



## The indispensable amateur

by Jacques Barzun

To make a point of calling the amateur indispensable should really raise the reader's smile. Who would not smile at the idea of a select group of businessmen foregathering to acknowledge in a big-hearted way The Indispensable Customer? Yet that is the position of most academies and professionals in art when they meet and talk about their place in the world today. They seem to take it for granted that they—teachers, performers, and composers—are fixed species without which the universe is inconceivable. They think of themselves as beginning and maintaining the cycle by which art comes into being. They do recognize that there must at some later point be a public—or as it is usually called today “a society”—which has the duty of keeping the arts alive; but this duty is taken to mean supporting the professionals, out of taxes if need be, and asking no questions. In short, the vocabulary and mental habits of our time foster the illusion that every cultural pursuit is carried on by experts for its own sake—whatever that may mean—or else for the sake of training future professionals.

But this self-sufficiency is not so inveterate that it does not occasionally suspect its own adequacy, and signalize it by calling for the dossier of the amateur and looking into it (as I have been asked to do) for the data on his apparently unavoidable existence.

Once a term of distinction derived from the idea of love, “amateur” now denotes a mongrel type and connotes disdain. The amateur is not a philistine but he is incompetent, he scatters his energies, and he never sees things from the correct or professional point of view. Like all unclassified people in a world of organized functions, he is a nuisance. For in the last one hundred and fifty years the liberal arts have split and split again, like the original amoeba. The sciences dropped off first, then each separate art or science; and within each, every separate activity, marked by labels and degrees, to a point where mankind is now divided into the two cultural classes of haves and have nots. You are licensed or you are not. This demarcation is so strongly reenforced by our institutions, whether trade unions or educational establishments, that it is no wonder the amateur looks anachronistic, primitive in his wholeness, close to the amoeba.

Yet when we examine the “society” to which we assign the role and duty of supporting the professionals, we find that it shows no unanimous, spontaneous desire to maintain the arts and discharge its duty. Certain persons have this desire and voluntarily assume the duty; and on inquiring into their status or quality one finds that they are in their diverse ways amateurs. Rightly or wrongly, with or without capacity, they love this or that art, or all the arts, and pay for the privilege. They take lessons, they attend concerts, they read books, they buy discs—some of them strive to become good performers. More, they talk and publicize their tastes. It is clear that they form no homogenous group of perpetual laymen, but pre-

sent rather a variety of interests and accomplishments that grow and change with circumstances and the passage of time. As a type “the” amateur does not exist; and as a group he turns out to be “the” public for the several arts—the public we professionals invoke and flatter in the abstract, the indispensable public.

Similarly, “the” professional is a myth, or at best an unlikely hypothesis, presupposing as the term does a near-identity of training, powers and purposes among a host of people. It is not merely their specialization as teachers and performers, composers and critics, that divide them, but a hundred differences of temperament, ability, and artistic ideology. The professional label spells uniformity only in the great conspiracy against the public. When you go behind the scenes and listen to the heart-felt gossip of the guild, you discover that no one within it really knows his business except the speaker and his revered teacher, now safely gathered.

As a guildsman myself, I can see that this is exactly as it should be: any artistic conviction worth the name implies a stubborn singleness of vision which usually (not always) blots out the merit of others. Add to this the normal dose of envy and jealousy, and you have for every profession no company of mutually respectful equals but a regular gradation of imperfect aspirants to the good. A parallel gradation necessarily obtains among amateurs, and it follows that by applying rigorously any tests of pure talent one would find many an amateur high up among the professionals and many a professional down among the duffers.

A test of pure talent is of course quite imaginary, and the distinction between professional and amateur remains real, indeed obvious. Only, it rests on other grounds than those commonly assumed, especially by the professionals themselves. It does not, as we just saw, signify a difference in native gifts, nor in devotion to the particular art, nor in the understanding and judgment of art at large. What it signifies is almost a tautology: the amateur does not earn, or try to earn, his livelihood by exercising the art of his choice; as a consequence he is free from certain compulsions inseparable from being artisan as well as artist.

