

THE NEWER COUNTERPOINT

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LIKE everything else in "new music" the new counterpoint was at first a phenomenon of reaction. What the modern movement set out to destroy and banish into oblivion, was music with a "meaning," music as expression, as the bearer of emotion, in short, so-called poetic and program music. All this was to be replaced by absolute music, music "as sounds, formally arranged."

Nineteenth century music possessed two great means of producing emotional effect, its harmony and its method of intensification—intensification in the broader sense, by thematic contrast, by the sequence and by dynamics. It had become apparent that all the forms of descriptive music characteristic of the so-called progressives from Berlioz to Richard Strauss were now impossible. Indeed with the birth of the new music Richard Strauss, most progressive of living composers, was revealed as the most unmodern of all.

Though descriptive and program music could no longer survive, neither was it possible to return to the classical sonata as a cyclic form or to the sonata form movement proper. The classical sonata, and here lies the special implication of the word classic, is a unity to which melodic, harmonic and rhythmic elements contribute. If this balance is disturbed at any one point, the whole form is destroyed though superficially it may hold together. The mistake of the absolute musician in the nineteenth century lay in his refusal to abandon this form even though its inner balance had been steadily impaired since Beethoven's time. In Schubert there is the preponderance of sensuous sounds for their own sake, in Schumann there are rhythmic and in Mendelssohn melodic weaknesses. And the works of Brahms or Bruckner,

no matter how dissimilar their creative powers, may be regarded alike as a tragic attempt to restore that classical balance. Max Reger who continued to use the sonata form despite the devotion of his contemporaries to program music, made no attempt to regain this balance. He filled the given form with his hypertrophied harmony; his famous counterpoint is determined altogether harmonically.

Essential to the sonata are a simple and large-scale tonal plan and an architectonic form. If the sonata is a conception in which terms such as first and second theme, subsidiary theme, development, recapitulation, coda, etc. are still to have a meaning, then these parts must really be contrasted and never split off into separate entities.

What the nineteenth century did with the sonata was to destroy it from within. A return to its early classical and simple beginnings could however be of no avail; it would never restore the natural relations of the parts and elements. All the sonatinas which Reger especially but after him Busoni, Jarnach and many others wrote, avoid the obscure form and the emotional content of the romantic sonata and emphasize the contrapuntal and melodic elements. Yet they remain in the end only melancholy archaisms, the nostalgic vision of a lost childhood land of music.

The whole new music is nothing after all but the abandonment of that ideal and achievement of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven—the free movement. This free movement was not only controlled by the simplest tonal relationships, despite all the refinements of the nineteenth century, but in principle it was also antipolyphonic.

The course of progress from the overdeveloped and oversensitive harmony of the romantics, by way of the impressionism of Debussy—the first to abolish the functional connections of chords—led to the complete negation of all tonal relationships. A neo-classic music is possible only if these old relationships still exist or if new ones are attained. But the leap backwards over the classical to the still older masters, to the forms of Bach and of the music of the seventeenth, sixteenth, and even fifteenth and fourteenth centuries was not only possible but justified. Here was music that did not draw its life from contrasts but was purely

structural and which, if it ever used contrasts, as in the *concerto grosso*, never did so for an emotional or poetic effect, but for the pure dynamic value and sound quality of the music itself. This contact with the pre-classical enabled the new music to approach the abstract. Two musical elements could be almost completely excluded—harmony and rhythm. What remained was pure and independent melody. This accounts for the sudden emergence of the solo-sonata which allows the melody to develop for its own sake, free of all harmonic hindrances. When two or more such purely autonomous melodies are brought together, their harmonic relation is to be ignored, they may go their own way in entire independence. The conception of the interval has completely lost its meaning, for from the simultaneous sounding of two or more tones there has vanished every association of tension, every memory of consonance or dissonance. In fact one must exclude all such conceptions and memories, and in their stead learn to hear un-harmonically. In Bach there are already many places where the driving force of the separate lines overcomes the harmonic connections.

