

THE TYRANNY OF THE ABSOLUTE

BY ADOLPH WEISSMANN

ONE of the chief tenets in the doctrine of the new music is evolution toward the absolute,—in other words toward pure music, or better still, pure counterpoint. Let us test the validity of this principle and its actual effect on music today.

The tendency, it is obvious, has been developed in opposition to the music of the nineteenth century. It is in conflict with the romantic, the emotional and the naturalistic. It demands of music the abolition of everything realistic, everything human, so that the art may emerge in its native purity. This theory, carried out to the letter, would result in paralysis, but fortunately the practise is not as drastic as the theory.

It is true that this movement toward the absolute is the main current in music today; we live in a period in which chamber music is almost sovereign. The spirit of the ensemble is being re-created in the sense that nothing superfluous or inflated is tolerated in the community of instruments. The creative world, invoking Bach, has turned ascetic. But it would be simple to demonstrate that Bach, fundamentally, is no ascetic. In repeatedly referring to Bach's linear counterpoint, one is apt to forget how melodically and harmonically a large part of his music is contrived.

It is of course desirable to abandon the orgies of sound, the self-revelations of the romantic, post-romantic and twentieth century music of a Richard Strauss, for the expression only of essentials. But the tyranny of chamber music necessarily results in the impoverishment of other forms. Absolute music carried to its logical conclusion would not only become the enemy of the theater, which is a tangible art, but would drive from the stage song, bound up as it is with a text and a content.

There are indications, however, that the dogma of the absolute is not adopted in its entirety. For example there are parody and the grotesque which play so large a role in modern music and of which the early Stravinsky was the pioneer. The chief resource of parody is rhythm, which is derived from vital human activity. Here music breaks away from the absolute, is indeed relative in the extreme. In parody, no matter how removed one may feel from the object of the jest, one's fundamental concern is with very tangible things.



Turning from the grotesque to dynamism, which is equally important in the new music, one recognizes another violation of the principle. This is particularly true of orchestral music. Arthur Honegger expressing his love for locomotives in an orchestral piece such as the *Pacific*, fortunately creates no absolute music, but sets out rather with a reality. One can say that everything called dynamism translated into music is a demonstration that the new music, even chamber music, expresses a theory, but, wherever possible, breaks through its confines and seeks a relation with something real. And here we must contradict Stravinsky—that is, the latest Stravinsky—who has outstandingly expressed the tendency toward pure music, but whose chief effects depend on dynamic energy.

Even Arnold Schoenberg, the most consistent advocate of the absolute, has written songs and monodramas. No one can deny that Schoenberg is supremely endowed for the expression of metaphysics in music. Indeed, he never found happiness in tone alone. The inclination toward chamber-music, in other words toward the absolute, was innate with him. In this medium he has given the world an example of how to break away from the all-too-human. Yet one cannot call his *Pierrot Lunaire* or his monodramas absolute music despite their attempt to submerge the theater in the accepted sense and to transfer action into metaphysical realms. Deep as is the impression made by such works, it is exactly the

contraction in the sphere of the theater which exposes a certain wearying inflexibility in the expression of feeling.

In brief, it is my purpose to emphasize the existence today of a positive tendency toward the absolute and at the same time to point out that contemporary, like all earlier music, inevitably attempts to free itself from the bonds of dogma. The present practice of asceticism also finds expression in the sphere of sonority. Here music striving toward pure counterpoint has made its farthest advance. But sonority is equally an element that is inseparable from the human organism. Music that is absolute must liberate itself from real sound and can only claim to be heard by the inner ear. While it is true that this principle has been carried out in a great deal of chamber music and in chamber orchestral compositions, there are many modern creators whose special distinction lies exactly in the discovery of new sonorities.



There can be no doubt of the extraordinary difficulty of releasing music from human bonds. The war against romanticism is significant only if it is directed against sentimentality. Sentimentality is fundamentally sterile. It will be impossible, however, to build up music outside human emotion and the human organism. The moment it attempts to abandon its relation to them both, music loses the ground under its feet. Because music is so intimately tied up with human activity, the distinction that has developed between vocal and instrumental music will not be maintained in the long run. Much of the new music is conceived and constructed as if there were no such thing as a human voice. The voice represents the sensuous element in music. In so far as one increases the separation between instrumental and vocal music, one does make music absolute to a certain extent, but one withdraws it from the fountain-head of the art. The community between both kinds of music cannot be ignored either in the song or the choral work. That is why neither the one nor the other prospers today.

So far as one can foresee, the future of music lies in its liberation from the rigidity of dogma. Only by a free employment of means, wavering always between the sensuous and the metaphysical, can music retain the far-reaching enthrallment which has been its prerogative from the first. Therefore it is certain too, that a relation to the tangible and the human will spring up again in a new form and music will cease to be absolute. With dogma overthrown, the life of art will again be renewed.

