

REFLECTIONS ON THE VIENNA FESTIVAL

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THE annual festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, from June 16th to 22nd, was the first one to be held in Vienna, although that city is in a sense responsible for the existence of the society. For it was a group composed largely of those young men who had gathered around Schönberg for the first semi-private hearing of his revolutionary works, when they were new, which conceived the idea, shortly after the war, of an international festival of modern music. At that time there was a considerable stock of music which had accumulated during the war and in the immediately post-war period, that clamored to be heard. Stravinsky was still in full evolution; Malipiero, Casella, Hindemith, Milhaud and Gruenberg were still to be discovered and the revolutionary movement was in full swing.

Now all of this has changed; inevitably the period of reaction (or at least of pause, stock-taking and consolidation) has set in. We no longer expect each festival to bring us a new tendency, a new set of esthetics. Though change, we know, is ceaseless, it is now going on at a slower tempo; we know now what to expect and we are better able to judge works by their excellences and their defects. In such a period we look forward to fewer revelations; we are fully prepared to find only a few works out of the many which will seem to us of intrinsic value or significance. In periods such as this it must always have been so; even in the golden days of music, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it would have been no different had such annual festivals been held.

And still one comes away, yearly, with a sense of disappointment which is felt to be not inevitable. The juries, national and international, seem to function only indifferently. If more time

were expended upon the choice of works would not the results be decidedly better? More interesting music is being written today than is performed annually at these festivals. Lacking time, it appears, the juries vote for names they know or names recommended by those they know. There is little sense of conviction behind the choice of works and the auditor has not the feeling (as he frequently has at festivals of age-honored music, Salzburg, for instance) of: "Here, we have looked about us and this is the best we have found to present!" The more the pity both for the society and for the cause of contemporaneous music in general! Since, in spite of all, the festival is a thing of importance and of stimulation to those who follow music in its present path.



Some years ago these festivals brought to light the fact that there was a distinct difference between the tendencies of contemporary composers of Western and of Central Europe; those in Central Europe were evolving along lines derived from Schönberg and his so-called atonal system while those in Western Europe, almost without exception, were showing themselves indifferent to this system; and, whatever else their innovations were, continued to express themselves in a melodic and harmonic system more or less tonal. This geographical cleavage seems as strong today as it was then; the Austrians and Czechs are, almost to a man (to judge by this festival) still under the spell of Schönberg while those from farther West seem influenced by the Viennese master not at all.

Another feature of this festival was the noticeable lack of that music whose insistent and dominant interest was the element of rhythm: rhythm for rhythm's sake, as most typically exemplified in certain pages of the *Sacre* or in America, in Copland's interesting and amusing experiments in poly-rhythmics. The violence of this phase seems to be a thing of the past. Experimentation in this field is in momentary abeyance and rhythm is again taking its natural place among the other vital elements which go to make up what we call music.

Conrad Beck, perhaps the only young composer of Switzerland to show individuality and a certain daring, has written an

orchestral piece which he shyly calls *Innominata*. It is a work of suppleness and strength in the linear-contrapuntal style, reminiscent of Hindemith. Beck is a composer of unquestionable talent; it is only unfortunate that he is not more discriminating in what he presents to his public. Ideas which are amorphous are placed hurriedly beside those which have real character and vitality. Nikolai Lopatnikoff's *Second Piano Concerto* has a greater breadth of style, a richer texture, an inspiration which is warmer and flows more easily—to say nothing of a greater technical equipment. His music, though, is partially spoiled by his obvious desire to make an effect, to gain success with the public. His Russianism seems to spring less from racial consciousness or memory (he has lived in Germany for a great part of his life) than from a show-man's knowledge that a dash of the Slavic folksong is almost sure fire in its appeal. Of finer flavor, though perhaps less mature than either of these works is the *Violin Concerto* by Jerzy Fitelberg. This music errs sometimes on the side of slightness but it is distinguished, limpid in its texture and forthright in its material and structure. The *Nonett* (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn and string quartet) by Tibor Harsanyi impressed by the seriousness of its purpose and the excellence of its workmanship.

