

# **MUSIC AND BAD MANNERS**

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Music and bad manners by Carl Van Vechten

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**CARL VAN VECHTEN**

**MUSIC AND  
BAD MANNERS**



Music  
and Bad Manners

*Carl Van Vechten*



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*To my Father*

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## Music and Bad Manners

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SINGERS, musicians of all kinds, are notoriously bad mannered. The storms of the Titan, Beethoven, the petty malevolences of Richard Wagner, the weak sulkiness of Chopin ("Chopin in displeasure was appalling," writes George Sand, "and as with me he always controlled himself it was as if he might die of suffocation") have all been recalled in their proper places in biographies and in fiction; but no attempt has been made heretofore, so far as I am aware, to lump similar anecdotes together under the somewhat castigating title I have chosen to head this article. Nor is it alone the performer who gives exhibitions of bad manners. (As a matter of fact, once an artist reaches the platform he is on his mettle, at his best. At home he — or she — may be ruthless in his passionate display of floods of "temperament." I have seen a soprano throw a pork roast on the floor at dinner, the day before a performance of Wagner's "consecrational festival play," with the shrill explanation, "Pork before *Parsifal!*" On the street he may shatter the clouds with his lightnings — as, indeed, Beethoven is said to have done — but on the stage he becomes, as a rule, a superhuman being, an in-

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terpreter, a mere virtuoso. Of course, there are exceptions.) Audiences, as well, may be relied upon to behave badly on occasion. An auditor is not necessarily at his best in the concert hall. He may have had a bad dinner, or quarrelled with his wife before arriving. At any rate he has paid his money and it might be expected that he would make some demonstration of disapproval when he was displeased. The extraordinary thing is that he does not do so oftener. On the whole it must be admitted that audiences remain unduly calm at concerts, that they are unreasonably polite, indeed, to offensively inadequate or downright bad interpretations. I have sat through performances, for example, of the Russian Symphony Society in New York when I wondered how my fellow-sufferers could display such fortitude and patience. When *Prince Igor* was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera House the ballet, danced in defiance of all laws of common sense or beauty, almost compelled me to throw the first stone. The parable saved me. Still one doesn't need to be without sin to sling pebbles in an opera house. And it is a pleasure to remember that there have been occasions when audiences did speak up!

In those immeasurably sad pages in which