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Foreign Letters

PARIS

The Auditory Function in Relation to Talent for Music Dr. Pierre Chantriot recently discussed before the Faculté de médecine of Lyons the early manifestations of musical genius. Chantriot is a musician himself and is sprung from a family of musicians. He stated that it was his endeavor to penetrate the thick cloud which enveloped musical genius and its first manifestations. He studied, in this connection, auditory sensibility and sensory and motor function in musicians, after having performed several experiments on psychomotor reactions. He would like to have completed his study by researches on the cranium and ears of great masters; but he did not meet with the cooperation of musical conservatories that he had hoped to find.

It is self-evident that the ear constitutes the basis of musical genius. The ear is to the musician what the eye is to the painter. But, though the ear is indispensable for the education of the musician, for the composer it is only a secondary aid, for had not Beethoven lost his hearing completely when he composed the wonderful Ninth Symphony, the climax of his immortal work? It has not been proved that the ears of composers are particularly good or characterized by any peculiar formation, as some writers have asserted who claim to have noted in musicians a peculiar inclination of the tympanic membrane. It is doubtless true that, in the development of musical genius, the ear plays a paramount part, since it alone can transmit to the cerebral cortex the impressions that constitute the basis for the ideas of the future composer. It does not necessarily follow that the organ of hearing possesses special physical qualities—at least not such as are perceptible to the investigator; but one must admit that practice may cause the ear to acquire a certain special quality—a certain fineness—that is distinct from auditory acuity. Excellent musicians often possess only a mediocre auditory acuity, associated with an intense musical sensibility.

According to Chantriot, a child acquires a sensibility to rhythm very young. An appreciation for relative height of tones and the relation of tones to one another develops later, except in the case of precocious subjects such as Mozart and Saint-Saëns....Genealogical tables published by Chantriot show how great is the influence of education on the musical development of individuals. Rare have been the instances of great composers who have not trained their ear from birth amidst familial musical talent. John Sebastian Bach was less indebted to heredity for the unfolding of his genius than to the fact that he constantly heard musical masterpieces executed by his father, brothers, uncles and others.

BERLIN

Congress of Psychology

After a long struggle, psychology succeeded in divorcing itself from philosophy, but only to yield to the enticements of the natural sciences. Today we observe the reverse process taking place. Psychology is now wresting itself from the embraces of the natural sciences, and is turning more than ever toward philosophy and metaphysics. The recent congress of psychology, held at Leipzig, showed plainly the new trend of events. Human personality was the central idea of the experimental psychologists. A congress of psychology had never before been able to attract so large an attendance—900—a good record when the prevailing economic distress is considered. Or would it be more accurate to say that it was on account of the economic distress that the attendance was so good?...

The Psychic Substrate

The proceedings began with a comprehensive paper by Krüger of Leipzig on the psychic substrate, which he defined on the basis of Dilthey’s views. In contradistinction to the inanimate substances of Nature, which we conceive of as existing only in the aggregate, psychic representations give us in all respects the impression of individual completeness, as having a significance of their own apart from other similar representations. For example, melody has in itself the character of completeness; it is more than an aggregation or mere synthesis of tones. In addition to the complete ideas which become definite concepts of our psychic life, we find in the psyche a qualitatively determined substrate, whence our completed ideas develop. This psychic substrate is not formless, and signifies more than a mere something that has risen above the threshold of consciousness. This substrate consists of real psychic units which have a constant value and determine that, under certain circumstances, we shall act thus and thus and have such and such experiences, and, under other circumstances, we shall act differently and have different experiences. In this sense we may speak of differentiated structural material, but it is wrong to employ the term “Strukturen” (psychic structural material) to experiences of immediate origin. The nature of psychic structural material becomes known to us only through study of its evolutionary manifestations. The departure of modern philosophers from the evolutionary concept has had disastrous results. After all, there can be but one psychology....

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Editor’s Note: JAMA Revisited is transcribed verbatim from articles published previously, unless otherwise noted.

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