

SCHOENBERG IN ITALY

BY ALFREDO CASELLA

IN the last few years several basic influences have been steadily shaping the destiny of musical Europe, of which the two most powerful are undoubtedly the work of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. Equally compelling, they represent extreme divergence both in origin and in development, but so sweeping is their energy that there is scarcely a young musician in Europe who has not enlisted under the banner of either one of these great contemporaries.

The ten recent productions of *Pierrot Lunaire* in Italy, under the direction of the *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche*, gave our young musicians and our public a direct contact with the strange art of Arnold Schoenberg. As echoes of the violent arguments aroused by these recitals have not yet died down, the moment may still be opportune to discuss the mutual relation between the art of the Viennese composer and the new musical sensibility that is developing among us.

First of all, little of Schoenberg's music has been heard in Italy; some rare piano pieces, the first quartet, played two years ago at Rome and just barely tolerated, although it offers no other disturbing features than its exceptional length, and the poem, *Verklaerte Nacht*, directed three years ago by Bruno Walter at the Augusteo of Rome where it provoked a memorable uproar, really unjustified, for the music is anything but aggressively audacious.

One can see how unprepared our public was for the hearing of a "bolshhevik" work like *Pierrot Lunaire*. Before starting on tour with this production I anticipated rather serious consequences and perhaps even some governmental decrees prohibiting the recitals in the name of the public peace. But, as a matter of fact, despite the outcries of a portion of the audience, the production

fared rather well, certainly no worse than in other and more advanced musical centers such as Paris, Vienna or Berlin.

These initial reactions have given no serious indication of developing into an enthusiasm for Schoenberg. Which is just the point I wish to stress. A composer at first may inspire deep hostility that gradually fades into complete capitulation to his ideas (is it not said of love that the most overwhelming passions have sometimes sprung from deep hatreds?). But in the case of Schoenberg it seems to me that his art is so alien to our temperament that the chasm can never be bridged.



Let us consider, for the present, similarities and differences in thought between the Austrian and his Italian contemporaries, starting our analysis technically.

The basic characteristic of Schoenberg's music is recognized quite generally today as his absolute atonality. What this term connotes even professors in our venerable conservatories are beginning to learn and I need waste no time explaining it here. There is, however, one outstanding feature which gives a definitive character to this atonality of Schoenberg. He was not only the first to explore the mysterious regions of tonal negation, but was able—which is more important—to create with his new means a language sonorous and perfect in itself and marvelously plastic to the poetic demands of its author.

This triumph of Schoenberg's is now fifteen years old. From that time to the present the technique of *Pierrot Lunaire* and *Erwartung* has not been further evolved either by the many disciples or—and this is a far graver matter—by the Master himself. What seemed at the outset to offer absolute freedom and a boundless horizon now appears to be, if not a narrow prison, then a vast park enclosed by lofty, insurmountable walls.

Just as Cezanne's worship of volume and mass had as its extreme consequence the art of cubism, now passé, so the chromaticism of romantic Germany has worn itself down to the atonal

system. Rising at first as a magnificent dawn, it has revealed itself as nothing more than a very rich but inevitable twilight.

True atonality has never found a place in modern Italian music. The writer has often been classified as atonal when as a matter of fact he has only once even approached such an effect, in the first movement of the *Sonatina for Piano* (1916). Other young composers have in their turn experimented with the new method only to abandon it for a return to the tonal system which, although progressively developed, is still in its essence traditional.

In this inability to associate ourselves with the absolute denial of tonality I see another clear proof of that ancient common sense which is characteristically Latin. The Italian has been defined as "an adventurer with feet of lead". And it is in fact apparent that the basis of all the major manifestations of our genius is an iron foundation of logic and good sense. The abnormal can take no root with us since the musical instinct of our race has restrained us from rushing headlong on a road that promised much but wandered on without revealing any opening.



Still other factors, more important than the purely technical considerations, alienate us from Schoenberg. Italian music, I mean pure music as distinguished from operatic, is just waking from a century-long sleep during which it was thought dead whereas it was really recuperating. Newly risen into the European circle it seems destined to wear an aspect of gaiety and light. The lively and clear eloquence of Domenico Scarlatti and Gioacchino Rossini is born again, that eloquence whose secret is known only to the Italian. "Children of the Sun" is the recent phrase employed by an American critic to describe our young school and I verily believe that it holds a profound characterization.

Here lies the explanation of that impassable gulf which separates the art of Schoenberg from our souls—his lack of radiance and joy. In his art all is dim, with a hopeless despairing density. The

tragedy and pessimism of the great German romanticists have degenerated here so that they bear the grimace almost of insanity or of hyper-acute neurasthenia. The voice of the poet appears to celebrate the death-agony of a once marvelous musical greatness which through him is passing forever.

Our youth does not seek such desolate songs, but rather the cry of joy, the song of the lark at dawn. These northern mists are not for us—men of the Mediterranean shores and born anti-impressionists.

And yet, though these incompatibilities are deep and incurable, I cannot close without giving the tribute of profound admiration to both the musician and the man. It is my hope that the entire work of Arnold Schoenberg, including the stage pieces, may be produced in Italy in the immediate future, and granted the recognition due their excellent worth.

