

MODERN MUSIC¹

IT is very difficult for a composer to speak of contemporary music without constantly speaking of himself, and those who attempt to avoid doing so, commit a fault even more serious. In failing to name themselves, they let it be understood that the qualities most lacking in their contemporaries are precisely those which they themselves possess, and seem to infer that the blindness and the prejudices of an unappreciative public cause their renown to be less great than their merits might warrant. However, while speaking of my own music, whenever necessary, for which I hope you will pardon me, I shall try to take a point of view as objective as possible.

At present, there are two very marked tendencies in music, two systems which oppose each other vigorously. On one side, the school which favors "the return to the classical tradition with a vocabulary as consonant as possible." On the other side the school of "dissonance, of the free use of musical matter."

Here we have the arguments of the former: Since the war, music based on the use of dissonant chords has come to an impasse. Its creations are full of false notes without rhyme or reason and this brings about an impression of similarity and of extreme monotony in all its compositions. Its only object is the extravagant search for discordance which deadens the auditory sense and destroys the desire for clear-

¹Lecture delivered under the auspices of the Rice Institute Lectureship in Music by Arthur Honegger in the Scottish Rite Cathedral, Houston, Texas, March 6, 1929.

ness. Let us return, they say, to the wise laws of tonality, of modulations, of melodic sweep. Let us take for models the divine Mozart, Bach, Scarlatti. Let us pass over old deaf Beethoven; let us ignore the German romanticists and turn with horror from Wagner and his following, Richard Strauss and Schönberg, to return to the noble simplicity of Donizetti, Verdi, and Gounod. Our master, Erik Satie, is the only one who has retained a clear vision; we have one more proof of this in the fact that even Stravinsky, in his last works adheres to those principles without which there is no salvation. Music above all must please, and moreover, must be a national language; no complications, no studied elegance, only simple melodies, diatonics of harmony according to the rules, in a word compositions following the classical model!

To which the other side replies: We cannot revive the past. It is impossible to ignore or to seem to ignore what has been done. Let us make use of the dissonance of modern harmonic language as of an inheritance. The generations which have preceded us have battled to conquer this new vocabulary. Let us keep it jealously; it is the outgrowth of a natural evolution. Let the new chords be the basis of a new harmonic system more real than the old one, which is based on harmonic resonance, but cut off at its most important point (that is, at the appearance of the harmonic natural of the 7th dominant). You proclaim yourselves disciples of Bach and of Mozart and you take from these masters only their most superficial quality, the harmony of their days. You do not penetrate their thought and you close your eyes to their audacious innovations, which prove their efforts to widen and develop that harmonic system. Dissonance must not be an end, any more than consonance, that is certain, but it is an admirable means without which, in our era, it is

impossible to create a living work. Your works in imitation of Mozart and Gounod are only so many medleys, more or less successful according to the degree of technique that you possess. At a time when even the most conservative musicians are setting forth timidly on the path of the new resonance, you are seeking by this means to pass as audacious innovators while you are really only plagiarists of authors long since fallen into disuse and, for the most part, unknown to the public.

At present, "No change on the front," as the war bulletins used to say. There is, however, a group of young composers who lean toward the first point of view, and we notice more and more works conceived in the style of this new Renaissance.

Another question, that of "musical objectivity," has greatly occupied young composers, and is still engaging them, although the principle of it is manifestly acquired. This question has been treated in a masterly fashion by the well-known orchestra conductor, Ernest Ansermet, in a study on Stravinsky. I greatly regret not being able to quote this study in its entirety for it explains the matter much more clearly than I ever could. Objectivity consists, therefore, in the search for "musical matter," above all, in search for expression. A beautiful melodic line, a beautiful modulation, an interesting superposition of theme, are "musical matter." They have their intrinsic beauty outside of all pictorial or philosophical considerations, and this beauty is not jeopardized by time; it remains eternally young. On the contrary, subjectivity which seeks preëminently the expression of personality by whatever means, leads easily towards what we term "sincerity" and which in art is an extremely dangerous objective.

