

Paul Hindemith  
A Composer's World



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**A COMPOSER'S WORLD**  
**HORIZONS AND LIMITATIONS**

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## PREFACE

**I**N Thomas Morley's *Plaine and Easie Introduction* (1597), among the important books dealing with the technique of musical composition an exceptionally pleasant one, there appears in the dialogue between the Master and his disciple Philomates a sentence of which I am particularly fond. It reads: "It is no maruayle to see a Snayle after a Rayne to creep out of his shell, and wander all about, seeking the moysture." We all know how sometimes such sentences cling to our memory, annoying and unin- vited, sticking all the harder the more we try to remove them. Morley's molluscoid creeper proved to be of this insistent quality. During the period of my writing the present book it hunted me — if this expression may be used with regard to a snail — incessantly and without any reason. Can one be blamed if after many attempts to neglect or outstrip the persecutor, one not only tol- erates it but actually feels it to be a part of the present circum- stances of creation and construction? Something would be missing if suddenly we were left without such companionship.

Eventually the importunate sentence led me to ask: Is a com- poser writing a book not like that Snayle, creeping out of his abode of settled professionalism and solid experience, seeking what corresponds to the moysture, looking for readers instead of listeners and forfeiting musical security for doubtful successes in a field through which he can only roam unsupported by profes- sional know-how but at the same time free of professional inhibi- tions?

After the Snayle and the moysture there still remains the Rayne to be accounted for in our sequence of equalizations. Its equiva-

lent which lured this writer out of his shelter was his being honored with the appointment to the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard University for the academic year 1949–1950. The series of lectures given under the auspices of that illustrious Chair of Poetry provided the subject matter for the present book, although the book form demanded varied modifications and elaborations in content and structure.

Neither the lectures nor the book was intended to be a musician's professional report to his fellow musicians. Thus the ever-menacing temptation to write a disguised form of textbook had to be fought. On the other hand there was no intention to add to the vast stock of lectures and books on the appreciation of some phase of musical production or reproduction, all those glimpses into workshops, those opinions on composers and compositions, those noncommittal aestheticisms, popularizations, and sugar-coated banalities. Musicians producing words instead of notes are too easily apt to fall into this sometimes enticing but mostly insipid kind of gossip with its strictly egotistic or pseudoprofound attitude.

The book aims to be a guide through the little universe which is the working place of the man who writes music. As such it talks predominantly to the layman, although the expert composer may also find some stimulation in it. The core of all the problems puzzling the composer — namely, the theoretical considerations concerning the nature and technical potentialities of chordal and tonal progressions which are his material of construction — is demonstrated in a general way, so as to acquaint the reader with the gist of the matter without bothering him with the subtleties of technique. Even so, the versed musician may find in that demonstration opinions somewhat different from our scholastic theory. (He may be interested to know that I am preparing an elaborate textbook on the technique of composition, based on the theories presented in this book.) From the center of basic theory our discussion will spread out into all the realms of experience which border the technical aspect of composing, such as aesthetics, sociology, philosophy, and so on. This will be done without the faintest pretension of saying anything new. Every fact given is derived from somewhere—even some ideas which I cherished

as the unique results of my own speculation turned out to have come from predecessors, parallels, or similar formulations elsewhere. Thus the only merit of this survey seems to be its tendency to focus everything surrounding us on the one point: the composer's work. This approach to a problem is magnanimously comprehensive; it is at the same time stubbornly one-track. In short, it is the typical artistic way of understanding the world. It is entirely opposed to the approach of a scientific mind. To the scientist our method — or, in his eyes, nonmethod — of looking at everything without ever fundamentally comprehending it must seem utterly amateurish. In fact, the artistic approach *is* essentially and inevitably amateurish, its distinction from the amateur's point of view being merely a considerably wider panorama. We must be grateful that with our art we have been placed halfway between science and religion, enjoying equally the advantages of exactitude in thinking — so far as the technical aspects in music are concerned — and of the unlimited world of faith.

