

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SLUMP

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IN these days of economic depression it is perhaps natural for musicians to feel, on surveying the assets of their art, that it too is in a bad way. On every hand one hears progressive critics complaining that composers have grown less productive and, when they do produce, less enterprising. What, they ask, is there nowadays to compare with the excitements of a decade or so ago? Since *Les Noces* has Stravinsky even once inspired a frenzied clash of enthusiasm and disparagement? Has Schönberg produced a single work after *Pierrot Lunaire* which could interest even his most ardent upholders as anything but a laboratory experiment? What other work, say those who complain of stagnation if music does not advance steadily at fifty sensations a year, has caused anything like the stir of these two landmarks in modern music, not to mention many others more or less contemporary with them? Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*? Yes—but *Wozzeck* too is ten years old at least, and its composer has kept silence since, so far as any striking new work is concerned.

What else is happening comparable to the series of thrills round about the period of the European war? Those still living who are likely to be the old masters of the early twentieth century—what are they doing? Elgar has long ceased to compose, as far as the world knows; Strauss *ought* to have ceased, as the world knows but too well; Delius, able to write only vicariously now, cannot be expected to do much more than repeat himself; Ravel, when he contrives to escape the squirrel's cage of his personality, becomes more and more precious and niggling even

outside it; Ernest Bloch is in hiding; Sibelius, after some years of apparent sterility, promises an eighth *Symphony* of whose existence concert promoters are so little convinced that even now the Royal Philharmonic Society in London announces its first performance with an alternative work in case of a renewal of its previous failure to turn up. For the rest, Bartok has done nothing of moment since the *Piano Concerto* and the fourth *Quartet*, Kodaly nothing since the *Psalmus Hungaricus*, while Hindemith turns out utility music at so many rivets a day, each new product having very much the appearance of the last.

Lamentations of this sort are heard right and left. They could be multiplied in detail, and one could also make complaints of a general nature. One of them would be that the nations of Europe organize annual International Festivals with few apparent results beyond attaining a greater facility for disliking each other's music; another that young America still vainly tries to convince the older strongholds of culture of a capacity to add something of its own to the world's music.

Such as they are, these complaints may be regarded as more or less justified. Shall we, then, throw up the sponge and declare the art of music bankrupt? Shall we not only agree with Adolf Weissman that music has come to earth, but, unlike him, believe that the impact has killed it? I think not. Only the musical hotheads and speed-fiends of this past century surely can feel quite so desperate for no better reason than that nothing hair-raising has happened during the last few years. For this is, scientifically considered, a very poor reason indeed, and the science that will help us to demonstrate the fact is history.

Let us try to discover in the past a period analogous to that of today and see if we cannot find some consolation, some kind of negative encouragement in it. The year 1850 will be a convenient choice. We may imagine a writer impatient for the progress of music in those days indulging in precisely such a jeremiad as that which I let loose—a moment ago. Listen to it:

The recent deaths of Mendelssohn and Chopin are still uncompensated for. Rossini and Spontini have both retired, Spohr is aging and unwilling to compose, so far as the world can tell, Schumann *ought* no longer to compose, as all the world knows

(No comparisons invited!). In France there are two young men of twenty-eight, named César Franck and Charles Gounod, of some promise, but no more. Only Berlioz—and he an eccentric in most musicians' eyes, alas!—towers above Adam, Auber, Halévy and Ambroise Thomas, to name only the best of the frivolous operatic composers of the day and not to mention a fashionable but uninspiring chamber musician like Onslow. In England there are no greater names than those of five small B's: Balfe, Benedict, Bennett, Bishop and Braham, and neither much above nor much below their level as Loder, Macfarren, Cipriani Potter, Henry Smart and Vincent Wallace. Germany is barren enough in all conscience with Flotow, Lortzing and Marschner supplying the stage, Robert Franz and Raff almost alone to be taken seriously in other departments. Wagner of course, despite his great promise, has by now made himself impossible in Germany, and considering that he has already reached the age of thirty-seven, it must be said that his private behavior has been a good deal more revolutionary than his *Tannhäuser*, while a *Lohengrin*, furtively produced by Liszt at Weimar, is said to be a toning down rather than an advance in audacity. Liszt himself is now alone to uphold the flag of progress. Meyerbeer, though as ready as ever to make concessions to the public, may be said to have his greatest successes behind him. Italian music is in the hands of people whose very names are hardly known abroad:—Bazzini, Mabellini, Mercadante, Pacini, Pedrotti, Raimondi. There is Verdi, of course, who goes on increasing his reputation, but to say that he was on the side of enterprise would be going too far. In Bohemia there is a young man of some promise, Smetana, while in Russia Glinka and Dargomizhsky are interesting but too narrowly national figures. Gade in Denmark is only a mild imitator of Mendelssohn and Schumann.

