

RECENT BOOKS

THE MIDDLE AND MODERN AGES

IF the animosity felt by the new generations of musicians toward music of the post-romantic era often approaches hatred, what can they find of interest in the music of the centuries "before Palestrina," whose legendary picture adorns the sentry box at what is considered the last outpost of musical civilization? I shall not here attempt to analyze in detail Gustave Reese's admirable monograph, *Music in the Middle Ages* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1940), unquestionably one of the most distinguished contributions of recent decades to musical knowledge. But I shall try to say what such a work can mean to the modern composer.

The preference of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries for altered chords in general — the first few bars of *Tristan* subjugated generations of composers — and for the augmented triads derived from the employment of the whole-tone scale — already fully evident in Liszt's compositions — indicate a desire to drive a wedge in the tonal system of the past. Scriabin's and Schönberg's new systems of harmony, the weird speculations of Busoni, of Bruno Weigl, and the experiments with quarter-tones and other new subdivisions of the diatonic interval all had the same aim, to broaden the major-minor system of tonality into another, affording a greater field for the combination of tones within the space of the octave. The most interesting practical system to come out of these experiments leading to "atonality" is Schönberg's so-called

twelve-tone system. We cannot undertake here to defend or attack atonality, a term often used in a misleading sense; the readers of *MODERN MUSIC* are familiar with the problem. Suffice it to say that this system has logic and order. Consequently whether we approve of "atonality" or not, it is not synonymous with absence of tonality as a principle. It is another system, based not on an harmonic type of tonal relationship but on a purely melodic-thematic one. Thus absolute polyphony not conditioned by harmonic principles has come back into its own. The old love for independence of the individual parts and their free melodic deployment reappears. Such melody is not bound harmonically, is not the result of a latent harmonic scheme, it moves freely in "atonal" space and its expressive force rests on the relation of tone to tone, all tones enjoying complete equality.

We do not have to go so far as Schönberg and his disciples to realize that, as has happened repeatedly in the past, a return to polyphony has proved the salvation of a style which, grown overripe, was drifting aimlessly in an uncertain musical world. By this return we do not mean such artificial imitations as Busoni's *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, but a going back to the spirit of polyphony, to individualized parts. Such writing can have architecture and characterization, both lost in the shimmering color palette of the disintegrating post- or pseudo-impressionistic school, a school of more orches-

tration than composition.

Schönberg and Busoni represent types rather than individuals. There are, of course, many other contemporaries who have achieved a regeneration of polyphony, if on less austere lines; on the other hand Busoni was not the only old-fashioned, fugue writer (a few ninth chords are not enough to disguise the academic nature of a composition). And it is just at this point that the lesson we can learn from *Music in the Middle Ages* is of special value. For a study of the organic growth of polyphony, undoubtedly the most interesting and vital question for the modern composer, will shed light on the failure of various attempts to regain independent part writing.

Polyphony was a mystic ideal to Franck, but when we examine his fugues – to take the most obviously polyphonic constructions in his works – we see that they are fundamentally homophonic, a sort of pseudo-polyphony, in which parts disappear before their mission is fulfilled, and in which excessive modulation through chromatic alteration creates the impression of linear movement. Reger and his contrapuntal school represent another aspect of *fin de siècle* confusion. His polyphony is essentially of the same nature as Franck's only it is carried to extremes; rapidly alternating harmonic progressions force the constituent parts to such frequent changes in position that they appear as independently moving contrapuntal lines.