The tendency of maintaining, nay defending this position against any nonartistic, nonscientific, and nonreligious attack by the forces of brutal personal ambition, commercialism, low-grade entertainment, and the like must inevitably lead to severe criticism of certain prevailing conditions in the musical producer's orbit. The reader, once convinced of the author's honest intentions, will doubtless take this criticism not as an acid outpour of an ill-tempered mind, but as a contribution towards the betterment of untenable and regrettable facts in our musical life, written by one who has had the privilege of becoming an active factor in it and by his inclination and vocation is profoundly devoted to the task of making music maintain a state of integrity in the cultural development of this continent.

A musician writing a nontechnical book is in an odd situation compared with the real man of letters. Unless he wants to make writing books a major part of his activities (which means neglecting composition, a necessity not aspired to by the present writer), he will hardly ever have an opportunity of amending his statements, of showing further developments, of correcting his mistakes, or of defending himself against misinterpretation, all of which the professional writer can do in his future books. The

musician-writer simply has to put up with this fact. Let me show you how harassing a situation may arise out of this ostensible incorrigibility of former statements. A quarter of a century ago, in a discussion with German choral conductors, I pointed out the danger of an esoteric isolationism in music by using the term *Gebrauchsmusik*. Apart from the ugliness of the word — in German it is as hideous as its English equivalents workaday music, music for use, utility music, and similar verbal beauties — nobody found anything remarkable in it, since quite obviously music for which no use can be found, that is to say, useless music, is not entitled to public consideration anyway and consequently the *Gebrauch* is taken for granted. Whatever else I had written or said at that time remained deservedly unknown, and of my music very few pieces had reached this country; but that ugly term showed a power of penetration and a vigor that would be desirable for worthier formulations. Some busybody had written a report on that totally unimportant discussion, and when, years after, I first came to this country, I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice who had become the victim of his own conjurations: the slogan *Gebrauchsmusik* hit me wherever I went, it had grown to be as abundant, useless, and disturbing as thousands of dandelions in a lawn. Apparently it met perfectly the common desire for a verbal label which classifies objects, persons, and problems, thus exempting anyone from opinions based on knowledge. Up to this day it has been impossible to kill the silly term and the unscrupulous classification that goes with it. However, this book might accomplish what a life-long devotion to serious music could not, although one may assume that again some clever classifier will deposit it in the *Gebrauchsmusik* drawer without really knowing what he has stored away. Doubtless the book aims to be useful, but certainly not in the sense that has become synonymous with our term, that is: relying on the tritest relationship of cause and effect in music. Music that has nothing else as its purpose should neither be written nor be used, and the same is true with books on music.

The people of the Harvard University Press have been more than helpful in the preparation of this work. They unflinchingly encouraged a side-line literate who rather preferred writing music; they were patient with an author whose only reliability was his

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never being on time with his installments; and they had a most generous understanding for his literary and linguistic weaknesses. It is a pleasure to assure them of my heartfelt gratitude.

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# A COMPOSER'S WORLD

HORIZONS AND LIMITATIONS



# 1.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

A COMPOSITION of everlasting value" — we know of quite a number of musical creations upon which in humility and admiration we bestow this title of reverence. It is our belief in the stability of musical facts that leads us to this and to similar statements. But which musical facts are stable? Certainly not the external body of music in its audible form, although for many people sound seems to be the only factor of importance, perhaps of exclusive validity in their musical experience. An individual piece of music, being many times reborn and going through ever renewed circles of resonant life, through repeated performances, dies as many deaths at the end of each of its phoenixlike resurrections: no stability here, but a stumbling progression from performance to performance. And the totality of this kaleidoscopic picture, all the way from a composition's conception to ultimate death in its last performance is not a stable curve either. Periods of appreciation alternate with periods of neglect; false interpretations, overrating, suppression, nonmusical evaluation — all such uncontrollable circumstances influence the total course of the life of a composition; they shorten, darken, brighten, or lengthen it as they do a human being's life on earth.

Sound, the ever present ingredient of music, is the frailest of its qualities. The sound of a Beethoven symphony, performed by our players on modern instruments, in modern concert halls, is different from the audible form the piece assumed in a performance in Beethoven's time. Attempts to reconstruct the sound which was the ideal of Bach and his contemporaries still encounter many obstacles (and probably always will); and access to the world of musical sound in the Gothic era is almost entirely obscured and obstructed.

