

# MODERN MUSIC

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## CYCLE OF THREE CENTURIES

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THAT special development of art which we attempt to grasp under the concept of "new music," has reached a turning point. There is a startling resemblance to the conditions of three hundred years ago. Around 1635, the first standard bearers of the "nuove musiche," the Caccini, Peri and Cavalieri, who were more effective in their protest against tradition or negation of the past than in musical ability, were already almost historic figures. Only the really great creative personalities, Gagliano, Monteverdi, Heinrich Schütz remained. "The war on counterpoint" was now a dead issue, and the principle of polyphony had unobtrusively stolen back into music under the new guise of the concertizing principle, the competition of voices over a harmonically determined bass. Not until the thirties was the attempt made in Italy to formulate the theoretical basis of the transformation. True enough there had been plenty of manifestoes and polemics from 1600 on, but it took a quarter of a century before people like Vincenzo Giustiniani, Pietro della Valle, Giovanni Battista Doni, and Athanasius Kircher drew up an esthetic accounting of what they had gone through.

Now conditions repeat themselves. The advocates of pure negation of music by the previous generation are no longer with us or have changed, the disciples are vanished. Radicalism for its own sake is not now a program or a battlecry; and unnoticeably, elements out of the past—elements developed in accordance with new conceptions, but nevertheless inherited from the past—

are again being taken up. It seems to be symptomatic that musicians everywhere, (for example, Malipiero and Casella in Italy, Martin in French Switzerland) are making a personal appraisal; that long after the expositions of Schönberg, who for years was the only one aware of what he was doing, there have appeared almost simultaneously books by Ernst Krenek and Paul Hindemith which might be considered theoretical apologia, reflections on their own practises, a "demand for a rule."

There was chaos in the beginning, as there was before the Creation. If not chaos, then negation of everything existing. The new generation of musicians did not know what they wanted, but they did know just what they did not want. They did not want to use the materials of the art of the past. In particular they shunned the materials and the spirit of the age immediately preceding. All this hardly needs repetition. The immediate past was typified by Wagner and his epigones and nothing was more distressing to youth than this superabundance of emotion, this over-emphasized bathos, this misuse of music for unmusical ends; represented in opera by the presentation of "universal ideas," by treats for the bourgeoisie; in symphonic music by the presentation of a "program." No one better illustrates this reversal than Schönberg, whose output swings about from the hyper-romanticism of the *Gurrelieder* and the "super-Tristanization" of *Verklärte Nacht* to the *Klavierstücke*, opus 11 and 19. But the reversal extended even to the older generation. For Richard Strauss wrote no more program music after the *Alpen-Sinfonie* (1915), a climax of materialistic, empty picturization, and confined himself to operas, in which orchestral commentary can be just as superficial but is always esthetically legitimate.

In that chaos, the whole organism of previous music was dissolved, none of the elements remaining unaffected, neither rhythm nor harmony, certainly not polyphony. For the new, free counterpoint which does not accept harmonic development and permits two and more voices to develop together with no dependence on each other, is different from polyphony in the traditional sense, it is a dissociation of melodies or voices. Above all it was form that disintegrated. Without any rigid harmonic tie and tonal organization there can be no relaxation, no deviation;

where there is no motive, there can be no development of motives and no contrasts. The most vulnerable victim of the new music was the so-called sonata form, whose fate is bound up with the conception of discourse, and whose elements are visible in even the freest symphonic poem. Musicians who were inclined to compromise, Hindemith in the van, went back to an older ideal of form. They leaped across two centuries and nourished their motives on the apparently more neutral melodies of Bach, their dynamics on the old-classic principles of the concerto grosso, which is based on more elemental, more objective contrasts and not, like the sonata, on intensified climaxes.

But no matter how honorable the compromise, a compromise it remains. For the new music to have been really consistent, it should have renounced prolongation and any development in time. Schönberg in a few of his programmatic works, and some of his students, particularly Webern, were daring enough to be so consistent. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to conceive how a piece of music which denies the unity of rhythm, harmonics based on traditional or other interrelations, polyphony, motivistic construction, needs to be further developed once the impression or expression, or the "idea" of the composer has been set forth. It is obvious of course that we are discussing only "absolute" or autonomous music, and not dramatic or stage works whose extension and development depend on non-musical forces. Nevertheless in *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Berg felt the necessity of propping these operas up with the forms of absolute music, supporting them on two sides, so to speak. And while the simple listener believes he is following spiritual or dramatic impressions engendered by the music, the expert basks in the satisfying conviction that everything is in exact and perfect order, and can be proved black on white on paper, if not by ear. This necessity, this dependence on forms which are mostly old, disqualifies Berg as a genuine, consistent Schönberg disciple; the compromise however won him supporters and toleration in circles that otherwise react to modern music as a document of chaos and confusion.

