

MODERN MUSIC

MUSIC AND WORDS

FREDERICK JACOBI

FACING the matter squarely, one must concede that there is a problem in writing for the voice which admits of no ideal solution—the conflict between the words and the music. One can of course evade the issue by using words or syllables which have, in themselves, little or no meaning; our Indians, and no doubt many other primitive peoples, do this. Arthur Bliss has done it successfully in his amusing *Rout*. Or one can allow the singer to vocalize freely on the vowels of the alphabet, as Rachmaninoff and Prokofieff have done in their *Songs Without Words*. Either of these methods leaves a melody free to develop itself organically, without external restraint or compulsion. But our listeners are not long pleased by vocal music devoid of literary interest. Seated deep within us is the vague conviction that to tell a story is a primary function of the human tongue. And many singers claim that words are the basis not only of their interpretative expressiveness but also of the actual production of their tone. So we have evolved a vocal art which for centuries has had as its duplex kernel the fusion of poetry and music.

The difficulty may be handled in two ways: one may bend the music to suit the will of the words, or one may manipulate the words, flexible and defenseless, so that they will follow the outline of the music. The masters have approached the matter each according to his own genius and according to the spirit of his age. Schubert's melodies are so beautiful that one is unconscious of his comparative neglect of the text. Debussy's musical

declamation is so profoundly moving that one is indifferent to a lack of pure melodic interest. Palestrina gave precedence to the music. He has been followed by Haendel, Mozart, Donizetti, Gounod those who, in their attitude to art, have leaned toward the "classic," the objective. Monteverdi, the first romanticist, thought primarily of adding to the poetic expressiveness of the words and invented a musical declamation which is a form of heightened, emotionalized speech. His followers include Gluck and Wagner. Albert Schweitzer, in his book on Bach, says: "The relation of Bach's music to its text is the most intimate that can be imagined Though he thought declamatorily, he could not help writing melodically. A vocal theme of Bach's is a declamatorily conceived phrase that by accident, as if by a marvel perpetually repeated, assumes melodic form."

But the problem remains, incapable of theoretic solution. There is much to be said on both sides; the entire literature of vocal music might be used to prove one contention or the other. The writer, however, is inclined to hand the laurels to those who primarily favor the music, for the simple but tragic reason that in the large majority of performances—why deny it?—the words, after all, remain unintelligible.



Like all the insoluble aesthetic problems of the past, this problem is with us today. Schoenberg, in his vocal writing, is a descendant of Monteverdi and Wagner. It is a far cry from the robust diversity of Wagner to the unvaried morbidity of Schoenberg, yet their method is the same. Schoenberg's large skips, his tortured chromaticism, are to be regarded, not as pure melody, but as a musico-poetic declamation, enormously exaggerated to fit the hysterical exaggerations of the mood. We find these characteristics unalloyed in *Das Buch der Haengenden Gaerten*, opus 15. In *Pierrot Lunaire*, opus 21, he goes a step further; the note which was sung gives way to the tone which is spoken (with a semi-musical exactness) and the effect is emotionally telling, beyond description.

Stravinsky, on the other hand, is a musical objectivist and his vocal line, taking *Les Noces* as the most characteristic of his vocal works, favors the music rather than the words. It is a melody based on the Russian folk song (having passed, perhaps, by way of Moussorgsky and Rimsky) and the folk song has, we know, a healthy way of primarily considering its own strength and beauty rather than its literary expressiveness. Stravinsky treats his peasant tunes freely and dissonantly and subjects them to rhythmic distortions of magnificent elasticity; yet they retain their inherent character as national tunes and, above all, their intrinsic strength *as music*. In *Mavra* he has sought (with his tongue in his cheek) to revive the opera of mid-Victorian Russia. Its nature is special and artificial. Its vocal line is the gentle parody of a past style and the work as a whole, like so much of the musical reconstitution which is coming from Europe today, is lacking in positive force and emotional sincerity.

