

## SCHOENBERG AND THE GERMAN LINE

BY ERWIN STEIN

RECENT international festivals have made it clear that the ambitions of the various contemporary schools of music are diverging, and that national distinctions today threaten to divide the East from the West. The Slavic composer seems to take his stand partly with the German, partly with the French. And indeed, it is no misfortune that music should develop according to national individuality. Provided that diversity in tendency and opinion do not provoke hostile estrangement, the more heterogeneous the musical product of the world, the richer the art.

To promote mutual understanding, it may not be amiss to discuss the characteristics of Germanic music here. With Germanic music I of course include that of Austria which for the better part of one hundred and fifty years has been identical with it. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and other great masters lived and worked in Vienna. The capital of a country that at one time united many peoples in a single state, Vienna has long worn an international aspect. Its population has adopted the qualities of other nations. To a German foundation were added the poetic tendencies of the Slavs, the appreciation of beautiful form which distinguished the Latins and finally, the temperament of the Hungarian. From such soil it is natural to expect the origin of many masterpieces.

What distinguishes Germanic music from that of other nations is, in general, a low valuation of outward design. Substance is the essential thing. For this reason the Latin composer is superior to the Teutonic where formal polish is the test. However, those Germans who possess a feeling for form attach to it a particularly profound significance. By form they under-

stand not only the outer aspect but the inner constitution—akin to that feature of any object, a machine or a building, which the engineer calls its “construction.”

For the very reason that the formal elements of music have always been a problem to the German, they have been submitted to the most intense cultivation. Rich harmony, ingenious development of themes and melodies, of variation and modulations, distinguish their works. The harmonic system is of especial importance in relation to the cohesion of forms. In any movement of a symphony by Beethoven or Brahms, the disposition of keys and modulations is really comparable in its deliberate plan to the inspiration of a great architect. Rhythm plays not nearly so great a role as a molder of form, which again is a most important difference between German and other music.

It is built more on the working out of themes, on progressive movement, on the dramatic; while western music depends on exposition of melodies, on lingering within a mood, on the lyrical.

The Germans speak of the “harmonic structure” of a composition, meaning that its chords, chord sequences and keys have distinct sonorous values and that the manner in which they are disposed and brought into relation with each other determines the form. These relations between chords and keys have been tested, organized and exploited to the greatest advantage in German music. Each new chord added not only a new sound and a new means of expression, but above all another medium to enrich harmonic form.

The rapid evolution of harmony beginning with Wagner eventually weakened the power of tonality to build up form. For the musical effect of any key rests on the fact that everything within a given composition bears upon one tonal base; it is the tonic which begins and closes the piece and is reverted to again and again during its course. The key rounds off a work, giving the music a certain unity. At least, this was the effect when the divisions between the keys were still firm and the number and kind of chords employed were limited.

But today, with each chord a native of all keys, the adherence to a single one, to the exclusion of the rich harmonic devices of

our time, may even strike those possessing a fine instinct for musical architecture as an anachronism. The simplicity of effect aimed at by the key-system bears an incongruous relation to the complicated harmonic means employed. We may therefore perceive two new tendencies among composers all over the world who have a feeling for significant form; one is in the direction of the more primitive harmonies, the other severs all connection with the old keys.



It is apparent from all this that tonality, and even the reaction from tonality, mean something essentially different to the Germans than to others. The very foundation of form, as conceived in the past, is renounced in the interest of symmetry itself.

When the composers of France, England and other countries first made the acquaintance of Schoenberg's work, particularly *Pierrot Lunaire*, they were enchanted by the daring and beauty of the new sounds. What was inadequately termed "atonal" seemed to offer a new idiom more expressive than the old. The perfection of form in these small pieces of *Pierrot Lunaire* prevented the realization of how brittle is the material of music which recognizes no key. Not many since have been fortunate in the attempt to write really valuable "atonal" works. The majority have turned only too quickly from the style which at first was so fascinating, and today there are but a few scattered Germans and Slavs who still pursue it.

