

TEACHING COMPOSITION

ERNST KRENEK

IN America, as well as in Europe, instruction in writing music is very often called "theory," apparently in order to distinguish this branch of musical education from the "practical" tasks assigned to the instrumental and vocal teacher. It is true that the composer is of necessity more concerned with purely theoretical problems than the performer (who could with profit be more deeply interested in "theory" than he generally is). But the relegation of composition to the lofty realm of theory is the remnant of a scholastic attitude toward music, and no longer in accord with the actual situation. The term "theory" suggests a belief in the existence of a solid system of rules and regulations covering all the crafts and technics which a composer ought to know. Once the student, by sufficient practice of the required exercises, has learned the different methods of putting tones together, he is presumed to be a master of the art, able to produce such music as can be decently expected of him according to the acknowledged standards of the craft.

This approach to the teaching of composition may have been legitimate when the quality of a composer was measured by the extent to which he fulfilled the stylistic ideal of his period. But that time is long past, it has been over for more than a hundred and fifty years. Today distinction is measured by the originality with which the musician expresses his own personality.

Yet out-moded categories still govern our system of teaching composition to a greater degree than we suspect. For many reasons instruction in writing music must begin with the illusion that there is something like a definite "theory." When I visited the Art Department at Vassar College, I was attracted by a wall covered by a great number of vivid though apparently amateurish and often crude paintings. These, I was told, were the result of assignments to the beginners' class, intended to test their imaginative powers. A theme such as "fear," "loneliness" and the like had been given and the students then were encouraged to paint, with-

out inhibitions, whatever they thought would be convincing pictorial expression.

Although the situation of my colleagues in the Art Department seemed to me enviable to a degree, it is hardly necessary to point out that such a method is impossible in musical instruction. First of all, the very nature of music excludes the untutored use of concrete subjects like "fear" or "loneliness" unless one should choose to encourage a perniciously low type of descriptive music. But even if we replace those too concrete ideas by more appropriate abstractions as, for instance, "motion," "equilibrium," "tension," which may be expressed more adequately in music, it would be preposterous, and unfair too, to test a composition student's imagination by such assignments.

This is the very point at which the concept of "theory" enters, or let us rather use the term "technic" in its stead. A person who feels the urge to express something by way of painting may be expected to have some idea of how to put colors on a flat surface with a brush. In most cases, his talent for painting probably manifests itself in spontaneous experiments long before anyone thinks of giving him professional instruction. The manifold refinements in handling that brush to obtain legitimate artistic effects may be taught later with this primitive technical knowledge as a basis.

The potential talent of a young person for writing music (and here let me distinguish between the creation of organized musical forms and the mere improvising of simple tunes) can be detected only indirectly unless he already has had some instruction. Without such information, the owner of even the most astonishing talent is helpless when put the first time before a sheet of music paper. The simple business of writing down a triad pre-supposes a considerable amount of generally underestimated technical knowledge. As soon as chord progression, melodic outline and rhythmic distribution of the material (all indispensable in even the simple forms of musical expression) are brought into consideration, the path of preliminary intellectual processes becomes increasingly involved. At the beginning of his endeavors, the student of composition may very often encounter a discouraging set-back; instead of trying to express something in tones he has to spend many weary months or even years, in practising technics which seem meaningless to him.

III

From a purely logical viewpoint, two ways of teaching the necessary

technic are conceivable. But first let us agree that the aim of instruction is to enable a student to express himself in music, by which of course we understand that, as a contemporary human being, an inhabitant of the present-day world, he will develop a personal idiom in some way related to the idiom of our day. We assume that if we do not subject him to any stylistic coercion, he will automatically evolve such an idiom once he has acquired the needed dexterity in writing. Now with this objective we might conceive of the student's scholastic growth as a condensed version of the historical growth of Western music. Since our present-day idiom is a result of the historical process, it seems logical that passing through the various stages of this process would lead him to that border-line beyond which the wide open spaces of the future call for the personal adventures of a mature talent. We would select for him several characteristic stages of this history of music, and ask him to master the respective technics, one by one. Logically and pedagogically, the method should be quite satisfactory since these stages, in historical sequence, are apparently also a sequence of gradually increasing difficulties.

The other way of teaching would start from a premise like this: Why should a person who is to be taught a living language waste his time assimilating first the many vanished features of the past? Anyone who is about to learn German starts immediately with the actual language. The *Nibelungenlied* and still older documents are rightly reserved for advanced and specialized studies; to express oneself in German it is not necessary first to master the vocabulary and grammar of Walther von der Vogelweide. Our conclusion then would be: Let us teach the student forthwith the technic of the modern idiom which we want him to learn.

I do not know whether this second way has ever been tried with beginners. As a matter of fact, there is no contemporary technic of composition which can be formulated comprehensively and unmistakably enough for teaching purposes — except the twelve-tone technic. Certain experiments have been made in teaching this to students who have not been rigorously put through all the stages of historic discipline. But since these students have at least some background, there is no final proof that the second method is anything but a variation of the first.

