



ANTON VON WEBERN

KURT LIST

BY DOLBIN

SOON, many of the musical voices which have been silenced in Europe may be raised again. As the Old World is set free, we can expect several familiar, and perhaps a few new spokesmen of radical art to make themselves heard. Radical musicians on the Continent are still sentenced to an existence of complete inactivity. Those who have not escaped into the free world, but are lucky enough to avoid the concentration camp, merely vegetate in the oppressive atmosphere of totalitarianism.

Anton von Webern, who will be sixty years old on December third, is one of these tragic victims of present circumstance. Overshadowed by his teacher, Schönberg, his music is however known for its own great distinction, though only a few of the works – the *Five Pieces for String Quartet*, Opus 5, the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Opus 10, the *Symphony*, Opus 21, and the *Piano Quartet* – have been performed in America. Taken as a whole, the body of this music is representative of creative output in Central Europe after 1910.

Since Hitler's armies moved into Austria, Webern has been isolated as a creative artist; his work has been little performed in the outside world, and not at all in his native country. Living in a small suburb of Vienna, he has remained more aloof from the great struggle than any of his colleagues. The charm of the Austrian countryside was perfectly suited to his character. Lost to the world, he had lived in his little village for years before the Nazis invaded the country, preferring the majestic mountains to the clamor of the market place. From 1934 on he devoted himself to teaching and composing. But now that rural Austria has been marred by Hitler's roaring war factories, the noise seems to have penetrated into the composer's own world.

Webern's instinctive spiritual detachment is obvious from his choice of poetry by such mystics as Rainer Maria Rilke (Opus 8), Stefan George

(Opus 3, 4, and 5) and the lesser known Georg Trakl (Opus 14), Hildegard Jone (Opus 30), and even of verses from the Catholic breviary (Opus 17). In matters of everyday ordinary life, however, he has been drawn to a rather confused ideology. As conductor of the Workers' Symphony Concerts in Vienna, he allied himself to the Social-Democracy. But, being utterly ignorant of politics, he was a ready prey to the personal influence of family and friends. He lived in a state of perpetual confusion about the proper solution for the plight of impoverished Austria. Soon he abandoned his first allegiance in favor of more nationalist ideas. This new course may have saved him from the concentration camp but it did not preserve his music under the New Order. In recent years he has made his living as an orchestrator of operettas. To hear his works performed he must travel to Switzerland; at home his musical principles are attacked as "Jewish" and bolshevist."

III

But neither the life nor any of the non-musical beliefs of Webern need concern us here. Our interest lies in his music, so "unreconciled," so full of meaning. It is important to have that music played again when the world is free to hear it.

The work of Alban Berg and Webern grew out of Schönberg's own struggle. Berg directed his efforts towards the marriage of the new style with the lusciousness of German Romanticism. Webern on the other hand carried the new conception to its most concise implications. He found the new direction, in many respects, easier to follow than did Schönberg. For he had only to move forward within a ready-made tonal world. Schönberg, his master, first had to construct this world, to overcome a tradition, and then prove the historic logic of his contribution.

This does not mean that Webern, during a long and varied career, typical of the German musician, took no part in the struggle to establish the Schönberg school. He promoted countless modern works as a conductor in the Vienna Workers' Symphony Concerts, as a writer in many magazines, as a lecturer for the Society for Private Musical Performances, and as a teacher of many young musicians. But, as a composer, he did not have to revolutionize the tradition of the nineties. He could accept all previous music as a shining example from which a young man could learn. There was no heartache in turning away from all that had been great in the masters but which endless repetition by unimaginative academicians had made into a series of clichés, shackling the striving musician.

Compare the romanticism of Schönberg's first works (e.g. the *Early Songs* and *Verklärte Nacht*) with the radicalism of Webern's first piece, the *Passacaglia*. The difference between their premises is instantly clear.

