



## REVIEW and COMMENT

# BIRTH OF A SONG AND A MAN

By VLADIMIR POZNER

FASCISM works like a muzzle: it keeps you from eating—and from raising your voice. Only if you choose to collaborate will you get your feed and your ration of words—not to speak, but to repeat. If not, it's hunger and silence. You may accept silence, and then perhaps you won't be hungry seven days a week. Or you may prefer hunger and retain your own voice. Then you'll speak—but illegal words. If you write—it'll be underground writing. And if you compose a song—it will be a forbidden song.

Through four years of silence and hunger, France has been singing forbidden songs. Old ones—the *Marseillaise*, the *Carmagnole*, the *Internationale*—and also new ones. New songs about bullets, knives, and dynamite, about "the long flights of ravens over our plains" and "the black blood that the sun will dry tomorrow on the roads." No one knows who wrote the words and composed the tunes—these songs are as anonymous as *Frere Jacques* or *Le Pont d'Avignon*—as anonymous and as popular. But whoever wrote the words was a poet, most likely someone we all know. And I have no doubt that the man who wrote the tune is not an amateur, not even a beginner. He is certainly a musician—a French musician. That's all we know about him—and all we need to know.

Let's make him an average man—not too famous and not too obscure, old enough not to be sent to do forced labor, and young enough to survive. He probably lives in Paris, on the Left Bank. Before the war he had an apartment—the same one for twenty years at least—with old furniture in rather bad shape—except the piano. He also had a publisher, and his new works were introduced at *Concerts Lamoureux* or *Salle Gaveau* to a few hundred attentive listeners who discussed them on their way home or in a cafe where they would drop in after the concert. The next day they were reviewed by music critics: the *adagio* lagged a little but the *schерzo* was charming and witty. He himself discussed his works, the public's

reaction, and the reviews with his friends, most of whom were connected with music in one way or another. And so were most of his thoughts, dreams, joys, and disappointments. Not that he had contempt for the people who could not appreciate good music. Not that he was a narrow specialist. But music was his craft, and to him it was all-important. Every year added to his reputation; a day would come when his name would become familiar to the tightly-knit family of music lovers at home and abroad.

IF HE had any social or political convictions he most certainly expressed them in his conversation and in his ballot—not in his works. The Munich conference has no possible bearing on a symphony you're writing. Your next-door neighbor is a fascist—does this prevent you from using brass winds in your second movement? War and defeat can change your life but not a single note of a composition you're working on. The keys of your piano are carved out of the same ivory your tower is built of.

It was still the same piano in June 1940. Fascism was all over Paris—

looking into your face from the walls covered with posters, from the front page of the newspapers, from the Eiffel Tower with its swastika flag. People were fighting it with bullets, knives, and dynamite, long flights of ravens were circling over the plains of France, and in the hungry silence of his cell one of the best French newspapermen, Gabriel Peri, was writing his famous farewell letter: "I am dying to make possible singing tomorrows." He was shot a few hours later, as were hundreds and thousands of others—for four years, day in, day out, a French anti-fascist killed every fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of silence, a shot, and silence again. The singing tomorrows were still far away.

I do not imagine that one day the composer, bursting with pent-up fury, sat down to write a song of revenge and hope. He certainly protested and cursed like the others. But even though it had become an act of courage to whistle Mendelssohn's Wedding March, and a crime to hum the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth, it probably never occurred to him to express his protest through his medium. I rather see him spending more and more time at home, alone, working on his symphony. . . .



"Don Chapito Thrown by a Bull," one of a group of prints by the Mexican artist Jose Posada, on view at the Brooklyn Museum until October 15. Posada, who died in 1913, produced more than 20,000 engravings in behalf of the revolutionary cause in Mexico. The mythical Don Chapito, a sort of "fall guy" used to represent feudalism and reaction, is here seen getting the worst of it in a tangle with the Mexican bull.

I would like to think that some day he was approached by a friend and told that the Underground needed a marching song. Here were the words; would he write a tune to them?

Was he surprised, disturbed, flattered, afraid? Did he hesitate? Did he consider answering that it would interfere with his current work, that he never wrote music to order? That he didn't like the words? No matter what he felt, how could he refuse?

The keys of his piano, when he sat down to work, were still carved of the same ivory. Here was a craft problem. Anger, resentment, hope had little to do with it, much less than a long line of song writers—from Schubert to Faure. Above all, it had to be good music. If the composer felt exalted, it was an artist's exaltation—the moment he found his tune and knew it was good he might have even forgotten for a while that France was occupied.

