

SCHÖNBERG'S NEW MÄNNERCHOR

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MORE than a year ago Erwin Stein demonstrated in these columns,* by an ingenious analysis of Schönberg's *Third String Quartet*, what may be accepted as the thesis of his "new structural form." Since then, Schönberg has made certain statements which deserve to be noted and therefore, I shall take this opportunity to supplement and to continue Stein's analysis, utilizing Schönberg's latest publication, *Six Pieces for Male Chorus*, opus 35.†

The principal objection to the composer's latter works has been that they lack spiritual resonance—that they find no response among the music public. But have not all really new and great achievements, scientific as well as artistic, met a similar reception in their contemporary world? Kant and Johann Sebastian Bach even today are not the common possession of a really large public. The work of our famous contemporary, Albert Einstein, despite the popularity of his name, is completely un-comprehended, outside the limited circle of his colleagues, and he is made to father absolutely irrelevant catchwords.

The mention of Einstein could lead us to a far-reaching parallelism, for the possibility developed by Schönberg of relating all musical happenings to a twelve-tone series is indeed analogous to the conception of all physically related systems as projected by Einstein. But in principle Schönberg transcends a mere relativity of musical coordinates, using his twelve-tone series not only as a scale but also as a motive on which to build the whole thematic development. He requires the interpreter to handle the fundamental series according to the necessities of the composition, that is, with the ultimate disposal of this material clearly in mind. The "double function" of the twelve-tone technic is quite obvious in the *Pieces for Male Voices* which will be

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briefly reviewed here. It even permits a close approach to the diatonic system through proper grouping of the elements of the series. In rehearsing twelve-tone works Schönberg has often found that singers who have fixed the fundamental series firmly in their minds easily overcome the remaining difficulties. This he considers proof of the practicability of the new form technic.

The text of the choruses is by Schönberg. With the exception of the fifth, all express some philosophical aphorism of a pessimistic nature. For example, the first chorus (it is given here in German; there is an English version by D. Miller Craig and Adolph Weiss) :

HEMMUNG

Ist ihnen die Sprache versagt?
 Oder fühlen sie es nicht?
 Haben sie nichts zu sagen?
 Aber sie reden doch flüssiger,
 je weniger ein Gedanke sie hemmt!
 Wie schwer ist es, einen Gedanken zu sagen!
 Und sie reden doch so flüssig,
 wenn sie eine Absicht haben!
 Wie oft muss man da staunen!

The polyphonic voice-leading, comparatively simple, is much subordinated to the vertical harmony. The characteristics of the early Schönberg: hidden double counterpoint, absolute freedom in the phrase-length and the absence of primitive sequences, are also present here in fullest measure. A discussion of the choruses individually is now in order.

I. *Hemmung*. The original twelve-tone series is divided into three four-note groups. After a twice-repeated beginning in which the melodic lines of the voices are interchanged, by a continued diminution of note-values in increasing rhythmic intensity the dynamic climax is reached in the twenty-fifth measure; here the twelve-tone series is revealed in its entirety for the first time:

The musical notation shows a single staff for the first bass part, labeled '1. Bass.' and 'ff'. The notes are: G⁴, A⁴, B⁴, C⁵, D⁵, E⁵, F⁵, G⁵, A⁵, B⁵, C⁶, D⁶. The lyrics are: 'how of-ten that a-stounds us; how of-ten — that a — stounds us —; how oft —!'. The notation includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'ff', and various ornaments like accents and slurs.

A two-measure vertical condensation of the series concludes the chorus in a pianissimo.

II. *Das Gesetz*. Here the first tenor presents the complete series at the start:

1. Tenor *p*
 When kings go, as always they have done, all's in our hands, we
 can - win - der - stand

The remaining voices execute the series simultaneously, beginning not with the first note, but with the fourth, tenth and seventh of the series respectively. In bar seven, modification of the series, such as the crab-form and inversion of the crab-form, appear in a really complicated fashion.

III. *Ausdrucksweise*. The series is presented below.

2. Bass *p*
 Through us, in man-kind's in-stand speaks for this on God

It proceeds in the manner of a passacaglia through all the voices and is later compressed within six voices. From the thirty-fourth measure an intensely climactic coda brings the chorus fortissimo to the close.

IV. *Glück*. This, in my opinion, is technically the most difficult to execute. Against the staccato chords of the upper voices, there is an expressive bass melody which receives extensive development in the course of the piece.

V. *Landsknechte*. This eight-part chorus is the longest and weightiest of the collection. Over accompanying figures of great rhythmic variety the tenors intone the theme series:

2. Tenor *f*
 Some day one must pe-nis, but who else thinks of that?

The intervals of the series, mostly comprised in two-note groups, make up the harmonic and melodic material of the whole piece, which also frequently employs effects of pure tone-color.

VI. *Verbundenheit*. This chorus seems to me the most interesting because of its apparent simplicity. Evidently inspired by the title and text, Schönberg, on concluding the cycle, returns by

the use of a most subtle means—the twelve-tone series—, to simple period construction and tonality and thereby reminds us of the foundation of his creative art.

It must be constantly borne in mind that Schönberg's works can be understood only after many open-minded hearings and that an extensive analysis in no way insures a complete understanding. For this reason the technic of composition employed here has been merely sketched and the spiritual background not even alluded to, for both are regarded by Schönberg as purely individual matters.

The true significance of Schönberg's powerful personality as the pioneer of a new art is best comprehended when we consider an analogous turning-point in the development of music, the time of Johann Sebastian Bach. Appended is an interesting comparison which Alban Berg published under the title *Credo*. It represents an almost complete transliteration of the parallel characteristics of Bach, as given in Riemann's *Lexikon* and applied to Schönberg:

“One of the greatest masters of all times, one of those who cannot be surpassed, because they incorporate the musical feelings and concepts of an epoch: who gains a distinct significance, an unparalleled greatness, in that the styles of two different eras are carried simultaneously through him to their highest flowering; so that he stands between them like a huge boundary-stone, which towers gigantically in both. He belongs to the antecedent

(Bach)

period of polyphonic music, of the contrapuntal, canonic style, and to the period of harmonic music and the system of modern keys, presented in its entire extent, for the first time (and taking the place of the church modes).

(Schönberg: paraphrase
by Alban Berg)

period of the harmonic style and to the period of polyphonic music, which is reinstated with him; i.e. the period of the contrapuntal, canonic style and the system of the twelve-tone series, presented in its entire extent for the first time (and taking the place of the major and minor tonalities).

His lifetime falls within an era of transition, when the old style has not yet ceased to exist and the new is still in its first stages of development and bears the mark of incompleteness. His genius combines the characteristics of both styles: as composer for the voice and for instruments he is heir to the art of centuries; as one who completes, summarizing everything, ennobling, through an exact understanding of all harmonic functions, every detail of form, great or small, that this period of polyphony has brought forth. His melodies are so thoroughly healthy and inexhaustible, his rhythms so manifold and pulsating with life, his harmonies so well chosen, indeed, audacious and yet so clear and transparent, that his works will not only remain the object of admiration but of ambitious study and emulation as well."