

MODERN MUSIC

“NEOGOTHIC AND NEOCLASSIC”

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A MATERIAL change is taking place in the esthetic approach of artists who are lending this period its vital significance. The stimulus of the emotional is being obviously replaced by the stimulus of the intellect. A new style is coming to life in the clash of two tendencies. Of these one may be termed neogothic, by which I do not mean a return to the style of the middle ages but a movement toward the expressive in art, a tendency which finally becomes an end in itself. Here, slightly transformed, is the same strain of individualism which belongs to the nineteenth century and whose natural consequence was expressionism in its extreme form.

On the other hand there is plastic realism which is the true medium of the purely musical idea. To put it exactly, neoromantic emotionalism is giving way to classical intellectualism.

These systems, both firmly intrenched in our age, are diametrically opposed; one excludes the other. The first, always egocentric, concerns itself solely with the temporal and ends only in an affirmation of self or the personal principle. The second seeks to affirm unity and unalterable substance. Transcending the limits of the temporal, its goal is a fixed place in the conception of musical time.

What I plan to do here is not to analyze the abstract musical forms toward which these tendencies lead but, in reference to them, to examine certain important characteristics of style in the recent past as well as in the present state of their crystallization.

There is much talk today about "pure" music. This is, however, an old problem. The aspiration toward pure art appears periodically whenever the way becomes blocked and the sense of direction in art is confused. Then the problem of pure form and material looms in the foreground. The immediate dilemma is a direct consequence of the intellectual attitude inherited from the end of the last century, from that combination of values willed to us in the form of post-romantic and individualistic culture. The effort of the first quarter of the twentieth century has been not to take possession of this heritage but to go beyond it and to prepare the way for new realizations. So far this end has not been attained. Now we are probably witnessing the last phase of the struggle between these two hostile forces, the one representing the personal and romantic principle, still unconquered and active in the guise of expressionism, which I call neogothic and ego-centric; the other, organically different, seeking to construct neoclassical forms by triumphing over personal utterance and affirming as the basis of an objective style a greater-than-individualistic principle.

The artists of the first group claim to be innovators and announce an esthetic creed that is "revolutionary;" while the second represent a conservative and reactionary element. To make a generalization, one may locate the contemporary musical camps as to their relative positions in the following way: at the extreme left, the expressionists; at the extreme right, the neoclassicists; with the adherents of impressionism in the center.



Despite all the esthetic upheavals and revolutions that have swept over European music in the last twenty-five years with the invariable slogan "a break with the past," the bond with the nineteenth century has never really been severed. That much is certain. On the contrary, rather than a rupture there has been a strengthening of the ties with that earlier music so detested by radicals throughout the world. The expressionists have com-

pelled themselves to return to it within the last few years, not without an evident compromise in direct contradiction to their previous activities. For the neoclassicists, on the other hand, the return was spontaneous and simple; for them it was merely a matter of choosing the line of least resistance.



The musical heritage of the nineteenth century, so recently rejected, has acquired new recognition, it is being called upon to influence contemporary music. Hereafter the effort to create a new culture will probably be realized (if it is not already being achieved) by adapting and assimilating the elements of the earlier period in the later, without the sense of necessity to separate the one from the other. Our attitude toward the past century, moreover, has fundamentally changed. We are now far from looking back with scorn and condescension, conceding it only mediocre value. Today the opposite point of view has developed; we are, if anything, too reconciled, too inclined to exaggerate the importance of certain formulas of the past, some of which are banal and insignificant. We have even reached the point of raking up small fragments of that past merely because we find in them traces of good craftsmanship, of impersonality and perfected solidity, as, after an accident, we gather up the objects that have escaped destruction, especially those which may prove still to be of some use. After the “audacities” of the radicals which began in revolution and ended in anarchical destruction, we now are experiencing an even gloomier tedium.

At any rate, the two opposing camps agree as to the need to re-appraise the musical values of the last century. But both must face about and start again from the beginning.

Revolution inevitably leads to anarchy. To destroy a value long considered immutable is enough to bring about a general collapse. From the six tone chord of Scriabin it was only a step to the twelve tone scale of Schönberg and to the disorder that followed. On the other hand it is equally true that this reaction eventually resulted in torpor and inertia.

Following the command recently issued to go back to Bach (and by the same token to the eighteenth century), only two or three years were needed for the wholesale imitation and production of old and outworn formulas. All in the name of neoclassicism, music was turned out in the manner of Czerny and even of Clementi. It would be useless to consider this subject at all if the questions it raised remained solely in the realm of musical theory. But the fact is that one can have no direct contact with the music of the hour without confronting this general situation. Concretely speaking, the controversy concerns itself chiefly with the work of Schönberg and of Stravinsky. The art of these two composers, who are at opposite poles in the world of contemporary music, exactly expresses the dualism I have been describing.