How many artists do say: "Above all, I am sincere. I

write what I feel. I say what I think. I give you my heart, etc. . . ." To which it would often be well to answer: "We don't ask for that much. Keep for yourself your heartaches and your impressions." There are crude ways of being sincere and some of them must be controlled. Roland Manuel remarks that "Sincerity may be an explanation; it is not an excuse."

This seeking for musical objectivity has little by little caused composers carefully to avoid all that which might be interpreted as music of expression or of description. They wish primarily to write "pure music," that is to say, music which rests on nothing foreign to matter purely musical. The titles of the impressionistic works (Debussy, Ravel) tending to create in advance an atmosphere, are carefully avoided. We no longer write anything but Suites, Studies, Sonatas, etc. That reminds me of a picture which I saw in the Salon des Independants by a painter who was a believer in "pure painting" and who, afraid to choose titles, borrowed them from music. He exhibited an enormous canvas on which a winding red line intermingled with a green line. The picture was called "Fugue in Two Colors." The public, at first, a little bewildered, understood soon enough that the red line was one of the colors and evidently the green the other. Thus everybody was satisfied with little effort.

In music we soon came to the same point and every work not lending itself to a literary interpretation was considered "pure music," which quality was sufficient to exact admiration. On the other hand, the musical element, however beautiful it might be, was neglected in every work expressing a certain definite sentiment, that alone condemning it *a priori*. This state of mind is the reaction of the new generation against romanticism and impressionism, and it is owing to such aesthetics that there has been a return to Bach and

Mozart, "pure" musicians. It is also the same theory which impels present composers to deny that dramatic musical art can survive. They all consider the musical theatre a dead form, incapable of regeneration.

At this point I shall take personal part in the debate and I will strongly protest against this conception. I am entirely convinced that the "musical element" is the most important thing, the vital essence of the work, but in my opinion this "musical element" finds itself greatly magnified if it corresponds to a general human idea. We have long admired Bach's *Choralvorspiele*, unique from the standpoint of its structure and its marvelous counterpoint, this being obviously pure music. Later, different authors, in particular Albert Schweitzer, have demonstrated that these *Choralvorspiele* are real symphonic poems drawing their subjects from the different stanzas of the chant and illustrating them by turn. Thus in the splendid chant of *Dogme en Musique, Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* (the enlarged arrangement for six voices), we hear toward the end, ascending in a strongly marked rhythm, the marches which in the symbolic musical language of Bach express religious faith. In the last stanza the words of the chant express the hope of divine pardon. In the chant *Durch Adams Fall*, the bass is entirely in discordant sevenths illustrating the idea of Adam's fall. I might also mention the great choral, *An Wasser flüsse Babels*, where the continued movement of double strokes is undoubtedly the description of a river. I might continue these examples endlessly, as all those who know the works of Bach can easily understand. This symbolism of the language does not diminish the intrinsic value of the work, but, on the contrary, it makes it more human, more moving.

It is in this spirit that I am attempting to write works such as *Pacific 231* and *Rugby*. The subtitle of these pieces

is *Symphonic Movement*, and that is their true title. In calling them *Pacific* or *Rugby* I am only indicating the sources of my inspiration, for reasons of honesty, and also to give to the listener a clue which will facilitate comprehension of the work. This being done, my aim is to interest my hearers not by the subject but by the music, by the "musical matter." My friends tell me that I have achieved my purpose. My critics tell me that I have succeeded only in imitating stupidly the noise of the locomotives and the thump of feet on the ball.

I believe firmly also in the possibility of a regeneration of dramatic music. Since the days of Debussy and Strauss it must be confessed that dramatic music has fallen into a period of depression. There are several reasons for this. First, the difficulty of freeing oneself from the tutelage of Wagner, Debussy, and Strauss; second, the difficulty of finding modern lyric subjects, that is, subjects of our day; third, the enchanted ring drawn around theatres by the publishing houses which hold the copyright of the current works of Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, Puccini. Last and foremost is the exclusive desire for pure music, on the part of the new school. In dramatic art, music must support and aid the drama. The desire for pure music, therefore, is in direct contradiction to its possibilities, and will cause the drama to be overwhelmed by the symphony.

