

GENEVA—ANOTHER DISAPPOINTMENT

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FROM the point of view of quantity, the seventh festival of the Society for Contemporary Music at Geneva was extremely rich; no less than twenty-one works were presented to the large gathering of composers and critics assembled there from all over the world. But the results considered from the point of view of quality were appreciably less satisfying. Only seven of the twenty-one had indisputable value and were worthy of the honor shown them.

It is apparent today that there is considerable waste in this sort of annual expedition. We may well ask if the selection of music for such public presentations should not be made with more rigor and discrimination. Every festival to date has offered us some music lamentably lacking in character. This was markedly so four years ago at Zurich, two years ago at Frankfort, and again at Geneva, where we were made to suffer by pieces whose inclusion on the program could have been due only to extra-musical considerations.

No one, of course, is surprised to learn that "log-rolling" develops when various national sections begin to manipulate the programs, for there are always certain ruthless members who do not hesitate to bring adroit pressure to bear for the advancement of their representatives' cause. The difficult position of the jury is easy to comprehend. Obviously it wishes to choose music of unassailable quality, yet at the same time the fear of affronting some powerful group prevails. The sacrifice necessitated by diplomacy is too often made. But the situation must be faced. If mistakes like this continue they will seriously threaten the prestige and the authority of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

This festival seemed to show that most of the musicians of Central Europe (Germany, Austria, Hungary) are stumbling along in the footsteps of Schönberg, whose theories they apply with more or less independence and varying degrees of success. If a few, like Alexander Jemnitz and Max Butting, succeed in establishing a harmonious balance between their own personalities and a doctrine in which cerebral emphasis is inherent, a number of others remain unable to free themselves from the dogma which makes their music so difficult and dry.

The Latin element was almost unrepresented at Geneva; the festival did nothing to clarify its direction for us. We can only draw the conclusion from our own experience that the influence of its leader, Igor Stravinsky, still prevails over the young French musicians.

Reviewing the programs of the five concerts at Geneva, we may eliminate at once a certain number of insignificant works or those of little musical value. The *Concertino* for piano and orchestra of Mlle. Bosmans (Belgium) did not rise above the level of agreeable dilettantism; the *Rhythms* of Frank Martin (Switzerland), rhythmic and tonal episodes, second rate as far as melodic invention is concerned, paid homage to the rather artificial speculations of which Jacques Dalcroze has made a specialty; the *Sonatina* for piano by John Ireland (England), stamped by soft sentimentality, audaciously set forth the most ancient commonplaces; the *Sonati* by Erwin Schulhoff (Czechoslovakia) was an honest composition but without personality, and the *Messe* by Leo Janacek (Czechoslovakia) proved a voluminous score in a grandiloquent and inconsistent style, whose vapid lyricism at times recalled certain passages of Massenet. Nor need we consider the *Quartet* of Julius Schloss (Germany) "written faithfully according to the technique of composition of the twelve tones which have no relation to each other." It is a work which has no apparent meaning, whose composer seems to follow an abstract goal to the exclusion of expressive or emotional intention. The *Five Variations and Double Fugue on a Theme by Schönberg* by Victor Ullman (Czechoslovakia), though less impenetrable and labored, gave no great satisfaction either to the heart or the head.

The *Symphony* of Roger Sessions, which has been heard in the United States and already discussed there, seemed to me more striking in rhythmic invention than in thematic contribution. The somewhat capricious rhythmic variation serves occasionally to relieve the too frequent melodic clichés. Contrapuntal writing, which characterizes the work in so many places, often lends it a certain dryness, which is especially aggravated in the first movement through the peculiar orchestration.

