

RECENT BOOKS

AND NOW, BASIC MUSIC

FOR those to whom the elementary formative disciplines of musical composition have no less importance and dignity than its most advanced stages, Schönberg's *Models for Beginners in Composition* (G. Schirmer, New York) and Hindemith's *Traditional Harmony* (Associated Music Publishers, New York) will come as a distinct disappointment. In view of the immense theoretical background of both authors, the narrow and conventional framework within which the respective materials are presented here is quite surprising. Both texts are designed for the practical requirements of the typical congeries of college music students. Still, that avowed function does not fully account for the narrowness of presentation. Both authors are explicit in their belief that students without the least creative ability may encompass these materials. Schönberg, much more than Hindemith, has formulated his contents to this end with an admirable consistency. It is curious however, that both should hew to the line of the most common denominator. Surely the musical needs of the serious student are not so adequately met that the one with "little creative ability and musicianship" need become the measure of success for a given method. The needs of the normally-gifted, let alone the highly-gifted student, are by far underestimated, and what is generally purveyed in the name of educational discipline leaves him grappling with an inert and shoddy musical language. Why then the emergence here of the student

"without the slightest creative idea?" Like the Dostoyevskan criminal who seeks a victim to concretize a pre-existent sense of guilt, the authors have perhaps invoked just such a student to personify the primitive and conventional lines which had already pre-determined their method.

In their conventionality these two books dramatize not only the lack of fusion between educational and creative practice, but particularly in Hindemith's case, a lack of relationship to the author's previous theoretical formulations. Hindemith attempts to explain away this gap by a thoroughly baffling process of reasoning; he lumps together all previous harmony methods; castigates them, yet states they have covered the ground again and again, nothing new remains to be said in that sphere, even by the greatest minds; in its totality, conventional harmony study is definitely outdated, yet for lack of a widely adopted newer system must be retained in a position of prime importance; but the material must be speedily absorbed; he, Hindemith, undertakes another conventional harmony-text in full "realization of its relative unimportance;" its virtues, however, will lie in the text's brevity, a minimum of rules and theory, and a greater stress on practical exercises. Taking it at its surface value, this craftsman-like stress on practice has provided a healthy source of exercise-material for the conventional course. But health, alas, has its neuroses too – as Nietzsche once pointed out. In his preface Hindemith

threshes about vigorously, bashing down "great thick harmony text-books," but his "emphasis on exercises and a minimum of rules" endows the book with only a specious air of lean vigor. The teacher who undertakes to guide the student from the elementary to the advanced stages of this material will of necessity have implemented the practical matter with a good deal of "theory" and "rules" – culled possibly from thicker texts than Hindemith's.

In this book Hindemith leaves harmony-study exactly where the most limited nineteenth century theorist leaves it – a strictly mechanical process of connecting chords. There is no indication of the vital inter-relation between harmony-study and the harmonic practices of music itself. To the extent that the advanced exercise material goes far beyond the mere technic of chord connections and touches the realm of composition, the text is in ill accord with its own design. It leaves a wide gap between its limited harmonic implements and the wider stresses this same material must furnish at a later point. Certainly the matter of *conventional* harmony study has been gone over again and again, as Hindemith says. But in the integration of harmony with creative practice, past or present, much remains to be done. Precisely this integration offers a fresh field of theoretical contribution. Without it, another harmony text is simply a routine affair – thick or thin.

Schönberg's text, more unassuming, and more logically developed, is wholly successful in its pedagogic design. By deriving melodic motifs from a harmonic unit, and combining these harmonies in various ways, proceeding systematically from the simplest combinations, he en-

ables the beginner to contrive a semblance of musical coherence in his various constructions. But if, pedagogically, there is much to admire in this procedure, one nevertheless questions the musical goals of the approach, with its over-simplification of musical matter. The relation of these over-simplified forms to living musical speech is not that of simpler syntactical forms to the complex ones of real musical language. Rather they seem to reach towards a sort of primitive and bastardized language – a language which enables even the little-gifted to contrive a minuet "that is not quite impossible." Surely that is not an essential task. There is nothing to be gained from contriving a primitive language for the use of students, while far above them the language of the masters dangles from unimaginable heights. The essential is to present the real language in its simplest syntactical forms first of all – but always with a clear understanding of its relationship to the more elaborated forms. The more fundamental the cleavage between the practice of student and master the less hope for any real progress on the part of the student. It is much more useful to stress the quantitative differences which measure off the work of the master and that of the pupil, than to delimit two metaphysically different languages: the masterly one with "something to express," while the pupil toils mechanically with an inferior matter. The student is to begin with, only too conscious of the distance that separates him from the master. To drive the wedge still deeper is perfectly useless. Schönberg, with characteristic thoroughness, has contrived a kind of Basic Music, suitable perhaps to the little-gifted, but hardly for the more capable.

Israel Citkowitz