Compare these efforts at linear thinking with the great polyphonic schools of the Middle Ages. Mr. Reese, after an elaborate "introduction" – in reality a complete essay – on the music of ancient times, discusses the transmission of the classic and Oriental heritage to the West, leading the reader through the labyrinth

of Christian liturgies and music to the "one-dimensional" music of the Troubadours and Trouvères, their Latin, Spanish, Italian, and English colleagues, as well as the Minne- and Meistersinger. This treatment of the complex problems of the modal, rhythmic, and formal systems of medieval monody, remarkable and unexcelled in any available monograph, sets the stage for what is probably the most fascinating scene in the drama of Western music, the emergence of polyphony. The earlier developments of organum and discantus lead to the crowning of the musical Gothic, the motet (not to be confused with its later Renaissance variety). Even the untaught person admires the towering bulk of a Gothic cathedral, he marvels at the vastness of construction, the boldness of line, the vigor of composition and virtuosity of rhythm in that maze of stone and plaster. In contrast the Gothic motet is regarded even by educated musicians as a sort of primitive curiosity, although it is clear that music too had "cathedrals," as bold, vigorous, and impressive. These motets are so thoroughly polyphonic, their parts so independent, that each has its own text and its own rhythmical pattern. The texts are often in different languages; sometimes Latin, French, and Provençal are used simultaneously in one composition, a truly marvelous source of study for the modern composer interested in polytonality and polyrhythmics. Reese explores the territory where the first waves of the early Renaissance reach the breakwater of the Gothic, showing us the Italian, French, and English styles merging in the synthesis which came finally in the Burgundian and Franco-Flemish schools. Problems of performance, notation, and articulation, the use of instruments, and the many capital questions of

musical theory and science which agitated the following centuries, all originating in this animated and dynamic era, are presented with careful judgment and consummate scholarship.

Men of letters consider it a duty to delve into the great literary monuments of the Middle Ages. Our museums are constantly increasing their collections, spending fabulous sums for early medieval woodcarvings, paintings, illuminated

manuscripts. Only the musicians persist in overlooking many centuries of great music as so much almost mythical terrain on the other side of an incomprehensible watershed called the "pre-Bach" era. It is to be hoped that Reese's work will provide a powerful incentive to explore this *terra incognita*. No one will benefit more by the extension of the musical horizon than the true descendants of the medieval musicians, the composer of today.

Paul Henry Lang

TOOLS OF MUSICAL CULTURE

IN *The History of Musical Instruments*

(W. W. Norton and Company, 1940)

Dr. Curt Sachs, the leading authority on this subject has produced a detailed and highly readable account of the progress of musical tools from bull-roarer to Hammond Organ. As concentrated as the condensed version of *The Golden Bough*, the book makes fascinating reading, giving as it does a splendid survey which no serious musician can afford to ignore. It is an epic of materials and mechanisms, of the sounds that come from wood and iron, bamboo, bronze and jade.

The book is as rich from the ethnological as from the musical point of view. Here we can learn of the sexual symbolism of flute, trumpet and drum, of the functional value of music in primitive rites. I must confess a preference for this part of the book, which makes exciting reading. Others may prefer to trace the history of the oboe, or follow the development of the baroque organ.

The volume divides into four parts, The Primitive and Prehistoric Epoch, Antiquity, The Middle Ages and The Modern Occident. Here we can see for the first time the relation of one musical cul-

ture to another, and get a hint of unsuspected cultural connections through the distribution of musical instruments. The book is rich in photographs, drawings and diagrams.

In spite of the erudition that has gone into it there are, unfortunately, inaccuracies. It is, for instance, irritating to find Javanese and Balinese instruments and orchestras misnamed or misspelled, or an exaggeration such as "in Bali some bands are as large as our symphonic orchestras" (the largest I ever found there, included forty players; the average gamelan consists of around twenty.) Then again, in describing a Balinese composition to support his conclusion that the Balinese have preserved an early dramatic quality later lost in Javanese music, he gives a rather garbled version, gathered from several musical styles, all of which are in the modern idiom of the twentieth century. In spite of the fact that there is no practical evidence in either Java or Bali to prove it, we come once more upon the statement that in the Javano-Balinese *slendro* scale the octave is divided into five equal parts. Most Javanese and Balinese *slendro* scales I have examined came