I hope he remembered it in time. Not to improve his work, but for the sake of his personal safety. His next-door neighbor might have overheard and remembered the tune, and later recognized it—his neighbor a fascist, hence an informer. If the musician thought of it himself that day, he must have felt—while he was soft-peddalling his instrument or even composing in his head, in silence—he must have felt that his concept of music was beginning to undergo a change. If not—it was just changing without his knowing it yet.

He wouldn't be slow to grasp this. It doesn't take long for a song to spread underground. From village to village, from echo to echo, from guerrilla to guerrilla. It becomes a password, a meeting point, a point of reference. Even children learn it. The enemy, too, is quick to spot it. There may be a few weeks only between the time the song is composed and a man is sent to jail for singing it.

**I** TRY to think of the composer after he had completed his work. Did he just experience a feeling of satisfaction over a well-done job and then forget all about it and resume his usual occupations? Perhaps. But what about the first time he heard his song hummed by a stranger? What about the first time he learned that men sentenced to die were singing it in the face of a firing squad? What about the day he was told that a guerrilla detachment won a skirmish because, in addition, to their other weapons, they had his song? He had become involved in the struggle—



**"Calavera of the Zapatistas."** Posada here turns to political use a typically Mexican form of humor, the "calavera," in which the living are shown as the dead. The Zapatistas were hard-riding revolutionaries of the south whose slogan, like that of their contemporary Villa, was "Land and Liberty!"

maybe despite himself—no longer as a man only, but as a musician. His tune had become part and parcel of French revolutionary traditions, of French history, and in the years to come not only music critics, but historians and novelists as well would write of it.

Today the black blood of fascists is drying under the sun over the roads of France. France is on her way out of silence into the singing tomorrows. France has found her voice again—in the Maquis of Brittany, in the ruins of Saint-Lo, on the barricades of Paris—and that voice is heard all over the world.

What is going to happen to the French composer? He is free now to go back to his pre-war life, have his new symphony introduced to a few hundred attentive listeners, discuss it with his friends, have it reviewed by music critics. He may retire again behind the ivory keys of his piano. Will he—after having learned that music can be a matter of death and life? That people die for a song and win with the song? I would rather think that in his case the birth of a song has become the birth of a man.

That is not—fortunately for you—an American experience. Your composers are free to write as they please and what they please. I trust they'll always be—perhaps because in France, and in Yugoslavia, and in Russia, and in China, hundreds of thousands of people who are not supposed to appreciate good music have died to make possible singing tomorrows. Tell me—does it necessarily take four years of hunger and silence, four years of fas-

cism, to make an artist realize where he and his art belong?

*This paper was delivered at the opening session of the Institute on Music in Contemporary Life, on September 14, 1944. The Institute was a four-day conference of musicians, sponsored jointly by the Musicians Congress and the Department of Music of the University of California, Los Angeles. The paper is reprinted here through the courtesy of the editorial committee of the Institute, which plans to publish the complete proceedings shortly.*

## Plus and Minus

AMERICA AND TWO WORLD WARS, by Dexter Perkins. Little, Brown. \$2.00.

**D**R. PERKINS, professor of history at the University of Rochester, has written this book to prove that American isolation is impossible, which is all well and good. He works his way through the diplomatic history of the United States from 1898 to 1944 and infers therefrom: "... that a great nation cannot isolate itself physically, morally, or intellectually from the rest of the world; that it cannot and will not suspend its judgments, or assume an attitude of cool detachment in the midst of world catastrophe; and that the only true prescription for 'keeping the United States out of war' is the construction of an international order in which such conflicts as those of 1914 and 1939 do not occur at all." This the author amplifies with: "Peace depends upon (1) the effective disarmament of Germany and Japan; (2) the harmonious cooperation of the victor nations; (3) the evolution of international institutions for the better solution of the broad economic and political problems of the international society. It depends too upon the sagacity of the American people, their choice of leaders, and the working of their constitutional mechanism. Finally it is related to the success of our own domestic economic order."

Plenty of proof is offered that our relations with Britain were never better, and from this it is estimated that they will remain so at least in the near future. Our relations with the Orient as a whole and with China in particular are good; everybody agrees Japanese militarism must be smashed. Dr. Perkins puts his finger on what he considers the most likely sore spot—relations of capitalist United States and its peculiar social traditions with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.