Bloch's vocal line, in its poignancy and dramatic power (*Macbeth* and the magnificent *Psalms*), is primarily derived from Wagner. Szymanowsky, in the eerie tenuousness of his *Songs of the Enamoured Muezzin* and his *Symphony of the Night*, considers mood rather than melody. Prokofieff is inclined to follow Moussorgsky and Stravinsky. Milhaud, in *Salade*, harks back to Gounod and the very defensible principle—with apologies to Anita Loos—that an expressive phrase may thrill one momentarily but a charming melody gives pleasure for many years. The lyricism of Malipiero is based on the Italian folk song and on the sweeping amplitude, the *panache*, of the Italian music drama. Louis Gruenberg (*Daniel Jazz* and the *Creation*) has thought of character rather than formal beauty. Whithorne, in his songs, has especially stressed melodic line.



Napoleon, whose interest in music was greater than his knowledge, once asked Grétry for a comparative appraisal of the compositions of Cimarosa and Mozart. Grétry is reported to

have replied that "whereas Cimarosa puts the statue on the stage, the pedestal in the orchestra, Mozart puts the statue in the orchestra and the pedestal on the stage." No one today will agree with Grétry in his criticism of Mozart, yet the question of the relative importance of melody and accompaniment still warrants discussion. In the operas of Bellini and Donizetti melody reached the apogee of its independence; accompaniment became a mere scaffold, stereotyped and insufficient, supporting the garlanded efflorescence of a top-heavy hanging-garden.

With Wagner all this changed; he completely altered the relationship of voice and accompaniment. He also sought to solve our problem of the beautiful versus the expressive; to his singers he gave an emotional declamation in the manner of Monteverdi, to the orchestra a music of intrinsic interest and beauty worthy of Beethoven. He realized that to compete successfully with the singer for the attention of the audience, the orchestra must of necessity be extremely full and complex. He did not fully recognize, perhaps, a principle in which the writer firmly believes: that whenever singer and instrumentalist appear together, it is the singer (whether we so desire it or not) who will inevitably become the center of our interest; that it is a law of nature that men should attract us more than things and that, accordingly, the expression which is the most personal is the one which would attract us most. And so ensues an unavoidable conflict; Wagner's rich and intrinsically beautiful orchestra vies fiercely for our attention with the human voice. One sympathizes with the bewildered listener who cries: "How much more I should enjoy it if only they would stop singing!" One should add: "or else playing!" And, thrilled though we may be, we long for a more comfortable art—one which will focus our attention rather than divide it.

Since Wagner, the dethronement of the singer has gone on apace. We rejoice overmuch today in the downfall of the late Queen Prima Donna and her consort, Prince Tenor. We welcome with glee the Diaghilev production of *Coq d'Or*, where the once proud singers now sit in humble stalls on the sides of the stage, while the action of the play is carried on by dancers. What a delightful emasculation of our former over-lords! We

enjoy a new sensation as the voice of Stravinsky's lovely *Rossignol* reaches us, not from the stage, but from the orchestra-pit. There is an intellectual satisfaction in the thought that in such-and-such new cantata the solo-singers will not be visible to the audience but will be seated obscurely beside the celli and the violas. Certain new pieces of chamber-music will use the voice, not as a solo, but, like any other instrument of the ensemble, as a subordinate part of the whole. It seems to the writer that, interesting and important as these experiments may be as reactions against excesses of the past, they are not steps in the right direction. As pointed out above, the human voice has a way of demanding our full and almost exclusive attention. It shall and must be solidly supported, but there is a psychological error in assigning to it any but the leading role.

It is altogether possible that the future of music may lie away from the realm of the voice; the tendency of the past years has been indeed toward an ever-increasing interest in the instrumental. Yet here too a reaction may come. Our speculation, our experimentation, may be luring us towards that which will no longer conform with our requirements. And the voice, with its natural limitations, may prove to be the one check on our misdirected impulses, the only constant beacon to keep music in the path of a sane evolution and in normal relationship with its creator.