

THE FESTIVALS AS MUSIC BAROMETERS

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DONAUESCHINGEN, a pretty, little town in the south of Germany, was unknown to the history of music up to 1920. Shortly after the war, in the summer of 1921, a time of great spiritual upheaval, a number of musicians, many of them young, gathered in that quiet spot to present programs only of unknown music by unknown composers. Some of these have since acquired fame, others have drifted into oblivion, but at that time they were all unfamiliar and all promising. Paul Hindemith, then a "new man," later to be known far beyond the little town in the Black Forest as a leading German composer, figured on the first program with a string quartet, Opus 16, and as the viola player in the Amar Quartet.

The most significant point about these festivals was their informal character. Donaueschingen became a center for experiment. Performers, audience and critics flocked there to be informed of the New Music which was just making its appearance. It provided that opportunity to probe into a young, still strange, often provocative art, which was not possible within the limits of the traditional musical activities of the large town. Composers urgently needed to hear what they had written at their desks, for there clung to the music of that time the stuffy atmosphere of the study. How many works can we recall of 1920 to 1925, which were merely written, appraised and theorized about but never performed! The composer's greatest need during this period, loosely described as expressionistic, was to come face to face with his own composition.

Thus originated Donaueschingen: a music festival less for its public (which hardly existed) than for musicians. The "new music" is greatly indebted to Heinrich Burkhard, Edward Erdmann and Joseph Haas, who composed the festival's jury in the

first years, and to the Prince of Fürstenberg who placed his means and his excellent mind at their disposal.



To be sure Donaueschingen was not the only tribunal before which contemporary music was being tried. There was the long established Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein founded by Liszt; but it was already too set to really grasp the stylistic revolutions of the chaotic period of 1920. After the commotion aroused at the Nürnberg Festival in 1921 by a Krenek quartet, it confined itself almost exclusively to works of a traditional nature. Of course it incurred no risk when giving a hearing to Schönberg in 1929 at Duisberg or recently at Königsberg to Alban Berg, Schulhoff and Lopatnikoff, for today all programs carry these names.

The International Society for Contemporary Music was founded in Salzburg, in the summer of 1922. It was no coincidence that its first meetings also took place in a small, remote spot. Although from the very start it had other aims than those of the *Kammermusik Donaueschingen*, it was at first limited to a small circle of friends. The International also began with chamber music, the metropolitan concert halls of the winter being still forbidden ground. The new styles of every country (not merely of Europe) were to be presented. The barriers erected by the war, even between artists, were to be razed! That was its mission and it was no less significant than the purpose pursued in the Black Forest. Today with the International Society for Contemporary Music in such a critical state, it is customary not only to deny its present worth but to defame its past. This is most unjust. The importance of the International Society cannot be overrated, especially for the Germans and Austrians who were so badly isolated by the War.

Naturally the management made many mistakes. The principle of internationalism was fatally exaggerated. The rule that whenever possible, every nation be represented at the yearly festivals, was not always happy in its effect. Quality often suffered in favor of distribution. In 1925, after Venice, this writer commented on the futility of festivals held regardless of whether

there was any worthwhile material; a whole week of music when there were only enough good works for a day. These festivals have, alas, become an end in themselves. In Frankfort in 1927 there were many bare spots. In 1928 at Siena it was worse. Geneva last year seemed more hopeful perhaps because the program had a certain western trend; western music is less pretentious and its modest pretensions are better realized. This year's fiasco in Liège proved with startling clearness how false is the principle of arranging a music festival simply because it has become a traditional affair. The International Society indeed still has a function, that of a musical exposition. It should present a yearly show of the most valuable products of all lands but it fulfills this task poorly if it places new but for the most part third-rate composers on its programs. The primary purpose of the I. S. C. M. was to give "new music" a place in the world. This object has been attained. If it is impossible to find a new and worthy reason for continued existence, its activities should cease. Music festivals which can at best be of interest only to the composers and to their publishers achieve the heights of tedium.



At Donaueschingen the danger of growing into an esoteric circle for experts and of losing contact with the world was felt in time. Up to the year 1924 it had limited itself to pure concert music, presenting works the authors had just composed, among which were some that are famous today; the quartets of Bartok, Haba, Butting, and Krenek; other chamber music by Toch and Schönberg, Slawinski, Von Webern, Jemnitz and Hauer, Jarnach and Petyrek—a brilliant series. And finally much by Hindemith; the *Junge Magd*, the *Marienleben* and sonatas of every description in addition to the quartets. This imposing array of works should sufficiently establish the importance of the yearly meetings. But another direction was given to the festivals which was to prove most significant.