Among the works which seemed agreeable and interesting to me I should rank the ballet cantata, *Le Fou de la Dame*, of Marcel Delannoy of France. This transposes the fortunes of a game of chess to a lyric episode, using a somewhat composite style, whose archaism at times (as in the final *Ballade*) is mingled with a certain manner popularized by the "Revelers." Made up of short pieces in which the composer did not burden himself with sustained developments, *Le Fou de la Dame* added a note of youthful freshness to the sessions at Geneva by its drollery and lack of restraint, the spontaneity of its writing, finally by a natural distinction; it was never trifling, tiresome or sentimental. Essentially this is a work for the theatre with plenty of movement that calls for dramatic interpretation.

In the *Chants à la Vierge Marie* by Nikolas Nabokof, I felt a strong impulse, a soaring exultation which gave one a sense at times (in the first piece particularly) of irresistible force. Often in these passages, the horizontal writing permitted the piano part to float lightly over the voice, to which it clings like a flowering and graceful vine.

The balance between the subject and emotion wavers occasionally with M. Nabokof, but the motet for eight voices, *Werkleute Sind Wir*, of Karl Marx, seemed on the contrary, to offer us perfect equilibrium. Through a rich but not overburdened polyphony, through concise writing of an astonishing dexterity and skill, one felt a thought, not striking perhaps for its originality, but none the less vigorous. Without markedly transforming the traditional form, or paying homage to the linear counterpoint which is so strictly adhered to today in the Germanic countries, the work of Marx had the merit of being conceived with clarity, on a harmonious plan.

The seven *Hais-Kais* (Japanese poems) of Maurice Delage (France) are of a quite different character. Brief notations, some of which are only ten measures long, formed with clear and exquisite art, they succeeded in achieving, in a few delicate and transparent lines, an atmosphere which was interesting and suitable to the text upon which they comment.

Though representing contrary esthetic principles, the *Serenade for String Trio* by Alexander Jemnitz (Hungary), and the *Quartet* of M. Fitelberg of Poland, had a common effect in showing us two exceptionally gifted musicians, possessing temperament, verve and sound technique. Of these two, Jemnitz has already reached spiritual maturity while the other has just started on his course.

A pupil of Schönberg's, Jemnitz has selected from his master's system those elements which permit him to develop his individual self. Carefully choosing his way in the maze of dogmatism that has isolated so many of Schönberg's disciples, he has fashioned a musical style in which the cerebral element plays only a small role, and one which reflects a strong personality well served by a sound technique. The *Serenade* gave us a sense of order, of logical development, not common in our day. A profoundly personal emotion pervades this work whose interest seldom flags, and in which violently agitated episodes are set against periods of lyric charm.

Less modern, in some respects even a little academic, the second *Quartet* of M. Jerzy Fitelberg revealed not only a certain technical skill of writing almost disconcerting in its cleverness and adequacy, but also a sense of movement and a mastery of form. The structure of this *Quartet* did not give sustained evidence of an entirely detached personality; but one can already perceive here a musician's nature which, when fully developed, may reveal great brilliance.

In Max Butting of Germany, we find, on the contrary, a musician whose gift is already fully matured. Adroitly exploiting the inventions of the contemporary school, not denying himself the resources of linear counterpoint, and yet pursuing, beyond all else, a goal of expressiveness, each page of Butting's score proclaims that preoccupation with emotion which gives his music its

especial and powerful thrust. A feeling that is intimate and at times deeply tragic is created by this symphony. One senses a fiery nature, a temperament to which movement is inevitable and whose outlet is in strong dynamic effect. Add to this the fact that Butting is the possessor of a technique which permits him to express himself, if not with that sobriety so highly valued by Boileau, at least with complete independence, in a language which, though at times lacking in distinction, nevertheless has vigor and accent.

The performances heard during the five concerts at Geneva did not give us much more profoundly stirring music than this *Symphony* by Max Butting. Of the group of musicians from over the Rhine he seems to me to be among the few to have happily effected the much desired balance between spirit and form. He is one of the few, surely who can still address themselves to the Latin intelligence and, while drawing deeply on the spirit of their own race, do not place an insurmountable barrier between themselves and us. He speaks a language which appears at least intelligible, strong and suitable as a medium of expression.