

NEW BOOKS

KRENEK ON MUSIC HERE AND NOW

ERNST KRENEK's *Über Neue Musik* originally published in Vienna and reviewed in MODERN MUSIC by Roger Sessions, has reappeared, with added material, in an English translation by Barthold Fles (W. W. Norton and Co.) with the title *Music Here and Now*. In its present form it makes important contribution to the general exposition of modern music, of atonality and the twelve-tone technic in particular.

What distinguishes this from other recent volumes is first, the quality of Mr. Krenek's pessimism which, right or wrong, is wholesome, hopeful and constructive, where others have made their readers feel that music was going to the dogs. Secondly, what he writes about atonality and twelve-tone music is authoritative, whereas the opinion of some others has been speculative, prejudiced and fearful. Many are satisfied that they are solving problems by condemning what they do not approve. Mr. Krenek dodges no issue—his entire book is a four-square attempt to prove that atonality and the twelve-tone method are the only new paths by which music can reach the future.

To one who cannot share his conviction his statements seem at times to radiate a convert's blind faith. At the beginning of his career, he confesses, he used atonal material because, being young, it seemed then to be the most radical means available. Next he turned against Schönberg and the twelve-tone technic, believing "that it should be possible,

by means of intensive new experience, to make the inherited material seem so fresh and powerful that a primeval sense would emerge from it. . . ." His conscience, however, would not let him rest; he felt that he had run away from the problem. "I had not realized what a decisive turning point music had reached with the advent of atonality (with all its implication of widening the scope of the art) nor that the continued existence of music would seem impossible and senseless if one did not struggle to the very end with the problem thus raised." The far-reaching problems raised by atonality "must be of serious concern to musicians before we can expect to achieve further progress."

Whether or not readers accept his dictum that atonality is the only way for music's salvation, they will be greatly impressed by Krenek's astute powers of observation and his erudition; his understanding of musical conditions and of the foibles of human nature; the fearlessness with which he attacks the problems of public taste, of commercialism in the handling of music, of the accepted "repertory program," of the faultiness of the royalty system, of the operatic situation and the modern idiom, and the non-constructive attitude of professional and lay critics.

Not all that is contemporary is new, says Krenek. The specialist will call modern "only that part of our contemporary music which emerges from the whole by a visible deviation from tradition in its material, its style, or in some other essential feature." With cutting

truth he dwells on the danger of turning success into mere commercialism; on a reactionary attitude; on the effect of neo-classicism, the disciples of which "bend their efforts to avoid, ignore, and supplant all that transformation of material which is covered by the term 'atonality;'" on Stravinsky's influence on contemporary music, and the transmission of surrealism to the field of music.

Folk-lore research, in his view, has had a reactionary effect on contemporary music. "Bartok is almost the only one who succeeds in bringing his penchant for folklore into fruitful relationship with the vivifying powers of the new music."

Krenek believes America has the opportunity to be what Europe once was — a spiritual and cultural unit. "The genuine American national ideal, unequivocally imprinted by history, is the one of humanity; and therefore the road for American music is clearly indicated in the direction of human universalism." He holds up Charles Ives as one whose "imaginary world is replete with purely native rudiments . . . but whose musical vision is far from being provincial or primitive." Ives' boldness to compose in so "impractical" a manner, is, he finds "stimulating in a period when conformity is rampant."

There is also, in two valuable chapters, "The Concept of Music in the Western World" and "Rise and Decline of Tonality," a history of the growth of musical structures. Atonality is presented as the inevitable development of Western music. The opposition to the modern visual arts is trifling compared to "the stone wall of silent rejection faced by atonal music." Mr. Krenek identifies atonality "by its distinguishing lack of the cadential and dominant functions and

the supplementary absence of a definite key-consciousness." He presents the arguments against atonality, and then fervently pleads its cause, showing its essential characteristics, with the aim of giving a fresh view of its significance to our epoch.

For those prejudiced for or against the twelve-tone technic, there is much valuable information in the pages of this book. It is, says Mr. Krenek "nothing more than an attempt to produce a new 'balance' by contrapuntal methods." It brings back the concepts of iteration and free articulation, outstanding characteristics of early church music, and breaks down the "symmetrical-scanning" which was one of the faults of the Romantic style. The fundamental principle is that "all the elements in a musical composition, whatever they may be, are developed from a single germ cell consisting of a succession of twelve different tones, stipulated in advance." To clear up possible misconceptions as to atonality and the twelve-tone technic, he writes: "Atonality covers a far larger territory and indicates a sound-language — a condition of the musical means necessitated by its historical development. . . . The twelve-tone technic signifies a grammatical style of the language, a method of composing within its range."

The twelve-tone technic he admits, may become less rigid. It is a disciplinary measure, and is sensible in so far as it "enlarges the region of spiritual freedom." Neither the only way nor the last word in composition, atonality, like every other musical method, "is exposed to change, to disintegration, and to transformation into a different sound language."

A great variety of other subjects is also

considered. The chapter, "New Media," covers a discussion of performance, the development of orchestration; "Work-Fidelity" relates to interpretation, phonograph, radio and mechanical reproduction. "From Minuet to Swing" throws much light on the perpetual conflict between serious and "popular" music. He criticizes frankly the weakness of the I.S.C.M. as he sees it. He asks "must opera perish?" and answers with practical suggestions involving radical changes of policy in production and a different concept of the essence of opera, with new methods of expression and new music to

present them. He also believes that "the composer's status in the imagination of society would change soon enough if new music were more strongly emphasized" in musical education.

And finally he says "the greatest psychological dangers of our time are a frivolous optimism which rejects all problems, and a desperately smart nihilism which, *a priori*, regards their solution as impossible and much prefers to await the 'inevitable disaster.'" He warns that both these attitudes are unworthy, and that we must proceed to the solution of the problem "here and now."

Marion Bauer

AN IDEA FOR BIOGRAPHY

ONE pledge of Deems Taylor's perfectly is redeemed by the short biographies of composers "from Bach to Stravinsky" making up Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock's *Men of Music*. "Whatever your reaction to the contents of this book" volunteers the famous commentator in his introduction to the volume (Simon and Schuster), "you will not, I promise you, be bored." Dutch Cleanser chases dirt no faster than it chases ennui. All is humanizing lack of awe in it, piquancy, alertness, a brightness at times witty and not infrequently sagacious. The texture cheerfully mixes intimate anecdotes and picturesque details with flashes of sometimes poetic and original insight. While giving the musical public the low-down on its favorite composers' venereal infections and sexual neuroses: the syphilis of Gluck, Beethoven and Schubert; Tchaikowsky's homosexuality, Chopin's effeminacy, the mother-fixation of Brahms, Wagner's

tendency to entanglement with married couples etc., at the same time audaciously it reappraises many a masterpiece. Possibly a few of the judgments are silly: for example the characterization of the *poco allegretto* in Brahms' *F-major Symphony* as "tepid and unadventurous." Possibly a few others are merely cheeky: for instance the complacent citation of Professor Dent's unfortunate "Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* should long ago have been retired to the shelf." Others of these revaluations are well-advised. Of course the *Appassionata* "ends in an orgy of musical fist-shaking!" Of course the *F-minor Fantaisie* of Chopin "has an architecture of its own as discoverable as cogent to its interpretation as that of a classical sonata!"

Not that *Men of Music* doesn't here and there — despite its unusual brightness — give one the effect of something a trifle antiquated. To begin with: its covert but essential *East Lynne* pathos. The ancient