What distinguishes Webern's music from all other radical innovations is its expression of the Schönberg principle in its most uncompromising and concentrated form. Music must be pure substance alone, every note should have its structural meaning. There is no place for embellishment. In Webern's music there is no extra-musical influence. Schönberg once said of the *Six Bagatelles* (Webern's Opus 9): "These pieces can be understood only by those who believe that music expresses what can be conveyed by music alone." Reacting so violently against the harmonic superabundance of the post-Wagnerians, Schönberg's disciples concentrated on the structure and material of the melodic factors. This emphasis is carried to the farthest extreme by Webern.

Thus the different voices of his *String Quartet* (Opus 5) actually combine into one all inclusive melody. The fourth movement consists of only thirteen bars (a brevity characteristic of his entire output). Starting in the first violin at F \sharp , two octaves above middle C, the melody descends in alternate fourths and tritones over the second violin and the cello down to F \flat in the second octave below. This sweeping conception keeps the listener breathless. Tension is further heightened by the entrance of each voice in the minor second. Yet no matter how free-flowing the melody may appear, its structure has thematic significance for the entire movement. The string quartet is alternately treated as a compact instrument embracing all the melody in one stream and as individual voices which present the theme according to contrapuntal ideas. But the significant intervals appear again as an upward run that signifies the ending of each of the three sections into which the movement is divided. Thus Webern avoids the cliché of the tonal cadence; he makes the ending clear through the repetition of a recurring figure, although this figure appears rhythmically varied each time (once in sixteenth notes, then in eighth triplets, and finally in sixteenth quintuplets).

This movement of his *String Quartet* lays bare the essentials of Webern's technic, his structural insistence, his new devices, his instrumental treatment. His recapitulation of themes is not as a rule an exact repetition of the original idea, but rather an associative reminiscence of sound. In his *Symphony*, Opus 21, no idea is repeated literally; each time a theme is to be heard again, its tonal color is suggested by using the same

instrumental combination. Even the sections are not divided by different thematic content, but by different tone color. In the first movement of Opus 5, Webern gives us a sonata form in only fifty-five bars, relying mainly on an identity of sound, not on identity of themes. Color is often enhanced by unusual instrumental combinations, as in Opus 15, *Five Sacred Songs*, for soprano, flute, clarinet, trumpet, harp and double bass; Opus 18, *Three Songs* for voice, guitar and Eb clarinet; and Opus 22, *Saxophone Quartet*.

Obviously, such a conception makes heavy demands on the listener, since our memory of tone color is even weaker than our memory of actual themes. In such a conception, brevity and vertical transparency are axiomatic, so that color, structure and counterpoint can be followed simultaneously. The softest possible dynamics and a super-expressiveness become essential to clear representation.

Thus all Webern's works are characterized by unusual brevity, musical concentration and dynamics that are pianissimo espressivo. It is indeed, as a composer working superbly within this range that Webern is famous.

Yet, although this music represents the purest expressionism, even the orchestration being determined by thematic necessities, it often bears a resemblance in color to the sound of the impressionists. What his music actually does, is to combine the substance of expressionism with the color of impressionism.

Webern first employed Schönberg's twelve-tone technic in his Opus 17. However, his basic treatment remained unaltered, for the structure still grew not from traditional, preconceived musical forms, but from the germ of the musical idea itself, though his material follows an arranged pattern, and the contrapuntal element has become more striking.

Webern's character is completely in accord with his style. Only a shy and retiring man could write such intimate and individual music. He exemplifies another of Schönberg's maxims: "Have the courage and force to approach everything in such a way that it becomes unique through the manner in which it is seen."

The very intimacy and conciseness of his music has been an obstacle to Webern's success. A world which has little regard for the individual, which is deafened by the thunder of war machines, is not attuned to the whisper of an artist's soul. Let us hope that at some saner, not too distant moment, Schönberg's wish for Webern's music will be realized: "May this stillness ring."