

RECENT BOOKS

THE FUNCTION OF THEORY

IN the preceding articles of this series the writer has attempted to form a judgment of what seem to him three highly significant contributions to present day thought regarding music. Two of these were the work of eminent composers (Hindemith and Krenek); the third (by Schenker), was the product of a mind of unquestionable brilliance and insight, and profound scholarship—one of the outstanding figures in contemporary musical theory and one, in spite of exclusive preoccupation with the past, quite capable of holding its own among the various involutions and complexities of contemporary speculation. Not only did it seem to the writer almost inevitable that he should compare them; they also led him, or at least accompanied him, very logically along certain trains of thought which seemed to him significant, regarding the condition in which music finds itself today.

What is musical theory and what is its function? For the musician, at all events, it has absolutely no other than a practical purpose—that of helping him more easily to grasp and hence to master his materials. It must therefore in overwhelming measure consist of a compendium of known materials and known procedures—that is, materials and procedures which have been given genuine artistic effect—the result of actual creative experience. Its validity lies precisely in the extent to which it faithfully reproduces the results of this experience and lays the foundation for further discovery on the basis of what is already known. It is, in other words, nothing more, in essence, nor less than a demonstration of actual results obtained and effects achieved. It is difficult to see how any more than this can be of value to the serious musician, whose self-educative task is, solely and unceasingly, that of gaining fuller control of his materials, both technically, in being able to use them as he will, and imaginatively, in apprehending their unexplored possibilities and above all in embodying in them his individual creative vision. But creation—the end—is a subconscious process, while technic—the means—is the conscious or super-conscious one; musical theory therefore that is

before the fact can have no conceivable value to the musician, and can only be poisonous to him if he allows himself to be really exposed to it.

In other words, musical theory is valid for the musician only in so far as it is practical and not speculative, in regard either to the nature of musical material or the establishment of abstract values. It must base itself on music in the concrete, and not on physics or history or esthetics. If the latter are adduced it must be by way of confirmation or analogy, in support of observed facts, not by way of exposition or deduction as to the inherent nature of music itself. Since physics and history belong in categories completely different from that of art, anything whatever—and, of course, nothing—can be proven from them.

If this is the case, and musical theory a compendium of results obtained, it is clear that a successful theory must consist of clearly demonstrable data, accessible and readily recognizable to all competent observers. It will in other words exist in a reasonably impersonal sphere in which not one style or tendency but all conceivable styles of a given time and culture are included. Otherwise no longer materials alone, but highly imponderable and inevitably shifting criteria are certain to become operative. Theory so based is, by just so much, rigidly circumscribed in value and applicability. At worst it favors a highly self-conscious and ultimately sterile attitude towards music, which is forced into channels of an academic and artificial nature.



The three books in question are interesting, then, because each in its own way tries to meet this test of universal applicability. Hindemith's book, *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*, comes, at least in tone and intention, the nearest to meeting it. It is less a "system" than the other two, and is by comparison remarkably free from aggressive polemics. But neither does he succeed in convincing the reader by his demonstrations, nor does he establish his thesis on a clear and indisputable definition of fundamentals. The result is a sense that, yes, music can no doubt be conceived in this manner, and move in this direction, but why must it do so? The end sought and obtained seems to be that of facility in Hindemith's own manner, the exploitation of musical materials rather

than their real mastery. Should it be applied, the result would be a virtual adaptation of Hindemith's style—a not, no doubt, fatal, but certainly—because it is strictly personal—a far from inevitable or profoundly motivated direction for music to take. It is, fundamentally, the direction of “Gebrauchsmusik,” produced according to formula and lacking the profundity and differentiation which only creative necessity can give. Certainly, far from Hindemith's intention, which was obviously a quite objective one. The book, however, is the most personal of the three—as completely personal, in its own way, as *Das Marienleben* or *Mathis der Maler*.

Krenek's *Ueber die Neue Musik* is the exposé of a system—a system not constructed, to be sure, quite out of whole cloth, but one inextricably bound to a definite interpretation of musical history and a marked esthetic bias. On this level, already, the system is suspect. This particular type of preoccupation with history, on the part of creative artists, is a quite recent development, and is all too often a symptom of profound inner insecurity. It is far different from Wagner's serene, magnificently and naively impudent assumption that all of his predecessors were in the last analysis but forerunners—an assumption that sprang not from any need for “rules” to support or to clarify his procedure but from an exclusive absorption and intense belief in his own partially fulfilled creative tasks. The twelve-tone system is bound to the past not by ties of continuity—which might conceivably lead in a thousand directions—but by the far more restricting one of opposition. History itself, after all, is based necessarily on abstraction, and the interpretation of history as the development of any single tendency is preeminently abstract. In the case of the *espressivo-Haltung* the abstraction becomes even more arid since “expression” or “expressiveness” is hardly conceivable without an object, and the ultimate question involved regards not the manner and intensity, but the quality and the content of expression.

