

TOWARDS NEO-PRIMITIVISM

HENRY COWELL

LOOSELY speaking, every one interested in modern music realizes there is some resemblance between certain aspects of primitive and of contemporary music. But there is no group of deliberately neo-primitive composers with formulated ideas that have been made public, similar, for example, to the painters of this school. Yet primitivistic tendencies exist in modern music, none the less, and give every evidence of growing stronger.

It is now more than twenty years since those adventures in dissonance and rhythm, loosely called modern music, were launched by Schönberg, Ives and Stravinsky and their contemporaries. Some of the changes they inaugurated did release certain primordial elements; but as a whole their music was a further step in cultivating complexity, with its delicate harmonic complexes, shades of tone coloring, wider melodic skips, and frequent use of a very large orchestra. Only the rhythm revealed a closer kinship to the primitive than did the music of the preceding period; because rhythm is more complex in aboriginal than in classic music. A growth of complexity in rhythm would necessarily take music in this direction and it would be absurd to say that this new rhythmic freedom represented a deliberate return to the primitive by the modern composers. Stravinsky was of course influenced by Russian peasant rites which are somewhat barbaric in character, but his use of these elements was comparatively slight and highly sublimated. The "primitiveness" which the public associates with the pioneers of modernism is the result of a most casual impression, often based on unfamiliarity with both the modern and the primitive idiom. The general conception of savage music is that it is something wild, confused, with raucous cries and noisy instruments all

bound together by powerful rhythm—an impression associated also with the more experimental type of modern music. But the primitive is often soft, melodious and soothing—and modern music is, after all, a highly organized, involved and sophisticated art.

Following the Schönberg-Ives-Stravinsky innovations by ten or fifteen years came a new counter-tendency, neoclassicism. This has had far greater ramifications than is usually conceded. The neoclassical writings of Stravinsky are known; but Schönberg has made as many experiments in this field. Schönberg kept his harmony and intervals in counterpoint modern but has worked in classical forms. Some almost forgotten very rigorous ones, such as retrograde, much used by early Flemish composers, are characteristic of his style since about 1920. With Stravinsky, the return to the old is easier to hear, for he began to use old types of chords and tunes. It is safe to say that one can find the neoclassic influence in nearly all important European composers in form, melody, harmony or general polyphonic line. Its popularity may be partly due to the fact that a composer who adopts it may still be considered “up-to-date” and yet run no risk of being misunderstood. He may deal with simple familiar materials which none will find too hard to digest. Even the conservative can take up neoclassicism and find himself seriously considered by the progressives.

Neoclassic music is not, of course, just like classical music; it contains new elements. But these are easy to understand since the background is familiar. The result is far too comfortable. Easy to compose, easy to understand, easy to forget. This preoccupation with the external aspects of a short period of musical history has resulted in some stagnation of creative work in Europe and even here. Nor is the effect on the public stimulating to its musical development.

Now the time has come for a strong new counter-movement, full-blooded and vital. The tendency already exists, and shows signs of steady growth. It reacts against the over-complexity of the earlier modern music but not against experiment; against the sentimentality and pomp of later romantic music but not against feeling; against the supercilious formalism of a return

to the particular style of some past century but not against the use of primary musical elements.



This tendency is obviously neo-primitive in its drive for vitality and simplicity. It is not an attempt to imitate primitive music, but rather to draw on those materials common to the music of all the peoples of the world, to build a new music particularly related to our own century.

Today the connection between primitive and contemporary music is clearer and more definite, not only because the newest music is far more genuinely related to this source, but also because we have learned a great deal more about primitive art itself within the past few years. Many of the customary generalizations can no longer be made in the face of this wider knowledge. There is, of course, no aboriginal music to be found anywhere which corresponds to the common conception of an uncontrolled expression of wild, unbridled, savage feeling. Nor can primitive music be lumped into one group. The music of various tribes is as different as the music of the various cultivated nations. A tribe may have a scale of its own, certain rhythms or instrumental color, or its own special vocal curve. The North Siberian tribes and the Mongolians, for instance, use sharp angular lines of tone and rhythm, while the Maoris of New Zealand and other South Sea Islanders never use a straight line of sound but curve every tonal edge and even employ a rhythm which has no beats but only a curved dynamic line. Our Indians lean to vocal music; they have few melodic instruments; the Pygmies of the Belgian Congo, on the other hand, use panpipes of great complexity and refinement as a standard, and their vocal music actually imitates the instrument. There is also a wide difference in scales. The same Pygmies use a scale built on their panpipe overtones, sometimes running a gamut from the fifth to the thirteenth partial in the overtone series, a highly developed medium. There are others, in Tierra Del Fuego, for instance, who in some songs use only one pitch.

