

# MODERN MUSIC

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## VOCAL STYLE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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THERE can be no doubt that in the twentieth century a kind of new humanism has made its appearance in music. This expresses itself in a retreat from the instrumental and, at the same time, a new interest in all forms of song. The situation is clearest from a negative stand: Claude Debussy is the last European master in whose work the concept of piano sonority is a creative force; even Ferruccio Busoni's piano music, measured by such standards, is not an instrumental goal in itself. Richard Strauss marks the close of a fascinating orchestral development; with his symphonic poems, musical naturalism ends in the tonal abstractions of philosophical problems and the indiscretions of a family idyll. The gifted individual accomplishments of Alexandre Scriabin fail to achieve a pianistic or orchestral style, no matter what possibilities may still lie in their formal and harmonic contents.

Hardly one of the leading modern composers has worked with the symphonic or instrumental ensemble to such an extent as to influence the general aspect of modern culture. In the field of piano music only Serge Prokofieff, urged forward by his prolific instrumental fantasy, has gone further along this road. All the others, even including Paul Hindemith, have cast their most important and decisive works into vocal forms. In France, the classic home of daring virtuosity and feeling for orchestral color, the young composers, influenced by Gabriel Fauré, have turned to song. Since 1918 Jean Cocteau's manifestoes have demanded a monodic style, which can find expression only in a vocal human-

ism. The advance forces of the world of music which concern themselves in France, Russia, Italy and Central Europe with new forms are compelled to choose the vocal rather than the instrumental, since the latter, without the help of words, cannot portray ideas.

Singer and composer have become enemies. This was not always so. As late as the seventeenth century the singer influenced the form and style of works which he was to present to the public. In Italy, this tradition prevailed as late as the nineteenth century; even Gioacchino Rossini knew exactly what demands he could make on the singers. Giuseppe Verdi is the first of that country to break with a rule which never had such a wide application in Germany and therefore could be treated with supreme contempt by Beethoven. But Verdi is enough of an Italian never to attack the complete supremacy of the "beautiful melody." It was Richard Wagner who first replaced it with the never-ending melody. His reform drove a wedge into the unity of vocal music and revolutionized the studios of the vocal teachers. During those very years, between 1870 and 1880, when Wagner was completing the *Ring des Nibelungen*, the last and most precious instrument of Southern cantilena grew up in Italy—the tenor, Enrico Caruso. Singers regarded Wagner's declamation as an oppression; it was later, in the twentieth century, that a method of delivery was discovered which did not endanger the voice or create a monotony of style.

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This then is the heritage of the modern composer. On the one hand a declamation which, from the standpoint of song, leads to an absurdity, and a medium of expression in which (from *Tristan* to *Pelléas*) the most extreme individualism also reaches the limits of technical possibilities. And on the other hand the "beautiful melody" of the last bel canto composer, Giacomo Puccini, a continuation of the Verdian cantilena with its billboard intrusiveness.

No wonder that our singers are in opposition and wholeheartedly decide for Franz Lehar. For the question what can and cannot be sung is no longer considered debatable by them. The fear of new demands, of the necessity of completely relearning their art, determines the prejudice against all modern music.

But what is really singable? The composers are quite busy trying to solve the problem all over again. Wagnerian declamation and the "beautiful melody" of Italian pattern will both be discarded, for one is a special case, the other a routine.

The new style attempts to achieve a new form of melody. After the homophonic, tonal music of the nineteenth century, after the glittering polyphony of Strauss, Reger and Rimsky-Korsakoff, after the color patches of Debussy chords, the single voice will once more come into its own. A tone is unsingable when it is heard only harmonically and not as the building block of a melody. Post-Wagnerian music is full of such vocal parts which are essentially choral components. In the new music, striving for polyphony, this kind of vocal phrase is impossible. But the concept of melody itself has taken on another meaning. No longer is a set-off phrase of four or eight measures considered melodic, nor the everlasting repetition of the same motive flowing regularly to a virtuoso cadenza or a high C. And just as seldom is melody found in the amorphous product of the accompanied recitative through which Wagner and Strauss or even Debussy compel their singers to swim. The new melody is plastic in line leading, it creates form but shuns the obvious effectiveness of the opera aria and its formal impulse has a higher goal than the fulfillment of the pattern, A-B-A.