It is partly man's own frailty and his unstable conditions of life that forces each new generation to modify its musical aspects and with them the evaluation of compositions; and it is partly the frailty of the musical form itself, which, because it is not built to withstand continual wear and tear, is subject to the musical equivalent of oxidation and decay. Our modern orchestral repertoire rarely includes pieces more than two hundred years old and most likely never will include much music written before 1750, so long as we maintain our manners and places of performance. The more complex the means of reproduction are, the less time-resistant are the pieces they help to represent. Solo pieces, ensemble and choral works of the sixteenth and even the fifteenth century may occasionally appear on programs, and courageous explorers are sometimes apt to dive down to the very beginnings of organized harmonious music.

All this shows that the "everlasting" value of compositions and their potentialities of performance are by no means eternal, and the majesty of the term "everlasting" dims even further when we compare the vigorousness of a musical composition with the thousands of years an architectural creation may last, or with the periods of development in general history and geology.

And yet, there are in music certain values that are not subject to instability. If we want to recognize and understand such values, we must perceive music not as a mere succession of reasonably arranged acoustical facts; we must extricate it from the sphere of amorphous sound, we must in some way participate, beyond the mere sensual perception of music, in its realization as sound; we must transform our musical impressions into a meaningful possession of our own. How we can do this will be investigated in the following chapters. For the present we will deal merely with philosophical values, the objective of such efforts.

These values, not being tied to the instability of sound or to any other external quality of musical creations, are domiciled in the more esoteric realms of our musical nature. We have to turn to the immaterial, the spiritual aspects of music in order to find them. In our dealings with the ingredients that go into the making of a composition, these values will be of the foremost importance: they will determine the human quality of our music. A musician

of culture can hardly be thought of as lacking a strong feeling for, an innate devotion to these values; yet it cannot be the task of a composer untrained in philosophy to analyze them thoroughly. He is not called upon to develop a musical-philosophical system; nor need he, in looking for confirmations of his home-grown philosophy, go systematically through every statement on music ever made in the philosophers' works. Since in venturing into the realm of philosophy we all enjoy freedom of choice, we may concentrate on the works of certain writers and entirely neglect others. We can exercise our prerogative of emphasis or bias without forgetting that our primary concern is, after all, not philosophy, but music.

## II

Let me first refer to a book which, more than fifteen hundred years ago, pronounced remarkable postulates concerning eternal musical values; postulates which have only in the most recent development of music philosophy and music psychology regained importance — obviously without due consideration of the earlier appearance. I am talking about Saint Augustine's *De musica libri sex*. In five of these six books the subject of discussion is meter as used in poetry — for us, whose concept of music differs in many respects from that of the ancients, a musically rather unproductive investigation.

In the sixth book, however, the work develops into a most intelligent analysis of musical perception and understanding. According to Augustine, musical impressions are by no means simple reactions to external stimuli. They are, rather, a complex mixture of diverse occurrences. First, there is the mere physical fact of sound. Although sound can exist independent of any listener, it is indispensable as a basic experience before the perception and mental absorption of music can take place. Second, there is our faculty of hearing: the physiological fact that sound waves act upon our ear and by muscular and nervous transmission release reactions in the brain's center of hearing. Third, there is our ability to imagine music mentally without the stimulus of music actually sounded or without recollective reference to a definite former impression. Fourth, there is our ability to uncover previous musical experiences stored in our memory like old keepsakes, to draw



them out of their hiding places, revive them mentally, and allow them to impress us with the same intensity as actual music would do, after which they may again be put to rest in the storage chests of our soul. In all these musical happenings both our corporeal and mental nature participate, with the emphasis constantly shifting from one to the other. Fifth, our mental activity must rise to predominance; we must in the moment of actual perception or of soundless concept subject the musical substance to an intellectual examination and judge its musical shape and grade. Thus the mere activity of perceiving or imagining music is combined with the satisfaction we derive from classifying and evaluating it. But we must not become slaves of this enjoyable satisfaction; it deserves as little confidence as a wooden board carrying us through a river's rapids: although we know its ability to float, we would not trust it without reservation. Musical order, as recognized and evaluated by our mind, is not an end in itself. It is an image of a higher order which we are permitted to perceive if we proceed one step further to the sixth degree on our scale of musical assimilation: if we put our enjoyment of such knowledge ("enjoyment, the weight of the soul!") into the side of the balance that tends towards the order of the heavens and towards the unification of our soul with the divine principle.

