

MODERN YOUTH AT PRAGUE, 1935

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WHERE is the youth of today going? What are its reactions to the past and the future? These questions were raised by the concerts of the thirteenth festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, which took place in Prague after conflicting reports, announcements, postponements and dark rumors and denials of political interference.

A decided backward tendency is clearly discernible in the work of our modern young men, if it is compared, for example, with Schönberg's *Orchestral Variations*, written in 1928 and played at this festival. It is absurd that youth should be so fearful of experiment and the future of music be left in the hands of the older men. But—perish the thought—is it because experimentation demands a certain mastery which youth has not had time to acquire? Quite definitely, modern youth does not believe in musical cataclysm, and quite as definitely, it leans towards a continuity of thought and the melodic line so characteristic of the generation before the war. Are we through with the exaggerated rhythms, acrobatic orchestral effects and other characteristics of the post-war period? Is it becoming apparent that music must express poignant experience of the human soul and not be the servant of man's technical devices and clichés? Are clichés no longer believed in? At any rate contemporary music is still the field of perplexing, interesting contradictions.



The festival was preceded by a performance of *The Kingdom of Hans*, a musical drama after Tolstoi, given in memory of Otakar Ostrcil, the late Czech composer. This proved to be the curious mixture of an extremely sophisticated score and simple story; the orchestra, constantly highly-pitched, overpowered the

voices of peasants expressing emotion in a most artificial manner. It is doubtful whether the opera has any other than a local or historical significance.

The first concert introduced a symphonic poem, *Miserae*, by a young Munich emigré, Karl Amadeus Hartman. One heard deep, protesting notes, sudden outbursts from the brass section, dramatic upheavals, but alas, all this turbulence and excitement failed to conceal the hollow thought, the amateurish workmanship and a melodic line so cluttered up that it could not be pursued. There followed a *Piano Concerto* by the Yugoslavian composer, Slavko Osterc, accompanied by an orchestra composed of woodwind alone and saxophones. It served to demonstrate that the supremacy of the Liszt-Schumann era has not been seriously menaced, and offered a naive blend of Hindemith and Czerny, who, by the way, seem in some sort of way to be related.

And then came the most personal, the most aggravating, and the most problematical piece of the entire festival, the *Orchestral Variations* of Arnold Schönberg. Whatever one may think of this most uncompromising of living composers, it is incontestable that his entire mature output has been founded upon an ideal so high, so free from the temptation to please anyone but himself, that it commands the greatest respect from his contemporaries. Of these *Variations*, however, it is difficult to speak in dispassionate terms. There was no theme and for that reason, at least for the writer, there could be no variations. The literally hundreds of themelets failed to develop any sort of co-ordination or movement. It was all extremely mathematical, non-spontaneous, unhappy and long. And yet, throughout, the work gave evidence of a highly developed personality, a personality so remote from our world and our prevalent conception of music, that one might almost believe this music to have been made on another planet. The *Variations* are supposed to be the most mature example of Schönberg's twelve-tone system; I was unable however to perceive anything but a natural and logical development of his former work.

To any very young composer desirous of almost certain success, it is a piece of good fortune to have his work heard immediately after the Schönberg *Variations*. At the Prague

festival Vessarion Shebalin benefited by the desire for relief on the part of the audience. His is a new name in Europe though he has already written three symphonies and two quartets, and was commissioned by the Soviet government to complete the unfinished opera *La Foire de Sorotchin* by Moussourgsky. The second symphony is a well-sounding work, grateful to Borodin and other Slavic influences, and, if not very original, had nevertheless the value of sincerity. Those who believe that the political experiments of the Soviet government offer a glorious opportunity for native composers to break with the traditions of the capitalistic world will be sadly disappointed, for nowhere does there seem to be less revolution in music than in Russia today.