The essential conciseness of the new music had to be overcome. Because of this need, Schönberg has proclaimed the right to

"construction" and created the twelve-tone scale, which is an effort toward a new organism. But it is an organism made up of wholly arbitrary elements. For those twelve tones of equal value are not to be found in nature, they are an abstraction; playing with them is an effort to intrude the transcendental into the world of the senses. Schönberg and his followers are making a coup d'esprit, an attempt that can be carried out with the greatest consistency, but which nevertheless lacks all relationship, every claim, to spiritual communication. The craftsmanship, the technique of this art, do come through, but no spiritual message. Try to improvise in the twelve-tone system and you immediately realize that this is music whose last detail is fixed on paper. The great problem of general communicability, the future of twelve-tone music, can be thus expressed: what is the relationship between the restraints of method and personal invention? In other words, between form and freedom? This music can attain communicability only if it can contrive a spiritual message, if it can add the values of art to skill, in short if it will form words out of the letters of the alphabet, and phrases from the words. Which indicates that by communicability we mean nothing less than "popularity" or universal validity. There are degrees of communicability in music; the *Einzug der Gäste in die Wartburg* is indubitably directed at a wider circle than the *Kunst der Fuge* or Brahms' clarinet sonata. All of this, of course, has no bearing on the relative quality of the three works. It would be enough if Schönberg's or Bartok's music attained communicability even for the smallest group. The whole question is whether creation can spring from construction, a problem for whose solution there is as yet no grasping point and no experience.

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The other musician of today whose work reveals the problem of the new music is Stravinsky. Stravinsky's production has gone through many stages, each symptomatic of the status of modern music, *Petrouchka* just as much as *L' Histoire d'un soldat*, *Oedipus Rex* or *Perséphone*. Stravinsky never became enmeshed in his structure, his musicianship is too rational, too devoid of the abstract, but he did come to a halt at many points in his development. Time and again he picked up the threads of previous

creation and then fled in any direction, in order to still create music at all. (We will disregard the serious question, which does not apply in the case of ordinary musicians; whether music should really continue to be created, whether it really can continue to be created.) He has been escaping since the Pergolesi suite, since *Apollon Musagète*, and then, ever more rapidly, from the violin concerto to *Jeu de cartes*, back into the past.

But his attitude is entirely new. Music of the past is just as historic for him as it is for Schönberg, whether the music of Bach and Pergolesi or of Wagner and Tchaikowsky are in question. When Max Reger writes a *Suite im alten Stil* he devotes himself with respectful earnestness to the task of creation à la Bach. When Debussy harks back to Couperin, he does so because he recognizes a spiritual kinship, because he considers himself a follower of Couperin. Stravinsky, however, has an oblique attitude toward the music of all his predecessors, and when he cites, uses or exploits them, he does not stand on their own ground but off to one side. He touches them only to maintain contact, and then travels further into the infinite. The term "tangential-music" might well be applied. When it is a question—as in the violin concerto—of a contact with Bach, the public remains serious, even though parody is involved, as in the obvious clowning of *Jeu de cartes*. For Stravinsky, the music of the past, even of the quite recent past, is a stirrup which he uses to swing himself into the saddle. The horse he rides is right out of his own stable, but where he is going is hard to guess.

Nevertheless, the example of the seventeenth century, which we have been talking about, should encourage many musicians. For almost a century, beginning with the fateful year of 1600, up to Corelli and Purcell or even to Scarlatti, Bach and Händel, strictly speaking, no significant, consummate music was written, no music which gave complete expression to its inner laws of form. It was always a struggle with form, always an experiment which never quite came off. And yet on the road to this complete accomplishment there stand works like Monteverdi's *Incoronazione di Poppea* or *Orfeo*, or Carissimi's cantatas and duets. It would be quite enough if a few such milestones were set up on our own road toward a future and completely significant music.