This sober abstract of an extensive and erudite dialogue cannot give an idea of its truly modern analysis of our faculty of hearing, nor of the profound and enthusiastic treatment of the subject and the conclusions drawn therefrom. Yet these few excerpts will show the lofty heights of psychological and moral clarity reached by musical comprehension in that period. Practical music in the declining Roman Empire had degenerated from a science into a form of agreeable pastime. It impressed people mostly with its entertaining, sensuous qualities, as it does the overwhelming majority of modern listeners. A work like Augustine's *De musica* must, in such circumstances, have appeared as a voice of admonition, and as such cannot have enjoyed a great dissemination. On the other hand, such a musical-philosophical treatise was certainly not the individualistic formulation of an isolated philosopher. It must have expressed the thoughts, feelings, and desires of many a person dissatisfied with the state of music in his time.

Books one to five of the work readily confirm this impression, since they deal with a portion of the classical intellectual heritage that was familiar to any cultured person as part of his education. But the abhorrence of everything pertaining to entertainment, even to professional musicianship is evident in the sixth book; and the conclusions of its final chapters transgress the inherited body of knowledge to a hitherto unexpected degree. However, in their serious attempt to coördinate music with the theses of the Christian creed — thus reinstating this form of art in an elevated community of sciences, a position it had enjoyed in the times of ancient philosophy — the consent of believers who saw in music more than a pleasant play of sounds was assured. They recognized in Augustine's conclusions the best moral, musical, and theological foundation for the development of religious music. True, religious music shows us most clearly the direct effect of the Augustinian attitude, but our secular music also can profit from those venerable ideas — in fact, it cannot exist without their support if it is to be more than entertainment. The tenor of that doctrine is: music has to be converted into moral power. We receive its sounds and forms, but they remain meaningless unless we include them in our own mental activity and use their fermenting quality to turn our soul towards everything noble, superhuman, and ideal. It is our own mind that brings about this conversion; music is but a catalytic agent to this end. The betterment of our soul must be our own achievement, although music is one of those factors which, like religious belief, creates in us most easily a state of willingness towards this betterment. In short, we have to be active; music, like humus in a garden soil, must be dug under in order to become fertile. Composers, performers, teachers, listeners — they all must outgrow the mere registration of musical impressions, the superficial and sentimental attachment to sound.

## III

Acknowledging the moral values of the Augustinian attitude and observing its honest scientific foundation, for centuries left unrecognized, we nevertheless may ask whether the serious emphasis on spiritual and even religious aspects is not so grave a burden that its general application will forever remain an unrealizable

ideal. Many participants, despite their best intentions, will not have the strength or the knowledge to develop their musical morality above a mediocre level. Can their genuine efforts be considered equal to the experts' more perfect achievements? Can we, furthermore, give full credit to those who after such perfect achievements relapse into periods of idleness? Even the most cultured mind sometimes feels a desire for distracting entertainment, and, as a principle, music for all possible degrees of entertainment ought to be provided. No music philosophy should overlook this fact. There are many methods of creating, distributing, and receiving music, none of which must be excluded from its theses so long as the slightest effort towards stimulating the receiving mind into moral activity is perceptible. The only musical activities to be condemned are those that do not aim at fulfilling such requirements.

Admittedly the dividing line between a devaluated or basically worthless music and a light-weight music of some moral value may not be clearly discernible. Moreover, our Augustinian theorems may not be lenient enough to serve as a guide through this moral-musical no man's land, and there may exist other cases of doubtful musical value in which rigorous decisions may lead to unjust or even entirely false judgments. No wonder, therefore, that many people try to approach the problem of musical responsibility from another angle. Already in medieval times we encounter musical philosophies and theories which oppose Augustinian severity with a more liberal attitude. If on examination we find that these philosophies deal with the problem of musical comprehension with the same devotion and seriousness exhibited in Augustine's work, they will also be accepted as valuable support in our search for clarity.

The most helpful indications of this type can be gathered from Boethius' work *De institutione musica*. It was written in the early sixth century, about one hundred years later than Augustine's *De musica*. Unlike the latter work, it was a well-known book, which throughout the following centuries exerted a strong influence on European musical education. Without this influence the organized technique of composition and its underlying the-

ories, up to about 1700, would probably have taken a course different from the one it actually followed.