Here are two conflicting musical conceptions. These two esthetic attitudes seem also to represent two distinct ways of looking at the world, the result in each case of a quite fulfilled experience. This experience appears too solidly grounded to permit a thorough reversal or radical change through a later evolution of the artists. It can only attain completion and variety, or gain in precision. Moreover, such an about-face is hardly likely as both Schönberg and Stravinsky have already almost conclusively taken their positions.

To treat the matter dialectically, Schönberg may be considered the *Thesis* and Stravinsky the *Antithesis*. Schönberg's thesis is an egocentric conception dominated by personal and esthetic elements which assume the significance of a fetich. Here esthetic experience takes the place of the religious, art becomes a kind of substitute for religion. Stravinsky's whole aim, on the other hand, is to overcome the temptations of fetichism in art, as well as the individualistic conception of a self-imposed esthetic principle. From this point of view, art is the normal function and projection of experience. The principle here affirmed is the limitation of the ego and its subordination to superior and eternal values. The two movements, characteristic of the modern artistic world, divide it into two camps, each of which, though possessing many variants, follows on the whole, one or the other of these banners.

Stravinsky's art is a reaction against Schönberg's esthetics and all conceptions belonging to that order. This is why he may be called the *Antithesis*. Naturally, only one aspect of Stravinsky is considered here, and one which would hardly seem important if his work as a whole were being estimated. The reaction stirred up by Stravinsky appears like an antithesis set squarely against the neoromantic individualism of which Schönberg is the most typical representative. The order to return to Bach given by Stravinsky, was taken up and proclaimed in the name of neoclassicism and in recent years it has steadily become more palpable, more aggressive, more powerful and altogether contemporary, while the movement represented by Schönberg has begun to decline. The latest works of Schönberg even show a certain hesitation, an attempt to adapt themselves to the situation in which one may discern a sort of concession to neoclassicism. His musical material always remains the same but he is showing a change of attitude toward form. Schönberg is endeavoring to establish a bond between arbitrarily created form as he previously conceived it and classical, that is to say, typical form.



But aside from the personal contributions of Schönberg and Stravinsky it is obvious to all that the so-called atonal music created by the former and the neoclassical music launched by the latter have had their day so far as movements are concerned. They cannot really be considered as active forces in the present situation.

For atonality leads to the creation of a new principle of musical construction which, in seeking to control the element of emotion and evoke a purified and obedient material, becomes itself subject to this element—a phenomenon not recognized until recently. The further we are from the period in which works deriving from this principle are composed, the more they appear in their true light; they reveal their essential nature as subjective and determined by a psychological element which is, above all else, extra-musical.

As to neoclassicism, which was born under the omen of a free classical tradition, most of its adherents are already falling into formalisms and imitations of the classic. It is being reduced simply to a current formula, a technical process stamped with the mark of facile eclecticism. Granted that it avoids the subjective and emotional which are forbidden by the movement, and that it seeks to cultivate the form of an impersonal expression, it retains only the semblance of tradition. The truly classical is not there.



With this statement of the situation, we return to the question of Schönberg's and Stravinsky's individual attitudes in the future. Whatever their activity, it is quite certain that Schönberg will continue to create neogothic music, while Stravinsky will try to strengthen the creation of an objective style. Schönberg's case is particularly delicate. He will probably not be able to continue his atonal system much longer, even though he is developing it along scientific lines. The reason is that his work is essentially "monomethodic." In all his music the essential point of departure, the procedure remains the same. He has occasionally changed only its form. (This was exactly the case with Scriabin, who in other respects is so different from Schönberg.)

Stravinsky on the other hand is "polymethodic," but the form of his method remains always the same. His procedure in *Petrouchka* differs from that of *Le sacre*; the same is true of *L'histoire du soldat* and *Les noces*; nor in *Oedipus Rex* does it resemble that in any of the others. Stravinsky, truth to tell, is no longer even a neoclassicist, for neoclassicism has now taken on the character described above. It was for similar reasons that Picasso found himself obliged to disavow cubism.

The synthesis of these two antagonistic conceptions does not exist today, and it is doubtful whether it can ever be realized. Still one can imagine a purely formal synthesis of these systems, but that is a subject which cannot be discussed in the present article, and for which a fuller treatment is demanded than is possible here.