

How About a Little Music?

BY SIGMUND SPAETH

A NOTED musical educator was addressing a group of New York business men at luncheon. Before starting he handed out a large assortment of toy instruments. One man got a drum, another a whistle, this one a small trumpet, that one a harmonica, a tambourine, a triangle, and so on.

As the musical instruments were distributed, a terrific din arose. For every hard-boiled, adult male in that room immediately began to toot and bang and whistle and clang as if his life depended on making as much noise as possible. The noted educator, who knows human nature very well, allowed the racket to proceed for several minutes. Then he raised his hand for silence and said, quietly: "The next time one of your youngsters does that, remember how you behaved under the same temptation just now."

How many people have gone through life with the sneaking suspicion that they might have played some musical instrument if they had only had a chance? How many have tried their hand at something of the sort, just "for the fun of it," only to be put off permanently by the stern reminder that they would "have to practise an hour a day"?

Has any child ever been shown the keyboard of a piano without wanting

to play on it immediately? What about the physical and spiritual satisfaction of picking out *America* with one finger? Or following the black keys down and up again in that silly little tune, *Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater*?

IT IS not generally realized that those five black keys, that stick out so temptingly from the white ivory background, represent the five-toned scale, one of the oldest patterns of folk-music all over the world. The "natural musician," who feels that he can play "only on the black keys" (which, incidentally, is the feeling of Irving Berlin, Charles K. Harris of *After the Ball* fame, and many other song writers), is unconsciously following in the footsteps of the troubadours, the Scottish minstrels, and the Master Singers of Nuremburg. When you or your parents played *Chop Sticks* (with variations), you were experimenting with the two most important chords of musical harmony, the tonic and the dominant. Even the simple act of beating time with the foot, to an insistent march or waltz tune, indicates an instinctive grasp of the two fundamental divisions of rhythm, upon which all musical form is based.

Is it therefore any real exaggeration to say that practically everyone

is a potential musician of some sort? Certainly some surprising results have been achieved when the raw material was caught young and properly trained, not by scales and finger exercises and hours of dull practice, but by the realization that music is a game that anybody can play, and the insistence that the element of fun be kept uppermost, and the element of drudgery be kept out altogether.

If people can not be instrumentalists, they can probably at least sing a little. It was quite astonishing, when the war days brought the craze for community singing, to find that almost any group could produce reasonably pleasant sounds, if there were enough people in it to cover up individual shortcomings. It may be significant also that before the days of Prohibition (and since, for that matter) the artificial removal of inhibitions from any group of four or more men invariably resulted in a spontaneous outburst of close harmony, with *Sweet Adeline* generally leading all the rest. The logical assumption is that man, in his natural state, freed from self-consciousness, expresses himself normally in song.

BUT, all theorizing, philosophizing and reminiscing aside, just what can the average American citizen be expected to accomplish in the way of making a little music of his own? Let us debar the radio and phonograph from consideration, even though they demand careful adjustment to get the best results. Their function is to provide musical background (and it is a most important one), perhaps even a musical stimulus. But they do

not in any sense represent personal performance on the part of the owner.

The old-fashioned player-piano was a different matter. For here individual ability, taste and intelligence counted strongly. The perforated roll of paper, sliding over the brass bar, made the right notes sound, it is true, but the human being on the stool could absolutely control the speed and loudness in great detail, and even create entirely personal effects of expression by the various ways of pumping at the pedals.

The piano itself, apart from all player mechanisms, is by no means on its last legs, as some pessimists would have us believe. It has taken some stiff wallops from the automobile, the phonograph, and the radio in turn, but it still holds its own, and remains the king of musical instruments and a definite necessity in the cultivated home.

TEACHING methods have changed very decidedly, and there are more than a few adults who have quietly made up their minds to give themselves once more the chance that they overlooked or threw away when they were young. With the old bugbear of scales and five-finger exercises removed, and a variety of practical systems available whereby anyone can actually "play pieces" after only a few lessons, business and professional men and women are finding it possible to take an occasional hour from their work to develop a recreational and social asset that they would once have considered automatically barred from their experience. There are special

schools and teachers of jazz playing that concentrate on the building up of simple chords and harmonies "by ear," which is the natural method of all instinctive musicians.

PERHAPS the most interesting development of the piano situation has been the "class system" of instruction. This is one of the significant effects of modern efficiency upon the part of music. Instead of taking a teacher's time to explain the same fundamental things to each individual pupil separately, the whole thing is done in groups, incidentally adding the important factors of competition and emulation. Whenever an unusual talent is discovered, it can easily be set aside for private instruction. The National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, which directs all such matters (including also the annual celebration of Music Week and musical contests of all kinds), last year received requests from nearly four thousand communities for information concerning class piano instruction. So the good old upright isn't dead yet by any means.

One musical advantage that we have today over our parents and grandparents is that there are more different instruments to choose from. It used to be a case of piano or melodeon, with perhaps an occasional violin for variety. But now we have ukuleles, mandolins, guitars, Irish harps, zithers, 'cellos and bass fiddles on the string side, and saxophones, trumpets, trombones, alto horns, melophones, Sousaphones, bugles, clarinets and flutes to develop the wind. (Have you heard the latest definition of a piccolo? "It's

an ill wood-wind that nobody blows good.")

All of these are now within the reach of the average amateur, individually or collectively. If he is too modest to woo a regular orchestral or band instrument, he has his choice of a wide variety of playthings that hover on the narrow border between amusement and art. He can get an imitation saxophone or clarinet on which he can pick out most of the simpler tunes. Or a trombone flute in which the notes change rather vaguely but by no means unmusically, according to the varying length of a mere telescopic tube, controlled entirely by hand. There are also the tin penny whistle, and the mournful ocharina, or "sweet potato," either of which a persistent experimenter can soon have literally at his fingertips.