The first sentence in Boethius' work can be regarded as the principal thesis of his philosophy. It says: "Music is a part of our human nature; it has the power either to improve or to debase our character." In the relationship of music and the human mind the position of forces has now changed: music has become the active partner; our mind is a passive receiver and is impressed and influenced by the power music exerts. No wonder, then, that music abandons its role as a modest aid to moral growth and assumes gubernatorial rights.

Music itself exists in three different forms, one of which, the so-called *musica humana*, is the principle which unifies the immateriality of our faculty of reasoning with our corporeal existence; which keeps the conscious and rational part of our soul aligned with its instinctive and animalistic feelings; and which brings about the harmonious coherence of our body's members and their smooth and well-tuned synchronization.

The second form of music is *musica instrumentalis*, music as executed by human voices or with the aid of instruments. This meaning of the term "music" coincides with our own modern definition.

The third form, however, acquaints us with the term's most comprehensive meaning. It is *musica mundana*, which governs the heavens, time, and the earth. It causes the planets to revolve in their orbits; it moves the celestial spheres. Without such organizing harmony how would the cohesion of the entire universe be possible?

This definition of music strangely widens the limits of this art, limits which, according to our own concept, are drawn by nothing but the possibilities of the musical material and the intellectual abilities of the producing and reproducing participants. It would lose its strangeness if we could, as did the ancients, classify music as part of the quadrivium, that group of four sciences dealing with measurement. Here we would find music united with geometry, which is concerned with the measurement of nonmoving planes and bodies; with astronomy, as the measurer

of moving entities; and with arithmetic, in which measurement is sublimated and concentrated into the operation with abstract numbers. The science of music deals with the proportions objects assume in their quantitative and spatial, but also in their biological and spiritual relations. There is no doubt about the existence of these measurements and the importance of their recognition. The only disturbing element to us seems to be the fact that it is music which rules in this field, and that so many great minds clung tenaciously to this concept. They did not doubt the correctness and reliability of music as a science of measurement. The fact that we see so many scientific heroes contribute to the evolution of music theory seems to provide strong justification for this attitude. The great second-century astronomer Ptolemy, whose concept of the planetary system was generally accepted until the Copernican theory dethroned it some thirteen hundred years later, wrote the major work on Greek music theory; a work that served as a fundamental source of information for many similar books of a later time, including Boethius' *De institutione*. Or we may think of the geometrician Euclid, the physicist Huygens, the mathematician Euler — to mention only one representative of each related science — all of whom wrote on musical-theoretical subjects; or Kepler, whose three basic laws of planetary motion, expounded at the beginning of the seventeenth century, could perhaps not have been discovered, without a serious backing of music theory. It may well be that the last word concerning the interdependence of music and the exact sciences has not been spoken.

## IV

The emphasis Boethius placed on the scientific part of musical experience led him quite naturally to judgments which sometimes sound strange to us. Whereas today we evaluate musicians exclusively with regard to their artistic activities, Boethius classified them according to their intellectual and scientific abilities. For Boethius (as for Augustine before him), singing and playing, especially for the purpose of earning a livelihood, is a low-grade, rather contemptible pursuit. Even a performer of highest vocal or instrumental perfection is far removed from musical in-

sight, is not gifted with scientific enlightenment. How could he be, since all his efforts must be directed towards his technical improvement? Somewhat more elevated than these most sordid of all musicians are those who are given to composing without being totally conscious of the technical and intellectual premises of their actions. They may do their work with talent and conviction, but with them musical instinct is more important than knowledge. It is knowledge — knowledge beyond all craftsmanship and intuition — that dictates the actions of the musician belonging to the third and highest class; “they have the gift of judging everything pertaining to music according to scientific rules,” as Boethius says. Let us assume that to the members of this most exalted caste of musicians it was a duty of honor to combine the craft of the two lower classes with their own wisdom. Without this combined insight they could scarcely have possessed the all-embracing power of artistic judgment, as demanded by Boethius, unless we conjecture that even at that time uninformed music judges were already existent.

