

## FORECAST AND REVIEW

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### SYMPHONIC AND CHAMBER MUSIC, NEW YORK

SCHÖNBERG's "free transformation" of Handel's *Concerto Grosso* into a concerto for string quartet and large orchestra, given by the Philharmonic, is a disconcerting work, to say the least. Being neither fish nor fowl, it repels almost every possible approach. Based on the product of another composer, the work obviously cannot speak for Schönberg's creative personality. And because there is in most part a considerable deviation from Handel's composition, it is just as impossible to regard the music as a transcription. So completely does this "free transformation" evade all existing categories of musical expression, that, short of recognizing it as a unique masterpiece which transcends all classification, there is no recourse but to view it as an artistic freak of the first order. Surely there is something unnatural about the origins of this work. His free-handed manipulation of Handel's music Schönberg justifies on the grounds that "such freedom would be found hardly more disturbing stylistically than the cadenzas which modern writers apply to classical concerti." It is grotesque enough that the mere existence of such a necessary evil as the modern cadenza should become the rationale for a work. But the full flavor of his complicated intent lies deeper still. Around an existing form Schönberg elaborates an entirely new structure. How is one to accept this structure, if not as pure act of creation? For structure is inseparable from creation itself, is its essential physiognomy in fact. And if Schönberg's concern is with the creation of new structure why must he approach it by the devious route of an existing form? Bach,

when he undertakes to adapt a work of Vivaldi, is the superior craftsman refining the work of an inferior one. His complete interest is in bringing Vivaldi's design to firmer and richer conclusions. Had he been concerned with a new form he would scarcely have complicated matters by weaving it across the threads of Vivaldi's pattern.

Two impulses of an entirely different order have combined in Schönberg to produce this extraordinarily hybrid creation: on one plane the desire of the craftsman to emend the unsatisfactory elements of another's work; on the other, an impulse to create a new form. It is a forced union, and no effort, no skill, however great, can create a real unity between them. Two physiognomies are always present, an Handelian simplicity of harmony and line and, merged with this, a complication of thought and texture that only a Schönberg could contrive. It is impossible to lose sight of these disparate elements; combined in one body, both sources remain recognizable. This dual aspect gives the work its singularly repellent character, and makes the application of the term hybrid much more than a figure of speech.

If this music had an authentic life of its own it would hardly be necessary to delve into its sources; our interest would be for the music itself. But such a distortion must be related to a psychological attitude. Why does a man in the full command of his artistic resources turn to so ambiguous an expression? Schönberg attaches more than an occasional importance to this work; he has announced several more of a similar nature. It may lie outside the scope of a review to inquire into the psychological motivation of a composer, but here these considerations impose themselves. Schönberg has found himself increasingly out of touch with the concert world of today. He has composed work after work based on the uncompromising formulae of atonality. But the current of the times has been in another direction, and almost no attempt has been made to absorb his productions in recent years. A betrayal of his own esthetics to establish some rapport with the world would be unthinkable for Schönberg. By undertaking the revision, if revision it be, of older works he finds some common ground on which to meet his audience. But, at the same time, he is under the compulsion to manifest himself

as a creator; and so these motives cross, and, in their confusion, prevent the development of clear strong expression.



The most immediate impression of Alban Berg's *Symphonic Suite* from the opera *Lulu* (given by the Boston Symphony), is its comparative simplicity of style. Berg has tempered the complicated and rigid procedures of pure atonality. He has modified its abstract chromaticism, and allowed a diffused kind of diatony to take shape. He may claim that all of this music does fit into an atonal structure. But inescapable is the dwelling upon melodic tones and harmonic successions that we instinctively relate to tonal pattern. Another striking feature of the work is the vocal aspect of its *melos*. The sweep and contour of the lines are so broad, so defined and closely knit, as to take on a vocal character. One might say that to this extent Berg has humanized his work. A typical disregard for the vocal basis of musical thought has always characterized atonal music. It is never the inner voice or inner ear that arbitrates the degree of its acoustic complexities. We can neither sing this music nor think it interiorly. Atonality develops its conceptions at the expense of this human participation. But Berg's music has never been completely without a vocal essence. Perhaps this is why some quality of his personality has always made itself felt when other abstract productions of his school have been void of any meaning. The music a man instinctively sings out expresses him more completely than all the contrapuntal complications in the world. If Berg has allowed his symphonic music to be dominated by a vocal impulse, it would follow that his treatment of the voice itself should gain in intensity. The *Song of Lulu* is written with an amazing instinct for a special quality of vocal expressiveness. The tremulous *melismae* of the voice impart an extraordinary pathos to this song, perhaps the only really original music in the suite. The features I have singled out in the rest of the music do not of themselves give it value. They are factors by which Berg's music has gained in accessibility. In a sense, with this music Berg has tried to reclaim his roots in an audience. In comparison with Schönberg's analagous intention, Berg's is truer

artistically. There has been no esthetic legerdemain, no attempt to speak with another man's voice, like Schönberg's grotesque sort of ventriloquy. He has spoken freely, and revealed his essential temperament as romantic par excellence. If Berg must simplify his style, it was inevitable that the result should be a music strongly colored by Wagner and Mahler. These are the sources of Schönberg too; but Berg at least has had the vitality and honesty to follow the romantic pulse of his nature.