In 1924 Hindemith took the place of Erdmann on the jury, convinced that it would not be fruitful to pursue art for art's sake further. He thought there was a need for new choral works

in small form, a revival of the old madrigal. Thus in 1925 besides a number of the usual concert works, small choruses were ordered from Krenek, Butting, Petyrek and from Hindemith, who from then on consistently played the role of initiator. The following year marked the transition to out-and-out *Gebrauchsmusik*. Toch, Krenek, Pepping and Hindemith wrote for the military band, and the possibilities of mechanical music were demonstrated in a practical way, with pieces for electric piano and electric organ. At the 1927 festival which had moved for technical reasons to Baden-Baden, the program presented few concert pieces. Film music, mechanical compositions and the important new departure, short operas, prevailed. The condition was similar in 1928 and last year, 1929, there was no concert music on the program, which was given over entirely to four new types of work—the sound film, radio music, music for amateurs and the *Lehrstück*. The ideas of Hindemith are well adapted to the situation today; he also has the support of Weill, Eisler, Göhn and the Frenchman, Milhaud. Why create for the deserted concert hall when sound films, radio and other realistic mediums present such alluring opportunities? Why yearn for Utopia when one can be useful in the present? The idea has much to recommend it, even though, as this year, its execution meets with little success.

In 1930 we find the Donaueschingen festival in Berlin, with the title *Neue Musik Berlin 1930*. It is stripped bare of the last vestige of art for art's sake and recognizes only *Gebrauchsmusik*. This in itself is not objectionable but newly apparent are the dangers of *Gebrauchsmusik*, whose first law must be general intelligibility. Now in Berlin 1930 we meet forced simplicity drifting to childishness, innocence degenerating to silliness.

An attempt to reproduce original music from records whose sound was distorted during performance fell flat; a poor joke and, in the presence of such a gathering, almost an insult. The electrical trials offered little better. The engineer Trautwein has designed a new apparatus which can reproduce the entire scale with the greatest variety of tone colors. The apparatus is superior to the famous ether wave instrument of Theremin in that it does not perpetually send forth the same sickly-sweet sound. But even

the skilfully written original composition of Hindemith, played thereon by the composer, failed to establish its importance.

Some choruses for amateurs were good in intention but poor in execution. The composition even of *Gebrauchsmusik* demands talent. Then there were two *Lehrstücke*: *Das Wasser* by Toch, whose text by the well known author Döblin had greater distinction than the commonplace though neatly fashioned music, and *Der Neue Hiob* by Hermann Reutter, which made a stronger impression. Musically this modern transcript of the fate of Job, interpreted with stock crashes and telephones, was hard and somewhat monotonous, yet the style had independence.

When *Gebrauchsmusik* employs literature words play an important role. Here most of the texts were by a certain Seitz whose experience, however wide, has not been tempered by an over supply of wit. His *Orpheus 1930*, a choral play for radio was plainly silly in text; Paul Dessau's music was not much better. Even Hindemith's *Sabinchen* despite some amusing episodes fell far below the composer's usual level.

The best results were obtained with the new attempt to write music for children. Here extreme simplicity is most suitable, it is even necessary. Dessau, Höffer and Hindemith succeeded in three small pieces which, employing elementary means provide very useful music. Hindemith's unison style is perfectly adapted to this medium. He wrote a small score which is really a masterpiece of simple structure. The children themselves were the best criterion; they sang everything as if it were Mozart. These pieces, moreover, are games as well. Hindemith's is called *We Build a Town*—and to see the eager children performing it provided about the only joy there was at this Berlin Musik 1930.



In the spring of this year we learned with great astonishment that the German Section of the International Society would give a two day festival in Bad Pyrmont. There was every reason to doubt the expediency of the already numerous music festivals; suddenly one more was added. At first it seemed that the German section merely desired to utilize a favorable opportunity to open a new branch. But to our surprise this festival proved to have a more convincing significance. The organizers had observed that,

besides the *Gebrauchsmusik* of the Hindemith circle, plenty of pure concert music still continues to be written. What temerity it requires of composers, who, aware of the meager chances for performance, still persist in the composition of chamber and orchestral music. It may be unwise but it is a fact. These musicians deserve a hearing, for among them are many young and talented ones, as Pymont proved.

Though it is true that all the compositions heard there were not good, the general effect was encouraging and left a far more favorable impression than the great festival at Liège. Among the pieces of quality there was a definite trend toward concerto music. One of the neatest short works was Helfritz's well-balanced *Cembalo Konzert*, almost French in its lightness. More compact, yet equally rich and correct in proportion was a chamber concertino by Heinz Schubert. The *Divertimento* of the Hungarian jazz-specialist, Matyos Seiber, is pleasant entertainment, planned without too much care but with a proper mixture of lyric and dance. The second piano concerto of Tansman is old virtuoso-music freshly tinted. Two young men, Hans Jellinak and Karl Vollmer, had pledged themselves again to the deity of jazz, but when half-way, lost their zest for impertinence. One of the most successful works was the *Vocalisen* for chorus, soli and five saxophones by W. Vogel, an original work not only in the scoring but also in musical substance and method of composition. Concerning the others silence is best.

Any assertion to the effect that *Gebrauchsmusik* is the sole product of Germany today would be unjust; the works on the Pymont program alone would prove the contrary. Where, by whom, and for whom they should be presented is another question.

I have attempted to show how the history of the new music is reflected in the history of the music festivals. The conditions under which the festivals are given have altered with the change in the general music situation. To have significance they must show the trend of music. This Liège did not accomplish. But we have every reason to refuse to believe that all European music is of such devastating mediocrity as was revealed at the eighth festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music.