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The Civic Aspect of Art

By
OTTO H. KAHN

**Address on the occasion of the
Inaugural Recital of New York's
Music Week, May 1st, 1922**

**Printed by
New York's Third Music Week Committee**



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IT is a particular pleasure to say a few words of greeting and congratulation on this auspicious occasion. Those whose vision and enthusiasm conceived the scheme of New York's Music Week and whose energy and zeal carried that conception into effect, deserve the thanks of the community. How timely was their plan and how correctly they judged public sentiment in inaugurating it, is fully proven by the wide interest, the universal approbation and the influential support with which it met from the beginning and which have followed it in ever growing measure.

This is the third recurrence of New York's Music Week. It is being celebrated in multiform manifestations, indicative of the keen and profound interest of the people of this city in, and responsiveness to, musical art. The success of the event is gratifying, but by no means surprising. Ours is an art-loving population and the potentialities arising from that fact are of great

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promise. What is needed to realize these potentialities, is what those in charge of Music Week are aiming to accomplish: Bring art to the people and you will bring the people to art.

Democracy Aims At The Spiritual

The people are hungry for nourishment for their souls. The upward struggle of democracy aims at the spiritual no less than at the material.

The lives of the vast majority are cast upon a background of sameness and grind and routine. Necessarily so. The world's work has got to be done. But all the more should we endeavor to open up, to make readily accessible and to cultivate those pastures where beauty and inspiration may be gathered by all.

We all are the better for psychic change from time to time, just as we are the better for physical change of air and surroundings. We need to give our souls an airing once in a while. We need to exercise the muscles of our inner selves just as we need to exercise those of our bodies. We must have outlets for our emo-

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tions. Just as the soil of agricultural land requires rotation of crops in order to produce the best results, so does the soil of our inner being require variety of treatment in order to remain elastic and fertile and to enable us to produce the best of which we are capable.

I believe that some of the restlessness, of the turmoil, of the lawlessness, even of the crime, of the day, arises in a measure from a reaction against the humdrum-ness and drabness and lack of inspirational opportunity of everyday existence. I believe that much can be done by art, and particularly the art of music, to give satisfaction to the natural and legitimate desire for getting away from unrelieved dullness and drudgery, and to lead the strong impulse underlying it into fruitful, instead of into harmful, or even destructive, channels.

The Piano Vs. The Policeman

When I uttered this sentiment a couple of weeks ago at a hearing before Mayor Hylan concerning the project of creating a Civic Art Cen-

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ter in New York, the Mayor interrupted to inquire whether I meant to say that art would be effective toward diminishing crime. I replied that the stimulation and wide cultivation of art, as of every other ethical element, would tend to make the soil less propitious for the growth of the weeds of crime. The Mayor continued: "One of this morning's newspapers wants me to put a policeman into every house", to which, yielding to the temptation of alliteration, I replied jocosely: "I would rather have a piano in every house."

This impromptu formed the text for much merrymaking and satire in the press. I need hardly say that I no more meant it to be taken in a literal sense than the poet when he wrote of "teaching the young idea how to shoot" meant to be understood as referring to revolver practice. The sense of my remark was akin to that of the well-known German popular saying which, like all popular sayings, has a great element of truth and wisdom in it:

"Where they sing, you may safely dwell.
There is no song in the wicked."

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("Wo man singt, da lass Dich ruhig nieder.
Boese Menschen haben keine Lieder.")

That does not mean that any and all members of choral societies are wholly free from evil, or that you would be safe in engaging a cashier in sole reliance on the fact that he has a well-cultivated tenor voice.

What I meant to convey, and what I maintain, is, that the best preventive against crime is to encourage and foster in the young—and in the grown-ups, too, for that matter—interest in, and understanding for, that which is beautiful and inspiring and which will bring into their leisure hours influences and occupations tending to counteract the lure of the street and to breed aversion and contempt for that which is vulgar, cheap, brutal and degrading. Toward that end, one of the most potent instrumentalities is art. It is, or can be made, a mighty element for civic betterment. It is, or can be made, one of the strongest among those agencies which have power to form and guide the thought and the sentiments and the conduct of the people. It has a weighty purpose and a great mission.

