

## EXPERIENCING MUSIC, A COMPOSER'S NOTES

Vagn Holmboe

Translated, Edited, and Introduced by Paul Rapoport

With a Foreword by Robert Simpson

Toccata Press

ISBN: 978-0-907689-15-7 – Hardback

ISBN: 978-0-907689-16-4 – Paperback

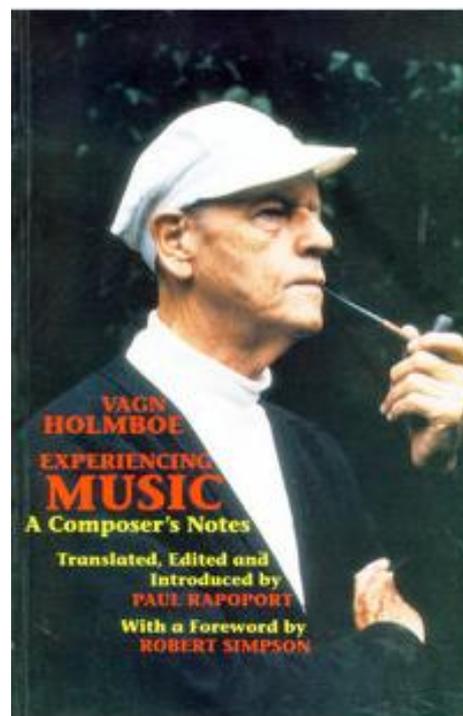
This book, *Experiencing Music* by Paul Rapoport deals with Vagn Holmboe's views on music and it is a book for serious and genuine music lovers since it treats of a composer who was a great composer himself. As Robert Simpson pointed out, Holmboe was a genius.

He had a healthy interest in life. He observed the growing of plants and trees, natural processes and such discipline is found in his music. Trees grow quietly without pomposity and hype, confident in their purpose and function. So it is with quality music. Holmboe speaks of music as art in the sense of skill and technique which evolves naturally; he speaks of it as culture and states that a country without a serious music culture is a dead country. He quotes from Niels Steenson and applies the quote to great music, "by far the most beautiful things are those we do not comprehend." There is in music literature some works that are so beautiful and skilful that words can never express them and we will never comprehend why they are so beautiful; it is incomprehensibly so. Berlioz found this so when he distressed himself because of his failure to describe the beauty of the slow movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No 4* – the slow movement of Bruckner's *Symphony No 8* is another case in point as Simpson once pointed out.

Holmboe reminds us that human development depends on thought and culture and the reward comes when we are involved with our minds. He continues, "Music is part of our culture and it demands effort". Superficial enjoyment results in passive stagnation. People who use music as a background are not attending to it; those who fuss about it being theoretical, mathematical, formal or historical are missing the point. Examining boards fuss over students' correct playing of musical ornaments and there is such a palaver about authenticity and how Bach would have played it. Does it matter? Music is an expression of the soul, not how many notes to play in a trill. As Holmboe says, music must have a direct experience; it must have its building blocks and they must be of quality and assembled with thought and care.

When Holmboe talks about the skill of composing he makes the valid point that composing is of the will. If it is merely feelings, you may write some good tunes and many composers have done so and little else but there is no structure, no form and no logic. The shallow person will only admire music with diatonic melodies and tunes and repudiate all else. The author states that composing is a "self-forgetting state where any objectives and desires, hopes and ambitions disappear. You are no longer conscious of yourself..."

Many will take issue on this but read his exegesis. He is absolutely right in what he says, music intentionally written for fame and fortune will always be cheap in some way or another. If you consider the greatest music, little is dedicated to royalty or is self-indulgent. Consider the masterworks of Mozart, Beethoven and Bartók for example... they were written to be music and music alone.



Holmboe deals with musical thinking. If you are a musician you have the capacity to be able to accurately think about music. However, if I have never driven a car, I cannot possibly think like a car-driver and you would hesitate about me driving your car.

Just as the real composer must and does compose merely for music's sake, so the performer must also follow the composer's intentions... if someone alters them then he is setting himself above the composer. As Holmboe writes, "The composer does not want to be the victim of misinterpretation or outrageous distortion". And yet, there are performers and conductors who are guilty of musical slander and libel and are still fawned over. To my mind, such conductors are frauds, but I had better not mention any names or proven cases here. A performer has not only to have the skill and technique to play exactly what is written but the understanding of the music. Interpretation is not how I think it should go, but how the composer wants it to go.

An interesting chapter follows on listening to music... note, not hearing it... and how a bad performance can deter a listener from a piece for ever. I heard a famous youngish British conductor in Birmingham perform Sibelius' Symphony No 5. It was simply awful and this was clearly the conductor's fault. My companion vowed never to hear the piece again. "We can have a different effect each time we hear a piece", says Holmboe. But it is equally true that some works, however often you hear them, always command attention. The author rightly says that pop music is entertainment but not real music since that only meets emotional and intellectual needs. The real music lover is not out to be entertained but to be inspired.

We proceed to the problem of modern music and how many so-called music lovers are uninterested, disapproving and sometimes rancorous about it. Some display a vicious attitude. They want music to be something to hug your comfort blanket to and suck your thumb to. But music, of whatever age, has to be assessed as to its skill and not its security of 'pretty tunes'. The unfamiliar or unusual causes unfair prejudicial distress but people long for the safety of the shores of predictability. "Culture will die if there are no new challenges", writes Holmboe.

As reviewer, I would like to add that I corresponded with Holmboe for some time and send him cassettes of all his symphonies as conducted by Bryden Thomson which thrilled him. As a thank you, Holmboe sent me a score of his Symphony no 5 which is, without doubt, a very fine work.

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