RECENT BOOKS

HINDEMITH ON THEORY

HINDEMITH'S *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* (B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz) embodies the results of a rich experience in teaching, in speculation, and in the *ex post facto* analysis of the composer's own works. It is confessedly an attempt to accomplish for the musicians of Hindemith's day what Fux, two hundred years ago, wished to do for his contemporaries: that is to say, to bring some order and control into the prevailing confusion of the musical language. In an exceptionally fine preface Hindemith discusses, with great sincerity and evident feeling, the problems of the present-day composer when faced by this confusion, and bears witness to the necessity which many contemporary composers—including this reviewer—have felt, and the effort which they have made, to attain for themselves and for their pupils a real perspective in the maze of contemporary musical procedure, as a prerequisite of genuine mastery. Hindemith himself comments on the singular fact that after Bach, and until very recent decades, no great composer distinguished himself as a teacher, while recent composers have, once more, begun striving to pass on to their younger colleagues craft and knowledge from their experience, and, what is perhaps even more striking, to formulate this knowledge into a coherent body of musical "theory."

The result is, as might be expected, an extraordinarily interesting and provocative book. It deals with music in its harmonic and, as a consequence, its melodic aspects. In his organization of the material Hindemith seeks a triple objective, consisting of, first, a solid basis in the physics of sound, second, a constant link with tradition, and third, a formula which will include as much as possible of the new material (and this means hitherto unexploited relationships as well as new "chords" or sonorities) which has transformed the musical language of the past eighty years. The book is divided into six sections, the first introductory, the others dealing respectively with elementary materials, the classification

of these according to character, harmonic principles, melody, and analysis. Hindemith's observations are always illuminating and vital; they are also clear, shrewd, and, granting his premises, generally consistent. They are, furthermore, often just and definitive, the conclusions of a musician of race and instinct in the finest sense of the word. Time after time this reviewer felt impelled whole-heartedly to applaud not only the unfailing justness of observation and analysis, but the precision and vividness with which they are expressed. Many young composers in the United States would profit, for instance, by reading Hindemith's general remarks on tonality, and above all his searching dismissal of such concepts as "atonality" and "polytonality" not only as outmoded but as demonstrably contrary to acoustic, psychological, and esthetic fact. These however, are only isolated and striking examples, and the reader will find this justness and precision duplicated whenever Hindemith speaks directly, as a practical musician speaking of concrete musical matters.

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Furthermore, the book makes at least one extremely valuable and, as far as this writer knows, quite original contribution to musical theory. It has been customary to distinguish in musical technic two principles, each of them cumulatively mastered by composers over the course of two great historical periods. From the middle ages to, say, 1600, musicians devoted themselves to the gradual mastery of counterpoint, the vocal or horizontal principle and, after a tremendous period of experiment, to the creation of masterpieces made possible by this ultimate mastery of language. The seventeenth century, through the emergence of instrumental music and the necessities of its organization, brought about the active development of a new dimension in music—the vertical or harmonic principle—the mastery and elaboration of which characterized and preoccupied the composers of the next two hundred odd years. In the music which resulted, the previously discovered technic was retained, profoundly modified, and inextricably fused with the newer, in a language of infinitely greater range and breadth.

It seems to this writer that since the earlier nineteenth century a similar change has been taking place. The importance of this

change it is not yet possible to determine, but its recognition is indispensable to the full understanding of contemporary music, its mastery, to music's future development. This new "dimension" arises from the vastly increasing consciousness manifested by composers of the last hundred years, in respect to sonority or what has been somewhat indefinitely called "color," and to the various factors which contributed to it. The most obvious among many events which favored this was the development of the orchestra as a comparatively standardized, flexible, and finely differentiated unit. As the century progressed composers became more and more conscious of the possibilities of "color" not only in the instrumental sense but in the sense of the individual harmonic sonority; a chord was chosen not only for its structural value—its relation to other chords in a complete tonal scheme—but also, and often almost exclusively, for its absolute sonorous value, as expressed in its instrumental coloring, the grouping of its component parts, and the "expressive," "emotional," or "coloristic" value of its component intervals, considered in and for themselves. Without a keen awareness of this element and its importance in contemporary music, no coherent understanding of that music is possible, any more than the technic of Bach for example, can be understood in terms of strict counterpoint alone.

