

# Composers as Correspondents

**LETTERS OF COMPOSERS.** *An Anthology edited by Gertrude Norman and Miriam Lubell Shrifte. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1946. 417 pp. \$5.*

Reviewed by IRVING KOLODIN

**T**HE book begins with Jan Sweelinck of Amsterdam writing, in 1603, to the officials of his native city: "So great is the correspondence between music and the soul that many, seeking out the essence of the latter, have thought it to be full of harmonious accords, to be, indeed, a pure harmony." It ends with David Diamond of Rochester, New York, writing from Paris in 1939 (to "an unnamed recipient" on the Continent): "Don't get too fascinated by those attractive Hungarian girls and glittering night spots. I like you too."

If the chasm between seems wide indeed, it is not too wide to be bridged by the total reach of the other ninety-seven composers whose selected correspondence makes up this absorbing volume compiled by Gertrude Norman and Miriam Lubell Shrifte. Those selections range from the supplicating to the superficial, from the overburdened to the undernourished, from the defiant to the defeated.

But it also shows in a manner more graphic than I know of, in any formal study, the emergence of the composer from a menial of princes to a modern man in a modern world. Perhaps his fate was in neither situation what he would have preferred, or even what he deserved, but at least the terms of address were different.

In the beginning, whether it was Heinrich Schütz writing to a forgotten elector of Saxony, or Haydn to the managers of the Esterházy estate, it was in terms of "I most humbly supplicate" or "I most respectfully submit." When Robert Russell Bennett, in 1943, had occasion to reply to a letter from the National Orchestral Association in response to an unsigned request for biographical information, he felt sufficiently certain of himself, sufficiently convinced of his independent existence as a free spirit to add the words: "I was born in Kansas City in 1894, studied composition with Carl Busch and Nadia Boulanger, married in 1919 in New York, have one daughter who is in Hollywood now—and died when I saw you forgot to sign your letter."

Perhaps it was no studied intention of the editors to weave this particular thread into the loose web-

bing of their volume, but the fact is they have provided "Letters of Composers" with an accessory interest not often present in anthologies. Like most examples of the kind, there is too much of what one doesn't want, too little of what one does. Just as one becomes interested in the intelligent prose of some such minor master as Glinka or Chabrier, for example, one turns the page expectantly for more, and is plunged into the relatively dull Mendelssohn or Dvorak whose chronological occurrences entitle them to the next few pages.

Along the way the panorama provides such items as Bach complaining that a dearth of fees from playing at funerals during a certain year has sharply depleted his income; Tartini expounding a point of violin

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technique as true today as when he wrote it two hundred years ago; Clementi gloating over a hard bargain he had driven with Beethoven on behalf of a London publisher; Spohr complaining of the "hellish noise" of "Tannhäuser"; Liszt expressing a magnificently appropriate estimate of Schumann; and the same Schumann, in the most intuitive phrase in the book, writing of Schubert: "There is no other music that presents so bewildering a *psychological* problem in its train of ideas." Italics mine, and emphatically so. Query to the authors: Did Schumann use a word with exactly this meaning or merely one which could be interpreted as having the contemporary significance of that very term?

As the book comes down to modern times, one is conscious of inhibiting factors—the reluctance of living composers to permit the use of material potentially valuable to themselves or their heirs; their unwillingness, further, to release correspondence uncomfortably frank in its appraisal of other contemporaries.

There are, however, notable exceptions, such as Virgil Thomson's point-

ed condemnation, in a letter to Aaron Copland, of the latter's "What to Listen for in Music"; Randall Thompson's well-phrased lament, in a letter to Douglas Moore, on the "decay of a noble art" (criticism as practised in the New York dailies); and the remarkably naïve Roy Harris's estimate of how a popular song becomes popular.