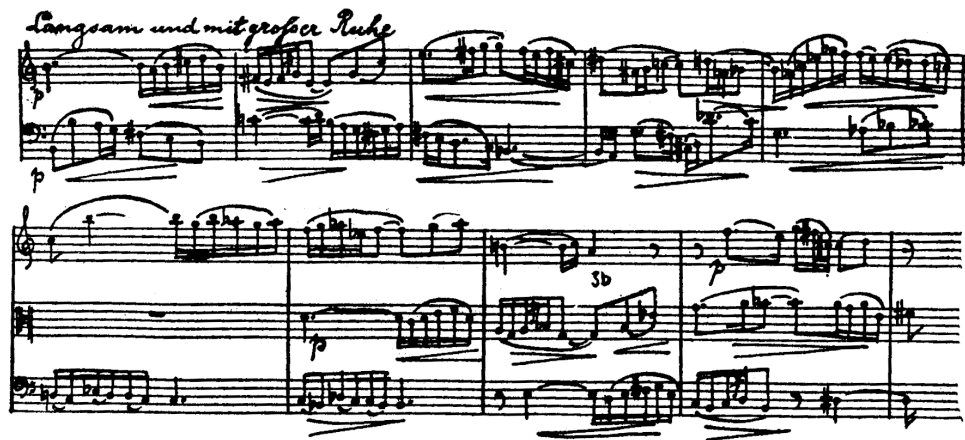


In order to consider the polyphonic content of a piece of modern music one must free the melody from all the accessory elements of accompaniment which are nothing more than contemporary substitutes for the old doubling in thirds, sixths and in the octave. All of Debussy is fundamentally monomelodic, and hundreds of chamber music and orchestral works of the new age are in a different way little else, shifting the melody from voice to voice, a sort of instrumental monody with a rhythmical accompaniment. There are all too few modern works based on strict structural polyphonic melody, one of the most noteworthy being Schönberg's *Piano Suite*, opus 25. But even Schönberg later left this purely contrapuntal mechanism to return, in his third *String Quartet*, opus 30, to a style in which one voice predominates over another—the subsidiary voice being, in spite of

its melodic form, nothing else than a split up, almost split apart, accompaniment.



Schönberg, the fanatic of consistency, is the main representative of a purely abstract music. Hindemith in Germany, also a polyphonic composer of the purest water, is too much the practical musician not to have instinctively recognized that the more completely contrapuntal music becomes, the stronger and more alive must its melodic motion be. It is not a question of the pure line alone, but rather of the plasticity of the melody itself. To realize the distinction fully, let us examine the beginning of the slow movement of Hindemith's *String Trio*, opus 34:



It is a strict canon in the sixth below, with an exact preservation of the interval relationships. The canon and all other devices of imitation are principally a means to achieve some possible form where all other efforts have failed.

A common means of binding together a movement is the ostinato bass motif; it hammers itself into the ear, gaining ever more melodic independence and importance; it permits other ostinato motives to be built up above it and lends itself to rhythmic

definiteness. It is not surprising that it dominates the field of chamber music among the Russians. Nowhere is it more characteristically employed than in the beginning of A. Mossoloff's *String Quartet*, opus 24, which is built up entirely on the ostinato technique.



Almost complete and separate melodic fragments, each one of a different type, are joined together here. The method reminds one of the motet technique of the thirteenth century, which has also found its modern revival in the vocal art of Petyrek and Kaminski.

The new counterpoint gains the greatest plasticity when it deals with a given, tonally determined melody. Hindemith's variations on the melody of *Prinz Eugen*, or the variant of a military march in his *Viola Concerto*, opus 36, number 4, show an entirely new departure:



It is a sort of return to the harmonic tension of the "punctus contra punctum" on a new basis.

But will not this very freedom and independence of the individual voices curtail the development and intelligibility of the new counterpoint? Is not polyphony pushed to extremes the destruction of polyphony? This is a most important question.

Fundamentally, even in the new music there can be no absolutely pure polyphony. The new music has sharpened our ears to the perception of harmonic tensions where our fathers and forefathers heard nothing but a chaos of sound. It will become more and more difficult for us altogether to escape the harmonic conception since the possibility of functional interpretations becomes ever greater. Why then should such interpretations be artificially excluded? A work of art becomes all the richer the greater the range of its interpretation grows, the more the various rhythmic, harmonic, melodic elements of music are forced together into a unity. The time of experimental formative isolation will pass; and there will come a new synthesis of all these elements.