This reviewer is convinced that a great part of the confusion in present-day musical theory and teaching is the result of a failure adequately to distinguish this principle and hence to investigate and formulate in clear terms the nature and limits of its possibilities and its relation to the other elements of music. "Harmony" in the theoretical sense has been, in view of these relatively new facts, an essentially vague concept embracing generally the problem of chord structure, certain aspects of the problems of voice leading and the as yet inadequately defined problem of the individual sonority.

It seems to this writer, then, that the significance of Hindemith's book lies precisely in the fact that here, for the first time, an attempt is made to classify all possible harmonic sounds on this basis and, with this as a point of departure, to formulate principles relevant to their usage. This is not the place to reproduce the necessarily involved processes of his thought or to properly

evaluate his conclusions. Since the latter, indeed, aim to establish general principles rather than simply to elucidate concrete instances, an evaluation can only take place slowly and as a result of painstaking observation and experiment; the reviewer has not yet found the leisure nor the time to do this. He feels fully prepared, however, to testify to the importance of Herr Hindemith's investigations and in particular to the observations included in the chapter entitled "Harmonisches Gefälle"—a term for which "harmonic gradation" or "incline" would be a literal rendering but which must wait for its definitive English equivalent until the translation appears. Here, as far as we know, for the first time serious theoretic attention is given to a set of facts of which every contemporary composer must certainly be aware.

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When all this—and it seems to the writer a great deal—has been said, the reviewer finds himself in complete disagreement with much in the book. First of all, he feels that Hindemith assigns far too great an importance, in the construction of a musical theory, to the physics of sound. He read the opening chapters of the book with pleasure and profit, recalled much previous but half forgotten knowledge, and gained some that was new to him. Nor would he think of denying the usefulness of such facts, to the musician. It seems to him, however, that such considerations are only relevant when taken in a completely *ex post facto* sense; that the musician as such is interested not in the objective nature of sound, but in the effects which sound produces and may be made to produce, and that physics can be useful to him primarily as a confirmation of effects observed, never as a point of departure, or as an adequate explanation of effects which are the manifest result of centuries of cumulative musical experience. It seems to him altogether too facile, for instance, to explain the chromatic scale on the basis of highly complicated acoustical calculations, rather than to show clearly how its present-day usage, and the finely differentiated relationships contained within it, have arisen out of this cumulative experience and of the compromises and artistically exploited ambiguities of the tempered scale.

In the writer's opinion, likewise, Hindemith pays too many

respects to certain other tendencies in nineteenth century theory —its emphasis (in other connections than the above) on the purely, so to speak, material, at the expense of the psychological or functional aspects of musical sound; its preoccupation with details of chordal structure at the expense of a clarification of their relationship to the musical line as a whole. Hindemith himself points out the tendency of certain recent musicologists to consider too exclusively the purely horizontal or "linear" aspects of counterpoint; but earlier theorists considered harmony in a far too abstractly vertical sense. It seems to the writer that Hindemith himself does this; specifically, that he fails to recognize, or at least to adequately provide for, the fact that the more complex a harmonic combination, the more its specific harmonic significance becomes modified, *for the ear,* by the musical context, and the less definitive, unambiguous, and univalent its sense. This is already clear in the case of such a simple harmonic combination as the "chord of the sixth" which functions often quite literally as the first inversion of a triad, but sometimes likewise, by virtue of the associations set up by the context of the music, as an independent chord in its own right, with its root in the bass. If the conception of a harmonic "root" or fundamental tone has any meaning at all it must be a psychological one; and experience seems to show that only in the case of the triad is this always fixed and apparently unalterable. While in the case of relatively simpler combinations a correspondingly simplified nomenclature is possible without distortion of the acoustic and psychological fact, this ceases to be the case when a higher degree of complexity is reached. It would be absurd to pretend that Hindemith is unaware of these facts, and indeed he pays constant homage to them in the course of the book. But he seems to underestimate the necessity of maintaining always a clear and exact picture of the acoustic and psychological elements involved in a musical impression. The older theory now seems inadequate, not only because it is not inclusive enough, but because it has long since ceased to do this. For reasons of a similar kind, though different in application, Herr Hindemith's system seems to us in some respects inadequate. This can be seen clearly in the analysis at the back of the book. The analysis of a passage from Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* seems to us to lay