This new melody first appears in Arnold Schönberg's work. Schönberg began with songs; the choral symphony, *Gurrelieder*, is the work of his earliest maturity. The *Second String Quartet*, opus 10, enlists the soprano voice as a means of building a climax of expression, in the sense of the *Ninth Symphony*, and in the Stefan George songs his personal speech becomes established. The two stage works, *Erwartung* and *Die Glückliche Hand* set up a new, fruitful and completely formed song style in opposition to Wagner's endless declamation. His work, by 1909, had fulfilled the artistic ideal of expressionism in remarkable fashion. But Schönberg goes even further. In the twenty-one melodramas of *Pierrot Lunaire*, he tracks down the melody that is latent in speech (Albert Giraud's poems, in the adaptation by O. E. Hartleben) and gives it expression in fixed rhythms and the indicated rise and fall of the inflections of the *Sprechstimme*. These

are truly the boundaries of music, boundaries also of vocal style, and yet it is no paradox that there is more melodic power in the melodramas of *Pierrot Lunaire* than in many songs by Hugo Wolf.

But all these works appear to be only preparations for the goal which is reached in the more cheerful opera, *Von Heute auf Morgen*. Here Schönberg is in full possession of his self-forged speech. The twelve-tone principle is carried to its complete harmonic, melodic and polyphonic conclusions. This strictly technical foundation lays the ground for the richest application of all his experiences in earlier work. The powerful individual expression of the new melodics, developed in the Stefan George songs, is present here in its instrumental freedom; it is carried farther than with Strauss in *Salome* and *Elektra*; and yet the limitations imposed on the human voice by breath, dynamics and the demands of change of register are never forgotten. Even the predilection for wide intervals, tonal stretches of a ninth, tenth and even more which gives this style its character, does not disturb the mechanics of the vocal chords. In these intervals there is, moreover, a forthright dramatic strength of expression, bearing eloquent witness to the musical high tension of our time. From the purely technical standpoint they may be entrusted to the singer who has thoroughly mastered Mozart's vocal music. The famous difficulties of intonation in Schönberg's music are a consequence of his autonomous melodic line which, so far as possible, avoids the tones of the accompanying chords or line; here too, in the elimination of notes "foreign to the harmony" is an important landmark of the new vocal art. It distinguishes the vocal style of Schönberg from the atonal lyricism of Josef Matthias Hauer whose preference for polyphonic constructions leads him astray, and whose voice parts (true to the twelve-tone principle) destroy the accompanying harmony.

Notwithstanding the complete defeat of declamation, the dynamics of the words set to music are safeguarded by this melodic system. But the feeling for phrasing and rhythm has completely changed, accents often lie in unaccented parts of the measure, new possibilities of *parlando* are found in syncopes, and the rhythmic web no longer knows the restrictions of the bar. A slavish adher-

ence to the declamatory metre would disturb the logic of a melodic creation which follows its own laws.



SCHÖNBERG—Von Heute auf Morgen (measure 490)

Along this road, Schönberg has an even more radical follower in the early Ernst Krenek; the song parts of *Orpheus und Eurydike* often appear to run counter to the rhythm of speech until the ear has learned to follow their special laws, logically conceived and carried out.

Schönberg's style has also opened new paths for ensemble singing, as is indicated by an example from his canonically developed quartet in *Von Heute auf Morgen*:



SCHÖNBERG—Von Heute auf Morgen

Alban Berg's vocal phrase is the product of an altogether different artistic temperament. The numerous technical and stylistic similarities should not confuse us. When Berg composes for a voice he creates, so to speak, the whole complex of the singing person. Schönberg's vocal melodics come from Logos, Berg's from Eros. The tremendous energy of expression released by Schönberg is utilized by Berg, but it serves him differently. Both employ the voice in the complete expanse of a wide compass, which reaches far over two octaves. But if we compare the conclusion of Schönberg's song, *Herzgewächse*,



SCHÖNBERG—Herzgewächse

with the cradle song that Berg gives to Marie in the third act of *Wozzeck*,

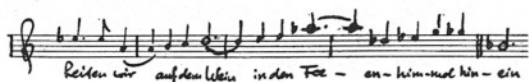


BERG—Wozzeck, Marie's Song

the difference of their hypotheses is revealed; in the one, an instrumental arabesque, enchanted by the transcendence of a new vo-

cal domain; in the other the passion of a woman's voice, attempting to traverse a world of dramatic feeling in the span of a breath.