To put it the other way around, the professionals resemble and recognize one another by virtue of the stigmata that their trade has left upon them. They are like the dog in the fable, whose collar had made an indelible mark around his neck. The amateur is the shaggy wolf whom no dog had better trust too far. Knowing certain things, using certain words, dealing with routine difficulties in a certain way are the characteristics of the professional. Some of this knowledge and prowess is indeed necessary, but much of it is arbitrary and changes with time and place. A professional pianist of 1890 would probably sound “amateurish” today, just as a modern singer would sound amateurish—downright untrained—to an



eighteenth-century jury of Italian professionals. There is a sense in which "professional standards" are but conventions for creating solidarity in place of the critical judgment that might destroy the guild. X may not grasp the essence of music but he's heard of tonic sol-fa—and what's more, he's taught it. The counterpart of this is the judgment that defines the amateur: "He doesn't even know..."; "he hasn't even heard of..." some elementary thing. In the eyes of the die-hard professional, no amount of genius will outweigh some glaring deficiency in the supposed rudiments, for the lack strips the man of his blazon and forces his antagonist to test their respective powers in action.

This reminder of the conventionality of profession standard does not mean that other things being equal the amateur is "as good as" the career man. To begin with, in such matters other things are never equal; they are incommensurable. In the second place, the application, the ambition, the obsession of the great professional is bound to make him absolutely superior to the finest amateur in all that is subject to the will. And the time spent on self-perfecting breeds habits that sustain or replace the will when it flags. In this regard, James Agate said the definitive word: "A professional is a man who can do his job when he doesn't feel like it." When the professional does feel like it and deploys the full strength of his native talents and acquired perfections, he is quite simply the great artist of our dreams, the paragon by which all others, professional and amateur, are measured.

But by this very definition, the sublime professional in whom all is genuine gift and discipline, not tricks of the trade eking out faults of nature, is what the scientists call a limiting case, that is to say, an ideal example constructed from partial observations of life. In actuality the advantages of professionalism are acquired at a price, great or small, and it behooves the critic to assess this impartially, just as it behooves him to spur and chide the amateur. The critic must in fact play one off against the other in the interest of art.

This dialectical opposition of persons is of course the parallel to the tension within the work of art between form and contents. We may properly concede that the distinction lies in the mind rather than in the work, for we perceive contents and form as one thing. Yet it remains a fact that in both creation and performance there come moments when only one demand can be satisfied, that of structure or that of meaning. We accordingly have the right to contrast technique and musicianship, polish and verve, dexterity and intelligence, precision and passion, ritual and spirit; and if we are wise we want all of each that is compatible with its contrary.

The role of the amateur is to keep insisting on the primacy of style, spirit, musicianship, meaning over any technical accomplishment. It is idle to say that he does this because he has the taste of sour grapes upon him. Perhaps he does envy the professional his technique, but he has also good reason to deplore it when offered as a substitute for thought. And it cannot be denied that the congenital disease of professionals is creeping anesthesia. They cease to hear, see, and think. It is for example the professionals who keep in print a large quantity of third- and fourth-rate music because it favors their instrument or is useful in teaching. It is the professionals who misguide the public by vain displays of virtuosity, competitions of speed or trivial accuracy, appeals by specious means to irrelevant emotions.

When I say that the professionals do this, I do not mean to imply that they are not tempted and abetted by the public. The corruption moves along an endless chain in which both public and performer prefer mechanics to art as being more showy, easier to command, less of a strain on the judgment—and hence sure-fire as regards applause and box-office returns. The by-product is to make still more difficult and uncertain the success of true art.

On this score the testimony of history is overwhelming. The best critics of every generation have groaned at the dearth of genuine artists amid a plenty of professionals. They have railed and stormed at the vulgarity of accepted tricks or traditions that denatured the meaning or quality of masterpieces. This purging of professional error can only be carried on with the aid of amateur taste and amateur performance: the critic is seldom himself a singer or actor, and he derives his notions of the possible from what he observes outside the professional arenas: "Miss Z. has no voice but how she can sing! If only our professionals, etc..."

