VOLUME XIV JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1937 NUMBER 2

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

THE NEW MUSICAL HORIZON

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I HAVE been asked to comment on the musical ideals of the "present generation." What is meant by this phrase? Today above all the most obvious characteristic of the musical world is the division of its ranks—its multitude of cross currents which may be, according to one's point of view, taken to indicate either a healthy ferment or a labyrinth of spiritual insecurity.

From a somewhat greater distance, however, one is struck by the completeness of a transformation which the entire musical horizon has undergone in the past twenty-five years. Contrasting personalities of the two periods—Strauss, Debussy, Ravel, Mahler, Scriabin, as against Schönberg, Stravinsky, Hindemith, Berg, Bartok—give an indication of the extent of the change; an indication which is enhanced if we contrast earlier and later works of the same composers: the *Sacre du Printemps* with the *Symphonie de Psaumes,* or Schönberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* with his *Variations for Orchestra.* Going further and examining critical pronunciamentos of both periods, we see the contrast at its greatest, partly because a really good work of art inevitably transcends the esthetics of the moment which produces it, partly because of the ephemeral character of nearly all contemporary criticism.

There is, however, no doubt that a certain era is definitely past. A few pertinent if obvious facts. Twenty years ago, for instance, the virtuoso was still a glamorous, almost a legendary figure; and this was true not only of great performers but of the pianist,

violinist, or singer as such. Today his hold on the public imagination has passed either outside the musical field entirely, or at best to the conductor. Even a Toscanini, however, scarcely has the half-legendary prestige of a Paderewski or a Caruso or a hundred others; and there are signs that the prestige of the conductor is already slightly on the wane.

In the actual music produced the change is at least as striking. Twenty-five years ago the most representative composers were still writing chiefly program music; when not writing definitely illustrative music they were seeking first of all the characteristic, the evocative, the vaguely illustrative, and seeking new effects with an illustrative purpose in mind. Today, to be sure, opera and ballads are still being written, as indeed they always were; but the important instrumental works of recent years have all been sonatas, quartets, symphonies, concerti and the like, with program music confined to the musical Hinterland and to the movies where its well-worn devices are enjoying a somewhat too protracted usefulness.

The phrase "present generation" therefore has a very clear meaning if we accept it in the most inclusive sense. In my opinion the changes briefly noted above are the essential and significant ones, far more so than the various differences in outlook among contemporary composers. The following words pretend to be no more than scattered observations; the subject itself is a vast one, and generalizations are always subject to the charge of superficiality.

An abrupt change in artistic direction, such as has occurred several times in musical history, implies either the completed excavation of an old vein or the sudden discovery of a new one. A period of experimentation—a "romantic" period—is followed by a period of selection—a "classic" one—in which the new materials are tested and absorbed with whatever is inferior in creative potentiality eliminated.

Without undue exaggeration it is possible to characterize the nineteenth century as one in which the individual detail or musical feature assumed constantly increasing importance, and in which synthesis, the real essence of musical form, became in in-

creasing measure a merely passive element—a necessary evil, as it were, instead of the essence of the music itself. This has often been noted; it has less often been pointed out that it brought with it quite new conceptions of harmony, rhythm, and melody; that such a change implies also new ways of *listening* to music—not only adjustments to the new idioms, but new and perhaps distorted conceptions of the music of the past. The "dissonances" in Bach or Mozart have a significance, both "musical" and "emotional" far different from that often lent them by hearers nurtured on nineteenth and early twentieth century music, in which dissonances are rather individual features than organic portions of a musical line. Here the influence of the Wagnerian leit-motif —more often than not extremely short and characterized by a single harmonic or rhythmic trait—is paramount. Its introduction is often motivated by dramatic, not musical necessities and once introduced it intentionally dominates the scene, to the obliteration of what surrounds it. The musical coherence is there, to be sure—but in a passive sense; the detail is more significant than the line, and the "theme" more important than its development. It is all too seldom noted to what an overwhelming extent the reverse is the case in the earlier music.