The scale of interest at the concert of the League of Composers ranged from the high point of Hindemith's *Serenade* to the low of Ernst Toch's songs. In between came Walter Piston's *Suite for Oboe and Piano*, Shostakovitch's *Prelude for Piano*, and Ross Finney's *Violin Sonata*. Hindemith's work has a quality of charm and beauty that gives it a unique place among his compositions. It is a succession of short pieces for voice with variously combined instruments; each piece drawn with the simplest means. The outlines are so clear, that with no more than a single instrument accompanying the voice Hindemith is able to round out a completely defined form. And then he displays an uncanny feeling for contrast. Each little tone-poem is cunningly placed and sets the other off in miraculous fashion. Hindemith achieves such an extraordinary result in the disposition of his material just because each form is so distinct in profile. The mysterious sinuous curve from the beginning to the end of the *Presto* for the viola and 'cello is so very penetrating in its effect, that the slow piece for voice and oboe becomes dramatic by its very juxtaposition. The concluding *Gute Nacht* is no doubt the most beautiful of the set. In itself it traverses a whole cycle of expression. It is astonishing to realize that this well-developed musical design has been carried out by just voice and viola, and that it is none the less as completely telling at its climax as at its lovely opening phrase.

Walter Piston's *Suite* is a work that needs a rehearing. It is such unassuming and self-contained music that we are apt at first to overlook its real qualities. If by reason of this reticence it seems to lack a certain profile, none the less it is a music that

proceeds on solid ground. This may be negative praise, but Piston's work, with its sure draftsmanship, and its fine sense of proportion gains continually on further acquaintance. It has more qualities than just his craftsmanship. For all its sobriety of manner it is curiously personal, with its dry wit, simplicity of mood, its unassuming decisiveness. His music may not seize us by its sheer force of expression, but it speaks for Piston the individual. But what reflects Piston more than this or that trait is the seriousness and refinement of his musical ideals. He defines an ever larger place for himself by the completeness of his style and attainment. Other of our composers may speak with greater impetuosity or brilliance, but none maintains a standard so unrelentingly.

Shostakovitch is a musician who might profit by more earnestly applied criteria. I have found about two or three of his six *Preludes* as bad as the others were good. But if this music is not always assured in actual content it is always so in manner. Its most striking quality is self-confidence, a complete acceptance of its own moods whether lyrical, whimsical, or satiric. The first *Prelude* with its clear direct opening and its dramatic close on a pedal-point is the most impressive.

Ross Finney's *Violin Sonata* has qualities of admirable musicianship. The music is on a broad scale and is carried through with decision. But the style is not as yet completely formed. It aims for the solidity of classical structure and tries to combine with this the nervous, brittle mosaic of modern form. In the choice of themes, for instance, the approach is academic, in its formalized psychology of contrast. His modernism betrays him at times into breaking up the surface and continuity of his line, where a straightforward development would be much more to the point.

The wonder of Ernst Toch's songs is that they are not more effective. Intelligence and taste plus musicianship have gone into their making. He has feeling for the words, and he knows how to project mood about them, and drama, too, where it appertains. He will in fact summon up with the greatest of ease whatever particular emotion is incumbent at the moment. Toch is a facile composer in every sense of the word. He can deal out

any phase of emotion as promptly as he can turn out counterpoint. Thus he assigns to each song its proper ingredient of pathos or gayety, passion or pain. It may be sheer power of imagination that is at work here; an imagination so great that it transfers itself into whatever mood is necessary. However, it is more likely that the whole gamut of human emotions exists in Toch's mind as just so much purely *fictive* material which he acts out in the interests of composition. He exercises his intelligence on this material in an effort to make it plausible. And that is the furthest he reaches. So that everything is plausible—and nothing convincing.

*Israel Gitkowitz*

### THOMSON'S MASS AND OTHER CHORAL WORKS

THE Dessoff Choirs, consisting of the Adesdi Chorus, (women's, sounding well) and the A Cappella Singers, (mixed, singing well) gave their final and not very enjoyable performance at Town Hall on April tenth, each chorus presenting works by two contemporary composers. The Adesdi gave the premiere of Virgil Thomson's *Mass*, commissioned by the League of Composers a year ago. The two vocal parts are simple and singable. The addition of percussion gave the music a real punch and clipped off as much as possible the tiny but annoying loose ends of sound left over between words by the singers, who obviously failed to get the idea of this matter-of-fact, hard boiled piece. (The critics were right on one score: it is no more devout than any group of nuns who have just finished tidying up the chapel and who are looking forward to some rolls and coffee.)

In the *Kyrie* the accompaniment of cymbal and the alto's ostinato figure established the straightforward mood. At times the snare-drum's punctuation of phrases in the *Credo* evoked the similar drum-remarks stuck in between strophes by the Saharan story-tellers. And it was used very much in the same way and for the same reason: to keep up the interest by helping to unify a long and repetitious text without much sense, by distributing landmarks in the form of various rhythmic designs spread along the large melodic design. The trim opening motif which recurs at "et resurrexit" and again at "Et unam sanctam"