

RECENT BOOKS

EXPOSITION BY KRENEK

IN the world of contemporary music, the group of composers adhering to the tenets established and followed by Schönberg and his school exert an almost unique moral and intellectual force. No other group of contemporary composers has—as a group—such lofty and unspoiled artistic ideals; no group has been so tenacious and unswerving in the pursuit of them, or has preserved such an attitude of loyalty and devotion among its members, and no group has at its disposal a more brilliant array of persuasive intellectual force. As far as creative achievement is concerned, at least two of its members—the master himself and his pupil Alban Berg—belong, through their far-flung influence as well as by their actual work, without question among the foremost composers of today.

All of these reasons, together with its own very high merits, combine to make of Ernst Krenek's *Über Neue Musik* (published by the Viennese firm, Verlag der Ringbuchhandlung) a book of extraordinary interest and, in many respects, even for the dissident reader an inspiring book. The "twelve-tone system" and all of its implications, both in historical origin and esthetic, moral and even social implication, constitute—indeed like all genuine art—in the intensity with which they are believed, not merely a system of esthetics and of technical procedure, but what amounts to an artistic religion. Krenek's book is not only the product of one of the most subtle and profound minds which concern themselves with contemporary music; it is a confession of faith, and has all the compelling force of such.

It is not surprising therefore that in his first chapter he summarily dismisses, by way of definition, from the category of "new music" all music which does not correspond to these tenets. His critique is, of course, general, but always brilliant and often, though in a strictly generalized sense, just. It has, however, the incompleteness that a cursory critique of tendencies rather than

works is bound to have, and the keen partiality of a thoroughly convinced, a-priori judgment. On this basis Krenek proceeds in the second chapter to a clear and highly interesting discussion of musical elements; he adduces illuminating and original conceptions of the nature of the musical "idea," "language," "articulation," "binding elements," and "form," which he uses as the basis of later chapters. The third section is devoted to "atonality," a term which he boldly if somewhat reluctantly adopts, with, however, the proviso of exact and painstaking definition, both of the term itself and of its antithesis which he confesses himself forced by the occasion to define in its narrowest and most strictly academic sense. The following two chapters, entitled "Twelve-Tone Technic" and "Music and Mathematics" are devoted to an extraordinarily clear, illuminating, and persuasive exposition of the technicalities and specific esthetic problems of the twelve-tone system; the final one, "Music and Humanity" to a discussion of the relation of the new music and its creators to society. In this chapter, in which one feels more than a trace of profound disillusionment and deep pessimism, he gives voice to the high idealism of the group to which he belongs, a proud and even aggressive affirmation of the isolation of the artist, and a well-merited disdain for the points of view, so popular today, which regard this isolation as deplorable.

There is much in the book that this reviewer can regard not only as penetrating and profound, but as true. This applies not only to Krenek's attitude as an artist but to much of his fundamental technical and esthetic analysis. Many of his interpretations, both of phenomena and of values, and of the psychology of composition, are so much like the reviewer's own as to cause the latter genuine surprise and pleasure—indeed, in so far as he found himself in disagreement with anything in the first two or even three chapters, it was a disagreement in detail, inevitable in the case of any book dealing with the subject to which he too has devoted his life. Moreover, Herr Krenek's presentation is so masterly and so convincing, his argument so completely evolved, that whatever objections are made to it are only to be made, so to speak, on the highest possible plane. The same may, of course, be said of the music of composers like Schönberg, Webern, and Berg.

To understand and to judge this music requires one's best faculties—to estimate it accurately and fairly puts all the qualities of heart and of intellect, as well as of musical understanding, to the test.

Herr Krenek's book deals, of course, not with specific musical works, but with a musical system. It is always necessary in speaking of any such system, to never lose sight of this distinction; the fact, that is, that works and systems belong to quite different categories, as different as those of grammar and literature. The test of the former is ultimately a purely empirical one—that of its proven adaptation to the ends which it serves. This is certainly as true of the twelve-tone system as of any similar quasi-grammatical basis of art; the ultimate judgment must rest on works and not on theories or points of view.

The first point of difference with this system which this reviewer feels—a difference in no way lessened by Herr Krenek's admirable exposition—lies in the very fact that it is, as has already been pointed out, a system which seems to claim more than empirical validity; a system, that is, in which the works seem to be almost of secondary importance in comparison with the theory behind them. This is never clearly stated, and would no doubt be denied by Herr Krenek and his colleagues. One can well understand that a new impulse in art, by reason of its very novelty, is often forced into a polemical position by the intensity of the attacks upon it, and what begins as a fruitful artistic discovery soon degenerates into a dogma. In this case the bitterness of the attack, though by no means unique in musical history, reflects itself on the other hand, in the form, also not entirely new, of sharp antagonism in principle to whatever is contrary to its tenets. It tends therefore to force the issue of partisanship.

Mediocrity, Heaven knows, is common enough, as is its tendency to rationalize itself in attitudes of escape which provide refuge from vital issues. But it is hardly possible to evade the realization that mediocrity exists within a movement as well as outside it, and for a certain type of mediocrity there is nothing so comforting as precisely such a movement as this, in which isolation itself provides a comforting feeling of warmth and over-compensation. It is therefore impossible to the outsider, aware as he may be of the prevalence of mediocrity, to accept as valid

a distinction based on principles of style or esthetics; his very awareness of the rarity of what is truly great inevitably must drive him to other criteria. Thus the specific dogma remains, as such, essentially false even if one were to admit that at a given time and place all the outstanding figures were numbered among its adherents.