As a matter of fact, Berg's vocal art (*Lulu* will confirm this observation) is closer to Italian models than to the style of post-Wagner Germanic music. Even in form, as compared with the prose, with the naturalistic flexibility of Schönberg's cantilena, it represents an inclination to a smaller, more comprehensible outline. Berg's goal is a new *bel canto*; the road thereto leads over a new, purified de-banalized domain of "beautiful melody." It is not by chance that Berg referred to Verdi's *La Donna e Mobile* in his valuable and lucid treatise, *Voice in Opera*. The tendency is discernible in early songs. It gains strength in *Wozzeck*, especially in the title role and Marie's part, and becomes dominant in the concert aria, *Der Wein*. In the middle part especially, *Der Wein des Liebenden*, the cantilena has a magnificent, swinging beauty.



BERG—Der Wein

The conclusion also  with the effective

Allargando and the radiant A# is conceived entirely in the spirit of carefree, vocal, aria construction. It is Berg's genius for the drama in particular that has directed this instinct toward the aria. The opera of the future, in so far as it pursues modern and artistically developed forms, can not ignore Schönberg and Berg.

Even more decisive is the break with declamation by musicians like Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, and Leos Janacek. Clearly as these three are differentiated in origin, style and artistic scope, they are nonetheless one in the desire to enrich modern vocal art by a return to the sources of the folksong. Nor are they the only ones. To be just we should include the efforts of Zoltan Kodaly and Manuel de Falla towards the same goal; however the latter two have not contributed in the same measure to the development of a typical modern vocal style.

Even Bartok has done more through example and the compilation of Hungarian folklore than by composition. The center of





tives and two keys in such a way that the individual voices interlock with the precision of gears and still may be recognized as independent.



STRAVINSKY—Les Noces

In his most classical development Stravinsky subdues the rhythmic explosions, purifies the passionate melodies and restrains this vocal art in a calm repose, beneath which the tension is hidden. In the choral passages of the *Symphonie des Psaumes*, the majestic breadth which already flows through the soli of *Oedipus Rex* is confirmed and intensified. But it is in *Perséphone* that Stravinsky completely consummates this technic. The tenor part for Eumolpe is the most powerful of any he has written for the human voice. Here a musical logic is achieved which rises directly from the possibilities of song. The variety of intervals, the utilization of all registers, and the remarkable chromaticism which has replaced the one-sided and primitive bitonality, have true style-developing power. It may no longer be reconcilable with the primitive force of the earlier Stravinsky for here the calming effect of the French language has equalized the rhythmic energies—but it is a step on the road to a new vocal art.



STRAVINSKY—Perséphone

"The teaching of composition," Janacek once said, "must be enriched by a new chapter. Just as counterpoint, harmony and forms are practised and studied today, so the young opera composer will learn to paint from nature to a certain extent. The sketching of actual speech melodies is comparable to the life class in art." In this sketching of actual speech melodies Janacek has given modern music a new melodic basis. The inner relationship of music and speech has become a personal experience to him; but, for the first time in centuries, he has put the melody of a word, a phrase, a narrative, in a form which is neither recitative or declamation. Janacek is the most scientific folklorist although he has collected no folksongs and almost never quotes them in his operas or songs. The genius of his accomplishment lies in the



fact that he has expressed the spirit of the Czech and Slovak languages, on which his melodic structure is reared, in a universally applicable form which is common property today. His song style has an almost recitative-like freedom and is at the same time formally restrained and therefore melodic. (Even the declamatory repetition of tones, which the sound of speech often requires, has a melodic effect in Janacek's music.) His lines are often composed of separate tone series; it is only a general, comprehensive glance that reveals their system. The rise and fall of the tones of speech encompass all imaginable intervals; therefore Janacek's style (although in no way atonal) is unfettered by inherited harmonic laws. The free-flowing rhythm of speech requires numerous changes of time; triolet forms, sudden accelerations or retards correspond to the emotions.