A period more hopeless than that could hardly have been imagined by those who looked for a bold advance on music's part. Yet before long *Tristan* was brewing its seditious potion in Wagner's mind, and all over Europe young people were at that moment growing up to give to music, some of them a new direction in groups, others isolated strong personalities. In Ger-

many and Austria were Brahms and Bruckner, in Russia the Five as well as Tchaikovsky, in France were not only Bizet, Massenet and Delibes destined for the stage, Guilmant and Widor for the organ and Saint-Saëns for everything, but leaders of the coming new school such as Chabrier, Fauré, Castillon and Duparc were at various stages of childhood. Elsewhere Dvorak, Grieg and Pedrell were approaching their teens. Only a few years to wait, and disappointment turned into new expectations, new fulfillments.

Two hundred years earlier the progressive musicians and music lovers in Italy must have gone through a period no less depressing. For what do we find to be left in 1650 of the high hopes of a musical renaissance raised not long before by the Florentine *camerata* and almost wholly realized by Monteverdi? Two eminent men, Allegri and Foggia, tenaciously representing the old-fogeydom of the polyphonic tradition. Carissimi reorganizing vocal music—especially the oratorio—on the new lines of major and minor tonality, but in an orderly, fundamentally conventional manner. The two Rossi—Luigi and Michelangelo—likewise smoothing out the forms of the vocal aria. The more enterprising but dramatically weak Cesti doing much the same. In Legrenzi the Monteverdian sense of drama being entirely lost, all the excitement gone—for those whose cry was for excitement and who had no ear for the heightened musicianship that went hand in hand with these people's endeavor to apply esthetic discipline to new resources. Even Cavalli, much the most daring inventor of the time, was felt to be tame in comparison with his precursors. But Cavalli was also practical and therefore successful on the professional stage, for which the Florentine amateurs had never dreamt of writing and which did not as yet exist even for Monteverdi.

Art is an eternal compromise between the creator's independent, ideal aspiration and the social conditions through which it becomes acceptable. There are periods, such as the beginning of the seventeenth century in Italy, when artists are so fired by new departures that they disregard the public and write only for themselves and for the *cognoscenti* surrounding them. But no art can proceed for long in this way. It is bound to come

before the public, and when that public cannot follow it, compromise steps in and either imposes itself on the composer or isolates him. The *cognoscenti* then say that those who have allowed it to influence them have deteriorated. To be sure, from their point of view, which is one demanding innovation at all costs, this is perfectly true. And it is precisely for those with such an outlook that musical creation today appears to be in a parlous state.

But, whatever the subversive enthusiast cheated of his excitement may say, that point of view is wrongly chosen from any angle but his own extremely narrow one. For excitement does not of itself make great music. Still less, it is true, does an effortless conforming to practical exigencies; but the point is that such conforming, reasonably done, never hurts a composer of genius. All the greatest masters wrote, so to speak, practically, not theoretically. That is to say, they either had in view certain conditions of performance which could immediately apply themselves to the realization of their plans (e.g. Bach's *Passions*) or they visualized some means whereby such conditions were eventually to be created, as in the case of the *Nibelung's Ring*, the completion and ultimate performance of which Wagner did not hesitate to bring about by means that were positively sordid in their materialism. Mozart could even turn out a *Don Giovanni* to order, to mention only one of the sublime masterpieces which owe their existence to a business arrangement.

