varying with each individual. For me, it could be a musical experience, such as the impression made by the work of another – usually contemporary – composer, but it is more likely to derive from another art – generally poetry. It could be a more human matter – a snatch of conversation, an argument, an intimate relationship, a child’s glance. It frequently derives from working as a performer, particularly in chamber music. But in each case it is likely to be an experience remembered rather than one currently enjoyed.

“Since musical ideas come to me more easily than verbal images, it is natural that experiences should translate themselves into music as means of expression.”

IAN PARROTT

“In these days, ‘devise’, ‘concoct’ and even ‘calculate’ are the fashionable words which describe the conscious work of a man’s *brain*. However, there is something beyond the brain, which obstinately refuses to fit the procrustean bed of science; and this is the *mind*. Goethe said: ‘No productiveness of the highest kind, no remarkable discovery, no great thought that bears fruit and has results is in the power of anyone: such things are above earthly control.’

“A few people can ‘translate’ from ‘outside’, ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ – without conscious striving – and these *inspired* artists usually acknowledge what comes from beyond the

threshold of consciousness, even at times feeling that ‘someone else’ has done the work for them.

“Inspiration may or may not ‘come’, but it cannot be forced. ‘Pan y myn y daw, Fel yr enfys a’r glaw.’ It is as deep a mystery as life itself and, as such, it is precious.”

D. AUSTIN RICHARDS

“We receive an inspiration through an idea, imagination and observation: a blueprint of our pending creation for which our construction tools are knowledge and experience.

“An inspiration rarely reveals what it can become through development. We get a theme and jot it down – that’s the print – and then work on it so that the ideal is realised.

“When we go deeper than our intellect – into the soul – it becomes a power of expression excelling that of the intellect – a ‘something’ characteristic of the creative realm towards which we unconsciously allow ourselves to be guided. Then our thought is raised above the sublunary condition of actual life to the region of the sublime.

“It is clear that, even with today’s modernist, the aim is beauty, and nowhere can we develop that better than amongst the beauties and joys of nature.”

ROBERT SMITH

“The process of creation in an art is like finding one’s way through unfamiliar rooms in the dark. No two rooms are alike in shape and size, and no two rooms are furnished in exactly the same way.

“Light may glow faintly under a door or flash through a window from the headlights of a passing vehicle. This light, of long or short duration, give one orientation – a sense of the way ahead. A ‘picture’ of the room can then be stored for use in finding the best path for one’s feet.

“If there is no light, the room and its contents may become more familiar by association with other known objects, but will never reveal its full identity. The origin of the light (or ‘inspiration’), temporal or spiritual, is of no intrinsic significance.”

DAVID WYNNE

“‘Inspiration’ is a word much used by romantic souls who rarely pause to consider its precise connotation. To these good people the seed of inspiration is fertilised by a sunset, a storm, a spring morning, a summer evening, or by a dozen-and-one such phenomena, which have been impressed on their minds, generally as a result of some poetry read during childhood or adolescence. When a composer, embarrassed by a naïve question as to the source of his inspiration, replied that it is an idea or a situation which serves as a stimulating factor, he is stared at incredulously. To the layman, inspiration is a purely emotional concept. He finds it

difficult to understand that works of art require as much concentration and thought as does the solution of a purely scientific problem.

“Composers rarely give the words ‘inspiration’ a crumb of thought, except when they are asked by some critic with a malicious sense of humour to pen some opinions about it. As far as definition is concerned, the act of composing is stimulated by a complex of associations on an emotional and mental plane: to clarify these associations and to weave them into a concrete form requires a technique of expression of a high order. Inspiration is the intuitive understanding and recognition of an idea in depth. It creates a situation where the whole man on the conscious and subconscious levels is compelled to submit himself without reserve to a plan of action predetermined by the quality and nature of the selected idea. The idea is a seed which develops into a plant according to its genetical constitution, and will develop into an anaemic or healthy specimen of its kind according to the fertility of the ground which sustains it.

“The entry of a theme or idea into the mind is rarely a matter of chance, but rather the result of a good deal of reflection regarding the type of work which is contemplated: that is, the musical thinking will depend on whether the work is to be for chamber ensemble or full orchestra, for solo instrument or voice and so on. The idea which results from a contemplation of resources may be a simple motive or a complex texture, but it will be one particularly suitable for the combination of instruments chosen. It will be an idea capable of sustaining an interesting and purposeful flow of music over a consistently planned time-scale. It is true that, after adequate reflection on the resources to be employed, an idea might spring suddenly to the mind, and having done so will immediately allow inspiration on the creative level to take over and stimulate the composer to a white-hot activity. Many times during the course of the composition, further inspirational stimuli – recognition factors, often intuitive – will direct the composer’s thoughts along lines always in keeping with, and under the control of, the main musical idea. The technical discipline needed to shape the inspirational drive and to keep it within bounds works simultaneously with the actual process of composition and will at times halt the writing, so that an assessment may be made of what has to be done, and to dictate if necessary a reshaping of passages which show a reluctance to conform. Perfection is the aim of every creative artiste, but if the original idea contains flaws, then perfection will remain an illusive shadow.

“The movement or work having come into an embryonic existence in the form of a first draft, another process of creative activity is proceeded with. The composer sets about evaluating the music as a whole and, if necessary, reshaping details and maybe re-composing complete passages. Inspiration is now stimulated by the overall design of the piece; and it is the freshness, vitality and originality which the composer can bring to the perfecting of his ideas in form which eventually produce a finished and inspired work. It must be remembered that many masterpieces were dismissed, at the time of their origin, in derogatory terms by contemporaries. This means that inspiration at the creative artiste’s level is very often not recognised immediately. One must come to terms with the particular creative method of expression employed before one is able, in general and in detail, to recognise the underlying inspiration.”