

SCHÖNBERG'S TWELVE-TONE OPERA

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WHEN so creative a spirit as Arnold Schönberg turns to the music theatre, we can expect that he will write not ordinary operas, light operas or *Gebrauchsmusik*, but works of art introducing to the drama those problems in absolute music that he solved for the whole world years ago. Even his first two works for the stage, the monodrama, *Die Erwartung*, and *Die Glückliche Hand*, were musical delineations of spiritual experiences materialized by the medium of the stage. There too, the artistic effect was achieved by purely musical means, the dramatic content contributing its color with unusual restraint.

These two early works were completed before Schönberg had perfected the twelve-tone technic which he has since utilized with increasing freedom as the basis of his work in pure music. The fundamental principles of this technic may be briefly recalled. Just as the logical relation between the individual notes of the melody in music of the seven-step scale is revealed by melodic and harmonic cadences, in twelve-tone music it is established by a fixed arrangement of tonal material maintained throughout the course of a composition. Since the basic figure of the twelve-tone series is often repeated, though in a great diversity of forms, the composition achieves a new unity which permits the utmost variation in melodic and rhythmic patterns. For the basic figure of the series is not always the same; it can be inverted, it can appear in a crab (backwards) and in an inversion of the crab. In Schönberg's newest works the series is also transposed, that is, employed in several pitches, and, moreover, divided up among several voices and instruments.

Schönberg's new composition, *Von Heute auf Morgen*, is a gay opera. The composer made a point of demonstrating that the difficult structure of the twelve-tone technic can lend itself to light and cheerful expression. He uses a one-act text by Max

Blonda which takes about fifty minutes to present. The plot is in a modern setting and it is necessary to follow it closely, for the structural form of the music arises directly out of the scene sequence and is also closely related to the dramatic characterization. A young couple return home after a social evening. The man grows enthusiastic about his wife's friend, a clever woman with great sex appeal, compared to whom his simple, loyal spouse seems pale. The wife realizes her husband's state of mind, and forms a dangerous plan to cure him. A harmless affair with a stupid tenor serves her purpose. She changes her appearance and behavior to conform to the worldly ideal of her husband. When he is again enamored she reveals the perils of this mode of life. She must have noisy entertainment, wine, dancing; she neglects her child, slights domestic duties and leads her husband to believe that the singer is her lover. The man has a spiritual revelation and gains a better sense of values. The nocturnal "intermezzo" closes with a return to reality of the ending. The puppets of today are motivated by second pair appear upon the scene, the wife's friend and the singer, who seem to lead lives of their own, but are in reality only shadowy figures of the theatre. But—ironic paradox—for them their lives are the reality, the lives of the other pair the dream. A quartet based on the interaction of these four characters is the climax of the opera, to which a short lyric coda is added, where, as in *Pierrot Lunaire*, the chanted, spoken word is used instead of singing, to accentuate the actuality and reality. But the play is not yet ended. By way of contrast the fashion, real people by love. The external world changes from one day to another. Hence the question with which the child ends the piece: "What are these objects, modern men?"

The dramatist Schönberg is able, as was Mozart on a different plane, to characterize these four figures *entirely in terms of melody*. The tone of the singer is somewhat lyric, artificially sweet, a parody of romanticism; that of the friend affectedly witty; that of the wife now sharp, now warm, flowing on naturally. These melodic themes are not only fixed in the intervals of the twelve-tone technic, but they also display a marked rhythmic structure, so characteristic indeed that certain parts of the

series are made to recur as unmistakable rhythmic motifs. Thus the singer is identified not only by a broad and flowing melody in six-quarter time, but also by occasional recurring suggestions of dance rhythms, easily recognizable as the waltz or the tango. Furthermore, in the melodies there is contrapuntal development, as in the interchanges in the duet through double counterpoint or canons in various leadings. Double canons also, and very skillful interweavings appear on close study.

In the larger formal sense the opera is constructed of distinct parts and recitatives. Recitatives are indicated as such and easily recognized. Arias are either strict or are in free arioso form, as, for example, the first, whose important melodic motif reappears later in four places in the opera, though greatly varied and intensified as well as in ever increasing rhythmic complexity. One notes a purely thematic connection between the separate numbers. When the wife speaks of the singer for the first time, and imitates him, she already forecasts the entire musical material of the telephone scene, which is later built up in a different form from the same elements. The enclosed arias of the husband emerge in clear relief. Even a song stanza with a definite, clearly developed counter-strophe appears in this music. It is interesting to note that the rhythm and the inner movement of the arias change with the characteristics of the form. They are intensified to indicate the wife's emotion and remain fairly even during the two arias of the husband. In the very first duet we get a fused portrayal of both characters. It is lively in tone, capricious, to a certain extent flirtatious. Then the expression rapidly changes; the duet of the quarrel is pointed and sharp. Here also one finds a clearly developed canon in the inversion of both voices. The pathos of emotion is grotesquely delineated and further emphasized by the instrumentation. A short orchestral interlude leads to the second aria of the husband, the one worked out in strophes; this evolves into a free arioso. In the following buffo-scene a construction new to opera is attempted; in the closed phrase a series of motifs is introduced, constructed one above the other and containing all the thematic material out of which the following scenes are composed. The telephone scene, which, as

I have said, is made up of earlier motifs in a new form, has a very easily defined structure. There are two strophes, a middle part, and a coda. Noteworthy here is the mawkish lyrical character contrasting so sharply with the preceding passage and also with the episode of the child's entrance so delicately orchestrated with solo instruments. An orchestral interlude at the climax leads into the conclusion, at the same time indicating a change in the character of the music from the forced to the real. The quartet combines these two melodic characteristics.

Even those in the audience who cannot follow the technic of Schönberg's music will be carried away by its expressive power, materially aided as they are by the orchestration. The orchestra is average in size. There are saxophones, mandolins and guitars, which often appear in solo parts, the piano, and the flexaton. The instruments are combined with greatest freedom. Solo strings, often contra-bass and cello, play in combination with wind instruments, at times with the transparent quality of a chamber symphony, at others in the fullest sonority. Schönberg also resorts to humorous, clever tone painting. Solo violins, saxophones, and piccolo trills create a champagne-like effervescence, while low string instruments and percussion, in conjunction with the deep saxophone, portray the dullness of a person walking witlessly into a trap, or a child receiving school discipline. Hovering above the strict formal unity there is a fantastic and free tonal play. The combination of these two elements outstandingly accounts for the charm of the piece.

It is to the credit of the Frankfort Opera House, and particularly of Dr. Turnau, that this score was given a living interpretation. Conductor Steinberg had drilled the orchestra in excellent fashion; it glowed, it scintillated with unusual color and was directed with uncommon precision. The scenic director, Dr. Herbert Graf, closely followed the composer's score complying with his directions even to the least detail of lighting. The audience was enthusiastic. Even those who could not intellectually comprehend the music responded to its power and Schönberg was repeatedly called before the curtain.