I am not defending whatever commercial instincts may manifest themselves in composers. One naturally has a greater respect for a Schubert or a Hugo Wolf, who write sheaves of songs with but the slenderest prospects of hearing them sung, let alone seeing them published, than for a composer who fishes for an order from a patron or an impresario. But the fact remains that even Schubert and Wolf, though they saw no practical chances for making their work popular, had the sound artistic commonsense to make it potentially so. For all true art must be capable of taking a share in artistic life, and that is what the Italians of the mid-seventeenth century tried to let it do. They do not happen to have been very great men—not one of them matched Monteverdi in genius,—but that is beside the

point. Had they been musicians equal to him in gifts, they would by their more practical attitude have overtowered him very much as Bach did later. The two men who came nearest to doing it in 1650 were the German Schutz and the exiled Italian Lulli, who, however, was then but eighteen years old. Froberger and Scheidt in Germany, Cambert in France, Henry Lawes and Matthew Locke in England, were on the whole no greater men than their Italian contemporaries, though in some cases as interesting personalities.

The application of these aspects of the past to the situation of today may now appear obvious enough. Let us admit that there is a dearth of startling musical productions just now, but let us also reflect that striking novelties are not necessary to a healthy evolution of the art of music except as sporadic phenomena acting as stimulants. If Stravinsky and Schönberg, for example, give us no thrills today comparable to those of ten or fifteen years ago, so much the worse for them, but not for music as a whole. Just as we must not clamor for continuous excitements, so we must not pin our faith irrevocably to a single composer until he has proved himself to the end of his career. Personally I feel no qualms whatever in assigning to these two a place as mere, interesting individuals, for I have never believed in them as leaders. They have indeed done a great deal of leading, but they did it too consciously and in the wrong places. Neither has led the public. Schönberg was frankly content with heading a school of specialists and is thus entitled to our respect as a musical sectarian with a fanatical faith in his creed; Stravinsky has indeed wished to lay hold of his audiences, but he has attempted to do it by way of intellectual argument through the mouthpieces of docile adherents rather than by consistently convincing achievements. Here and there he has produced fascinating works, but one feels that this happened almost by accident, for it is always the solution of a problem that interests him, not the carrying out of an artistic scheme by sheer inspiration. The great creator looks back upon his finished work and wonders how he did it; Stravinsky is too suspiciously intent on telling us that he always does exactly what he wanted to do, which is not the way of the supreme genius. He will be extremely lucky if

he retains a place as a restless musical explorer similar to that of Berlioz, which indeed will be an enviable fate enough.

Let us now examine the case of Paul Hindemith, since he is perhaps the most typical composer of these days of the slump, though forsooth his factory seems to be always working overtime. I take Hindemith to be far poorer in ideas and less enterprising than Stravinsky, but I think of him nevertheless as more essentially a musician. He stands, in fact, to Stravinsky very much as Carissimi or Legrenzi does to Monteverdi. He has fewer advocates to tell us incessantly that he is achieving his aims perfectly, and indeed one cannot feel that he always does so; but that the aims themselves are sound seems to me indisputable. For he does write practically. That is to say, he conforms to the artistic and social conditions of the day instead of always hankering after modes and manners that no longer exist. He does not suddenly reveal to us his conviction, as Stravinsky may do any day, that, let us say, Meyerbeer was after all a great composer and that nothing is more urgent than that an opera in his style should be written. Hindemith will decide to write an opera in his own way and that of his own time, and then give the world a *Cardillac* which may or may not be a great masterpiece—that is not the point—but which will at once spell conviction, just as Meyerbeer, great or not, did in his day, but as no imitation of his manner, however entertaining to the specialists, can possibly do now.

If, then, we are to have experiments for a few years, we can well afford to wait for the achievements that are to come after. The 1650's waited and then, after quite a long time, extraordinary things happened. They will happen again, only music will not keep pace with the speeding up of the rest of the world's production. Does that matter when it is patent that a speeding up leads to a standstill? If music too seems to suffer from a depression, we may at least, unless we disregard the lessons of history, feel sure that it is but a gathering of new forces. They may be different forces from those on which we decided to put our money only a decade ago. Where is the harm, so long as they are those which are to lead to a new vital intercourse between the musical producer and musical consumers at large?