A single modern composer has tried to find a balance between these extremes. Alban Berg, with his work entitled *Woozeck*, has aroused considerable comment in Germany. The symphonic part is constructed in classical musical forms, such as *Sarabande*, *Variations*, etc., upon which the drama is developed. Most of the other composers, dreading it, have evaded the difficulty and have taken refuge behind an attempt to regenerate the old opera. Stravinsky with *Mavra*

and *Oedipus Rex*, Hindemith with *Cardillac*, Darius Milhaud with *Les Malheurs d'Orphée*, Ravel with *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, Roland Manuel with *Isabelle et Pantalon* and *Le Diable Amoureux*, Auric with the *Bal Masqué*, and myself with *Judith*, a serious opera.

Along with these works, there are others by the same composers, in which the difficulty has been frankly faced with more or less success. For example, *La Brebis Égarée* by Milhaud, the three operas in one act by Hindemith, the dramas of Krenek, the *Sette Canzoni* by Malipiero, *Erwartung* and *Die Glückliche Hand* by Schönberg, *Le Poirier de Misère* by Delannoy and my musical tragedy *Antigone*. I wish I were able to tell you of the efforts and the determination of each of these musicians, but that is impossible. There is only one work of which I may speak with a thorough knowledge. That is *Antigone*. The principal reasons for the lack of success of the great part of the work of the lyric theatre seem to me to be the following: the slowness of the action, exaggerated by the chorus and the symphony, and the impossibility of understanding the text. In this day we are accustomed to speed. The motion picture has given us the taste for a swift succession of tableaux and the public no longer has any patience. Hence the dismay of the public when confronted by works of the dimensions of those of Shakespeare and Wagner. In singing in the normal fashion or in double or triple time, one emphasizes the duration of the sounds. Everyone has already understood the end of the sentence when the singer has scarcely begun (provided that one may understand him, which is not often the case). This condition creates a very painful impression of heaviness and weariness. A further disadvantage is the drawing out of the word on the sonorous syllables, which renders it unintelligible. Each word is more or less plastic according to

the place it occupies in the sentence. To draw out a part of that word to the detriment of another part destroys that plasticity. The word cannot be subordinated to the melody. It is the word, on the contrary, which ought to create the melody, for each word has a melody of its own. This melody has no more reason to be slower when sung than when spoken. "One should sing as one speaks," says Chaliapin in his *Pages de Ma Vie* and he adds: "The majority of singers speak as they sing which is not a compensation."

I have sought, therefore, in *Antigone* to keep the movement of the song almost identical with the time of the spoken word. The music is none the less melodious for it, because a melody can just as well be fast as slow, a fact which is not generally taken into account. In my opinion, this constitutes the true vocal style such as Bach in his recitatives of passion and Debussy in *Péléas et Mélisande* have conceived it.

What is the true vocal style? For me it is the manner of considering the voice as a vehicle for words. It is, therefore, a special instrument, different from all the others, which no other can ever replace. Try to play selections from the part of Péléas on a violin or a flute. It will be absurd. But take the *airs galants* from the operas of Verdi, Puccini, Massenet, of all those who have an acknowledged reputation of writing well for the voice. These airs will lose nothing in being interpreted by an instrument. This is not then the best style for the voice since the voice can be so easily supplanted.

The recitatives of Bach are admirable from the viewpoint of expression of the word because at that time he wanted the words to be understood. When the air begins, the words, always the same, are repeated several times. Then Bach treats the voice in instrumental style, generally making it dialogue with a solo instrument which outlines the same contours. Naturally all my effort has been spent on the concen-

tration of the symphony which supports the drama, in order that it may have a life of its own and its complete expression, without slowing the drama. When in this work the chorus intervenes, it is the lyric element, and the voices repeating the words are treated in the "vocal-instrumental and polyphonic styles."

I have thus dwelt at some length on my own conceptions because I felt that I could do no better than to present to you altogether candidly my chief objectives and preoccupations.

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