

The League of Composers' Review

RACE AND MODERNITY

BY ADOLPH WEISSMAN



MODERN music has drawn upon itself the charge of being a world-vernacular, a sort of musical "Volapük" without differentiating characteristics, and through this uniformity, of departing essentially and to its own prejudice from earlier music.

Superficially this reproach seems to rest on some foundation. It must be admitted that tendencies alien to the art, while not exactly removing all its distinctive features, have considerably weakened it. The commercial exploitation of music, intimately connected with the modern facility of travel, has effected a lasting process of reciprocal influence between nations, which gives a special emphasis to the relation between the concepts of "mode" and "modern."

Then the war, re-directing the intercourse of nations, created a new idea of the "modern." For although it was deadly to artistic life, it made extensive use of art as a source of political propaganda. In the new sense, Germany appeared absolutely sterile, while France, Russia, and England were acclaimed as modern.

Although international artistic relations have not yet been entirely restored, a lively exchange is now taking place in the world of art, which has doubtless sharpened the feeling for differences in music. The "national" concept has been blurred by the misrepresentation of this idea in politics, and has of course still less import in art. But although in contemporary

art a common feeling can be perceived, racial color is nevertheless apparent, indeed must be, or this art would be lifeless.

For Germany it was particularly difficult in 1900 to feel at home in the accepted world-view of modernity. This concept bore the stamp of Debussy. The essential modern element for which he struggled, and which was designated by his literary interpreters as "impressionism" was the enrichment of sonority (tonality) through the loosening of tone-matter. It was the outcome of a basic concept fundamentally different from that of the German. In "Debussyism" there is poetic feeling and sensibility, nothing of the ponderous or speculative.

Debussy, with the formal lightness that is in the very nature of French tradition, had risen from a melodious sweetness reminiscent of Massenet, and a Grieg-like landscape coloring, to his master-piece "*Pelleas and Melisande*," a tender, poetic renunciation of the tangible world. In German music, on the other hand, the tendency was definitely to retain firm hold on actuality, a mood that gained triumphant expression in Richard Strauss.

At this time Debussy tempted many Germans to imitation; but it was possible for them merely to repeat the gesture, not to express creatively the spirit of impressionism. But the spirit was essential, and its expression so intimately related to the personality of Debussy, that even his own compatriots could but achieve imitation. To be sure, they succeeded in mastering his style whereas German impressionism betrayed obvious effort through its heavy movement.

However, Debussy, and even Ravel, who at the same time and later continued the struggle for modernity, achieving the expression of a clear-seeing spiritual personality, are now no longer modern. They have become the classics of modernity.

For the moment the world of music is under the spell of two men—Schönberg and Stravinsky. Even here race has accentuated diversity. To Stravinsky may be accorded the western domain, to Schönberg the remaining countries.

Schönberg, who is rooted in chamber-music, in which field the most important utterance must be conceded him, draws with dialectic vigor and passionate feeling, with even more of the first than of the second—the final consequences of the Ger-

manic music-civilization. It must be pointed out, however, that the dialectic sharpness which transformed this former Wagnerian into the reformer of music, rests on Jewish race feeling, which fused with the characteristic impulse of German music to form a new sonorous tissue.

This mingling process, that is, the racial penetration of German music, has provoked the great crisis through which we are passing. Atonality and linear counterpoint are the external characteristics of this new music. The animating spirit, however, is, or rather tends to be, the traditional one—the spirit that moved Bach and ultimately Beethoven. Dialectic rigor may have cramped this force, but undoubtedly something genuine, definitely and characteristically German is apparent in this music, and the way is open for a truly creative spirit, which, disregarding dialectic, shall seize and utilize this stimulus. We need, as Busoni understands the situation, something akin to Mozart.

The appearance of a Paul Hindemith in Germany, who, despite Schönberg, once again creates opus after opus out of a true musical impulse, demonstrates more clearly than Ernest Krenek, who pursues the path of the linear with cerebral force and relentless strength of will, that the world must judge Schönberg as a means toward an end and not an end in himself. His contempt for all that is consonant would of necessity lead to sterility. The German impulse must not be diluted into a paper music.

Fundamentally racial also is the influence of Stravinsky, on whom we have fixed as the impelling force in western music. It is characteristic that the element which we call atonal, while automatically entering the western world, should make its appearance there with different effect. Whereas the Germanic, or the music world dominated by Germanic influences, tends to throw off an academic heritage and struggles to create a new form from a new content, we see the new form rising in the west with ease and a certain inevitability.

One might say that the western world is guided on the one hand by the feeling for sonority, and on the other by the instinct for the folk-psyche. Debussy was a fulfillment. What could follow? Even to him there had been revealed through Moussorgsky, the Russian visionary, something of folk-mentality. Contact between the French and Russian mind was of

long standing. The French folk-spirit was not potent enough of itself to create a new music. Salvation came from Russia. Through continued contact with Paris, and collaboration with the Russian ballet, Stravinsky paved the way for that music which we recognize as a synthesis of barbaric folk-feeling and the highest refinement, which finds its supreme expression in the "Sacre du Printemps."

Stravinsky's rhythm, his new tonality, have penetrated the world which is nearest him racially. The young Arthur Honegger, a Francis Poulenc, an Arthur Bliss may show us on what fertile field his inspiration has fallen.

It is race which colors modernity. But racial mixtures now appear, to open up new possibilities. In music, blood and not the mind is the ultimate determinant.