## William Morris Revalued

**WILLIAM MORRIS, MEDIEVALIST AND REVOLUTIONARY.** By Margaret R. Grennan. New York: King's Crown Press. 1946. 184 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CARL P. ROLLINS

THE medieval monk who wrote "Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla" was neither the first nor the last despairing intellectual to lament the state of the world. Indignation with the cruelty and oppression of man has led for centuries to preoccupation with a hereafter free from misery, but it has also inflamed the minds of enthusiasts to seek some solution which might emancipate living men.

From the vast mass of material at their disposal, the editors have produced a book which is informative and readable, useful as well as comprehensive. There is at least another volume of similar size in the letters they have decided not to include, but the sources of their choice are clearly indicted. The present volume includes a comprehensive index.

Of these prophets of a better day here and now was William Morris, who combined a knowledge of the Middle Ages with a zest for reform in the present. To his contemporaries it seemed curious that the Middle Ages, generally thought a time of ignorance and cruelty and bigotry, could furnish the inspiration for a better life here on earth, and most people today may feel exactly the same way.

To Mrs. Grennan this apparent paradox does not seem irreconcilable, nor, indeed, does it to anyone who, not hypnotized by our mechanized "progress," will read Morris attentively. The author of the doctoral thesis makes much of the fact that Morris was no dilettante in this matter. His knowledge of the Middle Ages was profound and accurate, though he was not a historian. He drew inspiration from his knowledge, and in particular the intimate study of life in medieval England revealed to his poetic imagination ways and means by which something of the pleasure of life, the salvation of hand work with tools rather than with machines, the superiority of brotherhood to caste and wage slavery, might be restored to a world which somehow took the wrong track when the Middle Ages were unable to grapple with a rapidly expanding world of thought and action. Something of the same dilemma faces us today, and if Morris did not choose to "go back" but rather to go forward in a definite rejection of certain modern concepts (e.g., capitalistic exploitation), his ideals of a reformed society (revolutionary is perhaps the better term) have more cogent validity than they did fifty years ago.

Mrs. Grennan's book is somewhat unnecessarily long, but it is worth reading. As becomes such a study, there are ample notes and bibliography and index. It is heartening to see Morris treated with clarity and enthusiasm as well as with fairness and intelligence. The author has understood the profound basis of Morris's revolutionary tactic and, in addition, writes sympathetically and shrewdly.

## The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
MURDER IN THE ROUGH <i>Leslie Allen</i> (Five Star: Two-bits*)	Bulky, golf playing detective Napoleon B. Smith and his Boswell unravel deaths on links and elsewhere.	Actual going almost as heavy as mythical bulk of Mr. Smith. Attempts at humor also elephantine and action hectic but unconvincing.	*Dear at the price
THE LATE LAMENTED LADY <i>Marie Blizard</i> (Mystery House: \$2.)	Bride of returned war veteran stabbed with kitchen knife in bedroom. Mac Bronson, F.B.I.-on-leave, does the deducing.	Well enough plotted and logically solved, but strangely lacking in action and impact.	Static
CATS DON'T NEED COFFINS <i>D.B. Olsen</i> (Crime Club: \$2.)	Murders on "baronial" establishment in California involve very queer doll, flower seeds, cat yclept Samantha, Sheriff Butterworth, and Sleuthess Rachel Murdock.	Title rather dragged in by Samantha's tail; murders effectively baffling, characters exotic, and Miss Murdock's sleuthing perceptive.	Agreeable
PUZZLE FOR FIENDS <i>Patrick Quentin</i> (Simon & Schuster: \$2.)	Sleuth Duluth loses memory after accident and wakes up as million-dollar catspaw in neurotic and murderous household.	Duluth's didoes with sultry females, his amnesiae deducings, and completely surprising solution make easy, if wacky, reading.	Triumphant silliness
CORPSE ESCORT <i>Clifford Knight</i> (McKay: \$2.)	Two stranglings, a knifing, and other skulduggeries solved handily by Prof. Huntoon Rogers—surrounded by movie people.	Murderer with screw loose in brain plants one corpse in coffin and otherwise disports himself in rather brittle and unconvincing tale.	Run-of-the-mill