Karel Haba, the younger brother of Alois, was represented by a concerto for violoncello and orchestra. A logically constructed and well-knit score, not entirely free from influences of Debussy and Rimsky-Korsakoff, the work nevertheless made a pleasant impression. There is plenty of talent here though the personal note is not yet greatly developed.



The program of the second concert, devoted to chamber music, was of such wholly disproportionate length as to make it impossible of proper assimilation. Seven works took three solid hours to perform.

The first, a sonata for violin and piano by a Holland composer named Hank Badings, revealed a rather nice opening movement with deep obeisances towards Caesar Frank; the second part served once more to show that young composers rarely find something interesting to say in a slow movement; in the third the atmosphere again reverted to the first, which naturally did not help much. Bolestaw Woytowicz was represented by a set of songs, accompanied by four instruments, called *Enfant va Dormir*. A rather interesting color was achieved by a group of flute, clarinet, bassoon and harp; the texture of the work was wholly French, of the school of Gabriel Fauré, without however, that master's innate simplicity. H. W. Susskind, a very young disciple of Schönberg and Haba, also offered a set of songs, accompanied by a string quartet. This proved to be an unhappy imita-

tion of Pierrot Lunaire and was very wearying. Fidelio Finke's *Concerto* for two pianos got off to a lively start but gradually petered out. Finke is undoubtedly a serious composer, but one who lacks a feeling for congruity of length and for contrast. It was impossible to find merit at all in the first few moments of Alan Bush's *Dialectic* for string quartet, but, as the composition developed, an atmosphere of freshness and charm became apparent and quite a few felicitous ideas made their belated appearance. Luigi Dallapiccola, a young Italian composer who received the Herzka prize in 1934, followed with a *Divertimento* for soprano and five instruments. The group, consisting of flute, clarinet, oboe, violin and cello, sounded well and colorful, and a sense of peace and maturity as well as a dramatic quality were apparent.

By this time the audience, having listened to three hours of music, would have been physically unable to appreciate the greatest of all masterpieces. W. Burkhard's *Fantasie* for string orchestra, which followed, suffered the consequence. It must suffice that the impression was one of maturity, heaviness and German texture.

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The second concert devoted to chamber music was characterized by the attempt on the part of the jury to emphasize the possibilities of amalgamating old and new forms with a modern expression in music. We were shown the old-fashioned, the old-fashioned combined with modernism, and the extreme modern completely and ruthlessly disregarding the past. There were a few inbetweens also. The Hungarian, Sandor Veresz, who possesses a certain puckish talent, and belongs to the inbetween category, revealed a few pleasant ideas which unfortunately were not developed into a clearly-defined movement. There was a lack of color and contrast in his String Quartet. Goffredo Petراسи, a talented young Italian composer, acutely aware of the contributions of his predecessors, attempted, sometimes with complete success, to bridge the gap between tradition and modernism. His *Introduction and Allegro* for violin and eleven instruments, showed an understanding of the resources of the instruments. It was well received and worthy of the reception. Raymond

Chevreuilles' *String Quartet*, also an inbetween work, could not arouse the same interest, for, in spite of several really good themes, his workmanship was too spasmodic, too aphoristic.

In the music of Anton von Webern we had the pithiest example of ruthlessness and complete disregard of traditional theme development. Von Webern is still Von Webern. His latest offering, the *Concerto for Nine Instruments* is not essentially different from any of his former works. There were the same shy bits, fastidious, birdlike pecks and squirts as before. This composition for nine instruments, asking but a few notes from each throughout, gave the impression that one would have sufficed for the material displayed.

The *Sonata for Harp*, by Sandor Jemnitz, proved rambling and rather uninteresting in spite of his understanding of the possibilities of the instrument. Elizabeth Moconchy, from the classes of Vaughan Williams, showed in her *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* for two violins, a nice miniature talent, fresh and naive. Vladimir Vogel, one of the last pupils of Ferruccio Busoni, is undoubtedly a talent of importance. The *Suite for Piano* consisting of a chaconne and a toccata, was a serious attempt to create new colors from the instrument. It suffered from a too heavy concentration of scale-like passages and an unrelieved contrast of material. But his work is well worth watching. Of Alexander Moyzes' quintet for woodwind, it may be said that the composer belongs definitely to the old-fashioned school. His work itself proved of little importance, in spite of its serious effort.



