THE NEO-BAROQUE

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THERE have always been enthusiasts for whom the baroque – in music the style which reached its final expression in Bach and Handel – has had vital meaning. Today however, interest in the baroque is so widespread, and the terminology so loosely applied, as to give the effect of a fad, a fad doubtless encouraged by some of the current efforts to popularize Bach. Of very great importance therefore is the actual re-discovery of the qualities in the music itself, a process which has been going on now for some time and whose full impact has not yet been felt.

The baroque revival can be abused. It offers an easy way out for those who cannot, for one reason or another, cope with "modern dissonance." On the other hand it has already done much to stabilize the often erratic course of contemporary music, less by direct influence than by setting up, as it were, remote controls.

One of the most potent tendencies of our time is the abandonment of subjectivism as we know it in romantic music. Moussorgsky and Debussy were pioneers in this new direction. More ardent partisans are the early Stravinsky and also the Hindemith of the Neue Sachlichkeit period. The pursuit of objectivity is a form of reaction against soul-wrenching "expression," which itself is not altogether unknown in contemporary music – as in the works of Schönberg where modern idiom and romantic expression are paradoxically united.

On the whole the strongest appeal of the baroque for the modern composer lies in its emphasis on the constructive element in music. The baroque maintains a relentless consistency of patterns through the whole movement of a composition. The most rigid is the ostinato in all its various forms. In addition, there are the obbligos, canon, double counterpoint, the creation of only one static mood, the so-called affection, in contrast to the dynamic sway of emotions in classic and romantic music. The growth of a form such as the fugue out of polyphonic devices is more fascinating for a modern than the climactic development of motives. Thus

a distinguishing mark of our times is an increasingly cautious avoidance of large formal schemes like the sonata or the symphonic cycle, and the adoption instead of concise sonata forms of the Scarlatti and Bach type. Stravinsky's lovely *Sonata for Piano* (1924) is patterned in all three movements after the baroque sonata form, and in the first and last movements even the style can be traced to Scarlatti, in the slow movement to Bach.

The example of Stravinsky's sonata is especially apt because it employs polyphony with restraint. Baroque music has been frequently used as a term almost interchangeable with polyphony. As a label it is in danger of becoming merely a generalized abstraction, too loose to have a precise meaning, and too limited for historic truth. Polyphony is surely one of the important characteristics of baroque music, but in the baroque opera and the concerto the emphasis rests on one leading melodic line. Even the theorists of the baroque era were quite explicit about this point. The style has frequently been called homophonic. If not qualified, this terminology implies that there may be no difference between the opera and the concerto styles of the baroque and the really homophonic style of the Mannheim school. The distinctive feature of the "homophonic" baroque lies in the impact of the ever present basso continuo which conveys to the melody a rhythmic drive of unique power.

The same rhythmic drive, translated into modern idiom, can be found in Stravinsky's works and also in the *Kammermusik* Opus 36, by Hindemith. This series of concertos, especially the one for viola, Number 4, represents Hindemith's neo-baroque style at its most perfect. The drive is achieved by a constantly running bass, ostinato-like devices, sequential patterns, a steady and relatively fast-moving harmonic rhythm, and, above all, the rhythmic "pulse," which I understand as a succession of beats not ordered by regularly returning accents at the beginning of a measure.

The harmonic implications in modern music differ widely, of course from the baroque use of tonal harmony. Composers today also work with ostinato basses, but these now have far less regulative power over the harmony. Baroque music lives on tonal harmony, it builds its forms on tonality and derives its polyphonic effects from the interplay of linear melodic design and harmonic progressions. The fugue, one of the main types of baroque instrumental music, tends toward an expansion of tonality by means of modulation through related keys. A rich harmonic texture results from the voice leading, but harmony is not the point of departure for the composer of fugues. The form of the fugue represents no

formal scheme or shell; it is subject to growth rather than development.