It would be false to discover a late flowering of naturalism in his method. Janacek's urge to stylization is too great. It is impossible to make comparisons about his characteristics; their originality is complete, the profile unmistakable. A work like the opera *Aus Einem Totenhaus* (after Dostoievsky's book), belongs with Busoni's *Doktor Faustus*, Schönberg's *Erwartung*, Berg's *Wozzeck* and Stravinsky's *Noces*, among the great influence spreading musical events of the twentieth century. Scenes like the conversation of the burning Alej with Petrovich, Act III,



JANACEK—Aus Einem Totenhaus

achieve, in the greatest degree, a crystallization of form together with supreme naturalness of cantabile expression.



The new worlds of expression stand opposed as Thesis and Antithesis. On the one hand the psychological cantilena of the Schönbergian school, atomically analytical, building on the most refined technical possibilities (the most extreme development being the songs of Anton von Webern); on the other the folkloristic primeval power of the Slavic and Hungarian moderns. If the one leads, with Berg, to a new molding of the "beautiful melody," the other rests on the declamatory style. Both however,

bel canto and recitative, appear before us in a new form. In the sense of our nineteenth century heritage the Wagnerian as well as the Rossinian method have been overthrown.

It remains for a younger generation to resolve the opposition. In his vocal works, Paul Hindemith draws logical conclusions from both schools. Here atonal and folkloristic elements are found side by side. Schönberg's expression melody is just as much a structural part as the harsh, motorized rhythms of the early, and the classical calm of the later Stravinsky.

Hindemith's musical imagination is nurtured by the mechanics of the instruments. He is no "natural" vocal composer; nevertheless he uses the voice as his highest means of expression. Therefore his music develops an instrumental melody which is appropriate to the singing voice. That is a tie with Schönberg, whom he surpasses, however, in the impersonality of his vocal style. Hindemith composes the non-erotic song passage par excellence. A speaking instrument seems to make music, not a breathing, warmblooded creature. In this characteristic, he follows a tradition already recognized as typically German in Gluck and Mozart. It accounts for the individual, pure, non-sensual atmosphere of logic in Hindemith's vocal composition, which hinders his success on the stage. He has achieved the most fruitful expression of his vocal style in the oratorio *Das Unaufhörliche*. The examples given here

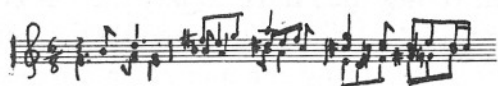


HINDEMITH—Das Unaufhörliche

show the definite characteristics: rhythm and tonal freedom, predilections for playing with triads whose harmonic tendencies always change, equal proportions of leaping and flowing melody. The neo-classic leaning is apparent more clearly in the choruses than in the soli of the same work. Widely arching themes of a Handelian plastic, interwoven contrapuntally and by imitation give this choral style its stamp.

Darius Milhaud has developed the classic choral-polyphony with still greater consistency. The impersonal style of objective

melody is his native heritage. Milhaud is French; therefore words, the rhythm of speech must govern his song. Like the German, Heinrich Kaminsky, Milhaud's vocal tendency is toward the choral group rather than the solo. For the polytonal phrase, of which he is a master, is unattainable in the single voice; it is only the ensemble of several melodic features that can achieve the distinctive sonority. The characteristic, logical nature of the style permits the greatest simplicity of detail. Milhaud's melodies are, in fact, unpretentious to an almost primitive degree. There are long stretches of pure diatonism which contrast with contrapuntal deviations from tonality to produce a most pronounced harmonic tension. But it is precisely this simplicity of the themes, their rhythmic clarity, that permits a new kind of choral composition in which elements of the concertante style come to full fruition. The powerful style of *Christophe Colomb*, undoubtedly a work of genius, in which the chorus has the same dominance as in *Boris Godunov*, is due entirely to such arrangement of the voices. In this work Milhaud has been carried farthest from the romantic ideal of the expression song: the complete elimination of expressive cantilena gives his vocal phrase an unearthly, almost machine-like power.



MILHAUD—Christophe Colomb

The goal of this style is not in the dramatic but in the epic field. However it seems to be clear that opera now tends toward an epic development. The work of G. Francesco Malipiero is also headed in this direction.

A great harvest of possibilities has been garnered by the vocal style of the new music. Even the technical capacities of the voices have been enlarged by the new works. It is not the worst modern singers who have recollected their duty to the modern composers. The singer and composer may no longer remain enemies; for it is only through the mutual relationship of creative and interpretive artists that contemporary musical life, threatened by a thousand critical omens, can again be revived.