The second orchestral concert and the last of the festival was another mammoth affair of five exceedingly long works, which left the audience in a state of complete exhaustion. The *Poème Héroïque* by the Belgian composer Jef van Durme is a well-knit piece founded upon Wagnerian and Straussian formulae. There was no trace of individual conception; the spirit of *Heldenleben* hovered about in no hazy or uncertain manner. Here was a good example of what influences a Belgian composer should avoid. Pierre-Octave Ferroud's *Symphony in A-minor* disclosed a serious work of value. Although the first movement is cluttered

with so much secondary material as to make the melodic contour almost non-discernible, there is a notable advance in clarity in the second. But the whole impression made by the symphony is of a serious attempt rather than of distinguished achievement.

Pavel Borkovec, a pupil of Suk, showed his master's influence in his *Piano Concerto*. After a rather meaningless start, à la Hindemith, the Czech Slavic color, which is much, much better, comes to the surface, finishing the movement far more interestingly than it began. The slow movement had little value, but the third had a vim and a go which, founded upon excellent material, brought the composition to a lively close. Here again the hegemony of the Liszt-Schumann dynasty proved supreme.

Alois Haba, the Czech quarter-note magnate and front-line fighter for the cause of modern music, was represented by a symphonic fantasy entitled *Le Chemin de la Vie*. Starting with an extremely interesting orchestral effect high among the strings, the work developed into a series of orchestral patches following on each other without any obvious structural plan. An enormous amount of irrelevant matter obscured the principal thought, giving to the whole a confused impression. The work also lacked contrasting color and was too lengthy. Haba is unquestionably a musician of value, a force for which his countrymen and the I. S. C. M. may be congratulated. Whether he is a great composer of individuality is not answered in the affirmative by *Le Chemin de la Vie*.

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Finally there was the eagerly-awaited hearing of Alban Berg's orchestral suite from his opera *Lulu*. This, the most important novelty of the festival, had the most serious success. The first part of the suite proved to be a heavy mixture of Wagner and early Schönberg and it was not impressive. But the second movement was of such vital importance and revealed such virtuosity as to make the two or three minutes of its performance one of the most exciting periods of the entire festival. The third movement, the song of Lulu, makes extraordinary demands upon the voice, achieving some very unusual effects, although it cannot be said that these were in every case satisfactory. The voice was at times subjected to nothing less than a murderous treatment, but it may

be claimed that psychologically this treatment was necessary to create the required impression. The fourth part was a series of variations, none of them ever reaching the importance of the second movement, in spite of several powerful moments. Berg's music, taken in its entirety, makes a very heavy impression, and his range of expression is limited. There are no glints of sunshine, nor feeling of simplicity, and no trace of grace in this score, but there is a power, a maturity, and a complete sovereignty of his conception of orchestration.



And now for a moment of retrospective comment. Youth today is more conservative than it was when the writer attended the first festival of the I. S. C. M. thirteen years ago. The experience of knowledge and emotion require time to be absorbed into a masterpiece. An enormous amount of energy and inspiration, an observance of law and order, daring, and many, many other elements are necessary to the birth of a great work of art—and youth cannot be condemned because it is young. To expect masterpieces from our younger composers is hardly just; we don't even receive them from our older composers.

It is typical of our day, as this festival revealed, that a new expression of melody has yet to be found, completely dissociated from the traditional conception. The deeper question of emotion and religion can only be considered when the pursuit of art as a profession is not beset by so many serious difficulties as it is today. And melody is song. Can we sing in these days?