Malipiero's string-quartet (*Cantari alla Madrigalesca*) was not entirely convincing either in its material or its structure. But its sonority was enchanting. Malipiero has a special style of writing for strings: the many open strings, the wide, spread-out positions of the chords, give a feeling of space and air, of naturalness and healthy serenity which are the more his own for the fact that they are so typically Italian. Arthur Bliss' *Quintet for Oboe and Strings* is also a work of technical mastery and of considerable charm, both of content and sonority. If it appears to spring from no deep inner compulsion, it has, nevertheless, a musical life sufficient to carry one along and to leave one, in the end, with a sense of satisfaction and refreshment. Vittorio Rieti's *Serenade* for violin concertante and eleven instruments brings us again the buoyancy, the wit and the grace which we have come to expect from this composer. One of the "discoveries" of these festivals, he, too, has consolidated his technic,

and has become, from the standpoint of *métier* almost a classic. What a pity, though, that he has not at the same time enlarged his field of expression, that he has been content, through these many years, to ride his really charming and amusing little circus-horse around the same arena! Nevertheless, his works are worth hearing and should be known in America better than they are.

Jean Françaix is a young man of unquestionable talent but he apparently writes too quickly, for there were pages of his *Bagatelles* for string-quartet and piano which were absolutely devoid of interest. How dangerous for young composers to read of the prodigious facility of Mozart and Haydn! Claude Delvincourt's *Bal Venitien*, dance-suite for orchestra, is the work of a routinier, one who knows the tricks of his trade perhaps too well. So-called "piquant" music is dangerous to write; for if the nerves are not titillated by something which appears to be new there follows inevitably a sense of deception and almost of annoyance. One cannot help feeling that France, in this festival, was not so well represented as it might and could have been.

In the Central-European camp there were works of an almost unrelieved "Schönbergianism;" works which seemed for the most part arid and devoid of the vital urge. Even from Czechoslovakia, the full-blooded and assertive young newcomer among the European nations, the music was covered over (to Western ears, at least) with a hue of studious intellectualism which was not exhilarating. Beside works by Karel Haba, Fidelio Finke, Julius Schloss, Leopold Spinner, Josef Mandic, Eduard Erdmann and Hanns Jelinek, the *Second Piano Concerto* by Norbert von Hannenheim impressed by its stark rhythm, its acrid flavor and its uncompromising directness. Karl Reiner's piano sonata also had a freshness which was lacking in most of these works. The festival's only attempted experiment was Miroslav Ponc's *Prelude to a Greek Tragedy* in the quarter-tone system. According to program notes, Ponc has divided his strings into two groups, one of which is tuned at a quarter-tone's distance from the other. In addition, there is in the orchestra a quarter-tone harmonium which should carry, according to the program, the quarter-tone system into the woodwind section. But all of this seemed to exist mostly on paper; for in reality the quarter-

tones could be heard at only rare intervals and even then they appeared more as "Nebengeräusche" (sounds sounding along) than as an integral part of the melodic, harmonic or even coloristic scheme. So at least it was to this reviewer; the quarter-tones were almost completely submerged in an overwhelming sea of tonality. The work was otherwise uninteresting.

Ernst Krenek's cycle of songs with orchestral accompaniment, *Durch die Nacht*, showed the versatile composer of *Jonny Spielt Auf* in a new light: Mahler, not Gershwin, has been the model this time and Krenek seems as much at home in the atmosphere of high-romance as he did in that of jazz. More authentic was his sprightly music incidental to the ravishing performance of Goethe's *Triumph der Empfindsamkeit*. Krenek has a real gift and an admirable technic. But the ease with which he writes in all styles, the lack of conviction one feels in any of them, make one suspect this erstwhile revolutionary of being fundamentally an eclectic.

Of distinction and exquisite charm were the *Six Catalonian Songs* for soprano and orchestra by Robert Gerhard (who, in spite of his name, appears to be Spanish). Reminiscent perhaps of de Falla, Gerhard has nevertheless treated his folk-melodies (or melodies of folk-character) in a way peculiarly his own; one which appears to be completely evolved from the special character of the melodies themselves. Their enchanting performance by Madame Conxita Badia D'Augusti was particularly happy and successful. Lovely too, in their way, were the childrens' songs, *In Praise of God and the Sun*, by the Pole, Boleslaw Woytowicz. Also of folk character, this time Slavic, the little cantata appealed by its freshness and naiveté; it was delightfully performed by those admirable little musicians, the Wiener Sängerknaben, under the leadership of Matuesz Gliniski.

The performances on the whole were of high order; special mention should perhaps be made of the conducting of Ernest Ansermet, Gregor Fitelberg and Anton von Webern; of the piano-playing of the Swiss pianist, Walter Frey and the unequalled performance on the oboe by Leon Goossens.

In addition to these, the official programs, there were a number of other events which took place, so to speak, on the side-