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BY H. L. MENCKEN

Books About Music

- A MUSICAL CRITIC'S HOLIDAY, by Ernest Newman. New York: *Alfred A. Knopf*.
- A MUSICAL MOTLEY, by Ernest Newman. New York: *Alfred A. Knopf*.
- STRING QUARTETTE PLAYING, by M. D. Herter Norton. New York: *Carl Fischer*.
- THE BOOK OF NEGRO SPIRITUALS, by James Weldon Johnson. New York: *The Viking Press*.
- THE NEGRO AND HIS SONGS, by Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson. Chapel Hill, N. C.: *The University of North Carolina Press*.
- MUSIC OF THE PAST, by Wanda Landowska. New York: *Alfred A. Knopf*.

MR. NEWMAN calls his book a "holiday"; it really includes the most valuable work that he, or any other critic writing in English, has done in its field. For there are two things in it that are rare and of great price, two qualities that are as uncommon among music critics as they are among musicians: the first is sound, deep and well-ordered knowledge of musical history, musical forms and idioms, musical anatomy and physiology; the second is simply common sense. What a combination! How many music critics can show even one of its two halves? What they deal with, ordinarily, is merely the thing that is before them; what they have to say of it is without background, without relevancy, without roots. The conductor, it appears, took the first movement of the Eroica too fast. The *Hexentanz* of the new genius, Sascha Ganovski, is by Eric Satie out of "Roll, Jordan, Roll." The new tenor sang flat, *i.e.*, the Prohibition agent took a bribe, the movie wench said she loved her art, the dog had fleas. What is most music criticism? A banal and nonsensical discussion of performers, *i.e.*, of mountebanks, musical scullions, non-musicians, enemies of music. The critic, exposed incessantly to their monkey-shines, takes on their character. He becomes a virtuoso. He

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gives his show—at the expense of music.

But not Newman. In "A Musical Critic's Holiday" he shows precisely everything that his average colleague lacks: an immense erudition, an astonishing skill at working his way through the tangled mazes of musical history—above all, the aforesaid sharp common sense. His business, in the book, is to examine scientifically the phenomena of musical development—to determine the qualities that make for genuine greatness in composers, and to find out what reactions they arouse in contemporary taste—in brief, to discover what hardships and impediments beset the first-rate man, and how he meets them. The result of that quest is a great slaughter of bombast and pretense. The neglected genius turns out to be an utter myth. He simply does not exist. There is no record in musical history of a man of the first talent who languished for recognition, or even lacked fame. "There has never yet been a composer so greatly in advance of his time that only an initiate here and there . . . could understand him." But what of the Schönbergs, the Stravinskys, the Ornsteins, the Saties? Such fowl have always existed, world without end—and every generation has promptly forgotten those of the generation before. Meanwhile, the Mozarts, the Beethovens, the Brahmses and the Wagners have gone marching on, honored while they lived and remembered after they died. What have the tin-pot revolutionists left? Many a novelty, many an idea—and some of them good. But they survive today, woven into the fabric of music, not in the compositions of the revolutionists, but in those of the men they stormed against—in brief, the genuinely first-rate composers of their time.

Mr. Newman's book is a work of great originality and high value. It sweeps away whole dumps of critical garbage. In "A Musical Motley" he is less profound, but unfaillingly amusing. "The Amateur Composer," "Bach in the Opera House," "Nonsense Music," "The Music of Death," "Brahms and the Waltz"—these are some of the things he discusses, always with something new to say, and always charmingly. There is charm, too in Mme. Landowska's excellent volume upon Eighteenth Century music—charm and sound knowledge, for what she knows about the performance of it is deep and singular. More than charm is in Mrs. Norton's book on string quartette playing. The curious thing is that the volume was not written long ago. Are there any greater delights on this earth than those offered by chamber music? I don't mean merely listening to it; I mean playing it. Yet the literature for the guidance of performers is astonishingly meagre, and the little that exists is of small value. Mrs. Norton indulges in no hollow rhapsodies. Instead she discusses the practical difficulties that quartette players confront, and shows how they are to be surmounted, with innumerable examples. Her experience has been wide, and she has got a great deal out of it beside mere virtuosity.

Another book that shows a lot of first-hand knowledge is Mr. Johnson's volume on the Negro spirituals. He and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, are largely responsible for the recent rise of interest in Negro music. They were among the first to make known what has since come to be known as jazz, but they are not responsible for its recent degradation: they are musicians, not zanies. In this book Mr. Johnson gives the words and music of a great many spirituals, most of them arranged by his brother, and as a preface he prints a long and extremely interesting essay upon them, full of little-known facts and shrewd observations. The talent of the Negro, he argues, is not for melody, but for harmony—and some of his harmonies are of a great boldness and

strangeness. Where did the spirituals come from? I myself was once inclined to believe that they were borrowed originally from the Methodist hymns of the poor whites. Mr. Johnson reveals the holes in that theory. They are rooted, he believes, in Africa; in America the Negro has simply embellished them, and put new words to them. And what words! How naïve and how moving! They are studied at length in the stately volume of Dr. Odum and Mr. Johnson—not only the spirituals, but also many secular songs. The two books complement each other admirably. They show that both white men and colored men in the South have begun to give Negro song serious attention, and that it is well worth their time and trouble.

The Next War

THE GREAT PACIFIC WAR: *A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-33*, by Hector C. Bywater. Boston: *The Houghton Mifflin Company*.

THIS book seems to be getting a great deal less attention than it deserves. Most book-buyers, I daresay, mistake it for a cheap and idiotic shocker in the manner of Cleveland Moffet's "The Conquest of America." It is nothing of the sort. On the contrary, it is an intelligent, well-informed and wholly admirable piece of work, done by a naval expert who is also a man of imagination, and, what is more important, an extremely skillful and ingratiating writer. I defy anyone to read the first chapter, and not go on to the end. The narrative begins to move, indeed, on the very first page, and presently it is so gaudily melodramatic, and at the same time so disarmingly plausible and matter of fact, that only the reader completely anæsthetic to a good story will ever be able to put it down. As everyone knows, novels forecasting the future are anything but uncommon. As everyone also knows, they are usually anything but good. But here, at last, is a good one. Here, in fact, is the best I have ever encountered. It is far better than anything that Jules Verne