far too much stress on comparatively minute detail and to give therefor an unduly complicated picture of what is after all an extremely simple tonal impression. Hindemith himself recognizes the simplicity; but aside from the fact that he goes to the trouble of explaining harmonically the details of a passage that is fundamentally linear in character, he fails to relate the details to the central harmonic fact or make clear the binding elements which knit the whole together into a single basic harmony. The result is an "analysis" which is scarcely less complicated than the passage itself.

Similarly in the analysis of the *Tristan* prelude the picture which he gives of the harmonic flow, and the relationships within this flow, seem to us, as they will seem to many, a distorted one. Taking only the first three measures; it is impossible for us to hear the first as a chord of F, or the second as a chord of G♯. As the root of the first measure we should insist on A; for the second measure it seems clear that the B is the real root.

This is not the place for what at best must involve a rather long explanation; but the fact that Wagner in the course of the work often lifts the "chord" of the first beat of the second measure (the *"Tristan* chord") out of this context and subjects it to the most varied possible harmonic treatment does not change our opinion; the very fact that, according to the specific context, any one of the notes of this chord may become its determining harmonic factor—and Wagner's technic untilizes such properties to their limit—only confirms us in our conviction that Herr Hindemith, in spite of the tremendous interest and force of his observations, has not succeeded in reaching a definitive solution of the problem. If and when the latter is reached, it will doubtless be the work of many unconscious collaborators, among whom Herr Hindemith will certainly hold a place of high honor.

Meanwhile, and in spite of certain dogmatic tendencies of today, it should never be forgotten that musical theory is a very different thing from music itself, and one can even plausibly question to what extent the former really influences the latter. Composers who have instincts will invariably learn through practice to follow them, and those who have none are not, in the proper meaning of the term, composers at all. Even a good teacher of

music will necessarily lay overwhelmingly greater stress on the practical exercise of his pupil than on the theory which he may adduce in order to illuminate and guide this practice. The real work of the composer lies in the unconscious or, let us say, superconscious activity of his musical impulse; the meager part that calculation plays is entirely subordinate in remaining either purely instrumental—in the process of orientation towards concrete problems—or critical and *ex post facto*. If we are to have theory, however, it must at least furnish a reasonably complete picture of the musical language and the elements of which it is composed. And while in a musical culture of strong and self-confident tradition, like that of Germany and to a lesser extent the rest of Europe, much may be left to the already formed instinct of the gifted student—the background shaping this instinct is, for good or ill, far more powerful than any musical theory can be,—in one like our own, which is still in process of formation and where all but a few exceptionally gifted individuals are still in a phase of groping and uncertainty, it is infinitely more important that the basic realities of music, technically as well as otherwise, be presented in as clear and flawless a manner as possible.

Roger Sessions

HITHER AND YON IN THE 20TH CENTURY

IN spite of a none too cultivated literary style and some occasional crudities of expression, David Ewen has gathered entertaining material concerning the lives and personalities of those whom he has chosen to present in his latest volume, *Twentieth Century Composers,* (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York.)

The material obviously entailed research in existing biographies and magazine articles, and by means of personal interviews; the result is a book which the layman can read with interest—informative, not too technical. Its value is anecdotal rather than critical.

One might question the choice of composers: Stravinsky, Strauss, Elgar, Sibelius, Ravel, Prokofieff, Falla, Loeffler, Bartok, Bloch, Delius, Hindemith, Schönberg, Malipiero, Roy