The second reservation is a more specific one. This writer has already, in these pages, voiced an attitude toward the twelve-tone system which Herr Krenek for all his compelling persuasiveness has not modified but, on the contrary, served to intensify. The final paragraphs of the book constitute an elegant defense of his creed from the reproach that it is based on thought as well as on intuition, and point, in support of his thesis, to clear examples from among the great figures of the past. It is indeed lamentable that such a defense should need to be made at all. A profoundly conscious attitude towards art has repeatedly been one of the attributes of greatness, though by no means necessarily a sign of it. This writer possesses photographic facsimiles of certain of Beethoven's sketches for the finale of Opus 106, that show beyond all doubt the conscious and even methodical testing of the various possibilities of his fugue subject, which can scarcely be other than a relatively cold process of technical modification. In such a case it is discrimination, not "creation," in the usual grotesquely misunderstood sense, which is inspired; the titanic power of this whole movement is quite evidently in no wise softened by the composer's complete awareness of his procedure, which appears in black and white on his manuscript pages.

One takes exception therefore not to the fact that the twelve-tone composers are conscious and reflective in their methods, but to the intensely abstract nature of their thought. In a remarkable passage Krenek demands not a *natural* (Naturgegebenen) but an intellectually determined basis (Geistesbestimmten Voraussetzungen) for music. This writer's antipathy for the twelve-tone system is expressed precisely in these terms, provided that by "nature" is understood not physics but the response of the human ear and spirit to the simplest acoustic facts. He is profoundly out of sympathy, therefore, with the conception which Krenek boldly avows, of music as an abstract system like geometry. On

the contrary it seems to him that its human meaning—and this has nothing to do with “success,” “conformity,” or any of their current and more pretentious synonyms—lies ultimately in the fact that such elementary musical phenomena as the fifth, and the measurably qualitative distinction between consonance and dissonance, are psychological as well as physical facts, out of which a whole language has grown, and which even in music based on the twelve-tone system seem often more powerful binding forces (“Relations-momente”) than those inherent in the system itself. As a result of an intensive and painstaking study, undertaken over a period of years in good faith and with the best means at his disposal, this writer has come to the conclusion that this is so; that what one hears in twelve-tone music is often plainly at variance with the conceptions that go into its construction.

The criticism which he would make is thus one not so much of the music as of the abstractions which lie behind it. What seems to him an esoteric conception of form, based not on the psychological process of association but on what may be called abstract literalistic procedures (e.g. the *cancrizans* and its inversion) seems to belong quite in the same category. Space does not permit the detailed discussion of these points, and the reviewer is all too conscious of the fact that by their very nature they cannot in any sense be proved. He adduces them only in order to explain and perhaps in some sense justify the recalcitrance of his instincts in regard to a musical tendency for many of whose representatives and creative products he has a genuine and deep admiration and respect.

His final question relates to the basic assumption of Herr Krenek regarding the historical inevitability of the system, as the latest embodiment of a constant tendency towards intensification of “expression”—what Herr Krenek terms the “Expressivo-Haltung.” The reviewer’s question is whether this intensification has not been carried to the breaking point, where real expression is vitiated by an over-abundance and excessive elaboration of detail. The history of art shows clear instances of such exaggeration in the past, as well as of the inevitable and fundamentally healthy reaction against it, somewhat as natural history shows instances of over-development of this or that biological trait, ending, how-

ever, in this sphere tragically, in the annihilation of a species. Here again the reviewer must abandon proof and fall back on a tenacious and undeniable instinct.

Herr Krenk in some measure seems to answer and justify this charge at the end of his fifth chapter where he admits the fragmentary impression created by his "new music" which he considers part of its character as the *innermost expression of reality* (Das Innerste Ausdruck des Wesens). But is it not precisely the nature of art to transcend this fragmentary reality and to give it significance through synthesis—through the creation of a spiritual world in which "the unattainable" in Goethe's words "becomes event" and the fragments achieve a unity impossible in the real world. The significance thus attained is no doubt never a truly definitive one, but it is perhaps in a still deeper sense the "Innerste Ausdruck des Wesens" since it represents the creative embodiment of the most constant even if ultimately the vainest aspiration of mankind—that of transcending itself and approaching something like divinity. Is not art therefore, significant precisely in so far as it is not fragmentary, and are not the greatest works of art those in which completeness, not so much of form as of range and depth and intensity, is most fully attained?

Roger Sessions

A NOVEL ONE-VOLUME ENCYCLOPEDIA

NICOLAS SLONIMSKY's volume, *Music Since 1900*, (W. W. Norton & Co., 1937) serves many purposes and all of them magnificently. As a source book of general information much of it is of value for the layman as well as the professional, but for the most part it will probably be read by those who have a particularized interest in music. Although for the student of modern music this work will perhaps not present a great deal of new or unfamiliar material, the manner in which important events in music and political and social happenings bearing on musical thought and activity are brought into focus, makes this volume an extremely important document of contemporary history and an indispensable addition to any well-stocked library.

Following a general introduction and an explanation of various terms used in relation to twentieth century music, the author