In modern polyphonic writing harmonic progressions are likewise the effect of voice leading. Harmonic results are to some extent coincidental. This does not mean they are negligible; on the contrary they are quite important, the opposed opinion of some composers notwithstanding. Instead of expanding one tonality in nearly related keys in the baroque manner the modern composer encompasses, in his expansion of tonality, the entire tonal material, exploiting the relations of any one tone of the enharmonic scale to any other. These relations include the "twelve-tone-system" as one restricted selection from the tonal material without being limited to it. A center tonality is, as a rule, clearly established at the beginning of the composition, temporarily abandoned, intermittently recaptured, and finally clearly reestablished. The interplay of keys *within* tonality has been replaced in modern music by the play *with* tonality as a whole. The specific new devices of the modern harmonic idiom can be described as non-triadic chordal progressions of indeterminate tonality which alternate with sections of clearly established tonality. In the absence of harmonic or tonal unity, linear melodic and rhythmic patterns give unity to the parts. The harmony is for the most part distinctly non-chromatic. The presence or absence of accidentals is less important in this style than the absence of chromatic progressions in melody and harmony.

The interplay of tonal and non-tonal sections finds its most felicitous application in the *concerto grosso.* In the baroque *concerto grosso* and *solo concerto,* the tuttis return in closely related keys throughout. In the modern adaptation of this form, periods of established tonal centers alternate with periods in which the tonal center has been temporarily abandoned. In addition, alternations of tutti and solo themes can be found in both the baroque and the modern *concerto grosso.* A great number of modern composers have realized the appropriateness of the *concerto grosso* for the modern idiom because it does not develop harmonically like the classical concerto, but grows by juxtaposition of sections. Hindemith's already mentioned series of concertos, Stravinsky's *Concerto for Violin,* Bartok's *Music for Stringed Instruments,* de Falla's *Concerto for Harpsichord,* to name only a few examples, are in form and style baroque concertos pure and simple.

Though the baroque concerto principle has been rediscovered it would be dangerous to assume that composers today have accepted the form "under the influence" of the baroque. The changing trend in modern

music, like the changing taste of the modern audience, is a symptom of a fundamental change in our whole attitude toward music. With this new orientation we can derive satisfaction from both baroque and modern music, though their structures are by no means the same.

It is primarily the features of the *late baroque* style, which, so far, have had had a bearing on modern music. I will list here only the principal characteristics. There is the *concerto,* with its continuo homophony, where the rhythmic drive of the themes derives largely from the instrumental nature of the melodic invention, even in vocal music. The preeminence of the instrumental idiom in the solo arias of Bach and Handel finds its direct counterpart in the arias of *Oedipus Rex* and *Cardillac.*

There is the desire for objectivity and "distance" manifested by the use of structural devices like ostinatos, quasi-ostinatos, consistent rhythmic patterns and sequences, and contrapuntal rather than harmonic voice-leading.

There is the contrapuntal "terraced" orchestration that uses contrasting colors for the sake of melodic independence, as opposed to the palette orchestration.

There is emphasis on chamber music, on small orchestral and chamber ensembles. It is characteristic that Stravinsky and Hindemith sometimes omit the violin section which is the backbone of the symphony orchestra.

There is the non-psychological attitude toward the text which does not try to express the words "in" music, but to create a self-contained composition that respects text and music as two specifically different media. In his song cycle, *Das Marienleben,* Hindemith even contrives a Renaissance detachment from the words.

Finally there are allegorical devices of an intellectual character which appear in baroque and modern music. If modern music be accused of "intellectualism" the charge should be construed not as a defect but as a virtue. Nothing could be more intellectual than certain allegorical or pictorial passages in Bach cantatas that avoid programmatic context exactly by being constructive rather than emotional. The decision about intellectualism should rest on the use made of it, not on its presence.

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As I have pointed out, the elements already vital to modern music all belong to the late baroque. The early baroque has not yet been

rediscovered. The objectivity of the late period was actually the result of of a long and hard-won struggle, and by no means a starting point. The free handling of tonality in the early baroque, the chromatic and harmonic experiments, and the development of idiomatic writing for instruments and voices may still hold many surprises for the modern composer. He does not know the early baroque as yet because a few desultory performances of Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, and Schutz do not lay the groundwork for a genuine knowledge.

But the cogency of design in all baroque music has one outstanding virtue that can scarcely be overestimated today. It conveys to those who have penetrated below the surface an intense and subtle sense of style which is needed more badly than ever before. Even in its worst specimens, baroque music maintains a high stylistic purity. The weakness of some of our younger composers lies precisely in such a lack. Past masters like Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Hindemith can always rely on a flawless sense of style which gives distinction even to their weaker compositions. Bartok in his earlier works was groping for it and has found it slowly but surely in such masterpieces as the *Music for Stringed Instruments,* or the *Mikrokosmos.* The ever widening comprehension of baroque music should strengthen this sense and indirectly also help us to a recognition of our own musical idiom.