



SO FAR, Americans have managed to survive population explosions, education booms, and social revolutions. The latest national convulsion, which will undoubtedly amuse future historians, is the Culture Explosion. This country can boast that it possesses some of the world's finest orchestras, a few distinguished opera companies, and several conservatories with more talent than they can handle. With the aid of records and radio, the shock waves of the Culture Explosion have been felt even in the family living room. Today, every well-stocked family must have a few expensive art books on the coffee table, a handsomely bound encyclopedia, and, of course, The Sterco, surrounded by several yards of record albums. But it would seem that the increased consumption of good music has also given many people feelings of guilt about their embarrassing ignorance of music and its history. Even the most casual browser in a bookstore cannot fail to notice the amazing number of music histories, biographies of famous composers, reprints of all sorts, and paperbacks, most of which are bought by ordinary people who want to understand

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more about all those records they own and concerts they attend.

For the man who wants his education quickly and cheaply, the editors of Time-Life records have now released something called *The Story of Great Music*. This six-volume series of records with commentaries is advertised as an artistic monument of the ages which somehow combines "great music, great art and evocative text." The records are by Angel and, in general, the performances are good. But the "evocative text," that is, those richly illustrated commentaries which come with each volume of records, should definitely be kept out of reach of children and, for that matter, innocent adults who really do not know much about music. Almost every old canard, every discredited view of music history can be found on the glossy pages of these texts.

Sometimes the editors make little mistakes. For example, we are told that young Haydn was dismissed from the choir of St. Stephen's Cathedral for cutting off the pigtail of a boy who sang in front of him. Actually, the true story is a lot less interesting. When Haydn's boy soprano voice began to change, the choir simply had no further need of him. This charming little story is by no means the only

spurious anecdote in the text. Apparently the editors feel that one unchecked anecdote is worth a thousand words of solid discussion.

There are times when the mistakes result from honest attempts to simplify everything for the layman. Simplifications, of course, are not a bad idea. Life would be difficult without them. But there is always a very definite point where the simplification is no longer an elucidation but a complete distortion. The editors write that the music of the late eighteenth century "suggested a dance taking place before a huge mirror, for its principle was symmetry—symmetry deflected or temporarily disrupted, but eventually restored." The comparison is silly and quite misleading. If only the editors had taken the trouble to analyze some of this music, they would have discovered that the simplification will not work. A quick glance at a Mozart or Haydn score would have shown the authors that these composers constantly avoided anything that sounded like rigid symmetry in the overall construction of their music.

THE FIRST few pages of the six booklets that come with each volume of records are designed to give the reader some idea of the historical period in which these compositions were written—a fine idea, which sometimes helps to deepen one's appreciation of the music. But, here again, the text is littered with grotesque historical generalizations that would make any historian cringe. On closer examination, however, most of this background information consists of chatty digressions on everything from the trivial to the irrelevant. It is very interesting to learn that Haydn was fond of attractive women and that the Viennese, so the authors repeatedly tell us, like to stuff themselves with good

food. But where, oh where, are the lucid discussions of the sonata principle, some basic technicalities, and the ways a classical composer handled his material in a symphony? Perhaps the authors may plead lack of space, yet they saw fit to provide the reader with a two-page spread—complete with magnificent illustrations—on late eighteenth-century wigs for women. The particularly vapid volume on the Romantic era completely lacks any coherent discussion of the differences between the Classic and Romantic symphony, or other important issues, but the editors found space for a color picture of the distinguished conductor, Herbert von Karajan, and his wife, both enjoying a ride on a yacht. Frau von Karajan—in the true *Time-Life* manner—is wearing only a very teeny bikini.

WHENEVER a publisher decides to put out a new encyclopedia or dictionary, he will usually seek the assistance of experts in various fields for contributions and supervision. Newspapermen and all-purpose researchers are simply incapable of writing the story of anything that takes a lifetime to study, be it art, science, history, or music. What is so annoying and so downright insulting about this Time-Life series is the absence of recognized scholars on the list of contributors (the only possible exception is Jacques Barzun, and he is responsible for just a brief essay titled "The Art and Pleasure of Listening"). One qualified, trained expert could have given the editors some really valuable insights, instead of anecdotes, and could have provided the reader with a meaningful introduction to the appreciation of great music. Unfortunately, the opportunity has been missed. We can only hope that the unsuspecting people who bought these excellent records will not bother to read the booklets that came with them.

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