This to be sure goes beyond the specific realm of the musical theory embodied in the system itself. As propounded in Krenek's book this is far more consistent and more refined than Hindemith's theory; it is however at the same time more stuffy and

more remote. Again, though by the mere fact of being a self-contained system, it is more impersonal, this same quality renders it, like the other, fatally insufficient as a solution of contemporary musical problems. Once more, it is at best possible, not inevitable. It stands fatally before the fact; its principles are, quite frankly and from the beginning, based on abstract reasoning rather than on concrete and demonstrable experience of effect. The music towards which it ineluctably tends is one in which "expression" and form (since the latter is bound by strict, pre-determined and invariable rules) belong in quite different categories and in which the former resides in dynamics, register, accent and color rather than in the specific musical content as embodied in an organically developing tonal pattern.

Of the three books, Schenker's *Der Freie Satz* is the most pretentious and, in spite of its exclusive preoccupation with the past, the most provocative. It deals with more fundamental questions than Hindemith's, and its approach to musical problems is far more concrete than that of the "twelve tone system." This latter quality is obviously due in part to the fact that it deals exclusively with problems of analysis, and takes as its basis the postulate of a past, complete in itself and sealed, so to speak, at both ends. But as opposed to Hindemith, it faces fully the problem of musical continuity—the continuity of organic growth and not merely that of succession, while as opposed to the twelve-tone system it takes as its point of departure the ear in its manifold discriminative and synthesizing functions, and not a set of arbitrary relations between tones. The writer has expressed himself fully in judgment of Schenker and does not feel inclined to modify his considered opinions. Theories such as those of Hindemith and Krenek are pertinent and vital, whatever their limitations, because they represent serious attempts to deal with actual problems; Schenker's goal, on the other hand, evades these problems and successfully vitiates the fundamental soundness of his approach.



The books raise, however, other questions than those inherent in their contents. Why, above all, do composers occupy themselves with musical theory? It is true that present day conditions

force many of them to become teachers and hence into the necessity of organizing their material into a consistent and presentable form. Such treatises as those of Schönberg and Krenek and even Hindemith, however, go far beyond this necessity and manifest both a preoccupation with theory as such, and a dogmatic, even a polemic, spirit in regard to it, which is one of the curiosities of the present day—one of the distinguishing symptoms of the somewhat anomalous situation in which art, like everything else, tends to find itself today. Like so many other forms of intellectualism it is to some extent a sign of profound inner insecurity—on the part of society perhaps, rather than the individual; a search for forms, external imperatives, to reinforce and direct confused or wavering inner necessities. After all, the composer's real task is to discover and utilize, not to classify and rationalize, his materials. He achieves form through the necessities of a clear and directed intensity of vision, not through molds into which his ideas can be poured, or recipes according to which they can be fabricated to pattern. If such rationalizations are to have validity even for the student—and they can certainly have no other—they must be deduced from the plenitude of actual creative achievement, not evolved in the factory of facile classification or the laboratory of a priori abstraction. It was not really Fux, after all, but his far greater contemporaries who, through masterpieces—deeds, not theories—brought order into the "chaos" of his time.

There remains, to be sure, a very real task for the theorist—that of deducing and finding principles from contemporary musical procedure and putting them into a form that will be clear and intelligible to the musicians of the present and future. It is, no doubt, not a task for the composer, whose approach and point of view, in our day above all, is an eminently personal one. In any case such a theory would seem to require, as its basis, a genuinely penetrating, all inclusive, and unbiased study of the musical ear in its varied responses and coordinating activities. As far as this writer knows, this has never been done with anything approaching adequacy, though all reputable musical theory deals with its problems. It is in truth a task of heroic magnitude, and one requiring a variety of attitudes very rarely met with in com-

bination—psychological insight and tact, ability for exact analysis, as well as profound and genuinely imaginative musicianship. It should, it would seem, irresistibly tempt musicians or musicologists whose interest in their art is more than a purely historical one. It should not however be attempted by anyone not fully aware of its pitfalls, or unwilling to reconsider in full the cherished concepts of existing musical theory. Above all it must aim, in the spirit of the practical artist, and not that of the speculative student, at demonstrating facts, not establishing laws, and at the enhancement of a musical language capable of meeting all of the varied demands which the composers of today place upon it.

Roger Sessions

TOVEY'S ANALYSIS

WITH the fifth volume published a few months ago, Donald Francis Tovey completes his *Essays in Musical Analysis* (Oxford University Press). This last book concerns "vocal music" (chiefly choral), and like the preceding four volumes it consists of a series of analyses of various classical and modern compositions. In its general plan it is not unlike other more or less familiar collections of musical annotations—Rosa Newmarch's, for example, or even Upton's old-fashioned *Standard Symphonies, Standard Oratorios*—but it differs from them in that Tovey happens to be a man of consummate genius in whose hands the medium has become an art-form.

It would be tempting to enlarge on Tovey's gifts; his masterly prose style with its almost poetic imagery, his humor, or his common sense. But those who know any of his works, even his extraordinary articles in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* will find it hardly necessary; others are best advised to look him up and find out for themselves. Tovey is the only living writer on music (with the possible exception of W. J. Turner) of whom it is not fantastic to say that his best work may possibly be remembered as literature.

The works analyzed by Tovey have been chosen from those performed at his concerts in Edinburgh and naturally the classics predominate to a large extent. But as his interests are