Actually our usual way of teaching composition follows neither line with consistency. It is a curious mixture of both ideas, a roughly empiric adaptation of the historic method to so-called practical conditions. Running through the historical stages in order would mean starting with un-

accompanied melodies of the Gregorian type and going next to medieval polyphony. But no matter how enticing this approach seems to the thoughtful composer, it is generally deemed inadvisable since it means introducing the historically untrained beginner to an almost unintelligible medium. And so one chooses to train him first in harmony because the music with which he is immediately familiar is said to be based on harmonic concepts. But this concession in favor of "practical conditions" is by no means thorough. The music which is most familiar to the average student actually is later nineteenth century material (approximately along the Chopin-Schumann-Tchaikovsky-Grieg-Sibelius line) and the present day's song-hit idiom which uses in general the same vocabulary, enriched by a few spices from Debussy's larder. But since this fare seems too heavy for a beginner, one reverts again to the historic method and goes back to the Bach chorale style of the early eighteenth century. Having ventured forward to the early romantic idiom in harmony, the student is now sent to the sixteenth century to acquire some ability in counterpoint. After that he is shuttled back to 1740 and encouraged to write fugues in the vein of Bach. Then, sooner or later, comes the day when he is advised to live up to his own fancies and to make the best of his zigzag journeys through history.

Although the whole method seems to be fairly inconsistent, nothing better has as yet been devised. Some educators advocate cutting out strict counterpoint so that the student should not be bothered with assimilating a "dead language." No matter how venerable the Palestrina style may be as such, they say, what does it mean to us, after all? But, as a matter of fact, it does mean much to musicians who are convinced that the type of contemporary music which is genuinely progressive rests mainly upon a new conception of polyphony and counterpoint. Furthermore, contrapuntal training is what makes the composer the real master of his craft. The style of the late sixteenth century is about the only one which can be exhaustively described in a system of unequivocal rules. But unswerving observance of those rules leads only to a faithful replica of the Palestrina style; it does not automatically inspire the creation of living, interesting and beautiful music – that still requires talent and imagination. The chief, the miraculous value of practising the Palestrina style lies in its technical features, which can be definitely described down to their most minute details, and which still leave open that characteristic margin wherein the composer's individual talent may find a fertile field for display.

It is not surprising that many teachers and students approach counterpoint with pronounced misgivings, in view of some incredibly stodgy textbooks which have dominated the last decades. Fortunately now at least two outstanding treatises on counterpoint are at our disposal – the excellent analysis of the Palestrina style by the Danish musicologist, Knud Jeppesen, and the brilliant though somewhat exacting work of the Harvard professor, A. T. Merritt. When the dreaded dry-as-dust atmosphere is absent, the discipline of counterpoint, if conveyed in the right spirit, arouses enthusiasm in students, even though today we are much stricter in following the historical models than were many generations before us. The technical value of composing against the tricky odds of tight regulations is – to put it bluntly – that the young composer learns to get himself out of trouble. He learns how to find a way out of intricate situations without destroying a given pattern, and to understand the significance of that pattern when he realizes that its faithful observance results in immaculate beauty. He comes to see that the perfection of a genuine work of art is measured by the extent to which the vitality of the creative idea can overcome the stranglehold of the pattern, not by breaking but by fulfilling its requirements.

To be sure, the pattern of strict counterpoint is pre-established, given from outside, and arbitrary with respect to the expressive intentions of the student. Yet its main asset is this very arbitrariness. Later the composer's own creative ideas will furnish the pattern which he will have to fill with life, i. e. by fulfilling its conditions. But, as long as he is not able to articulate his own ideas he is given the limitations of strict counterpoint which serve in the meantime as a sort of proxy for his own not yet fully developed principles.

III

The crucial point in teaching composition is the moment when out of all these crafts the self-expressive activity of the student is expected to emerge. At first he may have been disappointed by being thrown back to dull routine (instead of being encouraged to the improvisatory display of his fancy such as his painter-confrère was allowed). The routine may have grown into habit so strong that out of laziness or timidity he does not dare to use the acquired technics for the purpose of self-expression. In other words, it is difficult for him to consider the shackles and limitations the truest guarantees of his artistic freedom. This dialectic paradox is the one thing above all others which the teacher must unceasingly clarify for the pupil.

On the basis of my own experiences as a student in European schools and of my visits to a few score American teaching institutions, I venture the opinion that the American system offers, at least in its general aspects, certain opportunities which the traditional European arrangement does not as a rule include. In Europe, composition is taught almost exclusively in professional conservatories or academies. (Academy was the title of music schools of university rank in Central Europe). This has the advantage of setting high standards for the professional education of composers. But it also fosters a certain isolation, a narrowing of the composer's horizon to the outlook of a specialized craftsman. On the other hand, the music divisions of European universities are mainly concerned with musicology, i. e. historical research and analysis. They have only a few "theory" courses as auxiliary features to acquaint the musicologist with the technicalities of ages past.

In the American college system, composition is taught in an atmosphere of many-sided enlightenment and thus the higher significance of technic may be stressed. By taking advantage of this situation, one may avoid the frequent too professional conservatory attitude, as well as the sterile aloofness of pure "theory." There is, however, a danger that the college, centered on all-round education, will tend to slight the single discipline. Without vitiating the basic idea of college education, one may counteract aimless distraction by organizing and concentrating the teaching program and, above all, by teaching the student to take his own work seriously. Let him never be allowed to think of school work as insignificant exercises. After all, a seemingly primitive eight-measure period offers essentially the same artistic problems as an extended symphonic movement, though on an appreciably reduced scale. Seen from this angle, instruction in writing music loses the character of pale "theory" and becomes what it should be — the teaching of composition.