

# MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## HOMAGE TO SCHÖNBERG

*Arnold Schönberg will be seventy years old on the thirteenth of September. Modern Music has asked three writers to celebrate the occasion in advance by reviewing some of the early as well as more recent achievements of his distinguished career.*

## THE IDIOM AND THE TECHNIC

ERNST KRENEK

THE impact of Arnold Schönberg's creative genius upon the evolution of contemporary music was felt mainly in two instances. The first was the publication of the *Three Piano Pieces*, Opus 11, in 1910. The second, the invention of the Twelve-Tone Technic, was made known to the world at large approximately in 1923.

That a relatively small work like the *Three Piano Pieces* should be accepted at once as a landmark in the history of music is rather astonishing. New trends and directions emerge as a rule only after the persistent efforts of outstanding individuals, when their life work has asserted itself through time. Bach is felt as an ever-present influence since his music has been a permanent source of inspiration to composers coming after him and nearly every musical person is familiar with at least some of the phases of his work. Wagner's influence has been effective in a similar way, although his appearance on the immediate scene was by far more spectacular than Bach's. Schönberg's brief piano pieces proved an instant, potent explosive because they presented us with a completely new idiom and all the implications thereof, rather than a new style of musical expression. Bach and Wagner, to name only these two because we have referred to them before, introduced new, original, and significant ways of using the

available materials of music for their personal needs, thereby generously adding to the then known resources, to be sure, but not changing the essential characteristics of musical language. In Schönberg's Opus 11, the question as to whether the style is particularly new is completely overshadowed by the shock generated through the unprecedented character of the material in the new idiom. In fact it may well be said that the style of the *Three Piano Pieces*, so far as form, texture, and thematic elaboration are concerned, does not take us far beyond Brahms's piano pieces. (The *Six Piano Pieces*, Opus 19, by Schönberg, are much more indicative of new stylistic ideas than the earlier set, with their epigrammatic condensation of thought and the elimination of literal, or even varied, repetition of thematic elements.)

It is the newness of the idiom in Opus 11 that made Schönberg known the world over as a dangerous lunatic setting out to destroy all established musical values or as a prophet announcing the millenium. Both reactions were passionate and vociferous. The notoriety of the deed was greatly enhanced by the use of the explosive term "atonality" which one of its early adversaries attached to the new idiom. This term should be listed prominently in any manual of demagoguery. It has the enviable power of suggesting to the untrained mind a variety of destructive negations, obviously objectionable, while at the same time it describes nothing that is at all obvious. It can be forced to make sense only by a very careful process of definition.

Schönberg is quite justified in the attempt to eliminate the term "atonality" from serious discussion. It seems, however, that its catch-penny power is likely to frustrate such efforts, so that we may just as well accept it, trying always to use it with proper qualifications. Thus if "tonality" is defined as a musical idiom in which harmonic orientation is prevalent and the context of musical thought is ordered by a system of relationship between chords built in major and minor thirds, we may be reasonably safe in attaching the name "atonality" to any idiom in which coherence of ideas is accomplished by different technical means.

Ever since publication of the *Three Piano Pieces*, Opus 11, every contemporary composer has been obliged, at one time or another, to face the phenomenon of "atonality" and to take his stand in regard to it. I do not believe there has ever been a similar situation in the history of music. And yet, these very piano pieces are very rarely, if ever, heard in recitals, although they do not, with the exception of the third piece, offer any par-

ticular technical difficulties and are assimilated by advanced piano students of this generation, who have acquired some facility in reading complex music, as readily and spontaneously as anything written by Brahms or Beethoven.

This wide gap between Schönberg's fame as the leading atonalist and the general acquaintance with his atonal music was still further emphasized when his twelve-tone technic was brought to public attention. "Atonality" had become a matter of such general concern, that it could make the editorial pages of newspapers. The twelve-tone technic however has remained largely a controversial topic among musicians. It added to Schönberg's reputation as a hazardous explorer of dangerous territories into which no ordinary human being would venture to set his foot and gave him, in the world of music, a position similar to that of Einstein in the domain of physical reality. The theories of both men are discussed with about equal interest in the circles interested respectively in music and physics, and the general ignorance displayed in both cases is about equal, too. Compared with the theory of relativity, the gist of the twelve-tone technic is certainly kindergarten stuff. Yet Einstein is undoubtedly more popular than Schönberg, because the explorations of the former into the mysterious curvature of space make the common man hope that ultimately they will lead to some time- and labor-saving gadgets, while obviously no such desirable consummation can be expected from the abracadabra of the twelve-tone technic.

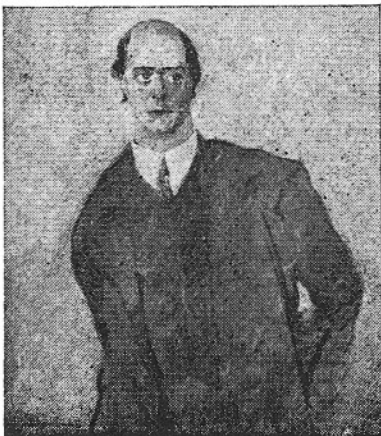
The twelve-tone technic remains a matter more interesting to the musician than to the layman, because it does not involve any mutation of the musical idiom. No uninitiated person, and probably only very few initiated ones, could tell offhand the difference between the *Piano Pieces*, Opus 11 and the *Suite*, Opus 25, so far as the method of construction is concerned. Nonetheless, the impact caused by Schönberg's setting forth of the tonal idiom was so strong that the twelve-tone technic became an object of considerable attention among contemporary composers. This fact, understandable in itself, is strangely at variance with the astonishing amount of ignorance generally displayed with respect to the basic tenets of this method of composition. It is true that for many years the twelve-tone technic was referred to only in articles printed in a few periodicals, but even now actual knowledge of its working grows but slowly.

Regarded as a method of polyphonic writing, this technic is no more difficult or mysterious than sixteenth century counterpoint which today is

increasingly recognized as material of elemental theory within the reach of college freshmen or sophomores. I do not know of any other method by which the idiom of "atonality" can be brought as clearly and unmistakably under control as by the twelve-tone technic. Regarded as a means of expression for living musical thought, it is as problematical and perilous as must have been the counterpoint of Palestrina in the sixteenth century, with Gesualdo's wild experiments going on at the same time and the Monteverdi-Artusi controversy in full swing. Considered, however, against the background of its far-reaching esthetic and philosophic implications, any artistic procedure becomes an object of tension between the forces of doubt and faith. It is no reflection on such a procedure that it compels each individual to take his stand and make his choice after having searched his conscience as thoroughly as possible. The least one may expect before either acceptance or rejection is a study of a method so clearly, impassionately and modestly set forth.

Anyone who has seriously occupied himself with the twelve-tone technic for any length of time will not be surprised to find that it leads ultimately to a state of musical consciousness in which what appears at first as an arbitrary restriction of free imagination will fall away like the scaffolding around a building near completion. This technic is no temporary aberration. It can generate new constructive principles and inspire the musical mind to even broader generalizations of basic ideas, and so it is of the very essence of life.

His gift to us of this immensely vital method of presenting musical thought in ever new shape, with increasing logic and simplicity, is in itself enough to make Arnold Schönberg one of the most "living" composers of all times.



SCHÖNBERG IN VIENNA, 1909

By MAXIMILIAN MOPP