This list of differences could of course be extended indefinitely; it is given here to dispel the idea of uniformity. The prim-

itives nearly always have certain musical conventions that demand strict adherence. In some places, among certain tribes in Hawaii, for example, to sing a tone out of the proper scale is an offense punishable by death. Elsewhere certain rhythms, scales, tone-qualities and melodies are taught as sacred, never to be altered or defiled.

However there are some general characteristics which nearly all primitive music shares. Most of it is sung to the accompaniment of percussion; melody and rhythm are thus the main elements. Where several different voices sing together they are either in unison or heterophonic, making a free polyphony in which each part is quite independent except that it must come out with the others at the end. Further, nearly all primitive music has rapid rhythmical changes, syncopations, polyrhythms and cross-rhythms. In the melody there may be a wide range of different sorts of pitch curves as well as straight lines of sound. The tones either wobble back and forth or slide up or down—not carelessly, but as a vital part of the musical scheme.



Let us now examine our contemporary music to determine in what direction its characteristics tend. If we look at the larger proportion of new music in Europe we will find the dominant aspect on the whole still neoclassical. There are major and minor scales and modes; many scale and other passages in unvaried meters and a running series of quarter, eighth or sixteenth notes—all the signs of a cultivated music. Furthermore, the structure is usually built on harmony, either dissonant or consonant, and the form is some version of the classic.

There is however in the music of some American and some Russian composers today enough material to justify us in pointing out a new movement that is primitivistic.

Soviet Russia is developing a new musical art. Modern, sophisticated, experienced composers write works which are interesting to serious musicians and yet may be sung by proletarian choruses. This music is characterized by a melody standing on its own feet and getting little support from harmony; if there is any harmony at all it is a secondary consideration. There is often an accompaniment on drums and a single line of melody

as in primitive music. The songs are often neither major nor minor, nor even modal, but they may have a melodic line with some free intervals suggested by the words. There is considerable use of vocal slides which are actually written into the score. The rhythm is apt to change frequently and to be vigorous and direct.

The well-known composers Mossolov, Shostakovitch and Vladimir Vogel, for example, write a great deal in this vein; Szabo and Weiss Haus of Hungary are following suit, as well as Hans Eisler of Germany. In this country, Lahn Adomyhan has written successfully in the same manner, and there are about a dozen young composers working with him. Their music is being sung by proletarian choral groups all over the country.

Among the more radical works written by non-proletarian American composers recently, there may not be anything so very definitely primitive in style, but there are strong tendencies to use primitive means in creating new sorts of structures. Up to this year, in my experience as a music publisher I have never been offered any work for percussion instruments alone. This season I have been offered fifteen different works for such combinations, the two most interesting being Varese's *Ionization*, and William Russell's *Fugue for Eight Percussion Instruments*.

Then there is the tendency of many of the young composers to emphasize vocal slides, as in the work of Irwin Heilner, Lehman Engel and Jerome Moross of the Young Composers' Group. Primitive rhythms are extremely noticeable in Moross' *Those Everlasting Blues*. In all such works, there is also a tendency to use chords percussively and for emphasis rather than to exploit them in a harmonic connection. This too is a sort of primitive simplification. Tone clusters, which are a simplifying into one unit of otherwise complex dissonances, also represent a return to such direct, primary modes of expression. Primitive elements may of course be utilized in many ways. One may be rather literal in their use, as in the case of Soviet musicians, or one may make a sublimation of direct and primary musical materials, unhampered by ecclesiastical rules, scales or rhythms. The latter course is being followed by many of the young American composers who have recently made a bid for attention.