It is easy thus to see how the element of line, in every larger sense of the word, tended to lose its importance, even though it could not of course be abandoned altogether. In the works of Debussy, Scriabin, the Stravinsky of *Petrouchka* and the *Sacre,* the Schönberg of the middle period, we have, so to speak, the apotheosis of detail. Harmony, for instance, instead of being as it had always been, until the so-called "romantic period," an organic element in a flowing musical line and even—so to speak—the determining framework of that line, has assumed more and more a purely coloristic function. According to the context it bears the weight of pathos, of suggestion, of evocation, and an infinite number of new colors and new nuances of relationship are brought into it; but it achieves its effect no longer through its organic flow and interplay with other musical elements but through the color and the dynamics of individual sonorities. Hence the static quality of some of Debussy's harmonies, a single harmonic detail often serving as the basis of an entire section or

even an entire work; hence the monotony of Scriabin who attempted to found a whole musical system on a single complex chord; hence the static quality of so much of the early Stravinsky where—as to a lesser extent in Debussy—the harmonies shift rather than flow.

It is a question, of course, whether the emphasis on evocation or pathetic detail was the result of program music, or whether on the other hand composers seized instinctively upon programmatic form and esthetic as the result of the accumulation of new musical materials of which — either for reasons springing from the nature of the materials themselves or, more probably, because of the breaking down of older syntheses and the consequent expansion and scattering of human impulses which characterized the nineteenth century generally — the significance could not yet be made clear through musical means alone. "New possibilities" destroy or modify older necessities, and the fact that Beethoven—whose material was so much more complex than that of any of his predecessors — still achieves, not without a degree of effort unknown to any of the latter, a completely satisfying synthesis, inclines one to the latter view, since his successors, who claimed him as their master, failed to achieve such a synthesis but turned to program music instead.

The music of the past twenty-five years, then, is the result of an impasse to which music had come, in the constantly increasing refinement of detail, the increasingly static quality of musical language and perhaps above all the inevitable sacrifice of profundity and significance in musical expression to sharpness of sensation.

We are told, then, that in contemporary music purely musical values predominate. What does this mean? To the critics of contemporary music it implies a denial of all "content." Such critics are I believe still under the spell of the older conception of music which persists in attaching concrete associational significances to each phrase and accent—the conception which persisted in counting the tears that fell on the hero's grave at the end of the Funeral March in the *Eroica,* and which revels today in Sibelius' evocation of "frosty northern landscapes." It loses

sight entirely of the fact that to a musician or a sensitive listener a purely musical idea is at least as profound, as poignant, and as concrete in its significance as any associations which it might conceivably evoke. No associations or verbally definable "emotions" account for the effect of, say, Mozart's *G-minor Quintet,* nor can any words be found which adequately describe or even suggest it. It is, say, noble, tender, melancholy, poignant, but so are dozens of other works by dozens of other composers. It is the music which Mozart has written which is great, not the "ideas" which Mr. So-and-So can read into it, or the mess of verbiage with which he may regale himself and his readers the next morning. Likewise, Beethoven's ideas for or against the Revolution were precisely what he shared with millions of his contemporaries. What is great in his work is what he alone was capable of achieving—his music, the sounds, the musical shapes which he conjured up, of which the profoundly human significance transcends his specific preoccupations only somewhat less completely than it does the fundamentally meaningless pomposities of M. Rolland or Mr. Ernest Newman. The content lies—as Beethoven himself pointed out—in the tones, the lines, accents and contrasts, and not in the thousand experiences which, fused together in a single gesture, take composite shape as a musical impulse or idea. It can never be too clearly stated that if musical expression is something unique and untranslatable it does not therefore follow that it is without human significance.

