

Music lessons from the blackbird

BLACKBIRDS and their use of song were used as examples in Vernon Handley's talk on "The Position of Music in Society" to Guildford's Concertgoer's Society on Saturday night.

Mr. Handley is Guildford's Director of Music and conductor of the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra.

Each male blackbird, he said, had an individual song of his own, which he sang from each outpost of his own territory to mark it off from other blackbirds.

Song was an essential part of a blackbird's life. He needed it for protecting his territory, courting his mate and when feeding his young—and sometimes he seemed to be singing just because he enjoyed it. Each blackbird's song improved during the summer, but—like people—they were affected by dull weather and were less likely to sing.

Mr. Handley said music was just as important in human society as it was to blackbirds. People turned to music at times of crisis, whether it was a national crisis such as war, or some personal crisis such as an unsatisfactory love affair.

A vast, untapped audience for serious music had been discovered during the Second World War. The fact that so many had turned to music and other serious arts must show that the arts answered a real human need.

Blackbirds, like humans, used their song to get themselves into certain states of mind. A male blackbird could sing himself into such a warlike frame of mind when preparing to chase off rivals to his territory that he would even chase off his own mate. Men, too, used music to get themselves into a military frame of mind, which was why each regiment had its band. Bands were not just for marching.

People used music to get into the right sort of mood for all sorts of activities.

Music was a sort of make-believe, he said, and he quoted from R. G. Collingwood's "The Principles of Art" on the importance of the imagination in art.

It was only by using imagination that people could improve. No one could improve at anything unless he could imagine being better at it at first. If he could imagine it he could believe it. Make-believe presupposed imagination and could be described as imagination operating in a peculiar way.

Playwrights and novelists used imagination to create the characters of their works. We all knew that imagination was not real in one sense but it was real in others.

And anything that imagination fed on to improve must be very, very important.

Nowadays there was so much emphasis on material possessions that the real importance of the arts to man's inner life tended to be overlooked. The artist using his imagination to create was making a real thing in just the same way as an engineer.

Mr. Handley made a further comment on the reality of art

when he said that for the composer the real work of art came when he created a piece of music in his head. Arranging the notes in such a way that it could be played before an audience was not the true work of art. And when the composer was creating the true tune in his head he was not concerned with the emotional effect it would have on an audience but with the music itself.

He thought that people who went to concerts simply for the pleasure of beautiful sounds were mistaken. It was like going to a scientific lecture and only listening to the lecturer's voice, not listening intelligently to what he was saying.

The individual response to music or any other serious art was the most important thing, yet this was constantly being overlooked. There was too much money being poured into "keeping up with the Joneses" in the arts, too much snobbery and too much criticism that told people how they ought to feel about a work of art.

How could the individual improve his response to art? The answer was "exercise." The affluent society did not dispose people towards physical or intellectual exercise, but if anyone listened intelligently to as wide a range of music as possible, he would in time improve the quality of his response to it.

Unfortunately, it was becoming increasingly difficult to hear a wide repertoire of music because of the competitive situation between the large orchestras in England. It was only the B.B.C. that had the scope to provide a really wide variety of music.

It was his policy in Guildford to give as many different works as possible. In fact, about 400 different works had been presented in the last 10 years, 75 of them new works by British composers.

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