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MODERN MUSIC

THE DRIFT OF THE CENTURY

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WE are constantly using the expressions "modern music," "musical modernism" and similar terms, but for how many such phrases have we any definitive meaning? Studying the history of music, of painting, of philosophy, it is the natural tendency of the mind to classify and organize facts into groups which enable us to orientate ourselves, to establish a certain amount of order. The most usual arrangement, of course, is according to the centuries. We distinguish music of the eighteenth from that of the nineteenth, conceiving them as separate entities, the periods set clearly apart by the nature of their works.

Obviously a rather artificial classification, it imposes definite limits between eras not in fact so sharply divided. Thus romanticism, which permeates the music of the nineteenth century, is to be found in some form or other in certain works of the eighteenth, Mozart's *Fantasie in C minor,* for example. On the whole however, the method has the merit of convenience.

Can it be applied to contemporary music? Or put it this way—does the twentieth century, rather the first quarter, have certain musical characteristics which differentiate it from the preceding hundred years in the same way that the latter are marked off from the eighteenth century? It is true of our age that the production of music has grown increasingly great and that new countries have entered the field. But taken as a whole, are our sensibility, imagination and musical thought alien to those of our predecessors?

At first glance the answer to these questions is simple; it is evident that in harmonic, rhythmic and melodic language the works of our contemporaries are a departure from the music of their immediate ancestors. About such considerations there can be no doubt. But neither do they constitute the problem. *Pelléas et Mélisande* is essentially different from *Tristan und Isolde;* Scriabin's *Prometheus* is far removed from Liszt's *Tasso;* between the harmonic language of Schönberg and that of Chopin lies a vast gulf. But have the works of today enough in common to justify our recognizing a native musical esthetics of the twentieth century that may be contrasted, for example, with the romanticism of the preceding generations?

The lapse of time enables us to see the general trend and the particular characteristics of the nineteenth century, those of the eighteenth even better, without losing ourselves in details. In the present quite the reverse is true—the details strike us first, the differences existing between Strauss and Debussy, Schönberg and Stravinsky. What they have in common, their essential relationship, the spirit of the age, completely eludes us. However, we may admit a priori that such a binding kinship exists, that the composers of the twentieth century, despite divergences, even oppositions, have a certain point of view and form a spiritual family characteristically different from the numerous family of the nineteenth century or rather of the period which stretches from Beethoven to Wagner.

Granting then that musical art since 1900, despite the multiplicity of its aspects, has a certain unity, a definite physiognomy, how can we perceive it? To examine in detail the enormous production of the past twenty-five years and to compare all the schools, all the different trends, in order finally to extract their common quality, their general principles, would be impossible. And aside from the difficulty besetting such an inquiry, the results would be futile, for in an undertaking of this kind, one must deal almost exclusively with mediocre or worthless compositions. Rare indeed are works that have value. However it is with just these exceptions that we are concerned, and on them that we must base our conclusions.

What characterizes an age in music, painting or poetry, is not

the ordinary production, the current fashion but, on the contrary, the one which violates the rules and seems to us beyond the pale. A nation is judged not by the average person, the man in the street, but by its outstanding figures, the geniuses to whom the people have given birth. To get a perspective on contemporary musical trends we must sweep aside standardized production and turn to a few works, unique in their class. If we succeed in finding among them, despite all the variations and oppositions they express, only one common element, one single bond of relationship, our goal will have been reached.

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Rising high above the general level of mediocrity and insignificance in the musical output of the first quarter of a century there are a few works which, in the strict sense of the word, are exceptional. They may rightly claim the honor of representing the age. These, in my opinion, are Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Scriabin's *Prometheus,* Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Stravinsky.

The list is doubtless too short for many readers, and some may also be surprised not to find included here certain great names of the twentieth century more popular, at least in some countries, than that of Scriabin, for example. I do not mention Mahler or Strauss; naturally, for I am not concerned with a question of sympathy or taste, of the success of this work or that. Strauss is undoubtedly a great musician, a virtuoso of the orchestra. But his music develops directly from the preceding century; it is not opposed to the art of that period, but rather continues it by fulfilling some of its tendencies. Strauss is the consequence of Wagner and Liszt; he out-distances them on the road of descriptive and expressive music; he extends the domain of music by further introductions of literary, poetic, philosophic and pictorial elements. But here we have merely a difference in degree, not of nature. This is clearly apparent in his harmonic language, an inevitable outcome of Wagner's. Were the twentieth century to be characterized by the art of Strauss one would have to assume that the development of contemporary music still follows the course

set by Wagner and Liszt, a hypothesis contradicted by everything that is happening today.