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Art Is Red-Blooded And Of The People

Art is not "high-brow" stuff. It is a red-blooded, democratic thing. General Pershing knew what he was about when, in the midst of the gravest preoccupations, he took steps to encourage singing and band-playing among the men of the American Expeditionary Force. So did the great Napoleon know what he was about when, in the field, engaged in a critical campaign, he turned his thoughts to making provision for fostering art in France. It is a significant thing that recently the labor unions of New York voted favorably upon the proposition to inaugurate a movement for the creation of a People's Theatre.

To acquire appreciation of, and understanding for, art is to acquire true enrichment. For, wealth is only in part a matter of dollars and cents. The occupant of a gallery seat, who has paid twenty-five cents for admission to a concert, will be far richer that evening, if he has brought with him love and enthusi-

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asm for art, than the man or woman in a box at the Metropolitan Opera if *blasé* and indifferent, they sit yawning or chattering. The poor man in a crowded tenement who feels moved and stirred in reading a fine book, will be far richer at the time than the man or woman sitting in dullness in a gorgeous mansion. If he goes to Central Park or Riverside Drive, with his eyes and soul open to the beauties of nature, he will be far richer than the man or woman rushing in a luxurious automobile through the glories of the Italian landscape, the man thinking of the Stock Exchange and the woman of her new dress or next party.

Art In Avenue A

I don't mean to imply that love of art is lacking among the well-to-do and is preponderantly confined to those not blessed with worldly goods. Feeling for art has nothing to do with the size of a man's pocketbook. Proportionately speaking, there is probably no very great difference, as to the number of art lovers on Fifth Avenue and on Avenue A. But the

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inhabitants of Fifth Avenue have a far greater and more continuous supply of diversions, artistic and otherwise, than those of Avenue A, and therefore, are naturally not as responsive and susceptible to the simpler appeal, do not bring the same freshness, zeal and enthusiasm to their enjoyments, nor carry away from them the same degree of stimulation and satisfaction. That is one of the penalties of Fifth Avenue and one of the rewards of Avenue A.

The dividends which we receive from having fitted ourselves to appreciate and enjoy art and beauty, no Bolshevik can take away from us and no income tax can diminish.

Not the most profitable business of my banking career gave me that sensation of gain which I experienced when, a boy of seventeen, I had the treasure house of "Tristan and Isolde" opened up to me. Nor did I ever come so near to having the feelings which are generally attributed to a plutocrat as on that occasion. It so happened that I was taken to that performance by one of the rich men of the town in which I

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then lived. He fidgeted restlessly through the first act, but during the divine duo in the second act he fell asleep and actually snored. No plutocrat, not the most "hard-shelled" capitalist, ever looked with a more lordly feeling of superiority upon the benighted poor than I did upon that snoring rich man.

America's Unlimited Possibilities

It has been said by a foreign observer that America is "the land of unlimited possibilities." And that is true. The saying was meant in a material sense, but it is equally applicable in a spiritual sense. Underneath the crudeness, the newness, the strident jangle, the jazz-iness and Main Street-ness of our young country, there lies all the raw material of a great cultural and artistic development. In this vast country, with its multifarious mixture of races, all thrown into the melting pot of American traditions, soil, climate and surroundings, every kind of talent is latent. All we have to do in order to bring it to fruition is to call to it, to look for it,

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and to extend to it guidance, support and opportunity.

American energy, enterprise, vision and daring have produced, on this new continent, a material development which has astonished the old world. If, as I trust and believe will come to pass, we will give to art that full scope and place and honor to which it is entitled, if we make it widely and easily accessible to the people, if we afford serious encouragement, fostering attention and adequate opportunity to worthy aspirations and genuine talent, and due reward to true merit, we shall, I am convinced, astonish the world and ourselves by the greatness and intensity of the manifestation of the American spirit in art.