Again, the history of creation is but a succession of battles between amateurs of genius—inspired heretics—and orthodox professionals. Every art has escaped sterile imitation and Alexandrianism only because men of genius broke up the old routines. We should remember more often than we do how many great artists were never "properly" trained and so remained, in the eyes of the rest, rank amateurs: Schumann, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Delius, Moussorgsky are a few that occur from recent history. Their genius, we say, overcame their lack of instruction, just as in opposite instances, it had to overcome an excess of same. No one but a mediocrity has ever been heard to approve his own education and the reason is plain. It seems part of the nature of things that all advance, all success in the unattempted, should be the work of the "irregulars." This is true even in the simpler world of machinery. We must take it as indicative that Edison and Ford both had a strong aversion to experts. As Ford put it in a brilliant phrase, the amateurs seem "less familiar with the impossible," and so conquer it more often.

The price the amateur pays for his singular power is of course very palpable: he wastes time, rediscovers what is known, and makes colossal blunders. But to dwell on any of these faults after they occur argues a weak, not a healthy, critical judgment. They are what we should expect and should dismiss from our minds without outcry, reserving our strength to praise the successful new achievement. If this suggestion seems unfair after the advocacy of strict dealing with professionals, we must remind ourselves of their respective moral positions. The professional has pretensions; he has made a contract, registered a vow, to serve a particular art, and we hold him to it when he commits a breach of faith or palms off a counterfeit product. The amateur as such has no pretensions—whatever may be his personal egotism or self delusion. In fact and theory he is deemed superfluous and marginal, and he usually acts apologetic. Yet it is from him that historically we receive our best gifts. It follows that to be treated justly his hits should be counted and his misses forgotten. Unlike the professional's faults, the amateur's are harmless because they are atypical and no one will take them as models or precedents.

But there is a further reason why leniency is called for, and that is the neglected truth that all professionals are themselves amateurs in some part of their own domain, and therefore must sooner or later claim our indul-





gence. This reversal of roles is due to the same cause that produces the professional's chief virtue, and that is: Concentration. The pianist, for example, has trained his hearing in a particular way; when it comes to playing with a string quartet he is probably insensitive to the refinements of their medium, cannot hear or gauge—much less direct—their efforts at perfection: he is an amateur in strings.

Doubtless a good pianist would soon conquer so elementary and physiological a handicap, provided he had the desire and the time. But an acquaintance with musicians or any other artists in the mass shows that the higher reaches of knowledge present the same unsuspected inequalities. Very few professional musicians respond with their whole mind and soul to the several kinds of music. Some actively dislike choral or orchestral works, others are devoted exclusively to the piano. Some will not listen to the organ, or to any music composed after 1700. The assumption that the term musician denotes a complete artist who can compose, play, hear, and lead any music is as obsolete as the notion that a doctor is a man who can treat a patient from head to toe. The professional of today is inevitably a specialist whom competition has made very searching in depth and detail, and very ignorant—if not scornful—of things outside his purview.

Nowhere is this more evident than in educational institutions, where the student is required to develop an interest in the liberal arts under the tuition of men who put their pride in ignoring all but one. This paradox of bad pedagogy seems invulnerable to reason, and in truth it is due not so much to intellectual rigor, or to the sense of one's limitations, as it is to laziness and misplaced fear. From this *mauvaise honte* the amateur is largely free, and being free he can recognize and cherish the unity of culture. In the art of his predilection he moves easily among the various forms, styles, periods, persons. Usually he has an intuitive grasp of the identical relation of all the arts to human experience, and in his stumbling uninhibited way he helps to promote a common language of discussion and criticism. To that extent he works for true culture and for the ideal solidarity which the professions cannot help breaking up into exclusive camps. We should remember that the meaning of *esprit de corps* originally was (and in France still is) derogatory: it means clannishness at all costs, particularism; and it accordingly needs the corrective of otherness and cosmopolitan freedom.

To say all this is to say that in effect the relation of the amateur to the professional is that of the individual to society. The profession is a society. It conserves what the outsider creates, he being an outsider by the mere fact of his difference from the compact body. To be sure, he draws from them most of his knowledge and possibly even his desire to innovate. But what he brings is more than what he takes, and all in all his services to the community are irreplaceable. A world of professionals is an image to shudder at; it would not be a world peopled, and hence capable of novelty; it would be *staffed* and rolling in accredited grooves. We may complain and cavil at the anarchy which is the amateur's natural element, but in soberness we must agree that if the amateur did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.

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