What we have just said about Strauss applies even more strongly to Mahler, whose ideas and musical language spring from Beethoven's. No matter how we admire his art, we must admit that Mahler does not belong to the race of inventors, of discoverers of unknown countries. The composers whose names I mentioned at the beginning of this section are quite definitely of that genus. For a similar reason I have not spoken of Reger. He has had a certain influence in Germany—greatly diminished today—but it was contrary to the direction of the twentieth century. In relation to that trend Reger's art acted something like a brake.

Pelléas, Pierrot Lunaire and the other works are in a class of their own because, whatever the goals of their composers, they have served to modify the very foundations of musical art established by the preceding generation. *Pelléas, Pierrot Lunaire* and *Le Sacre* are revolutionary in the sense that in them their authors broke with the past and renewed the spirit and technique of our art. To avoid the past, to overcome it, they often made use of it but they employed historic elements in quite a new fashion.

Pierrot Lunaire rests on an esthetics and a sonorous system distinct from those of the nineteenth century masters. One can indeed find the germs of atonality in *Tristan,* but Wagner's opera clings to an older musical concept for it still falls within the major-minor modality definitely established in music since the end of the seventeenth century. Scriabin in his *Poème de l'Extase* also links himself to *Tristan*—the source of all modern music except Stravinsky's. Yet Scriabin moves on a different plane entirely, for his tendency is toward freedom from the chains of equal temperament within which music was bound for two hundred years. Debussy, too, turned against nineteenth century traditions, not only by enriching harmonic language with new chords—there is hardly anything revolutionary about this—but in changing the relations between the chords by the systematic use of the whole tone scale and a return to the ancient modes.

There are but few points of contact between the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic methods of the three composers. Each

pursues his path without reference to the others. The bond of kinship which enables us to regard them from a single point of view is their common gesture of negating the past.

This gesture arises from the need for freedom which leads an artist to seek a new discipline. In the effort to express all the forces of their personalities, they arrived quite naturally at a rebellion against established habits and rules, inspired, however, not by the idea of anarchic license but by the hope of creating new ones more adequate to their emotions, their esthetic concepts. In short all three men sought to be *true* and each one succeeded in his own fashion.

"Impressionism"—the formula that once served to explain all of Debussy and particularly *Pelléas et Mélisande*—we now recognize as a false or at least insufficient label. Debussy was a constructor like all great artists, for it is the artist's nature to seek sincerity and truth yet at the same time to reach for a certain formal perfection. This perfection is achieved in *Pelléas,* appearing in an individual structure which corresponds exactly to the emotion and the mental attitude of the composer.

The "expressionism" of Schönberg is also only a convenient but inadequate tag. *Pierrot Lunaire* may be called a realistic work because Schönberg has modeled his musical phrase on the curve of his emotions and followed its slightest variations with exactness. It is a faithful translation in musical language of a certain psychologic reality.

Along this road Schönberg obviously ran counter to the old conventions, particularly tonality, which imposes a rigid mold, psychologically unresponsive, in which the composer is involuntarily constrained to cast his thought. *Pierrot Lunaire* is a striking example of the conflict between the artist who would express himself completely and with strict veracity and the decalog of generally accepted concepts. From this conflict Schönberg emerged victorious; the tonal framework was broken. But the composer overthrew the established order only to develop and submit to another. A study of the polyphony in *Pierrot Lunaire* and, still better, that in the *Quintet for Wind Instruments* will make this clear. Here Schönberg may be seen in the act of establishing the law of atonality, introducing new modes and making

various arrangements of the twelve tones in the tempered scale. In other words, he converts a combination of methods, which at first were only a means of personal expression, into a system.

The case of *Prometheus* is similar. Scriabin, like Debussy and Schönberg, was a realist; I mean that he sought a musical vocabulary for the direct expression of his inner world, that ecstatic rapture and exaltation which most of his works reveal. But it is only after the *Poème de l'Extase* or rather with the *Fifth Sonata* that he completely succeeds, that is, from the moment when he has established the principles of his harmonic system, fully developed in *Prometheus,* and based, as we know, on the synthetic chord—C, F♯, B♭, E, A, D, G—treated as a concord. In *Prometheus* it plays a role similar to that of the perfect chord in classical music.