In his *De institutione* Boethius is by no means an independent author with original ideas. We have already mentioned Ptolemy as his authority, and as further sources for his music theory he frankly adds the names of Aristoxenus, Nicomachus, Archytas, and others. He is, so far as the mere subject matter of his book is concerned, one of numerous compilers of classical learning. Even his book's first sentence, already quoted, which depicts music as the force that influences our souls for good or for evil, is not the result of his own contemplation. This sentence, the intellectual meaning of which is the tenor of the entire work, expresses the idea of musical ethos, so frequently dealt with in Plato's Dialogues. In a social order, as envisaged by Plato, music is neither entertainment nor a stimulus for the moral improvement of the soul. Music's purpose is to aid the government in its attempt at educating its citizens to be better citizens: it is music's ethical power that is summoned up.

Fortunately, Plato's Republic has remained theory. During the past few decades, in which, for the first time in history, governments have influenced the practice of the arts in a grand dictatorial manner, our experiences have been rather discourag-

ing. Theoretically the dictatorship of the philosopher-king and the royal philosopher is demanded, but practically it is without doubt always the greatest musical nitwit with the greatest non-musical power in whose hands rests the decision on both life and style of a musician.

The idea of musical ethos in its extreme Platonic form is in strict opposition to Augustine's musical attitude. To be sure, they agree in strictly refuting an autocracy of music in the form of shallow and narcotizing entertainment, but Augustine would never grant any worldly power the right to block the individual's musical and spiritual evolution and thus prevent his intellectual apprehension of a supreme divine law. Opponents of the Platonic idea also appeared from the opposite direction. To them it seemed quite inadmissible to couple such sober concepts as state, government, philosophy, and mathematics with music, which in its audible form seemed to be eternally elusive and irrational, and accordingly suspect.

## v

A glimpse at the writings of the Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus (ca. 200 A.D.) will confirm this statement. As a convinced skeptic, inventing arguments against all the sciences practiced during his time, he also scrutinizes music (in Book VI of his treatise *Against the Mathematicians*). He does not believe in any ethical effect of music. Music, as a mere play with tones and forms, can express nothing. It is always our own sentiment that ascribes to the ever-changing combination of tones qualities which correspond with certain trends in our mental disposition. Consequently, music cannot be used as a means of education, and all the stories which are told about the ethical power of music are plain bunk. There is the well-known anecdote of the flute player who plays for a drunk a tune in a certain mode, in order to prevent him from doing mischief. It merely proves that flute players are sometimes more successful educators than are philosophers. Spartan soldiers enter a battle to the accompaniment of music—certainly not because of the exciting effect the tunes have on them, but because of their need of some doping influence which blots out the fear of the horrors to come. Frequently

music's salutary effect on animals is mentioned; but have we ever seen a horse react to music the same way an audience does in the theater? Although Sextus' attacks are spiced with similar tidbits, his argumentations are not to be taken too lightly. They contain many sound notions which are important as a regulative against a superemotional or superspiritual evaluation of music. His philosophical system is so well founded that it could serve as a pretty strong justification for our lowest-grade modern entertainment music! Only towards the end of his brisk arguments does one hesitate to follow him. Here he tries to disprove other philosophers with their own logic and demonstrates rather convincingly the nonexistence of melodies and rhythm, and consequently of music altogether.

If Sextus' maxims became our sole guide in the search for musical enlightenment, we would soon be relieved of any worries concerning our musical behavior, for sooner or later music would disappear from our lives. Also Plato's ethos, as recommended and regulated by the government, would be no source of satisfaction, because we do not want to be deprived of our self-determination in respect to music; and so long as no brown, red, or other colored dictatorship sterilizes any individual impulse, we want to be free to produce music, perform it, and listen to it in our own personal ways and to assimilate and interpret it likewise.

It seems that of the different attitudes towards music, as discussed in these pages, our best choice would be either the Augustinian or the Boethian philosophy. Both grant us our own personal and uninhibited decision. There is even, in principle, no third position. The ethos of Plato, the skepticism of Sextus, and many other attitudes, no matter how unrelated they may appear at first sight, are only deviations from, or variations of, our two main trends; or they may represent one of the innumerable middle positions between the two extremes.

Extremes they really are! The Augustinian precept, in which our mind absorbs music and transforms it into moral strength; and the Boethian precept, in which the power of music, its ethos, is brought into action upon our mind. Truly these are basic and unalterable musical values. Either of these philosophies can lead us to the loftiest goals; either enjoys the protectorship of the sci-