THE ideal starting point for those who wish to blow their own is the conventional harmonica or mouth organ, now available in a great variety of types and sizes, from a miniature toy to a really expressive musical instrument. Harmonica bands are already common in schools and clubs, and many a youngster who started breathing in and out on two chords has proceeded to the eventual mastery of a regular band instrument.

For those who can't be bothered with even the simple process of moving up and down one side of a harmonica, a fascinating instrument has been perfected with small perforated rolls and a crank to turn them. All the performer has to do is to blow in and out, and keep turning the little handle. The player roll does the rest,

and even *Turkey in the Straw*, at top speed, becomes an easy matter.

The stringed instruments likewise have their mechanical improvements in this day of short cuts and quick results. There is a form of zither, supplied with lettered keys, like a type-writer. When you hold down one of these keys and run your finger or a plectrum across the strings, you get the chord indicated by the letter. A similar contrivance has been applied to some modern instruments of the guitar and mandolin type.

IF YOU have a good ear, however, and scorn mechanical helps, you will get the most fun out of a so-called "flexatone." This is simply a little piece of flexible steel in a wire frame, equipped with a handle. On each side is a small wooden hammer which causes the steel to vibrate as you shake it. A variety of tones can be produced by the simple process of pressing one end of the steel with your thumb. The more you press, the higher is the resulting tone. The quality is clear and sweet, like a whistle, and you can secure, with very little practice, a surprising accuracy of pitch.

With various types of xylophones, marimbas, gongs, drums and other instruments of percussion available, it is not difficult for any child or adult to work out the simpler patterns of rhythm and melody. You can play bugle-calls on the dining-room chimes, if you don't want to bother with blowing into a brass tube, and the same fundamental tones appear in one of the popular automobile horns of the day.

"Rhythm orchestras," in which the players merely have to keep time

on various instruments, are now an essential part of the kindergarten, and these youngsters of early musical training generally develop into efficient members of the school bands, which today give zest to the life of nearly every American community.

It has been said that if you keep a boy blowing a horn he is not likely to be blowing a safe. Certainly the brass band has become a decided factor in public welfare by its practical solution of the problems of juvenile delinquency.

It has been found that boys and girls can learn to play band instruments acceptably in a few weeks' time, again chiefly through mass instruction. The same principle is being applied orchestrally, with its climax in a remarkable summer camp for young orchestra players, conducted by that musical pioneer, Joseph Maddy, and the National High School Orchestra of over two hundred youthful members, which recently made a successful concert tour.

IN THE last national contest, 650 school bands competed for the prizes offered by the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music. This was four times as many as in the previous year, and most of these youngsters, incidentally, came from the rural districts of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Kansas and Iowa.

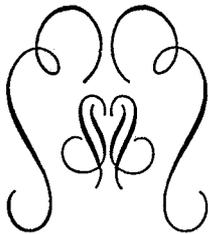
These young musicians are not being trained for professional careers, any more than our athletic coaches expect to turn their charges into commercialized hirelings of sport. American athletics, which are in a very healthy state, aim chiefly at the development of good physical habits that will last a lifetime. In the

same way our new conception of music as an everyday recreation may in time produce mental and spiritual habits that will add appreciably to the enduring satisfactions of life.

But this piece did not start out to be a sermon. It is only a fleeting survey of what is going on musically in a big, spread-out, rather haphazard country, which does not takes its art

very seriously but which seems to realize, nevertheless, that a continuous routine of hard work (and even harder entertainment) may have its drawbacks, and that there may be fun in taking even a small part in a game which has long held its place among the supreme pleasures of human society.

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Witches and Wills

BY HARRY HIBSCHMAN

YOU, of course, do not believe in witches. Hence the question of the effect of such a belief on the competency of its holder to make a valid will does not interest you as related to your own will. But what about that legacy you are expecting? Will the will giving it to you stand up in court? Is that dear and loving relative of yours normal? Or is he a queer old codger with crazy ideas and foolish eccentricities? Does he, perhaps, entertain quaint notions about fairies, ghosts and witches, or species not found on Broadway, that may be used later to impeach his mental fitness and his testamentary capacity?

These are questions that may prove of direct importance to almost anyone, for many a fortune has gone to the lawyers and the heirs, instead of to the beneficiaries mentioned in a will, because its maker was proved to have been too irrational to make one that the courts would uphold.

And so far as witchcraft is concerned, unfortunately belief in it is not yet dead in these Enlightened States of America, as has been demonstrated within the last few years in several notorious criminal trials. Witches and *hexers*, as they are called by the Pennsylvania Germans, still live and still play an active part

in the affairs of men. How do the courts look upon belief in them and upon the acts and deeds of persons harboring such beliefs? Particularly, what do they hold as to the testamentary capacity of believers in witchcraft?

THESE are not merely pertinent questions. They are also extremely interesting ones. For the answers must be sought in actual cases decided by the courts, many of which present facts so weird and preposterous as to appear like the inventions of a modern Poe or Munchausen. And even stranger than the facts are, in many of the cases, the decisions of the august judicial tribunals.

One of the queerest of these cases arose in South Carolina a little over a hundred years ago. It involved an attack on the will of an absurd character of the name of Mason Lee, who disinherited all his relatives including two illegitimate sons, and gave his property, valued at over fifty thousand dollars, to the States of South Carolina and Tennessee jointly. The facts as detailed in the opinion of the Supreme Court of South Carolina are in some respects so inelegant, to put it mildly, that only an expurgated version of them