Pelléas, Pierrot Lunaire and *Prometheus,* three works born of a need for truth, created in the name of individual liberty, have tended, each in its own way, to found a new system of laws. There is today a Scriabinian harmonic system as well as that of Schönberg and of Debussy.

None of these works are the musical expression of a given system or theory. The system and the theory have arisen from the music, but today the personal language of the three composers and their methods, their slightest idiosyncrasies, have achieved universal importance and a super-individual value.

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We touch here on what is, I believe, most characteristic in contemporary music—the strongly felt need for discipline. It is precisely this which differentiates modern music so sharply from the romantic individualism that prevailed in the nineteenth century.

It is style that we are seeking, and those who, like Debussy, Schönberg and Scriabin, revolt in the name of individual freedom, end by establishing general rules and building their particular cases into systems, their personal manners into a style. *Pelléas, Pierrot Lunaire* and *Prometheus* are not merely great works; they owe their importance among the productions of the twentieth century to the fact that they have aimed at a style, and, up to a

certain point, have satisfied the need for a super-individual musical language so deeply felt by the musicians of today.

The eighteenth century had a style, the nineteenth was incapable of creating one, nor did it try. But for a quarter of a century, consciously or not, we have again been trying to achieve one. Debussy, Schönberg and Scriabin have striven with all their might. Only, and it is the tragedy of these geniuses, it could not be accomplished by one man no matter how great. *Pelléas, Pierrot Lunaire* and *Prometheus* are in this sense abortive attempts. They have had many imitators, but the imitation of mannerisms, even when built up into a system and buttressed with clever theories, cannot create a style, although one style, as we have seen in the eighteenth century, can develop different individual mannerisms and most varied personal methods.

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Stravinsky's accomplishment is altogether different, and I have therefore given a separate place to *Le Sacre du Printemps.*

This ballet is not to my mind the most important of his works; it is not the most perfect—*Les Noces Villageoises* is far superior. It is not even the most revolutionary. Undoubtedly there are certain elements in the *Sacre* which link it to the past. We can recognize traces of the influence of Debussy in the first scene, of *Tristan* in the prelude to the second. *Petrouchka,* which preceded the *Sacre* by three years, was newer and bolder for its time. By comparison with *Petrouchka* one might say the *Sacre* indicates a certain retrogression. And yet, of all the works of Stravinsky, this score caused the greatest upheaval. It burst like a bombshell, delighting some, irritating others, more than *Les Noces,* more than the *Octuor* or *Oedipus Rex.* This was just because what was new appeared side by side with what was old and thus was emphasized by contrast and at the same time more easily assimilated. What is altogether new passes for the most time unnoticed; it makes no impression and it only takes effect later.

With all its harmonic complexities and the magnificent orchestral garment that enthralled the audience by the power and diversity of timbres, the *Sacre,* coming in 1913, created no inno-

vation. It was in the tradition of the beginning of the century, but at the same time it exerted a strong reaction against chromaticism and atonality. The real contribution of the *Sacre* was not grasped. Stravinsky was held to be a revolutionary like Schönberg or Debussy, discarding all musical ideals of the nineteenth century in the name of individual liberty. But the composer of the *Sacre,* holding to the concept of an objective and classical art, was as opposed to his contemporaries, Debussy, Schönberg, Scriabin and Strauss, as to Wagner and the earlier romantics. Today we can recognize the significance of this music because we have heard a whole series of works growing out of the *Sacre*—from *Rossignol* to *Apollon Musagète.*

The psychological elements at the root of Debussy's art, of Schönberg's and Scriabin's, are completely absent from the *Sacre.* Stravinsky does not even think about being "true" and sincere. He is not only a realist but a formalist; he works with musical values alone and his conception moves only on a musical plane. The *Sacre* is thus not the individual expression of the state of a soul; it is a musical construction like the allegro of a symphony by Haydn or a Bach fugue.

Despite the genius of their composers, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Pierrot Lunaire* were incapable of bringing a style to birth. The methods of Debussy and Schönberg are only extensions of their personalities and express a certain idiosyncrasy. But the language of the *Sacre* and of the later works, being purely formal and devoid of psychologic ingredients, reveals a certain general principle, a greater-than-individual meaning. One may imitate Debussy or Schönberg, one can compose operas in the manner of *Pelléas* or poems in the manner of *Prometheus,* but it is impossible to create according to the *forms* that these composers have bequeathed. Once and for all time they squeezed them dry. Stravinsky on the other hand has already opened a path to followers who will be able to pursue it still farther. Opened? Rather re-discovered, for it is the road of the masters of the eighteenth century.