The music of Schoenberg is derived from that of the German masters. Though he is self-taught, his preceptors were in reality Wagner and Brahms. From the one he learned harmonic daring, from the other how to utilize it to mold form. When he developed the harmony of his earlier works to the point where it burst the bonds of tonality, it was no more than a manifestation of his feeling for form. The old system had ceased to be adequate for his complicated harmonies and scorings. The danger of plunging into chaos held no terrors for him. His feeling for

structure was too well disciplined to desert him, even when venturing on an absolutely new road. Order dominates his work though one may not recognize it throughout. The difficulty of perfecting a system no longer in leading strings to the old keys was precisely the right test for the soundness of German musicianship. The Germanic tradition still lives in him, not, it is true, in its superficial aspect, but in the very essence of his music.

Schoenberg's rich imagination and creative force have given a great impetus to the development of the technique of composition. But his own evolution has been so swift that only a few have been able to follow his lead. Among this handful of young Germans and Austrians is Alban Berg. A strong feeling for design and a structural sense are also his characteristics. For him form presents a difficulty to be mastered now in this way, now in that; he even consciously sets himself formal problems to solve, in which respect he proves of the lineage of German musicians. His best-known earlier work is the string quartet in two movements, a composition distinguished by a wealth of invention. It is typical that, within a narrow compass, he should juxtapose striking plastic themes often contrasted in character. Notwithstanding the multiplicity of relations established by the motifs of these themes, he has preserved a certain requisite unity. Even before the first performance of his opera, *Wozzek*, last December, excerpts from the work heard in Frankfort revealed its strong dramatic quality, although the style is really symphonic. By composing each of the scenes as a separate piece of music he has given them a high degree of compactness. A later work, the double-concerto for violin and piano, accompanied by thirteen wind instruments, presents an extremely individual design. The first of the three movements combines the features of a theme and variations, with those of the classic sonata, the piano playing *à la concerto*. In the adagio, the second movement, the violin assumes this role. For the finale both instruments unite in a duet. The musical content of this last movement is in effect a combination of the first two. From time to time there appear voices from the earlier movements, set contrapuntally note for note one above the other; nevertheless in rhythm and development it has the character of a rondo.

It is quite another road that Anton Webern has traveled. Berg is a symphonist, Webern a lyricist. For him the new music is rich chiefly in the opportunities it offers for expression. The problems of the smaller forms only have occupied him. With the exception of one *Passacaglia* for orchestra, Webern has consistently published short works—a number of songs accompanied by small ensemble, pieces for orchestra, for string quartet, and for other instruments. They are of so limited a range that the question of form is of secondary importance. Their brevity enables them to be grasped almost at a glance, although they lack so much that generally gives structure to a musical work. One finds no repetition, no symmetry. It is the expression, in melody and sonority, which by its extraordinary intensity is so convincing. Webern's compositions are the most extreme example of freedom in form of all collected musical literature. One idea is set forth at a time; the composition lasts only as long as this holds out. There is no development of themes. His works are musical aphorisms of the greatest concentration.



The most significant composers of the generation still younger than Berg and Webern are Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek. Both are extremely prolific. Their music is generally more easily understood than that of Schoenberg, Berg or certainly Webern. It is less complex both in content and form and the attachment to tonal harmonies is also more definite. The works of Hindemith are frequently played at concerts, it is a pleasure to perform them. Themes and figures spring to life, almost, it seems, from the vitality of the instruments themselves—(for the most part Hindemith composes chamber music). To the piano is given a new and characteristic role, for it is commonly used as an instrument of percussion.

It is astonishing to realize how much has been written by Ernst Krenek in four short years of creative work—operas, symphonies, concerti, choruses, string quartets and other chamber

music, songs and pieces for the piano. If they are not all of equal worth, the abundance of his fantasy and the naturalness of his expression still compel admiration. From this musician, only twenty-five years old, we may still expect much that is interesting, perhaps even important.

This is hardly the place to enumerate all the Austrian and German composers who in some measure follow the "atonal" style of writing. We have named a few of the most outstanding, who, in spite of their radicalism, are rooted in the best Germanic traditions. Schoenberg's influence is recognizable in their works, more perceptibly in that of Berg than in Hindemith and Krenek. To judge from the most gifted talents of Germany and Austria today, it is already clear that Schoenberg has been no whim of the moment but that he has directed German music along the road it was destined to follow.

