

## MUSIC SINCE 1920

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ABOUT a year ago an American composer in these pages\* seemed baffled as to the future course modern composers might best pursue. A surfeit of new harmonies, rhythms, revolutionary methods seemed to leave the new composers with but little field for experimentation. Perplexed, he queried "Where do we go from here?" The plight of a composer, himself unclear as to the general direction the new music was taking, was curious enough; but it served to make more understandable the confusion with which the general public contemplates modern music. From the vantage point of 1928, it should not be impossible to present a few clarifying ideas as to the present status of the new music.

It is important, first, to point out that the term modern music has a variety of meanings. We can distinguish at least three different classes of so-called modern music. The oldest generation think of Strauss and Debussy as the last examples of a long line of great composers. As revolutionists they paved the way for the complete overthrow of nineteenth century harmonic laws. Their tonal innovations, so startling when *Salomé* and *Pelléas* were new, are now entirely assimilated and universally accepted. For the large mass of music-lovers these two men represent modern music; after them, all is chaos. This takes us no further than the decade 1900-1910.

A more wide-awake group of music-lovers think of Schönberg and Stravinsky when they speak of "modern music." For the sake of convenience that phase can be said to have lasted from 1910-1920. By no means do we wish to imply that what these men have written since 1920 is negligible or of less importance than their earlier production. But as a new departure, the

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uncompromising atonality of *Pierrot lunaire* and the intense dynamism of *Le sacre du printemps* must always be identified with musical radicalism of the second decade of this century. In the more exact sense, therefore, it is only the production of the years 1920-1928 that can truly be termed modern music. If, for the moment, this modern music concerns us, it is not in order to draw comparisons as to merit with the older revolutionary music but simply to make clearer the tendencies determining the music of today.



One marked difference between the older generation of modern composers—Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Schönberg—and the younger men who have appeared on the scene since 1920 is the fact that many of these younger men are very prolific composers. This in itself is significant. It does not merely indicate a lack of critical ability as some would have us believe. Even if it did, this fertility of invention on the part of such representative new men as Hindemith, Milhaud, Prokofieff or Krenek points unmistakably to one fact: modern music is no longer in the experimental stage. Just so long as a composer attempts to break new paths with each new creation he must of necessity work slowly. These younger composers write with facility and ease. They no longer seek new harmonies or rhythms, but are content to make use of the materials added to the technical equipment of composers during the years 1895-1920.

Take for example the case of Paul Hindemith. This young German must be placed among the radicals of our day, yet in no sense can we consider him an experimenter. His musical materials are culled from a variety of sources, yet every page bears the unmistakable imprint of his personality. The first of the piano pieces, Opus 37, will serve as an illustration. Rhythmically, it derives from Stravinsky and jazz. The insistent sixteenth-note motion, broken by sudden and irregular chord-crashes, points back to *Le sacre*, while the sections of poly-rhythmic writing which demand such completely independent

rhythmic control on the part of the pianist, have their origin partly in *L'histoire du soldat* and partly in jazz. No new dynamic effects are sought after, yet the result is entirely original and even characteristic of Hindemith. Considered harmonically, his music is neither entirely polytonal nor atonal, but keeps to a middle course which makes free use of both these harmonic styles. At the same time this piano piece recognizes the principles of tonality, since it can be said to be in the key of F major. His melodies, likewise, move around one central note but this is done with such freedom that they almost belong to the twelve-tone scale. Thus Hindemith adds nothing to the modern technique of composition; he merely uses what is already known in a highly personal manner. This fact, added to a natural facility of expression and a rich musical tradition, undoubtedly explains the vast amount of music he already has composed.

The picture presented by Darius Milhaud's career is equally instructive in another way. Unlike Hindemith whose musical activity dates from 1920, Milhaud was composing as far back as 1913. Both his nature and his environment made him peculiarly sensitive to outside influences. As ringleader of the *Six* at a time when experimentation was the password in radical circles, Milhaud proved to be one of the most uncompromising of innovators. In *Protée* and *L'homme et son désir* he experimented with instruments of percussion used alone, for their own sake; in *Le boeuf sur le toit* he tried his hand at ragtime; in his *Fifth String Quartet* he wrote polytonally in a more logical and inexorable manner than had ever before been attempted. Since about 1921 all this has been changed. One no longer has the impression that Milhaud is seeking new expressive means. His latest works, such as *Les malheurs d'Orphée* or *L'enlèvement d'Europe* are to be cherished not because of any experimental probings but for purely musical values.

Similar conclusions, in varying degrees, can be drawn from an examination of the works of Honegger, Prokofieff or Krenek. Minor experiments such as quarter-tone music or music for mechanical instruments have been undertaken since 1920, but these have left the large majority of composers untouched. Generally

speaking this is a healthy situation; it promises an end of useless turmoil, a period of repose in which the full energy of the composer may be directed toward the creation of perfected master-works.



The lack of interest in experimentation applies only to the technical side of music. From an esthetic standpoint, on the contrary, the year 1920 marks a complete change of feeling on the part of composers. The new impersonal approach toward their art, now firmly entrenched, was neither so sudden nor so arbitrary a change as it seems on the surface to have been. It can be traced back to the essential classicism of a Ravel, a Reger, or even the earlier Stravinsky. Allied with this is a renewed interest in the problems of form. Except for a tendency toward concentration, the older generation of moderns contributed almost nothing along these lines. The neoclassic movement has brought with it a renewed interest in old forms like the concerto grosso or the oratorio, from which interesting developments should arise.

New esthetic theories or new structural problems obviously mean nothing to the general public. It is far more sensitive to a startling dissonance than to a new form. This explains why the scandal caused by the harmonic daring of *Pelléas* in 1902; or some ten years later the shock produced by the rhythmic brutality of *Le sacre du printemps* have no counterpart in recent times. Our youngest composers startle no one. Even those critics who originally accused all modern music of being insane and illogical nowadays complain that it is not sufficiently new. Polytonalities, cross-rhythms—we've heard all that before, they say. They might just as well object to a C major chord for the same reason. The value of new music is entirely apart from the technical means employed.

Where do we go from here? For the present, nowhere. Let us be content to rest for awhile, to till the ground others have

cleared. Soon enough the time will come to set off again for undiscovered territory.

It may be objected that such an attitude impedes the healthy growth of music which implies a continual advance along new paths and that the end of experimentation in an art means stagnation and death. A close student of the history of change in music must be aware that while the obscure pioneer is preparing a new revolution the genius is summing up a period. Undoubtedly we are in a summing-up period. No one can say how long it will last. Perhaps some unknown composer is already preparing the new upheaval. But for the music of the present it is with men like Hindemith and Milhaud, Honegger and Prokofieff that our faith must rest.

