

BOOK REVIEW by Lothar Klein

"The Musical Symbol"; Gordon Epperson (Iowa State University Press)

"Tonality"; Molly Gustin (Philosophical Library)

"*Practica Musica* of Franchinus Gafurius; Trans. and Ed. Irwin Young (University of Wisconsin Press)



THESE three books testify to the interests separating musicologist, theorist and composer. Readers of this magazine will most likely be attracted to these books in the order listed above. The last two fall into the Ph.D. dissertation category; as such they demarcate very special pursuits and are of limited interest to practical musicians.

"*Practica Musicae*" is an important and influential compendium of Renaissance compositional techniques. Irwin Young's labours have advanced solid musical scholarship. His translation reads fluently, the musical examples quoted are in modern notation, and the edition is handsomely assembled.

Thoroughness and diligence also marks Molly Gustin's book although it is an almost-impossible-to-read, grim chronicle of missionary zeal, hoisting the flag of tonality above all other methods of musical organization. Her argument has its roots in the belief that tonal music is 'natural', while atonal music ("atonal" is Gustin's term) is 'unnatural'. To advance this well-known thesis, appropriate acoustical graphs are coupled with aesthetic arguments seeking to prove that tonal music is better than atonal music. While the author marshals impressive logic in attempting to emasculate atonal music as a method suitable for human expression, she ignores a fact basic to the creative human psyche — a fact which, while not scientifically demonstrable, manifests itself in the truly creative human being's desire to create anew, regardless of — and defiant of —

past aesthetic or historical norms. (A risky business to be sure but then life and creation are risks expressively significant of the human spirit.)

Who will read this book? Those who are convinced that tonality is the only valid basis for musical expression have been persuaded by 18th and 19th century music, not by any verbal explanation; today's composers devoted to expanding the expressive potential of music as a human art will certainly not be deterred by Gustin's admonitions. Sophisticated composers are well aware of the arguments contained in her book; they can take comfort from Voltaire's remarks concerning critics and artists, viz. a critic is like a flea on a thoroughbred's neck; it may bite, but the horse continues to run.

Musical debates, on the most perceptive level are, fortunately, not won by words. The weighty dispute broached by Miss Gustin can only be settled on an aesthetic basis (non-scientific) and a listener's sense of personal poetry.

Gordon Epperson's book, subtitled "A Study of the Philosophic Theory of Music" is in pursuit of such an objective. The professional musician might easily consider that to mingle music with philosophy is debonnaire cocktail party talk. Such is not the case with Epperson's noble undertaking. If the Gustin approach to music is sectarian, Epperson's seems all embracing. His concern is more with what music is than with what it should, or must, be. Thus, his vantage point investigates musical philosophy as 'the comprehensive

study of the nature of music in whatever aspects are relevant to an inclusive and coherent explanation of its meaning . . . to understanding its relationship to the world of human discourse. Lest it be thought the vastness of this premise permits wallowing in aimless intellectual exhibitionism, one need only scan the book's table of contents to discern a strong historical-intellectual direction.

Greek and Confucian views on music are traced through to eighteenth century musical thought. Ensuing chapters examine views of professional philosophers (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson) as related to music and also give twentieth century composers their say. Those consulted, however: (and this may be the book's prime flaw) Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Sessions, Copland are all traditionalists.

It is this preference for the pronouncements of the elite aesthetic establishment which, to me, leaves an incomplete or one-sided investigation of music as symbol. The omission of any detailed probing of John Cage's ideology (whatever one may think of his music) bypasses a formative influence which has, like it or not, played a devastating role in changing the terrain of music today. A confrontation between Cage's well-documented ideas and the traditionalists, subjected to the rigors of the author's inquiry, would grapple with the essential musical issues of our day.

The strength of Epperson's book is that it seeks to develop the concept of music as nonverbal symbolism; the weakness of Gustin's thesis (despite its strongly verbalized scientific data) is its refusal to recognize that musical meaning is nonverbal. The essence of music for Epperson is — to use Carlyle's iceberg metaphor — the submerged, uncharted region which exists under the immediately perceivable. Conversely, "Tonality" assumes that all icebergs must be judged by their caps or that music can only be, if it conforms to known, charted regions of aural experience. Those who take this approach would do well to heed Ernst Cassirer as quoted by Epperson: 'Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety'. The "Musical Symbol" distinguishes itself through the author's devotion to a complex and high minded task. It is recommended reading.