Such a change in artistic aims brings inevitably a change in technical outlook and in some sense a reinstatement of formerly discredited modes of procedure. Even Debussy—strange as it seems today—is quoted as having been wont to express himself in round terms apropos of the tyranny of the tonal system, from which it was one of his declared aims to free himself. The writer remembers being taken to task shortly after Debussy's death by serious musicians for suggesting once that, after all, *Fêtes* is in the key of A-major, *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* in G-flat. It was considered not only as a grotesque misstatement but a slur on Debussy's memory. Today such an attitude is out of the question. While contemporary conceptions of tonality are far from being

the same as those of a half century ago, musicians have nevertheless returned to the principle of a tonal, or, if you will, an acoustic center, around which tones and harmonies group themselves in clear relationship and in their various ways recognize the hierarchy of consonance and dissonance as it is furnished by the natural properties of the tone itself. This is, as should be clear to anyone but the musical illiterate, an inevitable result of the changes which I have attempted to describe. Tonality in the broadest sense is an inevitable product of the physical properties of tone, and as none other than Arnold Schönberg has often pointed out, atonal music is simply uncoordinated music. As for Schönberg's own "twelve-tone system," in which an additional set of relationships is, as it were, rigorously superimposed on those derived from the phenomena of resonance, it perhaps appeals to a quite special type of musical mentality, but its ultimate value will depend not on any question of abstract merit but on its efficacy as a vehicle for the imagination of those who use it.

It is inevitable that such a change as I have described should bring about changes in what may be all too inadequately termed the emotional content of music—the term is inadequate because it deals with what are essentially the intangibles of music. But precisely those intangibles are most striking to the average listener and changes of this kind have therefore, if anything, the widest repercussion. It is not difficult to see that the already noted preoccupation with detail went, as it were, inevitably, with an enhancement of keenness and intensity of sensation at the expense of profundity; concentration rather than development, contraction rather than expansion. It led thus to the exploitation of extreme and even exasperated moods, — the pathological exaltation of Scriabin, the shudders of the early Schönberg, even the expensive thrills of *Salomé* and *Elektra,* even, much later, the horrors of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu.* It would not, I believe, be too difficult to show that this is the inevitable development not only of a preoccupation with detail but of the peculiarly nineteenth century conception of the artist as "genius"—a word which Mozart and Bach probably never heard, much less dreamed of applying to themselves. The nineteenth century musician, on the other hand, performer as well as composer—and how well program music

was adapted to his ends—came before the public as a "personality," and became in turn a romantically lonely and tortured soul, a prophet, and a purveyor of thrills, delicate or violent as the case might be. Psychologically the sequence is logical enough if one considers the human experiences of the last century and a quarter and the relation of the artist to these. Logical also is the revulsion of the really contemporary musician who seeks emotional truth even sometimes at the risk of understatement and occasional gaucherie. From a similar impulse of revulsion also derives, at least in part, the now somewhat faded vogue of "Gebrauchsmusik," propaganda music, and the like—the exaltation of music which serves a "practical" purpose—which actually of course means a purpose wholly separate from the personality of composer.

It is the above aspect of contemporary music which has most puzzled and even alienated so much of the public and that more or less articulate portion of it which writes books and articles on music. The public still demands "glamor," even though it no longer believes in it. The first of these propensities is still constantly raising false hopes, the second brings inevitable and invariable frustration. This will doubtless continue to occur until the public as a whole looks for values in art other than those of what is commonly known as "personality."

This is not to say that the contemporary musician does not wish music to be "personal," in the deeper sense, or even "characteristic." But here again he departs from conceptions till recently prevalent. This older esthetic identified a composer's individuality with specific novel or frequently recurring traits in his style. Thus Debussy was the whole tone scale, Scriabin the "mystic chord," Schönberg, for the period, extreme dissonance, and so on. Since the aims of the contemporary composer are different, so is his esthetic; for him the composer's personality resides not so much in the material which he uses as in the individual accents which he brings to it. In a similar manner his nationality resides not in a self-conscious choice of "national idiom" but in the temperament which his work reveals. Both qualities are implicit in whatever music is real. But for the con-

temporary musician they are by-products in relation to his primary aim, which is musical expression—by-products as inevitable and fundamentally as resistant to conscious cultivation as the individual character of a gesture or a handwriting.

This is not to say that contemporary music is inherently better or more profound than what preceded. As Shakespeare's Hotspur noted and remarked, the spirits of the vasty deep do not always "come when you do call on them." The value of a work of art depends on quite other factors than the specific directions which a composer is following. What I have tried to show is some of the reasons, conscious or otherwise, why contemporary composers write as they do, and the causes which have produced them.