

AN AGE OF PLENTY

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NEARLY every age is inclined to suspect itself as decadent and those living in it are prone to assert that they are in a critical period and witnessing a turning point in history. Whether it is a question of art, of science, of politics or of religion, the same pessimism is voiced, the same regrets.

To us the eighteenth century may seem the golden age of music but the contemporaries of Bach, Haydn and Mozart complained of decadence and believed that music was experiencing a serious crisis. A similar idea was current in the time of Beethoven, in the time of the romantics and of Wagner: disaster was felt to be imminent and musical art to be approaching a dangerous point in its evolution.

Evolution, which as a process viewed with detachment seems so logical and regular, is after all made up of just such "turning points" and crises. The same apprehensions have recurred to-day. Critics agree on the whole in setting forth the dangers that beset modern music. The most optimistic express the hope that musicians will again find the right road but now they recognize only "experiments," "trials," "more or less successful attempts." They look forward to the future—the present offers only chaos.

This indeed appears chaotic, but, as I have said, the contemporaries of Beethoven and of Wagner summed up their periods in exactly the same terms. What complicates the situation today and makes the "crisis" appear particularly severe is a kind of decentralization or rather dispersion of musical activities in the present era. There was a time when German music reigned supreme; later, toward the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, Russia and France gained this dominant position. Today with the renaissance of the Italian, English and

Spanish schools, with the sudden appearance in the field of music of new forces like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, with a musical development in the nations of North and South America, we find ourselves confronted with quite new problems. On the one hand the national spirit in music expresses itself everywhere more strongly than before; on the other, a musical interchange between different countries, between the various continents, becomes daily increasingly active. There is a general tendency toward the establishment of an international language in music, and the various individual currents, the various national schools, seem to break through their ethnic and geographic limits to flow together, struggle and intertwine in a universal background.

Now despite this complexity, despite the fact that never before has the struggle between different styles, musical conceptions and esthetic systems appeared so bitter and intense, it does not necessarily follow that music today is in any danger, that the present crisis is an unhealthy condition which can be considered a sign of decadence. Not only may many good things be expected from the future but the present itself is in reality surprisingly rich and beautiful. Future historians will disentangle this chaos and make order out of the disorder of the present, but we who live in the very thick of the struggle, obliged by our tastes and our ideas to side with some composer or other, with some school or some trend, should nevertheless recognize that this very multiplicity of trends, the diversity, the contrast, the constant struggle with no decisive victory, are all characteristic of the whole present era and not alone confined to music.



Bellum omnium contra omnes—that is the state of music today in the Old World and in the New. This “war” of course has been carried on in every era, but the modern battlefield has been extended and the number of combatants considerably increased. So far as quality goes, an age which has men like Stravinsky, Schönberg, Ravel, Prokofieff, Milhaud, Honegger, de Falla, Hindemith and so on, is certainly one of the most fruitful in the

history of music. What disturbs us is that all these composers are opposed to each other. We cannot distinguish, in the labyrinth of directions along which modern music seems to flow, any prevailing line, any road which the music of the future will finally take.

But why not concede that the present struggle will continue indefinitely? Why expect that the multiplicity and diversity we observe today will end in certain and harmonious unity which will dissolve all present differences? When we judge modern music, it appears to us essentially transitional, a preparation for future conceptions, new forms of expression. To a certain extent this may be true but modern music has none the less a very real, already lasting value; it offers not only promises but a fulfillment which bears comparison with the great achievements of the past. If present day works appear mutually exclusive, if the music of Stravinsky, for example, is in open contradiction, as we see it, to that of Schönberg, this is no reason for pessimism but rather the opposite. For our age is characterized by the fact that all the daring and experimentation of our modern composers rest on old traditions which thus live again in a new guise.

It is just because of this that "modern music," in the persons of these great representatives of the art, is opposed to "modernism." The composers I have mentioned here are by no means modernists because what is understood as modernism consists of "a complete break with tradition" while we see these young men making a general effort to revive the old traditions, traditions which in many cases have been completely forgotten. Back of the musical tendencies in combat today, there are often century-old conceptions which continue to oppose each other under new forms.



The musical war we see about us is coincident with a remarkable new development of historical interest in music. One may state without hesitation the paradox that this historical sense is an entirely modern development, dating from the end of the nine-

teenth century. Of course the history of music is much older, but formerly the works of the past were considered dead and the past itself, not well known at best, did not extend beyond the eighteenth century. The development of historical research, the discoveries of the "ruins" of musical art in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have ushered in a renaissance of old music. The old works and traditions are alive again, they become active forces. No longer mere curiosities, they are a direct source of inspiration. The so-called revolutionary and iconoclastic art of today, consciously or not, in reality thrusts its roots into the past.



The present status of opera is particularly illustrative of this development. The opera, that so-called synthetic form of art, which has experienced so many reincarnations, is now again undergoing a severe "crisis," just like the symphony before it, the sonata and nearly all other forms bequeathed by our ancestors. It is noteworthy that all the modern composers who are struggling to revise the conventional forms of the lyric drama, of the Wagnerian music drama, of grand opera, rely on traditions which seemed definitely abandoned half a century ago. In their efforts to create new forms for the compromise between action, speech and music, which the opera attempts to realize, they turn toward the past.

In France the young men are inspired by the old French *opéra comique* and the old Italian *opéra bouffe*. In *Judith*, as Hon-egger himself has said, the composer wanted to use the old Italian structure of the *opera seria*. Szymanowski, in his *Roi Roger*, reverted to the old pattern of airs, duets, ensembles. Others, like Hindemith in his *Cardillac*, have tried to adapt to opera the style of eighteenth century chamber music. The *Intermezzo* of Richard Strauss, "where the voices are maintained in a continuous speech which only rarely develops into melody, the scenes being bound together by symphonic interludes," (A. Coeuroy—*Nouveaux visages de l'opéra*) borrows from certain attempts by

contemporaries of Monteverdi. Stravinsky's *Mavra* depends directly, with no attempt at concealment, on the Russo-Italian opera of the beginning of the past century. It would be easy indeed to add to the list.

The powerful influence of Bach on modern music is obvious. In the tendency to write like Bach which is evident everywhere today, there is certainly an element of faddism and snobbery and one may expect, I believe, a certain reaction. But that should not deter us from seeking the important reason for this return to Bach for it is one of the most characteristic expressions of the traditionalism of modern music.

Bach is a proponent of discipline; of course he is many things besides, but it is just this aspect of his genius which is so active and so fertile today. We need him, for this "war of all against all" which we now see in the musical world is waged in the name of discipline.

